RESEARCH REPORT / NOTE DE RECHERCHE

Shared Earnings, Unequal Responsibilities: Single French-Canadian Wage-Earning Women in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1900-1920

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THE LIVES OF SINGLE FRENCH-CANADIAN wage-earning women in Lowell, Massachusetts, highlight the considerable variability in the ways women contributed financially to their household economies in the early 20th century. In the extensive literature on French-Canadian immigrants in New England textile cities, there has been little systematic analysis of single female workers. Frances Early's skillful analysis of the French-Canadian family economy and standard of living in Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1870s gave little attention to unmarried female workers, except as potential marriage partners to their male counterparts or as wage-earning children who temporarily supplemented the budgets of their families.[1] In her seminal work, *Family Time and Industrial Time*, Tamara Hareven refuted the notion that women's wage labour was essentially confined to a temporary stage in

[1]Frances Early, "French-Canadian Beginnings in an American Community: Lowell, Massachusetts, 1868-1886." PhD thesis, Concordia University, 1979.

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their life cycle.[2] Hareven did so by documenting a degree of flexibility in transitions in and out of the paid labour force, into marriage, and, finally into household headship for French-Canadian (and other) working families in Manchester, New Hampshire, from the late 19th century to the 1930s. Still, most single wage-earning women in Hareven's analysis tend to appear as a homogeneous group whose members equally shared the financial responsibilities toward their parents' households. The actual variety in their working lives remains to be more fully addressed.

More recently, Thomas Dublin has explored the experiences of female wage-workers of different ethnic/immigrant groups in Lowell's textile industry during the last four decades of the 19th century. In *Transforming Women's Work*, Dublin brought to light a series of changes that occurred in the city's female labour force in terms of ethnicity, residence patterns, and family status.[3] Dublin argues that in comparison to an earlier generation of female factory workers, most of whom were young American women recruited from the rural communities surrounding the textile city in the 1830s and 1840s, French-Canadian and Greek factory operatives in 1900 were significantly more involved in contributing to their families' economic well-being.[4] Dublin's analysis confirms the hypothesis advanced by Joan Scott and Louise Tilly: that women's increased participation in paid labour markets represented a variant of a traditional family strategy, one aimed primarily at serving purposes relating to the family as a collective. Dublin's contribution notwithstanding, his inquiry obscures the variations in household economic contribution among women of the same marital status and ethnicity but who resided in different household structures and living arrangements.

The present study begins its analysis where Dublin left off. To what degree did the role of single French-Canadian women in earning wages vary? How did the ages, marital status, and residential patterns of these workers determine their financial responsibilities? To answer these questions, this study focuses on single French-Canadian female wage-workers in Lowell — a substantial proportion of whom were employed in the city's textile industry — from 1900 to 1920. The data used in the following analysis were compiled by the author from the US Federal Census Schedules (1910 and 1920), which provide the name, age, marital status, birthplace, relationship to the head of the household, and occupation for every resident of Lowell. A sample of 11,901 individuals (6,120 in 1910 and 5,781 in 1920), representing five per cent of the city's total population was created; with French-Canadian immigrants and their descendants (including Canadian-born and US-born) accounting for 2,258 (1,103 in 1910 and 1,155 in 1920). The number of never-married French-Canadian female wage-earners totalled 259 (126 in 1910 and

[2]Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge 1982).
[3]Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca 1994).
[4]Dublin, 232-233.

133 in 1920). Admittedly, these are relatively small numbers. This research paper will take a detailed look at the experiences and household situations of the sampled women, rather than just dealing with numbers. Before turning to an analysis of this group, let us look briefly at the historical context in which these women lived and worked.

The Socioeconomic Context of Lowell And Its French-Canadian Immigrants

The city of Lowell, located about forty kilometres northwest of Boston, was one of the leading centres of textile industry in the United States. Since its inception as a city, textile production, particularly of cottons but also of woollens and hosiery, had been Lowell's principal economic sector. Lowell's textile factories recruited workers from the surrounding rural communities in the 1830s and 1840s, then from Ireland and, increasingly, from Canada throughout the late 19th century, until "new immigrants" from Eastern and Southern European countries arrived in the city *en masse* at the turn of the century and into the early 20th century. French Canadians, however, represented the largest immigrant group in the city, and had done so since the last third of the 19th century.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, the proportion of French Canadians within the city's foreign-born and foreign-parent population remained constantly over one-quarter (or about 24,000).[5] The composition of the French-Canadian community changed, however, for by the end of the period, the majority of French Canadians in Lowell consisted of those born in the United States. This offers a clear sign that the immigrant influx from the north had peaked and that the population growth for this group was more and more dependent on natural growth.[6] In the early 20th century, textile manufacturing continued to dominate the city's economic activities. At the same time, its economic base was enlarged by a process of diversification as non-textile industries also came to thrive in the city. The latter included traditional industries such as shoe manufacturing and the textile machinery industry, as well as new sectors such as patent medicines and munitions firms.[7]

[5]US Department of Commerce, US Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Population: 1920, 745, 929.

