Women of the Victoria Shipyards 1942-1945: An Oral History

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B. A., University of Victoria, 1989

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Department of History

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of women in the shipbuilding industry in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada during World War II. Using oral history and relevant documentary evidence, I explore women's experiences in two shipyards-Victoria Machinery Depot and Yarrows for the period 1942 to 1946. The issues examined include: short-term employment, harassment, male resistance to women in the shipyards, union reaction to female employees and government concerns about post-war female employment. This study concludes that women viewed their war-time jobs as a positive experience despite the presence of patriarchal authority and deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about the proper work of women.

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Chapter I

> Now, for instance, there was only one toilet and we all had to use it. So we went in pairs and one girl stood outside. Anyway this one girl went in there and it was a urinal and she came out and said, "...you should see the funny showers they've got.[1]

Colorful and rich with laughter, the oral accounts of some twenty women bring to life their experiences in both the Yarrows and Victoria Machinery Depot shipyards of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada during World War II. This thesis uses these stories to explore the women's remembered work experiences during the period. The twenty women whose stories form the basis of this thesis were among the first ever to be employed in a British Columbia shipyard in a capacity other than in the secretarial or food services sectors. Their stories are an important chapter in British Columbia history. As an account of being female in an almost exclusively male world, these stories make a valuable contribution to Canadian women's history. It is the purpose of this thesis to explore this facet of Canadian women's wartime experience, looking particularly at issues of agency and how wartime work affected women. As little exists in written records, this profile is constructed primarily from a series of oral interviews. Through these

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[1]Elsie Watson

interviews, the day-to-day experiences of the women shipyard workers are captured in their own words.

The initial stimulus for this research began a number of years ago while researching a paper on a fishing strike for a labor history course. It was a short newspaper article, written in 1942, entitled "*First Women Report for Duty At Burrard Shipyard Today*". The article reported that: "Eleven eager young Vancouver women, dressed in whatever they could beg, steal or borrow, today dropped their roles as housewives and stenographers and became shipbuilders."[2] A copy of the article joined my labor history research notes and the quest for the story behind the rather cryptic article began.

Intrigued, I began to search through archives and libraries for further information. The current historical literature revealed that little had been written about women's involvement in war work in Canada. My main source was Ruth Roach Pierson's research on the significance of wartime changes to the women's labor force.[3] Her study focussed on women in the Canadian armed services but contributed very little on women's paid civilian labor. Just south of the border, however, there were two major studies on this subject which suggested to me several important parallels for Canada. In particular I realized that Amy Kesselman's study, an oral history, was very relevant since it gave me some ideas on how to conduct a similar study.[4]

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[2]*Vancouver Daily Province*, September 30, 1942, p. 3.

[3]Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).

[4] Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (State University of New York Press, 1990).

The reason for the lack of Canadian work on this subject may be the lack of archival resources. Documentary evidence about war production certainly exists, but there is a great shortage of material about the workers, and especially, women workers. There is some documentary evidence included on women's paid work in the federal and provincial government debates, Department of Labour reports, newspaper articles, photographs and shipyard worker magazines.[5] Given these limited resources, my next option was to use an oral history approach for much of the primary research. After a thorough review of Deborah Hirshfield, Sherna Berger Gluck and Amy Kesselman, the framework for my project began to take shape.[6] While Hirshfield did not use oral history, her study, based on how women were so rapidly integrated into the shipyards, established the focus for women's agency in this study. Both Sherna Berger Gluck's and Amy Kesselman's oral histories of women war workers illustrated how women viewed their wartime work experiences. From these two studies I was able to build a series of questions to help establish how the women in this study viewed their involvement in war work.

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[5]The House of Commons debates that touched on women war workers were few but in general evidenced concerns about women working outside the home and whether the women would go back into the home after the war. The Department of Labour Reports provided some statistical evidence on wages and numbers of women employed in industry. Newspaper articles were generally positive about female war workers but they too worried that women might not want to return to the home. The two shipyard magazines, *The Convoy*, Victoria Machinery Depot and *Wallace Shipbuilder*, Burrard Dry Dock, Vancouver, B.C. provided stories, cartoons and general gossip about shipyard life.

[6] Deborah Hirshfield, *Rosie Also Welded: Women and Technology in Shipbuilding During World War II.* (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of California, Irvine, 1987). Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited, Women the War and Social Change* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987). Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities.*

Oral history, long viewed with disfavor by traditional historians because of the apparent impermanence of the evidence, has become accepted as a valid research method. However, with the increasing use of oral history as a research tool, a number of concerns have risen. Can memories be accepted at face value? What are the effects of memory loss? How does selective remembering distort the account? How much impact does the listener have on the memories recounted?

Popular myth holds that women willingly gave up their household duties to enter war plant production to support the men fighting overseas, and that, at war's end, they happily gave up their coveralls to return to their aprons. This assumption has been soundly challenged by a number of historians.[7] Women, these historians claim, were victims of a paternalistic society, drawn or recruited into the labour force and then ejected at the end of the war to make way for the returning servicemen. The expanded economy and the male labour shortage created by the demands of war also created opportunities for women to move into hitherto male-dominated trade. Of course, the reverse happened at the end of the war: the economy contracted and employment decreased, pushing many women out of the work force. Government, church, media and union resistance, as well as the resistance of the women themselves, inhibited lasting change. Although this idea seems foreign to us now, at that time, as many

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[7] See for example: Pierson, *They're Still Women After All.* Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora Press, 1987). D'Anne Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Massachusetts: Cambridge, 1984). Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

women as men believed that a woman should not work outside the home unless she was the sole wage earner for her family.

Several excellent studies have found much to support the theory that women were indeed drawn into the workforce as temporary workers for the duration. The best known Canadian work is Ruth Roach Pierson's ground breaking study *They're Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood.*[8] More a study of women in the services than in the civilian work force, nonetheless Pierson's work provides an informative summary of government labor recruitment policies. Her analysis of Canadian government intervention in the wartime labor market is particularly applicable to this study, since she details government planning to utilize the vast reserves of female labor. Curiously, her findings that women were actively recruited through the National Selective Service are not mirrored by this study. In fact, only one woman recalled being recruited and that recollection is soundly disputed by one of her co-workers.

