

# The Tale of Tessie the Textile Worker: Female Textile Workers in Cornwall During World War II

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THE TYPICAL IMAGE OF NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN during World War II is that of an attractive, smiling, confident, independent woman clad in overalls, with a wrench, blowtorch, or gun in her hand. This stereotype, often referred to as "Rosie the Riveter" in the United States or the "Bren Girl" in Canada, was created and used by the media during the war to help recruit large numbers of women into the labour-starved war industries.

Since the 1970s, liberal historians have perpetuated such images in depicting North American women during the war. The first liberal scholars who addressed the issue of women's wartime experiences included Americans such as Richard Polenberg, Chester Gregory, and William Chafe, who wrote during the early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> These early feminist scholars argued that the war stimulated new social and economic opportunities for women, due to changes in societal attitudes concerning women's "proper place." This change in public opinion, they contend, enabled women to leave the home and work in high-paid occupations traditionally restricted to men. While all three scholars view these changes as having a permanently and positively affected American women's role in society, Gregory and Polenberg assert that the war brought about a type of second emancipation for women, one which promoted "a fully American egalitarianism by democratizing labor."<sup>2</sup> Adopting a less optimistic stance, Chafe argued that although the war did

<sup>1</sup>Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (London 1972); William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York 1972); Chester Gregory, *Women in Defense Work During World War II: An Analysis of the Labor Problems and Women's Rights* (Philadelphia 1972).

<sup>2</sup>Chester Gregory, *Women in Defense Work*, xi-xii.

not bring about an equality of the sexes, it did open up a new era of potential activity for women.<sup>3</sup>

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new group of liberal revisionists addressed the same issue, providing a less optimistic appraisal of the war's impact on North American women. Although scholars from this school such as Karen Anderson, Alan Clive, and Susan Hartmann accepted the argument that the war enhanced women's economic and social opportunities, they diverged from the first school in stressing the temporary and limited nature of such change.<sup>4</sup> Clive asserted that "there had been no revolution in attitudes, only a series of expedient measures, often implemented grudgingly in the face of national emergency."<sup>5</sup> In addition to emphasizing the limits of change, these studies moved ahead of their predecessors by expanding their analyses to include areas beyond the work force, and by testing theories about national trends in the context of smaller industrial communities.<sup>6</sup>

Ruth Roach Pierson's *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Women* adopted the same type of approach as the second school, but moved the focus from the workplace to the state by investigating Canadian government influence upon women's changing role in war industries, as well as in wartime military and volunteer organizations.<sup>7</sup> Like her revisionist American counterparts, Pierson challenged the notion that the war liberated women, arguing instead that "the massive recruitment of women into jobs outside of the home was intended to be only for the duration of the war and represented no concession of the principle of women's right to work."<sup>8</sup> The introduction of new tax incentives and daycare services, she argued, were simply short-term initiatives aimed at

<sup>3</sup>Chafe contends that "although the evidence suggested that a dramatic change had occurred in the status of women workers, a closer look at the nation's economic institutions indicated that some of the deeper manifestations of female inequality remained and had been only partially mitigated by the impact of the war." William Chafe, *The American Woman*, 150.

<sup>4</sup>Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport 1981); Alan Clive, "Women Workers in World War Two: Michigan as a Test Case," *Labor History*, 20 (Winter 1979); and Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston 1982).

<sup>5</sup>Alan Clive, "Women Workers in World War Two," 70.

<sup>6</sup>Hartmann's work investigates women's work in the armed forces and war industries and delves into the war's effect upon such areas as the family, education, politics, and law. Clive's article focuses on women in the war industries in Michigan and Anderson's book delves into sex roles, family relations and the status of women in defense industries in Baltimore, Seattle and Detroit.

<sup>7</sup>Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Women* (Toronto 1986). Also see her earlier work *Canadian Women and the Second World War* (Ottawa 1983). Sonya Michel's "American Women and the Discourse of the Democratic Family in World War Two," focuses on the motivation of the American Government's implementation of day care services, through the *Landham Act* in 1941. M.R. Higonnet, ed., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven 1989).

<sup>8</sup>Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*, 11.

providing temporary relief to women employed in war industries, for once the war ended, the government immediately rescinded such programs.<sup>9</sup> The state, therefore, simply promoted measures aimed at solving the particular labour and military imperatives of the day. Once the war ended, so too did the government's support for the programs and policies that momentarily enabled women to enter areas in the workforce that were once a male domain.

While liberal feminist scholars focused on attitudinal change among North American men and women as the reason for women's new role in the workforce, Pierson emphasized the role of the state as a patriarchal structure which produced and sustained an "egalitarian rhetoric" that encouraged women to enter the work force, thereby aiding the war effort by temporarily legitimizing the work that the women were engaged in during the war. Although the "liberationist" and "revisionist" schools have diverged in their assessment of the over-all effects and longevity of the changes that took place, I would argue that both have considerably underestimated the impact which material conditions had on women's lives during the war.

While Canadian middle-class women may have had the luxury to work during the war for patriotic reasons or in order to escape the confines of the home, as the early feminists argued, their working-class counterparts enjoyed no such choice, for individuals' choices are shaped by market forces. It was therefore economic necessity, rather than a change in attitudes, domestic ideology, or egalitarian rhetoric at the state level that dictated the occupational decisions of most women who worked during this period.

One group of scholars who acknowledged and emphasized the role that material conditions played in shaping women's wartime experiences were the Marxist feminist theorists. Drawing upon Marx's classic "Reserve Army of Labour" theory, they contended that a woman's status as a waged worker fluctuated according to market demands. Scholars such as Patricia Connelly, Margaret Benston, and Veronica Beechey asserted that women were used during the war essentially as a temporary form of cheap labour during a period of severe labour scarcity.<sup>10</sup> When explaining why women were so used, they emphasized the link between production and reproduction. Veronica Beechey illustrated this connection, arguing that "women form a specific element of the industrial reserve army by virtue of the sexual division of labour which consigns them to the family and inscribes a set of assumptions about women's role."<sup>11</sup> Women were therefore an

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 11-2.

<sup>10</sup>Veronica Beechey, "Women and Production: a Critical Analysis of Some Sociological Theories of Women's Work," in Annette Kuhn and Anne Marie Wolpe, eds. *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London 1978); Margaret Benston, "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation," *Monthly Review*, 21 (September 1969), 13-27; and Patricia Connelly, *Last Hired First Fired: Women and the Canadian Work Force* (Toronto 1978).

<sup>11</sup>Veronica Beechey, "Women and Production," 191.

available and exploitable group that could be used by capital when there was a need to discover and tap a cheap pool of labour. Once the war ended and market conditions no longer required these extra workers, they argued, these women simply were deactivated and sent home.

Although the Marxist feminists relate women's experiences to the vagaries of the marketplace and investigate the impact that capital had in shaping women's work experiences during the World War II, they tend to view patriarchy and capitalism as synonymous, with the latter structure taking precedence over the former, thereby ignoring or minimizing the significant and independent role that patriarchal forms of oppression played in shaping women's existence. Capitalists may have been responsible for creating a segmented labour force through the erection of occupational barriers, but one cannot ignore the role that patriarchal actors such as company managers, male union members, and the state played in supporting this discriminatory structure.

Ruth Milkman's *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* challenged the reserve army of labour theory, arguing that it was not women's role in the family, but rather the existing industrial structures that led to the segregation of women at work. By undertaking a comparative analysis of occupational segregation by sex within two very different industries — the American electrical and auto plants — Milkman argued that occupational segregation by sex persisted during the war due to the combined efforts of management, and in some workplaces, of male unionists, to keep a weak and divided workforce. Rather than breaking down during the war years, she asserted, capitalists were able to develop and implement new patterns of segregation.<sup>12</sup> Segregation was therefore an extremely malleable structure that could be altered by management to accommodate the particular economic exigencies of the day.

While Milkman's study effectively illustrates the collaboration that took place between some employers and male unionists in supporting a segmented labour force, she contends that the two male groups, at least in the auto industry, shared similar motives in keeping women relegated to the lower-paying jobs in industry. She therefore views their relationship as characterized by accommodation and general harmony. As such, she fails to recognize the inherent tension that often exists between these two bodies.

The literature on women and the war has focused on those who worked in the war industries, military, or large manufacturing plants located in North American urban centres, neglecting the significant number of North American, and particularly Canadian women who toiled in the traditional female manufacturing sectors located in small communities during the war years. Although one American scholar, Marc Miller, has produced a study on the textile workers in wartime Lowell, Massachusetts, the two Canadian historians who have written influential

<sup>12</sup>Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana 1987), 73.

studies on the textile industry in Canada during this period — Joy Parr and Gail Cuthbert-Brandt — did not address the question of how and to what extent the war served in changing women's experiences in the textile industry.<sup>13</sup> This study will attempt to redress this imbalance by assessing the impact that the war had on working-class women's lives in the textile town of Cornwall, Ontario.