[6]Calculated by the author based on the data derived from the five per cent sample of the manuscript schedules of the 13th and 14th Federal Censuses, City of Lowell, Middlesex County, Massachusetts.

[7]US Department of Commerce, US Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, Manufacturers: 1910, vol. 9,527; US Department of Commerce, US Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, Occupations: 1920, 172-173. See also Thomas Dublin and Paul Marion, *Lowell: the Story of an Industrial City: A Guide to Lowell National Historical Park and Lowell Heritage State Park*, Lowell, Massachusetts, Official National Park Handbook, Handbook 140 (Washington, DC 1992), 81.

Table 1. Age Distribution of Single French-Canadian Female Wage-Earners by Birthplace, Lowell, 1910 and 1920

	Birthplace							
	Canada				U.S.A.			
Age	1910		1920		1910		1920	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
0-5	1	1.3	0	0	2	3.6	0	0
5-10	0	0	0	0	1	1.8	4	3.9
10-15	3	3.9	1	2.9	2	3.6	3	2.9
15-20	20	26.3	3	8.6	27	49.1	38	36.9
20-25	25	32.9	9	25.7	14	25.5	30	29.1
25-30	9	11.8	7	20.0	4	7.3	18	17.5
30-35	5	6.6	3	8.6	2	3.6	5	4.9
35-40	9	11.8	3	8.6	2	3.6	2	1.9
40-45	2	2.6	3	8.6	0	0	3	2.9
45-50	2	2.6	5	14.3	1	1.8	0	0
50-55	0	0	1	2.9	0	0	0	0
Total	76	100.0	35	100.0	55	100.0	103	100.0
Average Age	24.2		30.4		21.0		21.7	

Source: Compiled by author from Thirteenth and Fourteenth U.S. Census Schedules.

Paid Work of Single French-Canadian Women:

Age, Places of Birth, and Occupations of Single French-Canadian Wage-Earners

In Lowell, as in many other textile cities, single wage-earners made up a majority of the female labour force; both in 1910 and 1920, two-thirds of French-Canadian female wage-workers were single. They did not, however, constitute a homogeneous group of young daughters. Table 1 shows a gradual increase in the age of single, French-Canadian workers, primarily among those born in Canada. It also points to the relative youthfulness of their typical American-born counterparts. From 1910 to 1920, the average age of single, female workers of French-Canadian background (regardless of their birthplace) increased such that by 1920 Canadian-born women were far more likely than their US-born counterparts to form age groups of forty-five or more. By contrast, the US-born women were much more likely than their Canadian-born colleagues to make up age-blocks under twenty-five years old. The average age calculated from the census sample also confirms this trend among the Canadian-born. During the period from 1910 to 1920, the average age of Canadian-born female workers rose from twenty-four to thirty years old. By contrast again,

the average age for the American-born woman worker in Lowell hovered at twenty-one.

Why was this so? The answer lies partly in shifts that occurred in the immigrant population supply. During the decade from 1910 to 1920, as French-Canadians in Lowell came to consist increasingly of American-born daughters of immigrants, so did the majority of the single, female labour force of that background. In addition, a natural demographic factor also played a role. As single wage-earning women became older, some got married, but others, despite their advanced age, continued to work in the factories. Clearly, as indicated by the census, by 1920 such demographic factors affected a greater proportion of Canadian-born women relative to their American-born co-workers. Another, possibly more important, explanation can be found in the household organisation of single wage-earning women. A considerable proportion of them lived with their widowed parents. Many postponed marriage temporarily or permanently in order to contribute to the households of their lone parents. Indeed, a significant minority of these women were over thirty years of age. Since the mothers of Canadian-born women were, on average, older than those of American-born women, a greater number of Canadian-born women lived with widowed mothers; in contrast, the American-born had fewer widowed mothers.

Canadian- and American-born French-Canadian single female workers also differed in their employment patterns.[8] The presence of a few Canadian-born women in skilled and supervisory jobs in the manufacturing sector indicates the emergence of "elite" workers who had climbed above the lowest rung of the occupational hierarchy where practically the entire French-Canadian female (and male) labour force had clustered earlier. In 1910 and 1920, a significant minority of Canadian-born women came to occupy some of the skilled jobs, such as finisher and folder in textile manufacturing. In 1870, these job categories had been inaccessible for 97 per cent of French-Canadian female workers regardless of birthplace.[9] A good proportion of Canadian-born women in 1910 and 1920 were concentrated in semi-skilled jobs, such as spinners and weavers in the textile industry. Furthermore, a small but growing minority of the Canadian-born worked as inspectors in the textile factories, a position that required a high degree of responsibility, skill, and experience.