Pierson's study, using gender as the interpretive framework, calls into question much of the current philosophy that World War II enhanced women's economic and political status in Canada. Throughout her study Pierson tests the familiar theme that the war brought great gains to Canadian women. The result of her analysis indicates that, far from women making impressive gains in overcoming the sexual politics of the day, they were kept firmly within government prescribed limits. Economic gains were at best transitory. Pierson also

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[8]Pierson, *They're Still Women After All.*

examines government job training programs for evidence that women were directed into domestic labour as opposed to traditionally male dominated areas. Her findings support the dilemma faced by one of the respondents in this study: welding schools were closed to women despite the great need for welders. In her case study of the Canadian Women's Army Corps, Pierson argues that the authorities ignored earlier voluntary initiatives in an effort to protect male interests both within the military and in civilian life.

Pierson's work is somewhat dated and does not address many issues relating to the labor force participation in the 1940's. We do not know enough about women's expectations, although the government did undertake limited surveys of women's opinions during the war. We need to know more about the experiences of women in specific industries that Pierson, because of her focus on the Canadian Women's Army Corps, did not study. What were the experiences of women in industry, and how did they understand those experiences? Above all, why did so many women view their war-time work as a positive, beneficial experience? The older feminist interpretation that working women were subject to a dominant patriarchal authority does not fully explain why those women saw themselves and, in retrospect, still see themselves, in a very different light: not the victims of patriarchy, but successful working women who won new opportunities and freedoms.

Pierson's study stresses government and military control of women but she does not explore how or why women may have fully supported these controls. Even if we agree with Pierson's assessment of the extent of patriarchal control exerted over women, her conclusion runs the risk of disregarding the amount of choice many women

possessed and exercised. Further, the push to encourage men and women to marry and have families is not unusual in situations where a large proportion of the young men have been victims of war. To assume women were controlled by patriarchal coercion is to negate women's own choices. That some women (and men) did not marry surely indicates that while societal pressure may have encouraged the cult of domesticity, some could, and did, choose to depart from the cultural norm.

Unlike Pierson's conclusion that women were contained and controlled by government policy, Carolyn Gossage's oral and documentary history, *Great Coats and Glamour Boots*, portrays women as active participants.[9] The book is a collection of anecdotal and documentary evidence woven together to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the women who served in the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Canadian Women's Army and the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. It is, as Gossage notes, "...dedicated, as well, to their remembered joys and sorrows, to the 'experience of a lifetime' for those women who answered the call of duty and were never the same again."[10]

Gossage, a popular historian, does not attempt an analysis of the women's words. Instead she presents their stories with a minimum of comment, allowing the women's memories to form the basis of the book. While her work may have benefited from some analysis the

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[9] Carolyn Gossage, *Great Coats and Glamour Boots: Canadian Women at War (1939 - !945)*, (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1991).

[10] Ibid., p. 7.

women's words provide ample evidence that the women were not victims of a system designed to keep them in their place. Gossage notes, and her informants concur, that "They [women] did not, however, totally conform to accepted military practice. Most women, in fact, immediately set out to find new and inventive ways of getting around the rules and restrictive regulations which were meant to keep them in check, if not 'in their place' ".[11]

Gossage's findings in this instance are supported by my study. While the shipyards instituted numerous rules designed to control staff interaction few of the women appear to have taken much notice. There were rules against staying aboard the ship during lunch breaks, talking to their male coworkers except regarding the job, and the requirement that women had to seek permission to go to the washroom. Despite all the rules, the women went where they pleased and talked to their male coworkers. Indeed several of the women interviewed in this study married men they worked with in the shipyards.[12]

Gossage's work lacks historical context and analysis in several fundamental directions. First, there is little awareness of recent studies that explore the complexity of women's lives in the World War II era. Secondly, Gossage neglects to place the changes experienced by her informants against current scholarship. A final concern arises from Gossage's use of oral documents. She does not begin with a careful discussion of her methods as oral historian. She does not refer the

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[11]Ibid., p. 123.

[12] As well as the women in my study who met and married men who were coworkers in the shipyards, the *Convoy* regularly listed forthcoming marriages between staff in the yards.

substantial body of writing that discussed oral historical methods and the problems that can arise when the historian attempts to use individual memories as evidence.

Gossage does not mention, for instance, the problem of selective memory. Alessandro Portelli warns about informants "telling only what the informant thinks may be relevant from the researcher's point of view."[13] Paul Thompson also discusses selective memory in his chapter on "Evidence". "A willingness to remember is also essential ...Conversely, recall can be prevented by unwillingness: either conscious avoidance of distasteful facts or unconscious repression."[14] Gossage's findings remain of great value, but they cannot stand alone. To correct for any bias that may result from selective memory, the historian must also use available documentary evidence from the 1940's. The historian must also take care to frame questions that minimize the risk of selective memory.

A second book edited by Gossage, *Double Duty: Sketches and Diaries of Molly Lamb Bobak Canadian War Artist*, further supports the premise that women were active participants.[15] Starting with her enlistment in 1942 and ending with her departure for overseas duty in 1945, Lamb Bobak's diaries and sketches record life in the Canadian Women's Army Corps. As such, they are extremely valuable first hand

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[13]Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History" in *History Workshop,* No. 12 (Autumn, 1981), p. 104.

[14]Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past,* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) sec. Ed., p. 114

[15]Carolyn Gossage, *Double Duty: Sketches and Diaries of Molly Lamb Bobak Canadian War Artist* (Toronto and Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1992).

accounts of military life from a woman's perspective. Her sketches and notes suggest that women were not particularly intimidated by military rules and sought ways to avoid or rework them to their advantage. For example:

> I was informed, "reported Private Lamb, " that I must report to the kitchen at fifteen minutes to six on the following morning."..."Well, we did slit a cabbage or two, peel a dozen onions, wash a floor or two, but that is called "fatigue." The rest of the time," mused Pte. Lamb, "we talked boyfriends ... and politics, until we were sent to get our respirators for a gas drill. I took the opportunity to get my sketchpad and the cook became interested. So I drew away the morning.... The Army," confirms Pte Lamb, "is alright."[16]

Throughout the book there are numerous cases of women actively shaping specific circumstances to fit their needs. While Gossage's books provide an insight into Canadian women in the armed services, they are of limited use in this study, which focuses on civilian labor.

Rosamond "Fiddy" Greer's study of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service (W.R.C.N.S.) is a useful look at women's life in the military.[17] Greer's book, as she unabashedly notes in the opening, is "...not an official documentation of the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service. It is a *memoir.* Each of us has one; I offer mine in the hope it will be accepted as representative of all."[18] Partly autobiographical and partly historical her book gives an insider's

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[16]Ibid., p.34.