Using a dual structural analysis, this study will argue that rather than experiencing new job opportunities and increased mobility within the factories, Cornwall's 15 female textile workers remained segregated in the same traditionally "female" jobs that they had occupied before the war. The gender-typed structure of the textile industry, it will be argued, rather than eroding during the war years, was maintained due to the often-concerted efforts of management, male unionists, and to a lesser extent, the state. All of these forces participated in preserving the patriarchal order, albeit in different ways.<sup>14</sup> Although dual structuralists like Zillah Eisenstein argue that capitalism and patriarchy are so intertwined and interdependent that they essentially fuse into a single entity, this study will reveal the inherent tension that exists between these two structures.<sup>15</sup>

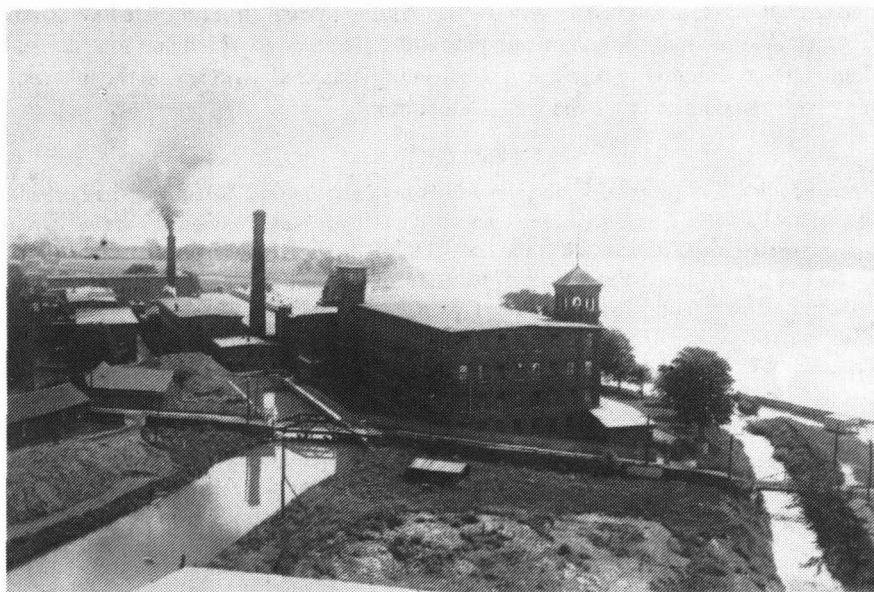
<sup>13</sup>Marc Miller, *The Irony of Victory: World War II and Lowell, Massachusetts* (Urbana 1988); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990); and Gail Cuthbert-Brandt, "Weaving it Together": Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 113-25.

<sup>14</sup>In her article "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital and Class*, 8 (Summer 1979), Heidi Hartmann defines patriarchy as "a set of social relations between men, which have a material base and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men and enable them to dominate women," 11. Sylvia Walby divides these social relations into six structures which include: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions. See her recent work *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford 1990), 20.

<sup>15</sup>Zillah Eisenstein asserts that, "patriarchy provides the sexual hierarchical ordering of society for political control and as a political system cannot be reduced to its economic structure; while capitalism as an economic class system driven by the pursuit of profit fends off the patriarchal ordering. Together, they form the political economy of society, not merely one or another, but a particular blend of the two." *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York 1979), 28. Hartmann argues that the two systems are separate but interacting systems and Walby argues that patriarchy and capitalism are independent and often at odds with one another, since they possess different interests vis-à-vis women's labour power. This argument is expressed in their respective works "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," and *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Cambridge 1986).

## I

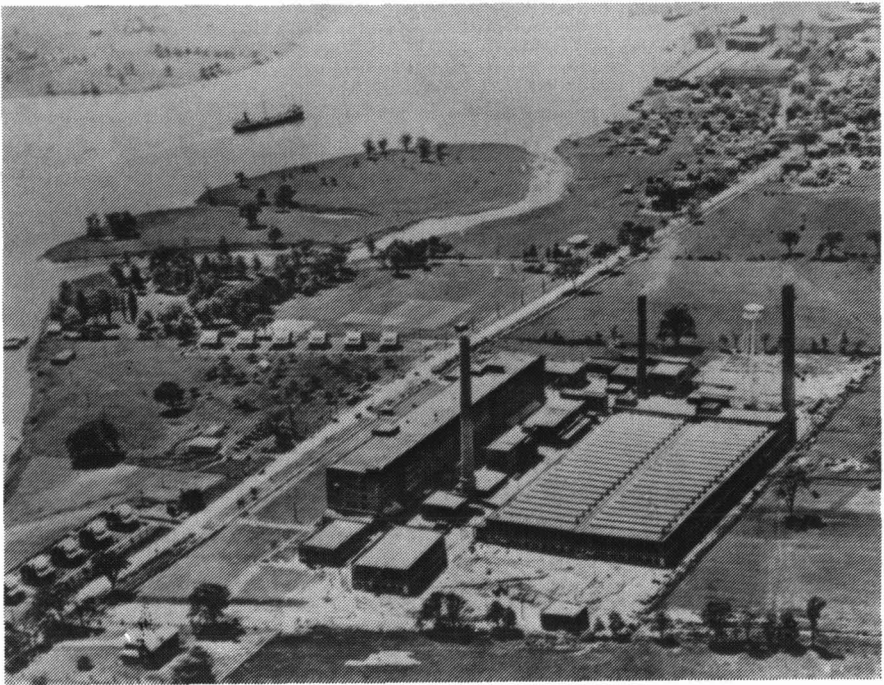
THE CITY OF CORNWALL was known during the late-19th and early-20th centuries as one of Canada's major centre of textile production. Ever since the first cotton mills were erected during the 1870s, the town's identity and economic fortunes remained intimately tied to its three cotton mills. Although there were many other types of industries in Cornwall, it was the textile mills that produced the most capital and provided the most jobs to the city's labouring citizens.<sup>16</sup> In 1927, British entrepreneur Samuel Courtaulds set up a branch plant of his rayon company in Cornwall. While the cotton mills had to compete with many other cotton companies across Canada, Courtaulds enjoyed a monopolistic reign over Canada's viscose-rayon market up until the 1940s.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Cornwall was a magnet to immigrants



View of Canadian Cottons Limited, Cornwall, Ont., c.1890s, *National Archives of Canada, National Photography Collection. Andrew Merrilees Collection. Acc. No. 1980-149. Series Group C. Box 6784. PA-163922.*

<sup>16</sup>J.F. Pringle, *Lunenburg, or the Old Eastern District, its Settlement and Early Progress* (Cornwall 1890), 294 and *Cornwall: City of Opportunity* (Cornwall 1950), 24.

<sup>17</sup>Although there was another company located in Québec, Canadian Celanese, that produced rayon fabrics, it relied on another process using cellulose acetate. It was also a much smaller operation and did not pose a challenge to Courtaulds until the 1940s. This information was extracted from the Report of the *Royal Commission into the Textile Industry* (hereafter RRCIT) (Ottawa 1938), 49 and the "Brief of Courtaulds Canada Ltd.," presented to the Trade Tariff Commission, Ottawa, 1945, 3.



Aerial view of the artificial silk, rayon, plant of Courtauld's (Canada) Ltd., Cornwall, Ont., 1935. *National Archives of Canada, National Photography Collection. National Film Board of Canada. Acc. No. 1971-271. Item B-1. C-046217*

and labour from rural areas, and even during the tumultuous depression years it sustained the Cornwall economy.

A second element that made Cornwall unique was its population's ethnic composition. Although the town was originally settled by Scottish Loyalists during the late-18th century, more than a thousand French Canadians moved to Cornwall during the 1870s to seek work in the mills.<sup>18</sup> During the 1940s, 50 per cent of the town's citizens were of Anglo-Saxon descent, 42 per cent were French Canadians and the remaining eight per cent came from European countries such as Italy, Hungary, Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands. There also were a small number of native Canadians living in Cornwall and immigrants from Asian countries such as Japan and China.<sup>19</sup> Although these groups were of different cultural and religious backgrounds, they worked closely together in the mills and as such shared,

<sup>18</sup>The number of French Canadians rose during the decade between 1871 to 1881 from 223 to 1,323. Elinor Senior, *From Royal Township to Industrial City, 1784-1984* (Belleville 1983), 237.

<sup>19</sup>*Canada Census 1941, Vol. 2, 434-5.*



Sorting room at Courtauld's (Canada) Ltd., Cornwall, Ont., c.1932, *Photo by unknown, National Archives of Canada, National Photography Collection. National Film Board of Canada. Acc. no. 1971-271. Series B. Item no. 74. C-053871.*

experience as textile workers. One anglophone textile worker who was married to a francophone employee noted the closeness that existed in Cornwall between the mills' multi-ethnic work force, stating that "people were tied together through intermarriage, family ties and as neighbours."<sup>20</sup>

While Courtaulds and the three cotton mills in Cornwall produced different types of products and utilized different manufacturing processes, all relied heavily on female workers. Traditionally, women represented as high as half of the work force at the cotton mills during the pre-depression years.<sup>21</sup> During the 1930s, however, their numbers began to decline due to two factors: technological innovations that made many female jobs obsolete; and secondly, the policy of the employers to give preference to male workers during the depression years. This

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Mr. Gordon Jarrett, 11 September 1989.