[8]In the following analysis I have used a modified version of an occupational classificatory scheme developed by Gérard Bouchard and his research group, the IREP (Institut interuniversitaire de recherches sur les populations). In an effort to take into account some of the ambiguities inherent in terms such as "skilled," "semi-skilled," and "unskilled," all operatives such as weavers, spinners, and carders, and craft workers such as machinists, mechanics, and engineers are grouped into one category. Gérard Bouchard, *Tous les métiers du monde: le traitement des données professionelles en histoire sociale* (Québec 1996), especially, 67, 78, "Annex."

[9]Early, "French-Canadian Beginnings," 110, 112, Tables 9, 10.

The working lives of American-born women of French-Canadian background provide further evidence of occupational improvement. Most significantly, a nucleus of the second-generation women was now working in white-collar jobs as bookkeepers and salespersons, a category which had formerly been reserved for the Anglo-Celtic population. Equally important, a small number of American-born women worked as inspectors in the factories by 1920, providing us with other evidence of their achievement. This was particularly important because it marked, for the first time since their settlement in Lowell, the association on the part of the American-born French Canadians with supervisory positions. Finally, a significant proportion of American-born workers of French-Canadian background held down semi-skilled jobs, as did their Canadian-born colleagues.

One might argue that the presence of single American-born women of French-Canadian background in white-collar occupations resulted from a considerable increase in the number of jobs available in these occupations. Indeed, the white-collar labour force in Lowell expanded in the early 20th century. Moreover, participation in these occupations was by no means limited to French Canadian single women. Nor was the expansion of the white-collar job category an isolated phenomenon in early 20th-century Lowell. Rather, it was part of a broader structural change that had begun earlier in larger northern cities.[10] Evidence from the federal census schedules shows that the proportion of women engaged in such jobs as salespersons, bookkeepers, and inspectors increased among long-time residents of the city, in particular among American women (of all marital statuses) and, to a lesser extent, their Irish counterparts (see Table 2).[11] Yet the large number of single women employed in Lowell's textile and shoe factories indicates that expansion in the white-collar sector did not significantly reduce the ratio of manual to white-collar workers. Furthermore, one would expect that if female workers had been somewhat shut out from the manual labour sector because of the decrease in labour demand in the manufacturing sector, such an effect would have been felt equally by all the city's French-Canadian female workers regardless of birthplace. There is no clear evidence to support such a hypothesis. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that the emergence of bookkeepers and salespersons among Lowell's American-born daughters of French-Canadian immigrants in 1920 reflected not only a necessary adjustment to changes in labour market conditions but also a degree of choice. The ability to choose among available job options, however limited they might have been, was probably made possible, in part, for American-born women by their acquired resources, particularly their language capacity. As

[10]In Boston, for instance, the "women's sector" had expanded significantly during the last three decades of the 19th century: the proportion of women working in clerical or sales jobs rose from 2.5 per cent in 1860 to 6.9 per cent in 1880; by 1900 it reached close to 20 per cent. Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work*, 237, table 7.3.

[11]From 1910 to 1920, the percentage of American-born women of American-parentage rose from 39 per cent to 43 per cent and that of the latter from 17 per cent to 25 per cent.

Table 2. Occupational Distribution of Female Wage-Earners in Five Ethnic Groups in Lowell, 1910 and 1920 (Number of Individuals per 100)

1910		French-Canadian	Irish	American	Portuguese	Greek
Manual Workers		80.0	72.8	49.3	93.4	92.3
	Unskilled	3.2	14.9	9.7	6.7	15.4
	Semi- and skilled	76.8	57.9	39.6	86.7	76.9
White Collar		8	17.1	38.8		
	Lower white collar (clerical etc.)	5.6	7	17.2		
	Upper white collar	2.4	10.1	21.6		
Professional		4.8		0.7		
Independent		2.4	5.5	8.2	6.7	
Other		4.8	1.5	2.2		15.4
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
	(N)	125	328	134	15	13
1920						
Manual Workers		82.0	71.3	45.2	95	97.9
	Unskilled	11.3	11.8	10.8	20	23.4
	Semi- and skilled	70.7	59.5	34.4	75	74.5
White Collar		18.1	25.3	43.3		
	Lower white collar (clerical etc.)	6.8	13.8	22.3		
	Upper white collar	11.3	11.5	21		2.1
Professional		–	0.3	0.6		
Independent		–	2.9	5.1	5	
Other		–	–	4.5		–
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
	(N)	133	348	157	20	47

Source: Compiled by author from Thirteenth and Fourteenth U.S. Census Schedules.

Notes: 1. Ethnic group is determined by the place of birth of individuals and their parents.

2. Because numbers are rounded, the total percentage may not equal one hundred.

3. Other occupations include farming and unspecified.

4. The category of professional includes nuns and the category of independent includes autonomous dressmakers.

well, their decision was likely influenced by an appreciation of the relative prestige — not to mention — salaries of white-collar jobs, reflecting values and preferences they increasingly shared with their native-born counterparts.[12] Clearly, they were becoming more and more integrated into American society by carving out better places for themselves within the larger urban economy.