[17]Rosamund "Fiddy" Greer, *The Girls of the King's Navy* (Victoria, British Columbia, Sono Nis Press, 1983).

[18] Ibid., p. 5

perspective on the morals and conventions imposed on women during the war. Greer's work is weakened by a lack of analysis. However, like the informants in Gossage's study, Greer has primarily positive memories of her experiences in the W.R.C.N.S., which are in sharp counterpoint to Pierson's assumption that women's wartime experiences were mainly negative.

Jean Bruce's book, a collection of excerpts from archival records, letters, diaries, radio transcripts, newspapers, books and oral interviews, focuses on women who were active participants in the war effort, and that, as she writes, includes women in the home.[19] This is a very general book written for a popular audience with limited understanding of women's war work. However, it is valuable as it gives thumbnail sketches of the wide range of women's war time experiences. As in both Gossage's and Greer's books the women are almost universally positive about their experiences. This positive approach is partly explained by the books being popular trade publications, as opposed to Pierson's scholarly study. On the other hand, Pierson did not ask women what they thought about their experiences, rather she relied on an analysis of relevant documents. Bruce, Gossage and Greer all sought the opinions and memories of the women involved in the war effort.

Concluding the relevant available Canadian material are three books dealing with British Columbia shipyards. G.W. Taylor's study on the principal shipyard companies in British Columbia covers

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[19]Jean Bruce, *Back The Attack! Canadian Women During the Second World War - At Home and Abroad* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985).

approximately one hundred years ending in 1986.[20] His focus is on the principal figures involved in the shipyards rather than the workers. In his chapter on the impact of World War II on shipbuilding he touches, briefly, on the numbers of men and women employed. Unfortunately because he has not documented the source of his figures on employment they are suspect and virtually useless for my study. The lack of source documentation renders this book unsuitable as a tool for further research.

The second related book, a history of the Boilermakers Union in British Columbia, does not mention women workers.[21] When I interviewed the author of this book, Robert MacIntosh, he asserted that there were no women in the shipyards during the war. This study, like that by Taylor, is also limited by its shortage of references to work and workers and a lack of documentation on specific sources.

The third book, *A History of Shipbuilding in British Columbia,* presents the early history of shipbuilding in British Columbia and includes a collection of oral history transcripts.[22] Written by the Marine Retirees Association this book focuses mainly on the Marine Workers and Boilermakers Union. They include interviews with only two women about their experiences as shipyard workers during the war although the authors assert that there were at least 1500 women employed in the Vancouver yards during the war. Despite its focus on

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[20]G.W. Taylor, *Shipyards of British Columbia: The Principal Companies* (Victoria: Morriss Publishing, 1986).

[21]Robert MacIntosh, *Boilermakers in British Columbia* (Published by Lodge #359, 1976).

[22]*A History of Shipbuilding in British Columbia* (Vancouver, B.C.: College Printers, 1977).

unions and lack of specific references, this book is a useful source of general information on the shipbuilding industry. Of particular interest are the sections on the development of the union and its near demise during the depression. As the depression deepened, and wages and jobs collapsed, throwing thousands out of work company control over their remaining workers increased immensely. With the return of full employment during World War II, union strength increased markedly, wages and working conditions improved and the membership sought to protect their gains.

On an international level, Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield's study of British women in World War II follows a similar theme to Ruth Roach Pierson's: women were a reserve army of labour in a tightly controlled patriarchal society.[23] Braybon and Summerfield conclude that while women were not expelled from the work force they were induced to return to the home by postwar child welfare societies. These societies, largely composed of the medical community and child psychologists, held that a woman's place was in the home rearing happy healthy children. Their view was strongly supported by those in positions of power over women, particularly doctors, social workers, and members of the educational community. In addition, this orthodoxy became a most useful tool for employers and unions to use to continue to exclude women from 'men's' jobs.[24] Two American historians, Ruth Milkman[25] and D'Anne Campbell[26]

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[23] Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*. Chapters 15 and 16.

[24] Ibid., pp. 278-279.

[25] Milkman, *Gender at Work*.

argue along a similar line. The cult of domesticity, so prevalent in the post-war years, lured women from the factories back to the hearth. Milkman also sees the reversion to sex segregation of jobs in the workplace as an important factor in women's retreat to the home or to more traditional female work.

Several American studies have proven valuable as resources during the writing of this thesis. Deborah Hirshfield studied women in the American shipbuilding industry during World War II. As the starting point for her exploration of women's roles, she analyzed technological change, which allowed shipyards to employ unskilled laborers. Hirshfield's study began with an analysis of World War I shipbuilding and the subsequent impact on shipbuilding during World War II. She notes that until the late 1930's a surplus of ships from World War I kept the industry at a standstill. On December 7, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and immediately created the need for maximum ship production. However, the lengthy decline in the shipbuilding industry had created a skilled labor shortage and industry was forced to turn to unskilled labor and eventually women. This need, she argues, resulted in the transformation of shipbuilding from a craft based industry to a mass production industry. As a result, craft skills were broken down to semi-skilled tasks.

Hirshfield concluded that World War II was not a turning point for women's labor. Rather, she argued it was part of an ongoing replacement of skilled workers with semi-skilled workers.[27] Harry

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[26] Campbell, *Women at War with America.*

[27]Deborah Hirshfield, *Rosie Also Welded: Women and Technology in Shipbuilding During World War II,* (Ph.D. Dissertation :University of California, Irvine, 1987).

Braverman's study on the labor processes within occupations supports Hirshfield's conclusions. Braverman argues that "work has become increasingly subdivided into petty operations..."[28] a point Hirshfield concurs with in her conclusion. "Women entered the industry after the transformation from craft labor to semi-skilled labor had occurred."[29]

Among the studies, Sherna Berger Gluck's oral history about female aircraft workers in the Los Angeles area[30] and Amy Kesselman's *Fleeting Opportunities,* an oral history of female shipyard workers in the Pacific Northwest, stand out [31]. Both studies rely extensively on women's memories about their experiences in wartime working conditions. Although these studies face the problems of memory loss as well as revisionist memory, they bring a refreshing viewpoint to what has been, for the most part, working class history conceived and written by middle class historians. What becomes clear in Gluck's study is that, of the women who wanted to remain in jobs similar to ones they held during the war, those who were fighters often achieved their goals. As Gluck points out, "...not all the women were fighters nor were there organizations to help working class women fight, except for unions, most of whom have blemished records on this score."[32] Although unions do not have a good record when it comes to

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[28] Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), p.4.