<sup>21</sup>In 1925, women comprised 43.8 per cent of the cotton industry and 64.4 per cent of the silk and artificial silk industry in Canada. RRCTI, 149.



latter trend was predicated on the prevailing notion that the men were the "bread-winners" of the family and as such were in greater need of jobs.<sup>22</sup> By 1937, both industries began to implement massive layoffs of both men and women but women's proportion in the mills plummeted to 22 per cent of the work force in the cotton industry and 40 per cent at Courtaulds.<sup>23</sup>

Married women became one of the main targets at Courtaulds following the signing of an agreement between the union and company in 1937, which was introduced and promoted by the union. It stipulated that married women would be laid off before single girls in the mills.<sup>24</sup> Although the company was somewhat reluctant to discharge these women, since many of them possessed more experience than the younger single girls, by 1939 the company felt that it had no choice but to capitulate to the union in order to gain labour cooperation in a massive lay-off scheme involving 148 men, 147 girls, and 6 boys.<sup>25</sup>

Although the decline of female workers was a temporary trend in the textile mills, occupational segregation by sex was a permanent fixture that had endured since the establishment of the first mill during the 1870s. Each job in the mill was assigned to a specific sex. The men in the mill were usually placed in the supervisory positions or jobs that required greater skill or strength such as loom-fixing, dyeing, and bleaching in the cotton mills, or doffing, fixing, and engineering in the rayon mills. The women, in contrast, were relegated to the semi-skilled and unskilled jobs, which usually involved work on the machines or in the finishing room.<sup>26</sup> These occupational divisions within the mills had existed for so long and had remained such an intrinsic part of the textile industry that they were rarely questioned and were viewed, in fact, as quite natural by employers and workers

<sup>22</sup>Both trends were noted in the *RRCTI*, which stated that, "there has been a tendency in Canada in recent years for the proportion of female workers to decline in the principal sections of the textile industry. This trend was particularly noticeable during the depression period when many employers gave preference to male employees and particularly those with dependents." *Ibid.*, 149. Between 1924 and 1941, Courtaulds had increased their machines from 24 to 151. *Standard-Freeholder*, 30 January 1943, 20.

<sup>23</sup>*Standard-Freeholder*, 5 February 1937, 1.

<sup>24</sup>At the time, it was felt that the married women should be laid-off before the single women, since they had a husband to support them. It was not uncommon, however, for married women to conceal their marital status from the union and companies in order to protect their jobs. National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Greater Cornwall Textile Joint Board Records (hereafter GCTJB), MG 28 I 219, Vol. 96, file #4, 4, Minutes from meeting held on 28 April 1939.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, Minutes from meeting held on 8 March 1939.

<sup>26</sup>Gail Cuthbert Brandt notes that "many of the traits of the accomplished weaver were those traditionally associated with women: nimble fingers; long slender hands; and a careful attention to detail. By contrast, not even the most intelligent female weavers were considered potential candidates for the position of loom fixer." "The Transformation of Women's Work in the Quebec Cotton Industry, 1920-1950," in Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle* (Toronto: 1986), 120.

alike. One man who worked at Courtaulds, Gordon Jarrett, described the rigid and institutionalized quality of the system as he knew it in the 1930s:

All the girls worked on the same type of jobs and the men on the others. You never had any mix of women on the men's jobs, nor did they have any mixing in the women's rooms. Women worked in lighter jobs that required more dexterity and speed. In our mill there were very definite divisions of labour. It had always been that way and that was the concept at that time, that there were jobs for women and there were jobs for men.<sup>27</sup>

This hierarchical system formed the basis of the capitalist-patriarchal order in the mills, which provided capital with a cheaper labour pool while male workers gained or maintained greater power, authority, and pay than their female counterparts.

One of the direct results of this gender-based structure, was the creation of significant wage differentials between the male and female textile workers. These gaps were especially pronounced in the rayon industry, where men earned as much as 50 per cent more than women. The average weekly salary for men in the rayon industry in Ontario was \$23.24 in 1934, while women earned a meagre average weekly income of \$12.60. In the cotton industry, the men earned a significantly lower salary than their rayon-industry counterparts, making \$17.26 a week on average. The female cotton workers, in turn, earned an average of \$13.13 a week.<sup>28</sup> While these paltry female salaries were clearly inadequate to support a woman at that time, wage levels were based on the assumption that all the women working in the mills were dependents, and as such had their husbands and families to support them and therefore only needed enough for "pin money."<sup>29</sup> It was this misconception, then, that served to perpetuate the use of wage differentials within the mills.

## II

THE WAR YEARS did not alter or improve the situation of female textile workers significantly. If anything, the war produced new emotional and psychological hardships for these women. During the first two years of the war, a large segment of the workers at the mills left, either to serve their country abroad by joining the military, or in search of brighter occupational prospects in the war industries of large industrial centres like Toronto, Hamilton, and Montréal.

<sup>27</sup>Interview with Gordon Jarrett.

<sup>28</sup>RRCTI, Exhibit #1289, 290.

<sup>29</sup>This trend was noted in the Royal Commission, which remarked that "the textile industry in some respects has been a "family" industry, in that often the children and sometimes the wife, in addition to the family-head, find employment in the one mill." They continue to add that "there has been a tendency on the part of employers to consider the wages which they pay not solely in relation to the requirements of the workers with dependents, but on the basis of the joint income which may be secured by a family if several of its members are employed." *Ibid.*, 157.

While the single female workers were able to spend some discretionary time engaged in organized sports and dances during the war, the married women were suddenly thrust into the role of being both a single parent and provider.<sup>30</sup> Although many husbands remitted to their wives weekly military pay cheques, these salaries often were very small. One married rayon worker, Rose Booth, received about ten dollars a week, approximately half the salary that her husband had received before the war at Courtaulds.<sup>31</sup> The sudden loss of income had the effect of increasing the need for the wives to work, in order to support their families during the war. For most women this was an arduous task, with the rising cost of living and a salary that remained fixed at thirteen dollars a week, it was often difficult for most of these women to make their monthly rent and furniture payments.<sup>32</sup>

The wartime financial burdens of married women were compounded by the problem of finding proper housing and daycare services for their children while they worked in the mills during the day. The local paper noted the scarcity of low-rental homes in Cornwall in 1943. The woman they interviewed, Miss Margaret Conliffe, Family Welfare Bureau assistant secretary, stated:

The housing situation has become serious. There are a few low rent houses in Cornwall and when one is available most owners refuse to take a family with children and some bluntly say that they do not want a soldier's wife in their house. There may be some justification for that attitude in certain cases but there are many worthy soldier's wives and families who are having great difficulty to find a home and get along on a small income.<sup>33</sup>

Although the government had funded daycare facilities for working women with children during the war, they were intended for those women who were employed by the war industries, and as such, were located in Ontario industrial cities such as Hamilton, Toronto and its suburbs.<sup>34</sup> Unable to take advantage of these subsidized daycare facilities, Cornwall's female textile workers were forced to rely on the services of family, friends, and babysitters instead, which in the latter two cases, often took a significant bite out of their incomes.

<sup>30</sup>During the war, the union and company sponsored softball games for the women as well as dances that were held at the local military base. The softball teams were organized by the local companies in town. This sport therefore provided some friendly rivalry between the young women from the different mills. The *Standard-Freeholder*, 11 July 1945, 8; and NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 100, File #3, letter from Lt.-Col. Larose to Leo Tessier, President, 15 January 1944.

<sup>31</sup>Interview with Rose Booth, 2 October 1989.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Standard-Freeholder*, 7 April 1943, 3.

<sup>34</sup>Within Ontario, 13 of the 18 nurseries that were established and funded by the government during the war were located in industrial Toronto; the rest were situated in Brantford, St. Catharines, Hamilton, Galt, and Oshawa. See "Ontario Day Nurseries Meet Wartime Emergency," *Standard-Freeholder*, 26 February 1944, 9.

In addition to the financial strains that these women faced, wartime conditions were an emotionally stressful time as well. One woman who worked at Canadian Cottons, Lucille Duschesne Jarrett, recalled tearful goodbyes to the men going off to war.<sup>35</sup> Although married women in particular feared for the fate of their husbands, most other workers had a family member or close friend who was fighting in the war. Throughout this period, the atmosphere within the mills was much more grave and sombre than it had been during the 1930s. There was a pervasive fear among workers that they would be called into the manager's office and presented with the fateful telegram, informing them of the loss of a spouse or child. Lucille Jarrett described the scene, stating that "they were coming with papers that their husbands got killed. Everyday there was a note to someone who went to see the boss and he was looking at you and you knew there was something wrong there."<sup>36</sup>

Although the departure of the men who left to join the armed forces took a lasting emotional toll from those women who stayed behind, it had the positive effect of creating vacancies in the mills, many of which were filled by the women who had been laid off during the depression years. Following the establishment of a war contract agreement between the textile companies and the government, the demand for labour was considerably heightened. Throughout the war years, the cotton and rayon mills were engaged in producing a wide variety of war goods. Courtaulds had altered many of its machines in the spinning room to accommodate the production of material for parachute and tire yarn. The cotton mills, in turn, manufactured tacking for the army, flannelette for the auxiliary forces, khaki drill for fatigue uniforms, and blankets for the men. These war contracts made up a considerable portion of the cotton companies' total production, representing 33-35 per cent of their output in 1943.<sup>37</sup> As the production demands at the mills increased during this period, so too did the pressure to hire more workers to keep up with war orders.

Throughout the war, employment in Canada was handled by the National Selective Service (NSS). The NSS was established on 21 March 1942 and was administered by the Minister of Labour. Its mandate was to direct the civilian labour supply toward meeting the requirements of war and essential services.<sup>38</sup> In order to hire any workers, the textile mills were required to go through the NSS. The problem, however, was that the government had given the war production companies priority over the consumer industries in drawing from the labour pool. While the textile companies in Cornwall were indeed producing materials to be used in the war, they were initially assigned a "C" rating on a scale from A to D in terms

<sup>35</sup>Interview with Lucille Duschesne Jarrett, 20 September 1989.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Brief of Courtaulds Ltd.* presented to the Trade Tariff Committee (Ottawa 1945), 3; and the *Standard-Freeholder* 30 January 1943, 7.