Living Arrangements and Diversity in Economic Contribution

As might be expected, most single French-Canadian female workers were daughters living in households headed by their fathers; however, this was not the case for all. Both in 1910 and 1920, the largest proportion of single women (over 70 per cent) were daughters living with their parent(s).[13] The minority, however, was composed of women whose relationship to the head of the household varied considerably. Some were sisters, granddaughters, and nieces; others were lodgers and roomers; and a very small number were themselves household heads. An analysis by birthplace sheds additional light on the diversity of these single, female wage-earners. Among those born in Canada, the proportion of daughters who lived in a household with their parent(s) decreased from two-thirds in 1910 to just over half in 1920. The percentage living with other relatives rose both among Canadian-born and American-born French-Canadian women workers. Furthermore, the percentage of Canadian born who were lodgers or boarders doubled, while the percentage among the American-born remained unchanged. Finally, small numbers of Canadian-born single workers (three in 1910 and two in 1920) came to head households of their own; fewer US-born women (none in 1910, one in 1920) did so (Table 3). One of them was Emma Crépeau, forty-four, who migrated to the US in 1889 and was working as a school teacher at a (French-Canadian) parochial school in Lowell in 1910. Another example is Florida Lapointe, a thirty-eight-year-old Canadian-born stitcher at a hosiery mill in 1910. Like Emma and Florida, all the six women in this later category were relatively aged, falling in the age groups from thirty-five to fifty years old.

Considerable change in household relations, more apparent among the Canadian-born women, resulted partly from a life cycle factor. As Michael Anderson observed of spinsters in mid-Victorian Britain, many single French-Canadian women in early 20th-century Lowell lived in their parents' homes.[14] Of single French-Canadian female workers, who belonged to the age group of 35 years old or more, as many as 18 per cent in 1910 and 47 per cent in 1920 resided in their parents' households. As they aged and their parents died, such arrangements

[12]This interpretation is influenced by the idea advanced by Carole Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City: Gender, Class, and Community in Troy, New York, 1864-86* (Urbana 1992), 52-60.

[13]Calculated by the author from 13th and 14th US Census Schedules.

[14]Michael Anderson, "The Social Position of Spinsters in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Journal of Family History* 9 (Winter 1984), 377-393, especially 388.

Table 3. Distribution of Household Relationships of French-Canadian Female Wage Earners By Birthplace, Lowell, 1910 and 1920
(%)

Birthplace	Year	
	1910	1920
Canada		
Daughter	67.1	54.3
Household head	3.9	5.7
Other Family Member	17.6	17.1
Lodger/Boarder	10.5	22.9
Servant	1.4	-
Total	100	100
(Number)	74	35
U.S.A.		
Daughter	84.3	77.6
Household head	-	1.0
Other Family Member	9.8	12.2
Lodger/Boarder	5.9	9.2
Servant	-	-
Total	100	100
(Number)	51	98

Source: Compiled by author from Thirteenth and Fourteenth U.S. Federal Census Schedules.
Note: Because numbers are rounded, the total percentage may not equal one hundred.

necessarily ended. Judging from the more pronounced upward shift in average age for the Canadian-born than for the US-born women, one may safely surmise that the effect of this life cycle stage concerned a greater proportion of the former than of the latter. Accordingly, more single women of the former category were compelled to find a place outside their parents' residence. Still, data derived from the US federal census suggests that, in contrast with Anderson's interpretation, for many French-Canadian spinsters living with parents was less a preference than an obligation, or indeed a constraint, accepted by those single daughters. It reflected a family strategy for assuring the daughters' contribution, both financial and

non-financial, to their parents' households. Also, such family needs were, to some extent, mutually shared by parents and daughters. Unlike wages of their male siblings, which might rival that of their fathers once boys reached their late teens, women's earning power remained without significant change over their lives.[15] In Lowell's cotton factories, Canadian-born girls between fourteen and seventeen years of age received a wage of $6.09 compared to the $5.01 per week earned by the Canadian-born boys of the same category. Canadian-born female cotton workers aged eighteen or more, however, made on average $7.08 (an increase of only 16 per cent), considerably surpassed by an average of $9.77 for their male counterparts (an increase of 95 per cent).[16] In addition to earning such low wages, more unmarried French-Canadian women, if not residing with their parents, came to live with other family members, a practice dictated both by Quebec custom and by American social norms, which frowned upon single women living alone.[17]

Notwithstanding the significance of demographic factors such as age and birthplace as well as residential situation, there are other, subtler variables, which defined the household responsibilities of single women in a more direct manner. The economic contribution of women belonging to the same age group and living in similar households varied considerably. The census manuscripts offer some examples, such as the case of two twenty-four-year-old women (daughters of household heads), Canadian-born Henrietta Desjardins and American-born Bertha L(a)urier.[18] Henrietta, a stitcher at a shoe factory, and Bertha, a winder[19] at a cotton factory, were among a substantial group of single wage-earning women in their twenties who resided with their parent(s).