[29] Hirshfield, *Rosie Also Welded,* p. 236.

[30] Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited.*

[31] Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities.*

[32] Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited,* p. 262.

supporting female workers, women have often displayed a great reluctance to become involved with unions, choosing to give family demands priority.

Amy Kesselman's study examines the role of women in three Kaiser shipyards in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington during World War II. By drawing heavily on oral interviews with thirty-five women residents of the Portland and Vancouver areas, Kesselman examined the varied roles of women in the shipyards. She also analyzed their responses to those roles, the reactions of their male co-workers, and government and industry reaction. Her findings indicate that women were never fully integrated into the shipyard work force. Nevertheless, the women found challenge and satisfaction in their jobs. According to a 1943 survey of female field workers conducted by the Portland Committee on Postwar Planning in cooperation with the unions, the Maritime Commission, and the shipyard management, almost half of the women employed in the area's three shipyards wanted to continue as skilled industrial workers.[33] Their goals were thwarted by the union's refusal to support their fight to remain in the work force and by the contraction of shipbuilding in the postwar years. Kesselman notes, after the war "...the sex-segregated labor market began to reassert its prewar contours."[34] Plants that had hired women during the war were replacing them with

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[33] Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities.* The survey explicitly excluded office staff, approximately 11,593 or 14.2% of the workers. Kesselman concludes this indicates the survey committee was not concerned about whether women would remain in the workforce only if they would remain in male jobs. Pp. 99-100.

[34] Ibid., p. 112.

returning veterans, pushing women back into more traditional female work roles. While management may have been willing to accept some women in industry, the metal trade unions made it very clear they would not support the retention of women for the shrinking job pool. Kesselman noted that the women were not surprised by this turn of events. "I guess I just figured," Mable Studebaker commented, "that it was just part of the times...They didn't hire 'em before the war and I figured they didn't hire 'em after the war either." [35] Despite the setbacks accorded working women at the end of the war Kesselman concluded that although the job opportunities for these women were fleeting, the experience left a lasting impression on them. Many of her respondents declared they developed a growing sense of themselves as workers and as equals in society.[36]

Nevertheless, despite the fleeting nature of the job opportunities created by the war emergency, women had taken enormous steps towards eventual job equality. Three of Kesselman's thirty-five interviewees continued to fight for the right to work in industry, two were successful and the third, unsuccessful in her job search, was instrumental in launching a sex discrimination suit. While this translates to an agonizingly low 1.75% of the interviewees, the numbers must be balanced against the fact that there were over 40,000 women employed in the Portland and Vancouver shipyards. There

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[35]Ibid., p. 110.

[36] Kesselman. *Fleeting Opportunities,* p. 133. For further readings on women in war work see, for example: Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*. Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited.* Milkman, *Gender at Work.*

may well have been many more women who fought both successfully and unsuccessfully to remain within the industrial workplace.

Sherna Berger Gluck has suggested that war work changed women's perceptions of themselves and contributed to [a]"...rising tide of expectations..."[37] Gluck has further noted that unless we begin to understand "...the complex ways in which change occurs...we too [may]easily fall prey to viewing women as the unwitting victims of a patriarchal, capitalist society, rather than portraying them as actors in their own lives."[38] While it would be futile to try to claim women gained equality then or now, there is a strong indication both in Kesselman's book and in the interviews contained in this thesis that women were far from victims. Instead, they were agents of change in their lives and in the lives of those around them.

This study of women workers in the Victoria, British Columbia shipyards focuses on the actions of the women in the shipyards. It examines how the women initially entered the yards, the reactions of the union and the men to the influx of women and what happened when the war was over. Based on the premise that women went willingly into industrial work, this study also assumes that women actively made adjustments and changes both personally and within the workplace to accommodate their new work surroundings.

After the initial discovery that women had indeed been employed in the shipyards, I began to examine the available secondary

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[37]Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited,* p. 267.

[38]Sherna Berger Gluck, "Interlude or Change: Women and the World War II Work Experience", *International Journal of Oral History,* Vol. 3, No. 2, (June 1982), p.92.

resources. I first explored my ideas of working women, labor and World War life through studying, among others, Pierson, Kesselman, Gluck, Summerfield and Braybon.[39] After familiarizing myself with the written sources, I then set about asking women who had worked before and during the war their memories. From their replies I began to understand the challenges faced by working women during the 1930's and 1940's.[40] From this point, I began to search for possible sources dealing with the women shipyard workers.

At first I attempted to find documentary evidence through traditional resources—employee records, union records, and women's journals. There is a great scarcity of this type of material. After a number of telephone calls to archives and libraries yielded little of use, I turned to one of the two remaining shipyards in Victoria, Victoria Machinery Depot. There a helpful person explained that, due to the high incidence of asbestosis claims among shipyard workers from the 1940's, the Workers Compensation Board had removed all employee records. A call to the WCB confirmed this information.[41] At this point, I learned many of the remaining union records were archived in Special Collections at the University of British Columbia. Unfortunately, union records are composed mainly of very brief meeting minutes and the occasional letter. These were no exception.

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[39] In addition to the above-mentioned authors, I also surveyed *Chatelaine*, May 1939; September 1940; March 1941; December 1942; February 1943; August 1944 and *Good Housekeeping* December 1939; June 1940; October 1941; August 1942; July 1944; September, 1945.

[40] This was an informal survey of family and friends and encompassed women who had worked and those who had stayed home.

[41] The employee records are sealed until cases of suspected asbestosis and other job related illnesses are resolved under the Workers Compensation Act.

It became clear that if I were going to pursue this project I would have to find a different way to access information. Following Kesselman et al I decided to find out what oral history would yield. Accordingly I sent a letter to the editor of the *Times Colonist* newspaper in April 1994 in which I explained my project and my need for female interviewees. Within two weeks, I had twenty-six responses, all women. Of these, twenty consented to personal interviews and the remainder agreed to speak to me on the telephone. Most also provided me with letters, clippings, magazines, and photographs. Seventeen of the interviews form the body of this thesis.[42] My one male informant was located later in the study, in the fall of 1995.

Once my sample was established, I scheduled interviews allowing one to one and one half-hours per person. At the initial telephone contact I would reiterate the purpose of my project and establish what job and which shipyard the woman had worked in. From that information, I would research the job requirements for her position before the interview. This allowed me to reshape my standard questionnaire to cover her position while ensuring all the questions were covered during the interview. All interviews were conducted in the subject's home. Occasionally a family member was present, either in the room or in an adjoining room. Equipment for this project consisted of a micro cassette recorder and a small, freestanding microphone. My goal in choosing as non-intrusive equipment as possible was to reduce resistance to being recorded. At the same time,

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[42] Unfortunately, medication and illness rendered three of the interviewees unsuitable.