<sup>38</sup>*Canada Year Book* 1944, 9.

of necessary war production.<sup>39</sup> As a result, the local NSS was required to send most of Cornwall's eligible and mobile workers to war industries located in some of the larger industrial cities, leaving only a small number to work in the mills.<sup>40</sup>

Considering Cornwall's resulting labour scarcity, especially at the textile mills, one would imagine that the women would have found all types of employment opportunities due to the severe and pervasive shortage of men. Indeed, Mark Miller's *The Irony of Victory: World War Two and Lowell, Massachusetts* has stressed the considerable employment opportunities that women were afforded during the war in Lowell, the famous American cotton mill town. Miller asserts that the presence of war industries in Lowell and nearby Boston allowed women to leave the textile mills and secure higher-paid jobs in war industries. This exodus from the mills, in turn, prodded textile mill owners to increase the salaries of their workers, in order to remain competitive with the war industries. As a result, he contends, in addition to earning higher salaries, female workers experienced greater freedom and more choices than ever before.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Lowell, however, Cornwall possessed only one war industry which employed mostly men. The opportunities for war work were in the larger industrial cities, and thus available only to the mobile portion of the work force.<sup>42</sup> Many women, in fact, remained in Cornwall and continued to toil in the mills, preferring to accept the poor pay and work conditions rather than relocating, which would force them to leave friends and family. This reluctance on the part of Cornwall's women to leave their families and homes was noted in an article published in the *Standard-Freeholder*. The writer stated that while the registration of female workers was increasing, "frequently, it is found that applicants prefer to remain at home or in the nearby district."<sup>43</sup> While some single girls moved, most married women were not as mobile, and consequently had to remain in Cornwall and continue to work in the mills in order to support their children and to wait for their husbands to return.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup>*The Canadian Textile Journal*, 60, 19, (September 1943), 17.

<sup>40</sup>This information was extracted from the article, "Desperate Need for Women to Aid in War Production," published in the *Standard-Freeholder*, 30 July 1942, 3.

<sup>41</sup>Marc Miller, *The Irony of Victory: World War II and Lowell, Massachusetts*, 56.

<sup>42</sup>Ruth Pierson illustrates that the NSS policy was to recruit the younger and more mobile female segment of the Canadian population during the early war years. This particular recruiting strategy, she asserts, was a means of resolving Canadian industries' pressing labour shortage problems, without disturbing the traditional family system. "*They're Still Women After All*": *The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*, 23-4.

<sup>43</sup>"War Plants Call for Female Help," *Standard-Freeholder*, 24 July 1942, 1.

<sup>44</sup>Although there is no quantitative data available to substantiate this trend, the oral interviews and newspaper articles indicated that most of the married women stayed behind, while the more mobile single women were more likely to search for work in the war industries outside of town.

In addition to emphasizing the new outside employment opportunities that women encountered during the war, most liberal historians have argued, too, that women gained considerable occupational mobility within industries during the war. They contend that following the exodus of male workers, the women were granted the unprecedented opportunity of entering those higher paying "male" jobs that had once been restricted to men before the war. One proponent of this argument, Karen Anderson, maintains that the "wartime imperatives were thus undermining somewhat the sex-segregated labor market and the ideas that perpetuated it, long an impediment to the economic advancement of women."<sup>45</sup> Rather than experiencing any type of alterations in the traditional sex-segregated labour structure of Cornwall's cotton and rayon companies during the war, however, women continued to be relegated to the same lower-paid, lesser-skilled occupations in the mills. Although some minor changes were implemented within the cotton mills, the sex-typed structure remained virtually intact throughout the war years in the Cornwall plants.<sup>46</sup>

During the early war period, much of Cornwall's adult male population began to enlist or search for work in some of the war plants outside of town. This large exodus of men created severe labour shortages in the mills.<sup>47</sup> It was the cotton mills, however, that suffered the worst, due to the companies' lower pay structure for its male workers. As a result, those men who remained in town often chose to work in the other industries in Cornwall including Courtaulds, which offered considerably higher wages to males. Although the cotton mills hired more women, they continued to remain segregated in the traditionally "female" occupations. The only exception to this rule occurred in the weaving room, where management was forced to engage an increased number of women as weavers, an occupation that while never designated a "male" job, was, in fact, preponderantly a male preserve before the war. Rather than going out into the community and hiring men in who had no experience at jobs at these levels, Canadian Cottons began to promote those women who had assisted in the weaving process as battery fillers before the war. Although the women were pushed up in the ranks in the weaving rooms, their salaries did not truly reflect this promotion. For instead of paying these women the same wages as male weavers, the company continued to pay them salaries that were only a little higher, but consistent with women's salaries elsewhere in the mill.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 6.

<sup>46</sup>See Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 1 for evidence regarding occupational segmentation by sex in the three cotton companies and Courtaulds during the war years.

<sup>47</sup>The 1941 *Census* indicated that 719 men from Cornwall left to serve in the armed forces during the early years of the war. They comprised approximately 24 per cent of the existing male work force in 1941. *Canadian Census*, 1941, Vol. VI, 14-5 and Vol. VII, 244.

<sup>48</sup>Interview with Lucille Duschesne Jarrett. Also see Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix 2 for more detailed information about the wage scales for the employees of Canadian Cottons and Courtaulds.

The situation at Courtaulds remained even more strictly segregated as the union men there had always held firm to segregation by sex, due to the greater wage differentials involved.<sup>49</sup> The rayon company attempted to fill its unoccupied positions by offering women more machines to tend at slightly higher pay, but the hard work and stress involved far outweighed the financial benefits. Women also were permitted to take over the "boy's" jobs that could be described as "gophering" type positions, requiring great speed and strength. While the girls in those jobs enjoyed the change of work, they found once again that the meagre financial benefits did not compensate for the more strenuous work.<sup>50</sup> Although the company and the union were willing to allow women to take on a heavier work load or move into the "boys'" jobs, they were unwilling to promote them to the more lucrative "male" jobs such as loom fixing, spinning, dyeing, and bleaching, despite wartime labour shortages. This deliberate attempt on the part of the companies and union to maintain the traditional gender hierarchy at the mills is supported by the figures in the chart below:

Breakdown of occupations by sex in the Cornwall Textile mills

Occupation	Number of males	Number of females	Total	% Men	% Women
Foremen	65	8	73	89	11
Bleachers and Dyers	31	2	33	94	6
Loom Fixers and Card Grinders	23	0	23	100	0
Spinners and Twisters	108	32	140	77	23
Weavers	147	57	204	72	28

Canadian Census 1941, Vol. 7, 244-52.

While some women apparently were employed in these traditionally "male" positions, the vast majority of female workers remained segregated in lower-paid "female" jobs.

Considering the firm position taken by the company concerning job segregation by sex, one would imagine that it would encounter problems keeping up production during the war, especially in the men's departments. Surprisingly, the mills were able to recruit enough men to keep the companies functioning at their

<sup>49</sup>According to the 1941 *Census*, the women at the cotton mills in Ontario were earning 58 per cent of the men's salary, while their counterparts in the silk and artificial silk industries took in a mere 46 per cent of the salary that the men in the mills earned. Canadian *Census* 1941, Vol. 6, 534-5.

<sup>50</sup>The boys' salaries ranged from about 28 to 40 cents an hour, a marginal increase from the women's salaries. Interview with Mrs. Jean Beaks O'Brian, 23 September 1989.

required levels. One company representative, Jack Mills, asserted that "they didn't have trouble getting labour at Courtaulds, I can assure you, everybody was glad to work there at that time."<sup>51</sup>

Most of the male recruits came from outlying rural towns. Another group of men who helped fill the empty ranks in the men's departments were those individuals who were either too young, too old, or unfit physically to go off to war.<sup>52</sup> While many of these men who were labelled 4F by the military simply had minor physical problems or ailments, the companies, during this time, were accepting any male capable of operating a machine. One worker, Joe Vaillancourt, recalled that the company even hired handicapped men to fill in for those who had left. He stated that "the company hired people who were not hired before because of an artificial leg or a small arm or something like that. They even hired a blind man who was responsible for nailing plywood boxes together to pack the yarn."<sup>53</sup> Clearly, this was not an enlightened policy toward the handicapped but rather an effort to maintain gender divisions within the mills. The last group of men that was brought in to alleviate the labour shortages in the men's departments were immigrants from Poland, Hungary, and Italy, who had arrived in Cornwall during the depression years and did not serve in the war.

Although the two companies found enough men to keep production going, they never secured enough to replace all the male employees who had left. They could have moved some women into these jobs, but they decided instead to leave such positions vacant, losing profits in the process. During the years after 1943, however, the emergence of severe labour shortages and growing absenteeism among male mill workers during this time temporarily forced the companies to reconsider their segregation policies.