[15]The average annual earnings of female workers eighteen years of age and over was $283, in comparison to $463 by their male counterparts. US Congress, Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industries,* vol. 10, 61st, Cong., 2d. Sess., Senate Doc. 633 (Washington, DC, 1911; reprint, New York 1970), 260, 263.

[16]Immigration Commission, *Immigrants in Industry,* vol. 10, 251-254. The differences in the wage increase between men and women were largely a result of job mobility within the industry. An interview of a female weave room inspector, occupying one of the highest positions women could achieve in the textile factories at the time, reveals that men went into weaving with the idea of getting a job in loom fixing, slashing, or of going into the machine shop. "That (weaving) was their stepping stone to something else. It was almost like a career ladder, up the ladder, you know." In contrast, female weavers mostly stayed as weavers because they didn't have "anywhere to go." Narcissa Fantini Hodges, interview by Mary Blewett, reproduced in Blewett, *The Last Generations: Work and Life in the Textile Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1910-1960* (Amherst 1990), 84-91, especially 90.

[17]Tamara Hareven and Louise Tilly, "Solitary Women and Family Mediation in American and French Textile Cities," *Annales de démographie historique* (1981), 253-271.

[18]13th US Census Schedules, 1910, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, district 839, ward 2, dwelling 1, family number 1; district 861, ward 6, dwelling 81, family number 225.

[19]A winder attends to the mechanical transfer of yarn from one size or form of package to another, such as from bobbins to cones to tubes. Blewett, *The Last Generation,* 323.

Henrietta's family consisted of a father who worked as a stone mason, a mother who stayed at home, and two younger sisters: Rose, a twenty-year old stitcher, and Joséphine, a fifteen year old who was not listed as working outside the home. The Desjardins family lodged a shoe cutter, John Desjardins. Although the census schedule listed John as a lodger, one may speculate from his family name that he was a close relative. In that case, John possibly paid the family a smaller amount for his bed and board than other lodgers would have done.[20] In any case, with the additional income provided by the lodger and the steady work of her father and her younger sister, Henrietta's earnings were not the family's primary source of income. The case of Bertha L(a)urier was quite different. Bertha and her sister, who worked as a stitcher, were the principal providers for their family. The two sisters supported their widowed father and a younger sister, neither of whom was gainfully employed. Consequently, in comparison with Henrietta, Bertha's economic contribution was of relatively more importance to her family.

The case of an older single woman named Angélina Larogne again demonstrates how the family situation largely defined the degree of a single woman's economic responsibility towards her household. Angélina, born in Canada, was a thirty-nine-year-old weaver at a cotton factory. The oldest of six daughters, she lived with her widowed father, who worked as a teamster. Three of her five sisters worked at a cotton factory; nineteen-year-old Louisanna, a stitcher; eighteen-year-old Rose and fifteen-year-old Liliane, both of whom were winders. The second oldest, thirty-one-year-old Georgina, was listed as not working. Georgina possibly took the role of her deceased mother, keeping house and caring for her ten-year-old sister.[21]

Greater Variations in the Roles of Single Daughters: Women in Widow-Headed Households and Women Living Away from Their Parents

The principal wage contributors of widow-headed households were children. Given their significance, their employment patterns have, until recently, received relatively little academic attention. Scholars have begun to point out the substantial economic role that children and, especially daughters, assumed in widow-headed

[20]Denyse Baillargeon has shown cases of married young couples living with their in-laws in Depression-era Montreal. These couples made a variety of arrangements for paying for their bed and board. Most frequently, young couples, the least wealthy ones, simply paid an amount for their bed and board. Others assumed responsibility for paying the rent, electricity, and heating, while the parents paid only their food. Still others, instead of paying for bed and board, provided services, such as the case of a young wife who worked in the boardinghouse run by her mother-in-law. Baillargeon, *Ménagères au temps de la crise* (Montréal 1991), 94-97.

[21]13th US Census Schedules, 1910, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, district 861, ward 6, dwelling 102, family number 355.

households; by contrast, the contribution of single women living in a household that included one or more married male wage-earner was generally less significant.[22] In a similar vein, one may expect that in Lowell the financial responsibility of single daughters in households, lacking the wages of a father or male sibling, was far more important than that of unmarried women who lived with their parents. Such was the case of a twenty-one-year-old sewer, Blanche (Laronoiw?), who lived with her widowed mother and an eleven-year-old brother, neither of whom worked outside the home. Blanche was therefore the main provider for her family.[23] And like Blanche, an important minority of unmarried female workers in Lowell resided in households headed by a widowed mother and contributed to their household budget. This was the case for as many as one in four single wage-earning women born in Canada, and one in five American-born daughters (28 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively). Many of them would never marry and this contributed to the aging of female workers discussed above.