I also allowed the interviewees the right to ask me to turn off the recorder if they felt uncomfortable about something they were going to say being recorded. Three people used this offer.

The women I interviewed came from diverse backgrounds and varied widely in age. The youngest was seventeen and the oldest thirty-three when they started work in the shipyards. Nine had worked previously in 'traditional' female jobs--waitress, sales, and clerical work. Three were newly out of school and this was their first job. Five were married. My sample includes only women who worked in the shipyards in Victoria, British Columbia from 1942 to 1945.[43]

This sample of women, although representative only of the shipyards of Victoria, provided a sufficiently large group of subjects for a significant study. In addition, by focusing on the Victoria area, I was able to restrict my study to a group of women who had not been previously studied.

Clearly there are problems associated with the sample used in this paper. All my interviewees volunteered to participate in my study. Consequently, all my participants were people who wanted to talk about their experiences. This increased the chance that they may often have thought about or told their stories. The problem of an oft-repeated story is recognized by some oral historians as "mechanical retelling."[44] While the possibility of mechanical retelling occurs in these interviews, I do not feel it substantially alters the usefulness of

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[43] Women did not enter the shipyards in Victoria until the fall of 1942, shortly after the first women were hired in Vancouver.

[44]Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: the Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.19.

the collected material. Overall, however, I noted in their individual responses common patterns suggesting a shared experience in the shipyards. With one or two exceptions, my interviewees discontinued contact with one another at the termination of their employment in the yards.

Another problem I noted was failing memory. Many of the women often remarked "That was fifty years ago now, you know" or "I don't remember...." With the admissions of memory loss in some areas, there was also a sense that many memories, while faded, were enhanced during the interview. It is unlikely that this was a deliberate attempt to mislead but perhaps rather an effort to establish an identity. As Luisa Passerini notes, "In the cases in which work serves to establish the identity of the narrator, fantasy and reality are mixed up."[45]

A number of oral researchers address these problems. Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank, who has conducted extensive work in the area of life history research, provides timely information on oral historical methodology.[46] Her recent article "Oral Tradition and Oral History" stresses that rather than mining oral history for "facts", that we should instead focus on oral history as a social process. She also draws attention to the question "...who gets to frame and tell the story -- whose voices are prominent in these discussions and whose are

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[45]Ibid., p 42.

[46]Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Native Yukon Elders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990). See also: Julie Cruikshank, "Myth as a Framework for Life Stories", in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds, *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

marginalized."[47] Although her primary concern is the oral history of aboriginal peoples, her points are equally valid when applied to the study of women's history. Like First Nations people, women have been marginalized within the dominant historical structure. Another oral historian, Elizabeth Tonkin, urges us to assess oral history on its own merits as well as a 'backup' for documentary sources. She notes that "...finding errors in an account, whether written or oral, does not necessarily invalidate the account..."[48] Paul Thompson notes that "even a lie is a form of communication; and it may provide an important clue to the family's psychological and social attitudes."[49]

A final area of concern was the problem of verifying the women's accounts. Because so little documentary evidence remains detailing the women's work in the shipyards, my primary validation comes from the similarities of each woman's story. Addressing the problem of validity, which has often been the sticking point for the use of oral history by more document-based historians, are several oral historians. One in particular, Wendy Wickwire, has shown, in her comparison of oral accounts and documentary sources, that oral histories can remain highly reliable over long periods of time and

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[47] Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Oral History: Reviewing Some Issues", *Canadian Historical Review,* LXXV, 3 1994, p. 403.

[48]Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). For a further discussion of oral history and memory see also: Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal,* Autumn 1981, and "The Time of My Life: Functions of Time in Oral History," *International Journal of Oral History,* November, 1981 and Karen Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," *Oral History Journal,* Vol. 17, 1989, 44-53.

[49]Thompson, *The Voice of the Past,* p. 145.

retelling.[50] These and other contemporary perspectives on oral history are drawing attention to the vast untapped potential of oral historical research.

My questions yielded certain types of responses. One variation which Karen Fields discusses is the "wedding list" or "church program" sort of memory. [51] Fields notes that the "wedding list" memory causes the informant to list every person who could be remotely connected to the story, much like making a wedding guest list with people who have to be invited because of some real or imagined family connection. This, of course, results in inclusion of names and incidents which may have very little to do with the story. My informants used this form of response to several of my questions. Deeply concerned about getting the story right but equally concerned about not gossiping, they often evaded issues of harassment, sexuality and workplace problems. Instead of responding directly to my question, they would talk about other people or incidents in the shipyard. This left many stories incomplete or told in a mythological fashion.

Using mythology to explain an uncomfortable situation was another common way my informants answered questions about sexuality, harassment, or workplace problems. This form of narration corresponds closely to Passerini's category of "double representation

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[50]Wendy C. Wickwire "To See Ourselves as the Other's Other: Nlaka'pamux Contact Narratives," *Canadian Historical Review,* LXXV, 1, 1994, 1-20. See also: Julie Cruikshank, "Myth as a Framework for Life Stories", in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, editors, *The Myths We Live By,* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[51] Karen Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," *Oral History Journal,* Vol. 17, 1989, p. 45.

of self" wherein the storyteller starts the tale with the "...classic formula 'once'...which by its vagueness shifts us into indeterminate time..."[52] This was a familiar theme amongst all the women interviewed when my questions seemed to come too close to their personal experiences in areas they were not comfortable discussing. "No, but one time..." or "Well, once we heard about..." generally preceded replies to my questions in these areas. Despite patient and persistent questioning, allowing the interviewee to use Passerini's category 'once', not one woman would fully respond to the questions on harassment, sexuality, or work place problems. Several, Sumner, Taylor and Owen, for example treated these questions almost as insults—becoming irritated and changing the subject immediately. Others, Smith, Barnes and Wood, acknowledged the questions but evaded supplying detailed answers. The remainder simply denied any knowledge of any incidents.[53]

My approach gave my interviewees time to think about what they were going to say and how they would structure their stories. This became clear to me when some began their stories before I had set up the tape recorder or asked my first question. Two had made notes to ensure they would "get it right" while others gave the impression they had memorized their story. Despite these problems, the women's memories of their work experience in the shipyards during the war years provided us with a rich source of contextual information about

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[52]Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, p. 20.