Throughout 1942-43, the two companies began to suffer from chronic absenteeism which slowed production and exacerbated the companies' labour-shortage problems. With the exodus of many of the town's men to the military and the lure of higher-paid jobs in war industries in and outside of Cornwall during this time, the mills found themselves unable to maintain enough workers in the traditionally male jobs. One main factor that led to the exodus was the NSS autumn 1943 ceiling on the wages paid to those employed in non-war industries.<sup>54</sup> This meant that the textile companies could not increase the salaries of their workers without the NSS permission. Since this process took some time, the mills ended up losing a large number of their workers to the more lucrative war industries. Mrs. Rex Eaton, NSS associate director, noted this trend, asserting that "the wage rate for beginners now

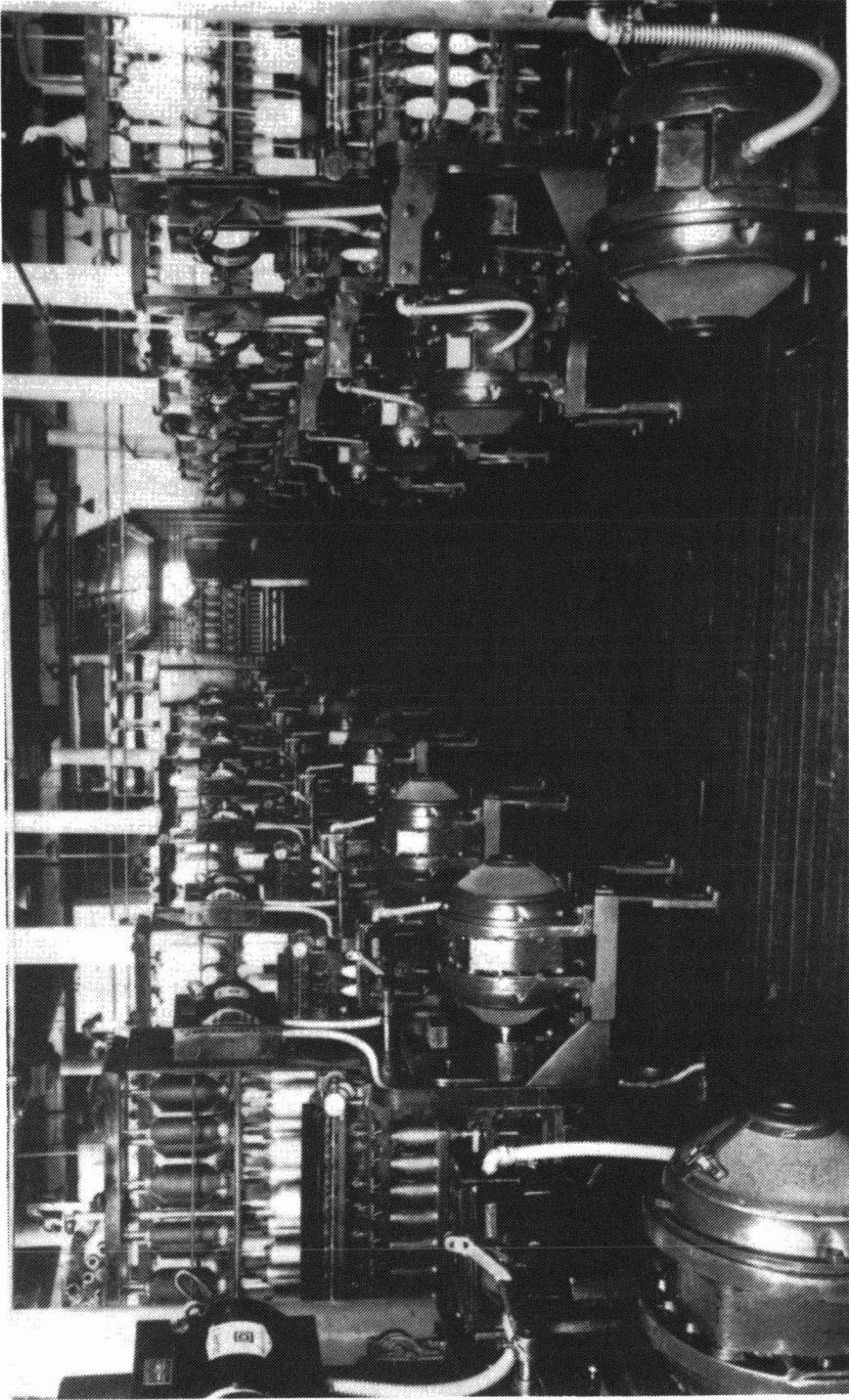
<sup>51</sup>Interview with Jack Mills, 25 September 1989.

<sup>52</sup>*Cornwall: City of Opportunity*, 24.

<sup>53</sup>Interview with Joe Vaillancourt, 20 September 1989.

<sup>54</sup>NAC, Records of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, RG 64, Vol. 45, "Report on the Canadian Textile Industry," June 1944, 45.





Spinning room of the Stormont mill, Cornwall, Ont., N.D., National Archives of Canada, National Photography Collection. National Film Board of Canada. Acc. no. 1971-271. Item no. B-11. PA-800607.

paid in some cotton mills understandably is one handicap in making referrals of suitable applicants."<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the departures, the mills also suffered from a high level of turnover and absenteeism in the "men's" jobs. In January 1943 alone, Courtaulds experienced a 37 per cent turnover in the spinning room.<sup>56</sup> Competition eventually took its toll on the mills, for in just one year, the production rates of both companies began to decline by 10 per cent and 15 per cent in the cotton and rayon mills respectively.<sup>57</sup> In order to enlarge their labour pool, the companies began to hire back those employees who had been laid off during the 1930s, and temporarily rescinded the 1937 policy regarding married women. In a letter from the president of the union to the manager of Courtaulds, Mr. Edward Hazeley, the union conceded to the company's request to terminate the 1937 agreement temporarily, stating that "recognizing the difficulty of obtaining suitable female employees, we are in complete agreement that previous commitments regarding the restriction of their employment shall be considered non-existent for the duration of the war."<sup>58</sup>

In addition to rehiring former employees and hiring married women, the companies attempted to solve their severe shortage of male workers by seeking a higher priority-rating from the NSS, which would enable them to acquire extra male workers in order to fill in the serious gaps.<sup>59</sup> When this request failed to elicit an immediate response from the NSS, Courtaulds felt that it had no recourse but to pursue a different and more radical course of action. Faced with growing war orders and a declining male workforce, it chose to abandon temporarily the old gender-segregation policy in favour of higher productivity and profits.

On 16 April 1943, Courtaulds broached the subject of allowing women to fill the empty "male" jobs for the duration of the war. Motivated more by economic necessity than any type of altruistic or feminist spirit, the Courtaulds manager Edward Hazeley attempted to demonstrate to the union how all the other attempted solutions had failed to create an adequate labour pool and as such there was no other option but that of allowing the women to work in some of the "men's" jobs.

<sup>55</sup>NAC, Records of the Department of Labour, RG 27, Vol. 666, file #6-5-21-1, Memorandum written by Mrs. Rex Eaton, 13 September 1945, 1-2. The male learners at the mills were earning \$.285-.414 an hour and their female counterparts earned \$.235-.3175 an hour at the time. Many of the war industries, in contrast, were paying salaries that were close to one dollar an hour for men and more than 50 cents for women. NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, File #R-3, pt. 3, Memorandum from Primary Textiles Institute to Donald Gordon, Chairman of the National Textiles and Leather Requirements Committee, 21 June 1943, 5.

<sup>56</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file #7, Minutes of a meeting 20 January 1942, 1.

<sup>57</sup>NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, file# R-3(5), "Proposals for Standardizing Production and Releasing Manpower in the Textile Industry," November 1942, Tables IV and VI.

<sup>58</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 100, file #1, Letter from Textile Workers Union of Canada, local 3, to E. Hazeley, 25 April 1942.

<sup>59</sup>NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, file #R3-1, Letter from V.W. Boyd, Canadian Cotton Co., to the National Selective Services, 21 May 1943.

Hazeley proposed this controversial change at a joint meeting of company and union representatives. He asserted:

There are quite a number of jobs that can be done by girls. That does not mean I am asking to get rid of these men. We have quite a number of cases where they actually refused to do the job and because I wanted manpower I have not fired them.

The union members seemed to be a little surprised and unclear about the proposition that Hazeley was making and asked him to elaborate on it. Hazeley continued:

One or two of the spindle motor men have to go into other jobs. I will have to replace them. There is a definite case of where we could get husky girls who could do the job.<sup>60</sup>

Rather than readily accepting the request, the union representatives inquired as to whether the women on these jobs would receive the same salaries as men. Hazeley responded by explaining that:

If a girl takes a man's job she gets that man's rate providing one girl can do one man's job. If I get girls in the spinning who can doff they will get fifty cents an hour. I am not objecting to the wages for any girl replacing a man. If she can do the job she should get a man's rate. We have to get the spindle situation better so that we can get going without criticism.<sup>61</sup>

Even after the company agreed to meet this request as well as that of supplying work clothing for the women, the union remained reluctant to accept the placement of women in "male" jobs. It is apparent that while the company was finally willing to waive temporarily the job barriers that had excluded women from the "men's" jobs and pay them wages equal to the men, it was the union that proved reluctant to adopt this new scheme. Throughout the war, the union waged its own internal conflict within the mills, one aimed at protecting job barriers that had in the past protected them from competition with the women and from the possible erosion of their higher wages.