Daughters, as well as sons, in widow-headed French-Canadian households in early 20th-century Lowell, as observed elsewhere in the late 19th century, left their family home much later than peers from households with two parents.[24] Among Lowell's single wage-earning women of French-Canadian background, who resided in a household with two parents, two per cent in 1910 and six per cent in 1920 were aged thirty-five or more. In contrast, among single wage workers who resided in a household headed by a widowed parent, a majority (84 per cent in 1910 and 80 per cent in 1920) were under the age of thirty-five, but a significant minority (six per cent and 20 per cent, respectively) were aged thirty-five or more.[25] Late departure from the parents' home frequently coincided with a temporarily or permanently postponed marriage, thus ensuring a prolonged attachment to the parental household. These single daughters diverged from the conventional pattern, as Cohen asserted, by working for wages for much of their adult lives.[26] Their contribution was not limited to the household budget, however. They also provided unpaid labour to their domestic economies.

[22]Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City,* 85-91; Marilyn Cohen, "Survival Strategies in Female-Headed Households: Linen Workers in Tullylish, County Down, 1901," *Journal of Family History,* 17 (Winter 1992), 303-318, especially 308; Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto 1993), chap. 6; Hareven, "Family and Work Patterns of Immigrant Laborers in a Planned Industrial Town, 1900-1930," Richard L. Ehrlich, ed., *Immigrants in Industrial America, 1850-1920,* (Charlottesville 1977), 47-66, especially 62.

[23]14th US Census Schedule, 1920. Middlesex County, Massachusetts, district 226, ward 6, dwelling 65, family number 106.

[24]Bradbury, *Working Families,* 205; Owen Hufton, "Women without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Family History,* 9 (Winter 1984), 355-375; Cohen, "Survival Strategies," 308.

[25]Calculated by the author from 13th and 14th Federal Census Schedule data.

[26]Cohen, "Survival Strategies," 303-318; Hufton, "Women without Men," 362.

In her study of working-class families in late 19th-century Montreal, Bettina Bradbury observed the different needs of households headed by single parents.[27] The household arrangements of the two French-Canadian families in Lowell discussed above are similar to the ones analysed in working families in industrialising Montreal. Differences in household organisation determined the varying importance of these single women in their role as wage-earners, as well as domestic care-takers in their households. In Angelina's family, for example, her widowed father needed someone to take charge of domestic tasks, while other family members likely had to earn wages in order to supplement the father's wages as a teamster. As this case illustrates, in families headed by a widowed male, the primary problem was to find someone, usually an older daughter, to replace the deceased wife in performing household chores. In households headed by a widowed mother, such as the cases of Eugénie and Blanche, the problem was of a different nature. Domestic duties would be assumed by the mother and efforts were to be made to find adequately paid employment for the other members. Given the low wages of female workers, the widowed households were usually in more dire financial straits than those headed by widowers.

Evidence from Lowell's French-Canadian immigrant women also shows that, as observed in textile cities elsewhere, it was common for widows not to be employed if their older children earned wages.[28] When French-Canadian daughters were not the only wage earner in their household they were much more likely to share this economic responsibility with their siblings than with the widowed mother. Twenty-six-year-old Eugénie Vigneault, born in Canada, lived with her widowed mother and supported the household together with her twenty-nine-year-old brother Alphie. Eugénie worked as an operative at a hosiery factory and Alphie as a box-maker. In the Vaillancourt family, three teenaged daughters (nineteen, seventeen, and thirteen years old), worked as a stitcher, winder, and doffer, supporting the rest of their family with their earnings. Their forty-two-year-old widowed mother stayed at home caring for their five other siblings who ranged in age from four to fourteen, none of whom worked.[29]

Still, in the household of a single parent (either male or female), the two imperatives — securing a minimum household income and having someone take care of domestic tasks — likely determined a daughter's marriage prospects. In these households, it was common to find one or two unmarried daughters (and, to a lesser extent, sons as well) either working for wages or taking charge of domestic

[27]Bradbury, *Working Families*, chap. 5.

[28]Cohen, "Survival Strategies," 307; Hufton, "Women without Men," 362; Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City*, 87.

[29]14th US Census Schedules, 1920, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, district 537, ward 16, dwelling 79, family number 257; district 570, ward 4, dwelling 38, family number 84.

work.[30] In the absence of sufficient social services, single daughters often assumed most of the obligation of providing care to their elderly parents in addition to their already burdensome economic responsibilities. The burden was most strongly felt by the daughters of widow-headed households who often had to submit to the idea of a life of temporary — if not perpetual — unmarriageability. The question of who should care for elderly parents at times became an emotionally charged issue, which created tensions and conflicts, and usually came to a head at the time of a marriage proposal. Oral interviews with Lowell's French-Canadian women do not show the same degree of family tension as in the instance of a French-Canadian daughter, Marie Anne Senechal, in Manchester, New Hampshire, who postponed her marriage for forty years.[31] Nonetheless, considering French-Canadian women's various domestic tasks and financial contributions, one cannot overstate the pertinence of Tilly's and Scott's observation that a daughter's marriage revolved more often than not around the question of when one should marry rather than whom.[32]