[53] Ruby Sumner, Ida Taylor,(pseudonym) Jean Owen, Hazel Smith,(pseudonym)Daphne Barnes, Eva Wood.

both the work experience and the women's expectations as workers and women.

"The credibility of oral sources is a *different* credibility."[54] While every problem mentioned above affects the credibility of the interviews, the fact remains that these life memories, as recounted by the women, are informational. Certainly there are inaccuracies and embellishments but these are important for what they reveal about these women's dreams, desires, and beliefs. So does documentary evidence. Unfortunately, documentary evidence relating to women in the shipyards in British Columbia is scarce, making the job of assessing the value of the oral testimonies even more difficult.

A careful survey of the four primary newspapers within the area of my study, for the period 1939 to 1946, resulted in twenty-seven articles dealing with women shipyard workers.[55] The articles ranged from registering astonishment at women entering the shipyards, to pride in the jobs "our girls are doing", to predicting women would or would not wish to return to their homes.[56] For example, one story highlighted the first two women working as bolters-up. "In all winds and weather Phyllis Nugent and Lorraine Deegan, only girl bolters-up in a local shipyard, are at their jobs on the hull of a ship and doing so well that their foreman is asking for more."[57] Another article

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[54]Portelli, "The peculiarities of Oral History", p. 101.

[55] *The Vancouver Sun, The Vancouver Daily Province, Victoria Daily Times and The Daily Colonist.*

[56] See, for example, *The Vancouver Sun,* May 15, 1943, *The Daily Colonist,* August 29, 1945, *The Vancouver Daily Province*, May 27, 28, 1943.

[57] *The Vancouver Sun,* March 1, 1943. P. 13.

highlighted the results of the sub-committee on the post-war problems of women. "The post-war Canadian woman will be housekeeper, mother and wife only part-time. Day-nurseries, trained domestic help, streamlined housekeeping will release her to take her place in industries, professions and community life."[58] Other articles appear to be aimed at encouraging women to enter industrial jobs and to assuage the concerns of the community. For instance, "Special pride in the five rivet-passers and the woman who keeps an eye on them, Mrs. Gladys Sherk, is taken by Mrs. Grace McGaw, first woman supervisor in a shipyard."[59] Here we have two women supervisors 'watching over' the female employees: one on the riveting team as well as a general supervisor of all the female yard employees.

The newspaper reports illustrated many of the concerns of the day. Could women do men's work? Was it 'safe', especially in the sense of sexuality and morality, to allow women into industry? Would women go back into the home after the war? Drawing on these concerns, I framed several of my questions to reflect what appeared to be the general mood of the day. In particular I sought answers to questions on femininity, sexual harassment and types of employment obtained after the war.

It is important to remember here the biases inherent in newspaper articles. First, the Canadian government had developed the Defence of Canada Regulations, a set of stringent rules that, at the decision of the Federal Cabinet, could be brought into effect under the

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[58] *The Vancouver Daily Province*, September 13, 1943. P.11.

[59] *Vancouver News-Herald,* October 22, 1942, p.3.

War Measures Act. Amongst the rules was the government's right to control freedom of expression through censorship and suppression of the press.[60] Clearly the press was not going to risk censorship, therefore it is likely the wise editor followed government guidelines in the matter of what stories could be printed and in how the subject matter could be treated. Inherent in the threat of censorship is the deliberate slanting of stories to reflect the interests of the controlling party. Second, the editors and reporters were overwhelmingly male and, as such, reported on stories they deemed interesting to readers. Therefore, they likely saw stories about women as topically of interest.

Interestingly, none of the women interviewed recalled any newspaper articles about women working in war industry or about worker shortages. "I didn't have time to read the papers..." was the response from one rather exasperated informant. "By the time I took care of the children and the house and shopped and got myself to work..."[61]

With one exception, private papers or diaries were nonexistent. Working women rarely have the time or inclination to write and these women were no exception. Only one woman, Sheila Anderson, left a small file of personal letters and speeches written during the time she worked in Victoria Machinery Depot (VMD) shipyard.[62] Although most of her material was intended for public consumption, it

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[60]Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Victory 1945: Canadians From War to Peace* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 96

[61]Mrs. Smith (pseudonym.)

[62]Personal papers of Sheila Anderson loaned by her daughter, Fiona Hyslop

nonetheless substantiates much of what the interviewees recounted some fifty years later.

Almost as scarce as personal papers were photographs. This gap, at first puzzling, soon became understandable. The shipyards were under high security, both because of worries about sabotage and because of very real concerns that the Japanese would attack. Consequently, a naval censor censored all official photographs. Carrying cameras was forbidden. Despite these restrictions, a few photographs do exist. Most were taken outside the yards, but an occasional official photograph was taken inside the yards. The illustrations included in this thesis are a mixture of official and personal photographs.

Among the printed documents I examined were the following: the *House of Commons Debates* and the *Post War Reconstruction Committee* recommendations. Both sets of documents provided an insight into the evolving debate about hiring women as war workers and highlighted concerns about women displaced by returning veterans. They were useful because they were representative of the national concerns of Canadians.

The Department of Trade and Commerce statistics proved to be a useful source of employment numbers.[63] By tracking the numbers of shipyards and employees in British Columbia, it was a simple matter to establish the increase in female employees relative to male employees overall. Unfortunately, these statistics are not broken down by yard or

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[63] Department of Trade and Commerce, Dominion Bureau of Statistics of Industry, Mining, Metallurgical and Chemical Branch. (Ottawa, Kings Printer 1939-1947).

job, so their usefulness is limited. On the other hand, the British Columbia Government Sessional Papers provided a breakdown of average weekly wage by occupation and sex.[64] These proved useful in determining the average wages for women working in female dominated occupations as opposed to women working in male dominated occupations.

Other documentary evidence included two in-house newsmagazines, *The Convoy,* Victoria Machinery Depot, and *The Wallace Shipbuilder,* Burrard Shipyard, magazines that provided useful depictions of shipyard and wartime life as written by the workers.

The main problem with the documentary evidence, including photographs, is its scarcity. The very small number of House of Commons debates on the problem of women workers indicates there was less concern about integrating women into the work force than current literature suggests.[65] On the other hand it may simply have been there was so much else to worry about that women workers were only a concern when it came to post war reconstruction and re-employment of men. The relative scarcity of documentary evidence makes it difficult to compare the women's memories with written records, raising some concerns about accuracy. On the other hand, it also allows a fresh perspective of wartime Canada to emerge through the voices of the women.