When explaining the union's attitude, one active union member, Gordon Jarrett, argued that there were a number of factors behind the union men's reluctance to consider letting women work in the "male" jobs. The factors he cited included: the women's lack of physical strength to take on the more strenuous male jobs; the lack of suitable washrooms and changing rooms for the women in the men's departments; and finally, the possibility of weakening the union's organizational strength should the women enter the male departments. Jarrett expanded upon this final point, stating that "I think one of the things that might have bothered the men was the fact that the union was not as strong in the women's departments as it was in the men's and that there might be the possibility of a loss of some

<sup>60</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file #7, Minutes from meeting held on 16 April 1943, 7.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

concessions down the line."<sup>62</sup> While perhaps some of the men truly were convinced of the validity and weight of these potential problems, for most these were excuses which simply served to mask their fear of female competition. One male worker revealed the men's sentiments, stating that "at that time there was no such thing as getting women to work in men's jobs. In those days there were laws and the protective mood of the men that they didn't want the women to cut in on their job."<sup>63</sup> Prompted by the desire to preserve their dominant position in the mills, the union men actually undermined the female members' chances for advancement by fighting for the perpetuation of occupational segregation. Obviously, the union brothers had a gender-specific notion of solidarity.

While the company appeared willing — even eager — to set aside the existing job barriers for the women, they made no effort to try to improve the job conditions or wages of their female workers. Conditions and pay, in fact, differed little from those that existed before the war. The companies continued to pay men by the hour, but used a piecework quota system within the women's workrooms. Whereas the men at the mills were able to earn as high as 77 cents an hour during this time, women's wage ceilings were set at 31 cents an hour at Courtaulds.<sup>64</sup> In order to earn this salary, however, the women had to meet the established quota for a three-week period of time. If they failed to sustain their production during this interval, their salaries would be cut to 25 to 28 cents an hour and they would face the prospect of severe chastisement from their managers.<sup>65</sup> In order to earn the top salary of 31 cents again, the women would have to meet the quota for three consecutive weeks.<sup>66</sup> Since the quotas were often set too high for the women to reach, a number of them would arrive at work before the factory opened in order to get a head start on their work. They were not remunerated for this extra time. Those employees who not only met but surpassed the quotas also found themselves unrewarded, for the company refused to pay a salary above the ceiling of 31 cents.

In November 1943, the female workers and the union representatives addressed and questioned this system, arguing that it was unfair for the women to

<sup>62</sup>Interview with Gordon Jarrett.

<sup>63</sup>Interview with Joe Vaillancourt.

<sup>64</sup>During the war, the company established a maximum wage of 31 cents an hour for those female workers who had successfully met their quotas. The men, in contrast, were paid by the hour and began to earn substantially higher salaries than those that existed before the war. Male workers' salaries tended to begin at 36 cents an hour for the unskilled positions to over 70 cents an hour for skilled occupations like engineering and loom-fixing. NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, file #R3-4, "Textile Report," 19 March 1945, 2.

<sup>65</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file #7, Minutes from the joint meeting on 14 October 1941, 9. Some of this information was also acquired during my interview with Jean Beaks O'Brian.

<sup>66</sup>One company representative, Mr. Thomas, explained how this system worked, stating that "a girl has to drop boards consistently for three weeks before her wages are reduced but when they come to make their boards they have to make them for three weeks before they get an increase." *Ibid.*, 8.



Interior view of one of the mills of Canadian Cottons Ltd., Cornwall, Ont., 1948. Photo by Malak. National Archives of Canada, National Photography Collection. Malak Collection. Acc. no. 1985-070. Item 959-11245. PA-179681.

work on their machines, even after they had satisfied their quotas. Hazeley responded to this complaint, asserting that:

The girl has to work the full eight hours of the shift. Nobody has ever said that 250 cakes is all we expect of a girl. We know that more cakes can be coned than that. The 250 cakes is only the minimum number of cakes that we expect for 31 cents an hour. If she falls below 250 then she doesn't get 31 cents. A good many girls do more than 250, and we expect more than 250 from any girl being paid 31 cents.<sup>67</sup>

While the natural tendency on the part of the women was to slow down or actually stop their machines after they met their quota, the company enforced its unpopular policy by empowering their staff with the right to use almost any type of tactic, including coercion, to see that the 'girls' not only made their production but worked at their machines until the end of the day.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, Vol. 96, file #7, 10 November 1943, 4.

## III

UNLIKE THE MEN, who enjoyed a great deal of protection and privilege in the mills during the war years, the women constantly faced the threat of being dismissed if they failed to meet their quotas. Rather than remaining passive victims, the women at Courtaulds adopted a security scheme based on mutual cooperation. The practice for older and more-skilled women to use their extra time at the end of the day to help those who were struggling to meet quotas. One coning machine operator at Courtaulds, Jean Beaks O'Brian, explained that "if they said that I was faster than another girl, I would take some of her cakes and help her get done. If I was done ahead, we would help one another."<sup>68</sup> Another worker, Dorothy Chisamore, explained her view of this practice, asserting that:

According to the plant we were supposed to work right up until the end, but why if you're finished your production and you're standing there, it's just as easy to tie a broken end up and let it run off for the other one. That's how I saw it. So if you were working it would be just as easy for you to do that so that if the girl said she left it nice for me, I'll leave it nice for her.<sup>69</sup>

Rather than giving in to the company's plan of creating an individualistic and competitive labour force, the women developed their own system aimed at protecting one another from either dismissal or severe chastisement. It was this type of strategy based on mutual aid, that enabled them to endure the often cruel and unfair treatment that they received from the company during this time.

In addition to the problems with wartime wages and the quota system, the women also received poor and occasionally-coercive treatment by their foremen and floor ladies in the workrooms. Although the majority of the women who worked in Ontario's textile mills were between ages 20 and 34, they were treated like little girls, incapable of behaving properly without the watchful eye of the floor lady and the strict policies of the company.<sup>70</sup> In addition to having to respond to the piercing sound of the whistle that blew at three different intervals during the day, they also had to face the indignity of asking their floor lady's permission to use the washroom.<sup>71</sup> While the men could come and go at will and visit the washroom whenever it suited them, the company felt that the 'girls' would abuse this type of freedom by arriving late and chatting in the washrooms with their friends. To prevent this, the company posted a woman in the washrooms who was

<sup>68</sup>Interview with Jean Beaks O'Brian.

<sup>69</sup>Interview with Dorothy Chisamore, 24 September 1989.

<sup>70</sup>The *Canadian Census* reveals that only 33 per cent of women who worked in cotton, silk and artificial silk industries in Ontario were between the ages of fourteen to twenty. Fifty-seven per cent of the female workers, in turn, were between ages 20 and 34, and the remaining 10 per cent of the women ranged from 35 to 70 years of age. *Canadian Census* 1941, Vol. 7, 594-7.

<sup>71</sup>Interview with Dorothy Chisamore.

responsible for recording the name of each 'girl' who came in and for ensuring that nobody spent too much time there. When the union and the women raised this grievance at one of the joint meetings with the company representative, Mr. Giles, he demonstrated his reluctance to alter this policy, stating that "you have to have some plan and system about it. You couldn't have a broad ruling that any girl could go any place without permission." One of the women attending the meeting illustrated her frustration and distaste for this practice, arguing "that is school days."<sup>72</sup>

Another practice that the women found intolerable was that of the floor ladies inspecting and cutting the female workers' fingernails if they were deemed too long. While the company argued that this was a safety measure against having the women get their nails stuck in the machines, their real concern was the quality of the yarn and the possibility that the women might accidentally rip or damage the product. It is evident that the company promoted these types of degrading and patriarchal practices as a method of establishing a system of shopfloor control over the 'girls' in order to insure higher production and profit at the expense of the workers' sense of freedom and pride.<sup>73</sup>

The final and most serious problem that the female workers were exposed to during the war was that which we refer to today as "sexual harassment" by their foremen. While many of these foremen were married men in their mid-thirties or forties, and supposedly respectable individuals, there were a number at the mills who took advantage of their powerful position by verbally and physically harassing their female workers. Many of these cases went unreported, since the young women often were too frightened to report such incidents to the management or union for fear that they would not believe them or even worse punish them. One woman who was herself the victim of this type of harassment brought no charge because she feared that the company would probably dismiss the accusation and insinuate that it was she who was responsible for leading on the foreman, thereby damaging her reputation in the workroom and the mill.<sup>74</sup> Two cases, in fact, were brought up at a joint meeting and immediately dismissed by the company. One exception to this failure to acknowledge harassment cases arose in 1940, following a strike involving all 1700 workers at Courtaulds. The union charged a company foreman, Louis Cinquini, with committing assault and improper moral behaviour in his department. Since the company was unwilling to dismiss Cinquini, the state was asked to intervene and mediate the case under the *Industrial Disputes Investigation Act*. Albert Constantineau, the judge for the County Court of Prescott and Russell, was appointed commissioner of the inquiry. The proceedings reveal that the union

<sup>72</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file #8, 16 June 1944, 7.

<sup>73</sup>Interview with Dorothy Chisamore.

<sup>74</sup>Interview with one of the women who worked at Courtaulds, September 1989. Due to the sensitive nature of this information, the woman's name will be withheld in order to protect her privacy.

initiated the charges in response to an assault made by Cinquini with a two-by-four against a young boy in his department. The additional charges of sexual impropriety were meant to support the union's case for Cinquini's dismissal. Regardless of the motives involved, it became clear throughout the hearing that the company and the judge gave no more attention to these types of cases than the union did.