For daughters who lived with their widowed fathers the obligation to remain in the family was felt even more strongly. After the wife's death, the oldest unmarried daughter was usually expected to take the role of the family's "second mother," managing the household and taking care of younger siblings. The responsibility of a second mother ranged from making everyday financial decisions to caring for younger siblings and their father, and providing moral support for family members. Lucie Cordeau was sixteen when her mother died. Soon after, her older sister also passed away and Lucie became the only girl left at home. When she was twenty-nine, her father told her, "Lucie, you better get married. I won't live

[30]A comparative study of several New England textile communities conducted by the United States Bureau of Labor in 1910 reported that while sons contributed 83 per cent of their income to their parents' household, daughters delivered 95 per cent of their pay to the family's budget. Clearly, the daughter's commitment to the family's income was more critical than the son's. US Department of Labor, *The Share of Wage-Earning Women in Family Support*, Women's Bureau Bulletin, no. 30 (Washington, DC 1923), 137-140; Hareven, *Family and Work*, 47-66, especially 62.

[31]Marie Anne Senechal endured forty years of courtship until she was finally married at age sixty-seven. After five years of marriage, she was widowed: "My husband and I waited forty years to get married. Forty years! The first year I met him, he was eighteen years old and I was six years older. I could not get married because I had to bring up a family, and he had to take care of his family. I thought I'd never marry. I was sixty-seven years old when I got married. And I'm seventy-nine now. It was too much of a wait, when I think of it now, because I would have been happier if I'd got married. But when you don't know, you just stay that way." Marie Anne Senechal, interview by Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, reproduced in Hareven and Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York 1978), 281.

[32]Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work, and Family* (New York 1978; reprint, 1987), 192.

forever."[33] When she eventually married she was thirty-six, quite late for the norms of the time, according to which an unmarried woman over twenty years old was considered to be an 'old maid.'[34] Lucie recalled:

> At that time, when the mother died, the older girl used to take over. As they said, the girl, she has a little bit of heart. My father never remarried, and I married only after my father died. (...) The older girl takes over. She's the second mother. She has to supervise and make all the decisions in anything. And if you had a boyfriend, when you have to go back home and cook supper for your father or cook meals for your brothers, the boys never stay long. The friendship never lasts. They say, You take your family before me.[35]

Once again, the daughter's marriage was contingent upon the family's needs. Bound by family responsibilities, single women like Lucie were deeply committed to their family's well-being, in terms of making a financial contribution, supporting the daily survival of other family members by transforming their wages into sustenance and shelter, as well as providing emotional care at home. The evidence on the postponed marriage of daughters in households of single parents reinforces, to a great extent, Tamara Hareven's thesis about the flexibility in the household unit in determining the "family time." The diversity in such timing, described as "flexible" in Hareven's study, was indeed so as far as age norms were concerned. The evidence presented above confirms a hypothesis Hareven herself added: such divergence occurred within a framework that imposed considerable constraints on individual preferences, especially daughters', for the sake of the family's collective goals.[36]

Despite the constraints upon marriage, the commitment of single French-Canadian women to the care of their families by no means represented a barrier to their participation in the labour force. Whether they accepted it willingly or not, these older single daughters, often in their thirties or more, frequently held greater responsibilities than their younger co-workers who lived in a two-parent household. Lucie began working at a factory at fourteen years of age and continued to work there until her marriage. For Lucie and many other women like her, the doubled responsibilities of financially supporting, and providing care for, ageing parents and younger siblings were not only considered compatible but even obligatory.[37]

[33]Lucie Cordeau, interview with Blewett, reproduced in Blewett, *The Last Generation*, 73-80, especially 73.

[34]There are abundant examples of French-Canadian daughters postponing their marriage. Cora Pellerin, for instance, remained single until she was thirty although she had known her husband-to-be for ten or eleven years. See Cora Pellerin, interview with Hareven and Langenbach, reproduced in Hareven and Langenbach, *Amoskeag*, 210.

[35]Lucie Cordeau, interview with Blewett, reproduced in Blewett, *The Last Generations*, 75.

[36]Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time*, 187-188.

[37]In her study on Irish collar workers in Troy, New York, Carole Turbin also confirms that the responsibility of financial contribution weighed heavily on older single women. Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City*, 83-84.

In this regard, Bettina Bradbury challenged Joan Scott and Louise Tilly in their assertion that in the industrial mode of production, "single women are best able to work, since they have few other claims on their time," as opposed to married women who had to adjust reproductive and domestic activity with paid employment.[38] Evidence from Lowell's French-Canadian single women reinforces Bradbury's argument. Most single daughters in early 20th-century Lowell, like their mothers and married sisters, had other claims on their time. Such claims included the tedious and physically demanding nature of domestic tasks in early 20th-century immigrant households, the care of younger siblings as well as their ageing parents, in sickness and in health, and the "myriad of other largely invisible pursuits and strategies necessary to survival."[39] For French-Canadian immigrant families this often meant that women were needed at all times to assume the entire responsibility of housework. That they carried out paid work did not reduce their heavy workload at home. Whatever the household structure, women's work at home was crucial for the very survival of their families.