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[64] Sessional Papers, First Session Twentieth Parliament of the Province of British Columbia, Session 1940-47. Annual Report The Department of Labour.

[65] See, for example: Pierson, *They're Still Women After All* and Summerfield and Braybon, *Out of the Cage;* for discussions which strongly indicate that women were systematically suppressed by government controls in the workplace both during and after the war.

Before World War II the shipbuilding industry in Canada had an almost entirely male work force. In 1939, eighteen shipyards in British Columbia and the Yukon employed 968 people of whom 6 were women. Nationally, shipyards employed 3,491 men and 48 women.[66] Unfortunately, the Department of Trade and Industry statistics do not provide a breakdown of job type. In this case it is safe to assume that the women were employed in either a clerical or food services position. The demands of war quickly changed the shipbuilding industry, bringing in large numbers of hurriedly trained, inexperienced, new workers, and of these increasing numbers many were women. By 1945 the number of plants in British Columbia had risen to twenty-four, with 19,127 employees, of whom 1,314, or 6.9%, were female.[67] Unfortunately, there are no figures available to indicate the percentage of women employed as industrial workers as opposed to clerical or food services. My informants suggest that many women were placed in non-industrial jobs within the shipyards.

Layoffs in all Canadian shipyards began shortly after Victory in Europe Day, May 8, 1945 and accelerated after Victory in Japan Day, August 14, 1945. Shipbuilding quickly lost its wartime status as a large employer and reverted to primarily a male occupation. British Columbia shipyards showed a dramatic decline in the number of all employees. By 1945-46 the total number of shipyard employees had dropped to 6,291, of whom women accounted for only 159.[68] Victoria

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[66]Department of Trade and Commerce, Dominion Bureau of Statistics Census of Industry, Mining, Metallurgical and Chemical Branch. (Ottawa, Kings Printer 1939), p. 3.

[67]Ibid., 1946, p.2.

[68]Ibid., p. 2.

shipyards closely paralleled the national trend, laying off workers after Victory in Europe and Victory in Japan. In Victoria there was no apparent importation of women workers, unlike Prince Rupert and Vancouver, where quarters were built to accommodate the expanding female work force. The only concession to 'women's quarters' in Victoria were lunchrooms set aside for the exclusive use of female employees.

Available figures on the number of women employed by Victoria Machinery Depot shipyard indicates there were approximately 250 women.[69] The figure for Yarrow's shows 2,624 men and 401 women in the period beginning November 1943 and ending March 1944.[70] This is higher than the national average and may be a reflection of the number of servicemen's wives in Victoria.

Women of the Victoria Shipyards 1942-1945: An Oral History, a study of the women shipyard workers in the wartime shipyards in Victoria, British Columbia, has a two- fold purpose. The first purpose is to add to the discussion of women's wartime activities through the inclusion of these women's memories in the growing body of Canadian women's history. The second purpose is to challenge the prevailing view of women as victims of a patriarchal system as put forward by

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[69]Sheila Anderson, personal papers, letter to Mrs. Hysolp. The figures Mrs. Anderson gives are the only indication I have as to the number of employees in VMD. Mrs. Anderson was the women's representative in the yard and gives the figure of over 250 women working in all departments.

[70]Yarrows documents, Esquimalt Archives , this information was written on a slip of paper with the notation "figures for the boss -- highest employment. Men 2624 women 401 [total] 3025 . Nov. 43/ March 44. These documents are in a box in the archives and are not otherwise catalogued.

Roach Pierson et al. The latter tends to negate women's proactive roles during World War II. I argue that, while women were working within a patriarchal system, they were active decision-makers in their own lives. While women had no choice but to work within the existing system, they cannot be seen merely as victims of the system. Women struggled to take advantage of what ever opportunities were afforded to them within the workplace. Some even moved into positions of discretion and the exercise of authority. Drawing heavily on women's personal recollections of their working experiences in the shipyards, I argue that women exercised much control over their lives. In *Women of the Victoria Shipyards*, I will explore women's responses to their wartime work experiences and also their responses to the loss of their jobs in the postwar era. Using the women's words and perspective, I will examine their work and the loss of their jobs at the end of the war. Using the women's memories as a reference point, I will explore the reactions of the men, the unions, and the government to women in heavy industry.

Chapter II

The Women and Their Work

Who were these young women who "...dropped their roles as housewives and stenographers and became shipbuilders"?[71] It is, perhaps, easier to say what they were not, rather than what they were. They were not all young, nor were they housewives or clerical workers. They were a diverse group of women who wanted to earn money and support Canada's war effort. Although I had no particular preconceptions about the reasons women went out to work for the war effort I was surprised to find that all my informants saw the need to support the war effort as paramount. It is difficult to know if patriotism was always of prime importance or if the idea of it has become more important over time. Nonetheless, in every testimony a fierce sense of pride in a job well done and in their support of Canada at war came through quite clearly, both verbally and emotionally. In this section I will examine how my informants got their shipyard jobs, how they described their work roles and their remembered reactions to these new roles. In an attempt to preserve the continuity of each woman's story, I have, for the most part, presented each woman's story as a unit. Since conversations, even those directed by questions, tend to ebb and flow, I have reorganized portions of their recollections to fit a common narrative framework.

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[71] *The Vancouver Daily Province,* September 30, 1942, p. 3.

Although history and the popular media have tended to portray female shipyard workers as 'Rosie the Riveter'[72] most of the women were helpers. A 'helper' as used in this paper indicates an employee whose primary job was to help the journeyman perform his or her job efficiently. Helpers were usually new, untrained employees who, if they proved to be adept at the job, were promoted to better positions on the team and eventually given the opportunity to train as a journeyman. It is not clear if many women would have been able to move from 'helper' status, as their tenure in the shipyards was too short. This reflects both their inexperience and indicates that many of the jobs created by wartime expansion and those vacated by men going overseas were in the less skilled areas.[73] While the highly skilled men were more valuable in the factory than at the front, there was also the age factor. Many of the men holding highly skilled positions would have been older and less likely to have been recruited.[74] Initially, trade' training was oriented towards young men, but as the demands of

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[72] 'Rosie the Riveter' is usually portrayed as a young woman, hair safely wrapped up in a white kerchief, smiling cheerfully through a fetchingly begrimed face. My argument in this section is that women did not enter the shipyards in leadership positions, which is what is implied in being a riveter.