On 21 September 1940, six young women, ranging in age from 17 to 24 years, testified that foreman Cinquini, had "indulged in vulgar stories or used words of a double meaning." They also revealed his physical violations of their privacy, divulging how he had pinched them or engaged in "other acts which they did not approve of."<sup>75</sup> While these female workers obviously did not elaborate on abuses out of shyness or fear of being too explicit, the numbers involved should have illustrated that something was awry. Following the trial, the judge ruled in favour of Cinquini, dismissing the testimony of the six women. Constantineau provided an explanation for his ruling and decision to ignore the "girls'" testimonies, stating that "even if the story told by the six girls who testified against him is true in every detail, the acts of impropriety imputed him are of such trivial character that they do not warrant his reputation being seriously besmirched on that account."<sup>76</sup>

Following this judgement, the union responded by writing to Judge Constantineau, explaining certain factors that they hoped might alter his decision. The union argued that the young women who testified had "a certain hesitancy in having to reveal in detail things of this nature." They also placed some of the blame on themselves, "in not having given a greater measure of consideration to the girls of the plant" and adding that "until the past few weeks, the girls had no machinery for the adjustment and consideration of their grievances, being an unorganized department." The union concluded with the statement that "it is obvious that in an unorganized department, there is the ever-present fear of discrimination and victimization when unorganized workers take it upon themselves to protest against existing conditions."<sup>77</sup> Since the union at that time operated under a closed-shop agreement, "unorganized department" must have meant that grievance procedures had not been elaborated for that particular workroom, which indicates the union's failure to supply adequate support for their female members. While the union appeared to show great sympathy for these women's situation, their concern lasted for only as long as this specific case was in progress. Following its completion, the union's interest in the issue disappeared entirely, even though harassment continued in many of the women's departments. One man summed up the situation,

<sup>75</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 107, file #3, "Report of the Commissioner," 2.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 4; Information about Judge Constantineau and the trial was extracted from the *Labour Gazette*, November 1940, 1137 and from the *Strikes and Lockout Series*, NAC, RG 27, Vol. 407, Strike #139, 99.

<sup>77</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 107, file #3, Letter from the United Textile Workers Union to Judge A. Constantineau, 26 September 1940, 6.



stating that "whatever went on wasn't taken very seriously then. . . in terms of sexual harassment." He added: "in those days, the girls looked after themselves."<sup>78</sup>

These harassment cases were only one of the many women's issues to which the union gave insufficient attention during this period. Throughout the war, the union tended to place the female workers' grievances on a backburner, giving precedence to those of the men. Considering the increased numbers of female union members during the war, one might assume that their problems would have received greater attention from their union. This situation has to be attributed, in part, to the women's lack of representation at the senior levels of the union leadership. During the war, men occupied all of the executive positions as well as those on the negotiating committees and delegation parties.<sup>79</sup> The only higher positions that the women occupied at this time were those as shop stewards. While stewards had the authority to act as intermediaries between company staff members and the female workers, their opinions and complaints were not taken very seriously or given much consideration by the union men. One woman who served as a shop steward during this time described the union meetings as being "mostly about the men."<sup>80</sup> While the men occasionally listened to some of the women's minor problems at the meetings, the one subject that weighed heaviest on the female workers' minds and received little or no consideration by their union brothers was that of wages. During the war years, women were excluded from participating in the annual contract-renewal negotiations with the company. O'Brian describes this situation, stating that "we would have meetings and then they would tell us what they were going to go in for, we wouldn't ask them to go in for anything, they told us what they were going to go in for. They were going to go in for a raise, different things for our benefit."<sup>81</sup> While the men usually did secure raises for the women, these were negligible, usually half the sum that the men received, and hardly kept up with the inflation rate. The justification that the men usually gave for demanding a higher raise than the women each year, and subsequently the existence of huge wage differentials between the two sexes, was that as dependents, women did not need more money. As a result, O'Brian stated, "the women got so much and the men got the most, because the men were seen as the breadwinners of the family."<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the war, male workers consistently fought for wage increases in the men's departments, ignoring the financial burden that females faced at this time. On four separate occasions the men asked for wage increases that would only affect the male workers at Canadian Cottons and Courtaulds. In January 1941, the union requested a wage increase for the men, basing this demand on the particular

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Gordon Jarrett.

<sup>79</sup> An article in the *Standard-Freeholder* noted that a UTWC meeting was held in Montréal and attended by the executive and eighteen delegates from Cornwall's rayon union, local no. 3. All of the individuals who were in attendance were male. 3 November 1942, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Jean Beaks O'Brian.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

difficulty that married men had supporting their families given the steadily rising cost of living.<sup>83</sup> One year later, the union approached the company once again to request a 10 cent-an-hour increase for those men at Courtaulds who were working on the new Tenasco spinning machines used to manufacture the material for some of the war goods that the company was producing. The following year, the union requested that the company provide a bonus scheme to discourage absenteeism among the men. They also asked that the age standard regarding pay for young males in the mill be eliminated, in order to remove the wage ceiling that had been imposed upon these employees. And finally, the engineers at Courtaulds threatened to quit if their salaries were not raised to one dollar an hour plus a cost-of-living bonus in order to match those of their counterparts who worked in the war industries.<sup>84</sup> While the company did not agree to all of these requests, it is clear that the men had a great deal of leverage during this time, due to the increased demand for male workers during the war years. It is also apparent that the male unionists consistently promoted their own interests regarding wage demands, neglecting the needs of their female members. The union men, in essence, placed gender issues before those of class, thereby alienating a large section of the workforce.

#### IV

IN 1944, THE WOMEN once again came under attack by the union, whose leadership ostensibly was concerned about the prospects of returning veterans. The union men suggested to Courtaulds that the firm should prepare for the return of veterans by designating the married women as temporary workers so that they would be prepared to be the first to leave in deference to former servicemen's job needs. Leo Tessier, the president of the union at this time, presented the following suggestion to the company at one of their joint meetings:

All married women are considered temporarily employed. On a lay off they should be the first to get laid off and if a girl becomes a married woman while she's working she shall go to the bottom of the line.

<sup>83</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file # 5, Minutes of the joint meeting 4 January 1941, 1. In a letter written by the secretary of the TWUC local for Canadian Cottons, Mr. A. McConnell explains to a company representative, Mr. W.M. Boyd, why the union requested a 10 per cent increase for the male workers at the cotton mills. He asserts that "Mr. Tolmie states in his letter that I failed to mention the grounds on which the 10% increase was made. I did not think that was necessary, as he must know there is quite a number of his employees only receiving the minimum rates and quite a number of them are married and supporting a family. It is hardly fair to ask a man to do this on 33-1/2 cents an hour." NAC, RG 27, Vol. 639, file #235, letter from A. McConnell to W.M. Boyd.

<sup>84</sup>NAC, GCTJB, This information was extracted from the minutes of the meetings 23 June 1942, Vol. 96, file #7, 4; 17 March 1943, Vol. 96, file #7, 1; 6 May 1943, Vol. 96, file #7, 1.; and 25 May 1943, Vol. 96, file #7, 1.

He continued his statement with the additional comment:

*I think the girls should have the preference in any promotion and if there is a lay off I think the married women should be laid off first and the married women should go to the bottom of the line.*<sup>85</sup>

Although the union men may have honestly been concerned about the fate of veterans and single women, it appears that their real anxieties lay in the status of married women after the war. While the men believed that wartime imperatives demanded that married women work during this period, they apparently hoped that the postwar years would bring a return to domesticity and the re-establishment of traditional gender hierarchies both at work and at home.

The company, however, was reluctant to consider this type of proposition during a period of economic prosperity. Giles responded to Tessier, asserting that:

*After all, if we were in a period of serious unemployment there would be an entirely different problem involved in the processing, for instance, we can't get enough girls. When the time comes when there are not enough jobs the single women will be given preference. I don't think there is any real grievance to be discussed.*<sup>86</sup>

It is apparent that timing played a significant role in determining the company's reluctance to support the union's demand regarding married women in this case. While the company was perfectly willing to collude in this type of scheme during the depression years, when it was plagued by severe unemployment problems, it was less enthusiastic to cooperate when the economy was as strong as it was during the war years. Evidently, then, economic reasons played a far greater role than values or attitudes in determining corporate policies affecting female workers.

## V

THE CORNWALL EXAMPLE provides ample evidence of the synergism between capital and patriarchy within the mills. While some dual structuralists promote the argument that these two structures are so interdependent that they essentially operate as a single entity, or are separate structures that coexist in harmony, such theories tend to blur the intricacies and inherent tension that exists within this type of relationship. The Cornwall case demonstrates that although patriarchy and capitalism reinforce one another in terms of their support of a sex-segregated workforce, the commitment and motives of the two structures involved varied significantly. Both the union men and the managers were allied in supporting the patriarchal ideology of "woman's place" and the maintenance of a gender-based hierarchy at work that favoured men. The companies' commitment occasionally wavered only in response to economic and labour market fluctuations. In contrast,

<sup>85</sup>NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file #8, Minutes of a joint meeting 16 June 1944, 8.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

although the union men could be sympathetic to female grievances regarding work conditions, they remained unyielding in their support of a segmented workforce and "family wages" for the men, since this type of system provided them with a monopoly on the more skilled and higher-paid positions in the mills. The "family wage," in fact, was a seemingly benign concept that masked men's attempts to keep their wives at home and maintain a segmented workforce. The cotton and rayon mill owners and managers were therefore more willing to abandon, at least temporarily, the gender-based work structure when economic conditions rendered it a less than profitable option.