The extent to which unmarried women, who lived without their parents, contributed economically to a household varied considerably. The situation of female family members who were not daughters of the household head, but were sisters, granddaughters, or nieces differed from lodgers and roomers. For example, as lodgers paying for bed and board, two sisters, Valentine and Clodia Ducharme, both born in Canada, were likely economically more independent than those who lived with their own immediate families. Valentine, a twenty-six-year-old housemaid, and Clodia, a thirty-two-year-old velvet finisher, boarded with a French-Canadian immigrant family, the Desmarais. Clodia may have worked at the same cotton factory as her landlord couple, who were listed respectively as a machinist and a cutter. The census data do not tell us the exact nature of the relationship that Valentine and Clodia had with the Desmarais.[40] Whether it remained an acquaintanceship or evolved beyond that owing to the network of people they knew in common from Canada or Lowell itself, remains unknown.[41] In any case, a minor

[38]Scott and Tilly, *Women, Work and Family,* 231.

[39]Bradbury, *Working Families,* 142

[40]14th US Census Schedules, 1920, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, district 218, ward 3, dwelling 782, family number 33.

[41]The case of Cora Pellerin in Manchester was rather exceptional among the single female workers at the time. When her parents had gone back to their farm in Canada, they allowed three of their working children, Cora (then thirteen), her older brother (then sixteen), and her older sister (then eighteen), who wished to stay in the United States to do so. After having boarded in a family-style boardinghouse, Cora began living in an apartment by herself. Acknowledging that in those days a woman living alone was rather unusual, Cora described herself half-jokingly as being "a wildcat." Some of her friends' mothers, learning that Cora was in an apartment, did not want "their daughters to hang around with her." According to Cora, this was because those mothers were afraid that their daughters would "get the idea." See an interview with Cora Pelerin, Hareven and Langenbach, *Amoskeag,* 201-211.

yet significant number of these single women were self-supporting. This meant that most such women who lived as lodgers and roomers did not have the same responsibility as daughters of widowed households, who supported themselves and/or provided for their dependent family members. Without ruling out the possibility that some single lodgers may have sent money to their parents' household, the primary concern of most was to make enough to support themselves. Consequently, their earnings were financially more critical to their own survival than those of daughters who supplemented the budgets of a two-parent household.

The above assertion does not imply, however, that the financial contribution of single daughters who lived in a household headed by a wage-earning father was negligible. Rather it asks us to distinguish, as Carole Turbin has done in her analysis, between different types of contribution of single women. Among French-Canadian women of the same marital status and age group, some supplemented their fathers earnings; others, living in a single-parent household, assumed the role of principal provider; still others in a single-parent household worked together with their siblings or widowed parent; and others still were self-supporting. Regardless of their financial contribution, most of these never-married women commonly shared the responsibility of domestic work

Conclusion

This study of single French-Canadian women in early 20th-century Lowell has shed light on subtle and complex variations in their responsibilities. The diversity in their employment patterns and financial contributions emerged from an analysis by birthplace. Unlike Irish working-class women in late 19th-century Troy whose occupational distribution within the garment industry shifted substantially from a cohort made up of foreign-born immigrant women to another made up of their American-born daughters,[42] single French-Canadian women in early 20th-century Lowell demonstrated relatively little evidence of such occupational mobility within the textile industry's labour market. Still, the presence in 1920 of a fair proportion of them who worked as semi- and skilled workers and of white-collar workers among American-born daughters reveals a historical change which had been inconceivable among the cohort in the 1870s.

The working lives of single French-Canadian women in early 20th-century Lowell also reveal that a significant proportion were older, single women of age thirty and up. Some may have hoped to end their factory working days through marriage, however, their employment was rarely temporary. Others may have enjoyed being single and supporting themselves. Evidence that many worked for wages over a long period in their lives suggests that these single workers shared common characteristics with their married co-workers who continuously or intermittently brought home wages. A further investigation of married women's paid

[42]Turbin, *Working Women of Collar City*, chap. 2.

work will help to confirm, or contest, criticism advanced by Carole Turbin, challenging an analytical framework based on oppositional categories such as temporary/permanent and dependent (girls and wives)/independent (spinsters and widows).

Finally, this study has pointed to the common thread which ran through the diversity of experience of single French-Canadian women in early 20th-century Lowell. The obligation of carrying out housework and providing family care, appears to have invariably fallen upon daughters regardless of their age, household composition, or employment. Their domestic work was mostly performed without any monetary gain and was supplemented by their paid labour outside the home. In order to fully understand their role at work and at home, it will be crucial, therefore, to explore further the importance of their work outside the formal economy.

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