Although the women were subjected to discrimination by both of these bodies, they often were able to protect themselves through the use of strategies based on mutual cooperation, or simply by concealing their marital status from the company and the union when their jobs were on the line. While members normally would expect to receive support and protection from their union, the women were often left to fend for themselves. Rather than remaining passive victims, however, these independent women displayed a great deal of strength and ingenuity when defending themselves against the state-sanctioned discriminatory policies foisted upon them by both company and union. Although no amount of ingenuity could alter the well-entrenched, sex-segregated job structure within the mills, the women's initiatives enabled them to secure for themselves a sense of collectivity, pride and self-esteem.

In addition to illustrating the predominant role that these two structures played in influencing the female textile workers' lives, the Cornwall case also offers a marked contrast to the war industries during this period. Unlike the women employed in the war industries who were earning higher wages and experiencing greater occupational mobility within the work force, Cornwall's female textile workers, on the whole, remained relegated to the same low-paying unskilled jobs that they had occupied before the war. Rather than being treated with the type of respect and status afforded to the female workers in the war industries, Cornwall's female textile workers endured the same deplorable and discriminatory practices that had existed during the pre-war years. Continuity, then, rather than change, characterized Cornwall's female textile workers' experiences during the war.

Although women in the Canadian textile mills only comprised approximately seven per cent of the workforce, the Cornwall case provides another answer to the question of what type of impact World War II had on women's lives.<sup>87</sup> As such, it illustrates the importance of examining the lives of women employed in areas outside the war industries, in order to establish a more complete picture of women's experiences during this period. In the future, I hope historians will venture beyond this realm, exploring women's experiences in occupational areas such as the

<sup>87</sup>There were 57,366 women employed in the textile industry in Canada in 1941. This figure represents seven per cent of the total female work force in Canada, which was 833,972 in 1941. *Census of Canada*, 1941, Vol. VII, 54.

clerical, service, and professional fields. Although these professions were not as visible or glamorous as the military or war industries, they employed approximately 69 per cent of all Canadian women during the war.<sup>82</sup> This figure alone should indicate the need to delve into these long-neglected areas if we hope to understand more fully the nature and scope of women's experiences during the war. Evidently, while Rosie and the Bren Girl worked and flourished in the war industries, their less-famous and less-fortunate sister Tessie toiled in the textile mills.

*I would like to thank Professor Bryan Palmer for his help as a supervisor with the thesis from which this piece was drawn. Other individuals who played an important role in the production of this article include: Peter De Lottinville and Dan Moore, who provided important suggestions in regards to the manuscript records that I used; Craig Heron, for his suggestions at the CHA Conference in Kingston; the anonymous readers for Labour/Le Travail; and Terry Cook, Pierre-Pascal Gendron, Robert McIntosh, and Professor Stephen Scheinberg for their editorial assistance. Finally, I would like to pay homage to the wonderful people that I interviewed from Cornwall, who provided information about their experiences that significantly contributed to this work.*

<sup>82</sup>While most studies have concentrated on the manufacturing industries, they represented only 15.5 per cent of the female work force. The service industry still remained the largest employer of women during this time, employing 50 per cent of all working Canadian women, 15 per cent of which were professional employees such as lawyers, doctors and teachers. The clerical profession, in turn, employed 19 per cent of the female work force. *Ibid.*

## APPENDIX I

TABLE I

Occupational Breakdown by Sex for Rayon Workers in Ontario (1943)\*

Occupation	Number of Men	Number of Females	Total	% Men	% Women
Weaver	15	37	52	29	71
Battery Hand	2	0	2	100	0
Fixer	11	0	11	100	0
Spinner	0	9	9	0	100
Twister Tender	7	64	71	10	90
Winder	6	157	163	4	96
Warper	8	7	15	53	47
Twisting-in	0	6	6	0	100
Slasher-Tender	5	0	5	100	0
Finishing-Inspector	0	6	6	0	100
Total	54	286	340		

Source: NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, R3-5, "Wages in the Primary Textiles Industry in Canada, 1943," 19.

\*These figures are actually for the rayon industry of Ontario, but at the time, Courtaulds was the only rayon company operating in the province.

\*\*Unfortunately, this list does not include figures for such male dominated occupations in the mills such as: picking, carding, doffing, engineering and machine tending. This list also does not include all members of the workforce, since Courtaulds employed far more than 340 employees. Judging from the numbers involved in the strike of 1941, there were approximately 1700 employees working there at the time. It appears as if Courtaulds only provided the Department of Labour with figures for a limited number of occupations, in order to serve as an example of the breakdown of their workforce.

**TABLE 2**  
**Breakdown of Occupations by Sex in the Cotton Mills (1942)\***

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number of Men</b>	<b>Number of Women</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% Men</b>	<b>% Women</b>
Weaving Room	217	124	341	64	36
Carding Room	114	57	171	67	33
Spinning Room	44	43	87	50.5	49.5
Finishing Room	42	59	101	42	58
Spooling	8	19	27	30	60
Dying	46	2	48	96	4
Picking Room	25	0	25	100	0
Napping Room	29	4	33	88	12
Mule	44	4	48	92	8
Slasher	20	7	27	74	26
Shop	35	0	35	100	0
Yard	14	0	14	100	0
Beam	4	4	8	50	50
Speed	2	2	4	50	50
Bleach	3	0	3	100	0
Machinist	3	0	3	100	0

Source: NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 118, Union Dues Ledgers, Cotton Workers Local, 1938-1946.

\*The ledgers only provided information regarding what type of work the employee was engaged in and/or what workroom he/she worked in. There is therefore no information provided on occupational breakdowns within the workrooms. It therefore does not illustrate how many of the men in these rooms were employed as fixers, a position that paid a far greater salary than that of machine tender.

**APPENDIX II**  
**TABLE 1**  
**Breakdown of Wages by Occupation for**  
**the Employees of Canadian Cottons (1945)\***

Occupation	Male Salary per hour	Female Salary per hour
Battery Hand	--	0.3625
Beamers	(piece work and 0.38)	
Card	0.5425	--
Carders	0.49	--
Card Tenders	--	0.425
Cleaners	--	0.3325-0.3625
Creeler	--	0.3625
Doffer	--	0.3625-0.405
Draw Frame	--	0.4025
Engineer	0.7375	--
Factory Worker	0.445	--
Fixer	0.475	--
Fly Frame Tender	--	0.3625
General Help	--	0.3325
Glubber Tender	--	0.405
Grinder	0.6425	--
Labourers	0.3325-0.4425	--
Labourers - Boys	0.325	--
Loom Fixer	0.77	--
Spindle Setters	0.644-0.77	--
Spinner	--	0.405
Spooler	--	0.39
Weaver	piece work	
Winder	--	0.3625-0.38 and piece work

Source: Textile Report, NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, File #R3, pt. 4, 2-3.

\*This document was submitted to the NSS by Canadian Cottons Ltd. Considering the information that was available in the union records and the oral testimony, the



wages, especially for the females, appear to be far too high. It is possible that the company sent the Department the wage ceilings that were set for each occupation, rather than the average wages that their employees earned. There would probably be a large discrepancy, then, between these figures and the ones projected from real average earnings. In addition to illustrating the type of misinformation that the Department was circulating, in order to hide the meagre salaries that they paid their staff, these figures also support the fact that there was a great deal of collusion that took place between the federal government and the company. These higher figures may also have been used to attract more workers to the textile industry.

TABLE 2  
Wages by Occupation for Rayon Workers in Ontario (1943)\*

Occupation	Men		Women	
	Number of men	Avg. wage per hour	Number of women	Avg. wage per hour
Battery Hand	2	0.66	--	--
Cloth Inspector	--	--	6	0.41
Fixer	11	0.71	--	--
Slasher Tender	5	0.70	--	--
Spinner	--	--	9	0.42
Twisting-in	--	--	6	0.42
Twister-Tender	7	0.50	64	0.47
Warper	8	0.64	7	0.50
Weaver	15	0.60	37	0.50
Winder	6	0.38	157	0.47

Source: NAC, RG 27, Vol. 1518, R3-5, "Wages in the Primary Textiles Industry in Canada, 1943," 19.

\*These figures are actually for the rayon industry of Ontario, but at the time, Courtaulds was the only rayon company operating in the province.

\*\*Like table 1, these figures were also submitted by the company to the Department of Labour. These salaries also appear to be greatly inflated, since there was never any mention of female employees earning more than thirty-one cents in the union minutes. It may have been possible for women to earn more than that if they were sharing a second job with another woman, but it is doubtful that their salaries would have been above thirty-eight cents an hour. This list also does not include male

dominated areas in the rayon mills such as: picking, carding, doffing, electrician, machinist and engineer. The latter three occupations has salaries set at 72, 72 and 78 cents an hour respectively in 1939. The boys working in the mills usually earned a little more than the women but had a ceiling established at about 40 cents. This list also does not cover the entire work force of Courtaulds, therefore, it was most probably used to provide examples of wages from each occupational group. The information about these missing occupational wages was extracted from salary listings that were submitted to the union by Courtaulds. NAC, GCTJB, Vol. 96, file #3 and 4.

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