[73] Anecdotal evidence gathered from the women and from a survey published in the Convoy, July, 1943 supports my conclusion that most of the women were hired in a helper category. There were, of course, exceptions to this, as evidenced by the two women electricians and three woman welders in my study. However, I do not think this can be used to support the idea that many women became journeymen, rather, I suspect these women felt they had more to contribute to the study and were, therefore, more willing to talk about their experiences. For an excellent discussion of the switch from craft based labor to semi -skilled labor in the shipyards see Deborah Ann Hirshfield, *Rosie Also Welded: Women and Technology in Shipbuilding During World War II,* University of California, Irvine, Ph. D. Dissertation, 1987.

[74] The age of enlistment varied considerably. Officially, men could enlist at 18 but could not serve overseas until they were 19. The upper age limit varied considerably with rank, education and skills at the time of enlistment. Source: Canadian Scottish Regimental Museum, Victoria, B.C.

the war increased it began to shift toward women. Two journeyman trade in which women achieved status (welder and electrician) required several months of intensive training in trade schools. All other training was on the job.

It was government policy to limit women's employment mainly to either young, unmarried women or childless married women. None of the women I interviewed, however, had paid any attention to this. Aged seventeen to thirty-three, twelve were single with few responsibilities; five were married; three were mothers, and two were sole supporters of their families.

Among the single women, ten worked in traditional female jobs. Edith Tataryn, for example, worked as a hardware store clerk, a job she returned to at the end of the war. Elsie Murcheson worked in the concession stand at the Willows Racetrack. Three of the women I interviewed were married with children when they decided to go into the shipyards.

Many of the women described parties associated with their work in the shipyards. They reminisced about going for after-work drinks with co-workers and chuckled about the virtually unlimited opportunities to meet men in all these situations. Several talked about being able to earn enough to support themselves and their children in the case of a failed marriage or the death of a spouse. Others used their work as an opportunity to save for the future. "Every week, every payday I would head to the bank with five dollars. OH! I was going to have a fortune when my husband came home."[75]

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[75]Elsie Watson

What jobs did women do in the shipyards? Contrary to popular opinion, both then and now, the women in the shipyards did not work as riveters, as suggested by the sobriquet 'Rosie the Riveter'. There were no riveters among the women I interviewed. There are a number of factors that may account for this. First, handling a riveting gun takes enormous muscular strength. This is not to imply that women were not capable of working a riveting gun. Instead, the issue of their strength may have been used to prohibit them from trying. Robin Williams, the one male interviewee in my study, theorized that women were probably too small to handle the thirty to forty pound rivet guns hour after hour, day in and day out.[76] Mr. Williams also believed that the cult of masculinity prohibited women from working as shipyard riveters. Riveters were by definition very strong men and if women could use rivet guns, it would seriously impinge on this domain. Shipyard culture was a subculture in which men's roles were clearly defined, and shipyard workers were proud of how hard and dirty the work was. As Roper points out, men claim status from their daily battles with machinery.[77] The importance of those battles would be seriously weakened if women were seen to be as effective as men.

Women were primarily employed as helpers. The first women employed in the Burrard Shipyard (Vancouver) were 'passer girls'

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[76]Robin Williams, a former shipyard employee and author of *A Vancouver Boyhood,* privately printed, 1995.

[77]Michael Roper, "Yesterday's Model: Product fetishism and the British company man, 1945-85", in Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds. *Manful Assertions; Masculinities in Britain since 1800,* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) pp. 190-211.

hired to replace boys returning to school.[78] Later, women moved into most, if not all, of the shops in the shipyards.[79] It is difficult to assess how much autonomy women were able to attain in their jobs. Some jobs, such as driving trucks, operating lathes and drill presses, were technically not helper positions since they did not involve assisting a charge-hand. I hesitate to reclassify them, however, since their status as temporary replacement workers would essentially relegate them to helper status regardless of the jobs they performed. While the list of jobs that follows is extensive, it is not exhaustive.

Women worked as heater boys (girls), rivet catchers, passer girls, sweepers, bottom cleaners, machinist's helpers, mold loft workers, pattern loft workers, truck drivers, crane operators, painters, tackle riggers, bench workers, drill press operators, lathe operators, plate markers, electricians and electrician's helpers, welders, bolters up, burners, rigger's helpers, tool room assistants, and in ship's stores. Others worked in areas more traditional to women: secretarial, checking and recording work, cleaning and food services. Kesselman's study supports my findings that women were employed mainly in the

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[78] A 'passer-boy' (girl) stood between the riveter and the 'heater-boy' (girl). The heater-girl heated the rivets until they were white-hot then she hurled them at the passer-girl who caught them in a metal funnel-shaped bucket. The passer-girl, using tongs, snatched the rivet out of the bucket and popped it in the rivet hole. As soon as her tongs were out of the way the riveter and the 'bucker-up swung into action, the bucker-up holding the rivet in place with a dolly-bar and the riveter flattening the head of the rivet with a rivet gun. Dolly-bars came in all shapes and sizes depending on the shape the riveter wanted the rivet to take. In cases where the bucker-up could not get in position the dolly-bar was wedged in position and held in place with air-jacks. Note: The use of boy or girl in this paper mirrors the usage during the period under consideration. A young man, newly hired, was a 'boy' the same terminology was applied to the newly hired young women, who were referred to as 'girls'.

[79] Shop in this use indicated various areas of the shipyard, for example machine-shop, blacksmiths shop or electricians shop.

helper category. In her study women helpers were the most numerous at 31.52 percent by classification. The next highest classification was exempt and clerical workers at 22.22 percent, followed by welders at 21.60 percent.[80] Kesselman notes that "Women were hired mainly as helpers, jobs which required less training and received less pay."[81] Hirshfield's conclusion that the transformation of shipyard work from craft labor to semi-skilled labor allowed for women's entrance into the shipyards also supports my initial findings that women were hired mainly in the helper category.[82] J.S. Marshall further supports the idea of women as helpers. Women, he writes, first entered Burrard's as passer-girls and as housekeepers, then, as the war progressed, moved into almost every job. However, as his job list shows, women were employed primarily as helpers.[83]

The method of training for women was virtually the same as for the men they replaced. After being hired they were sent to a team or gang to learn their jobs. Often my informants were vague about their first day on the job. They all recalled their first day but not necessarily their training or job-related fears. In his book, Robin Williams

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[80] Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities*, p. 35.

[81] Ibid., p. 37. Kesselman goes on to explain the high number of welders quoting from a study by Dorothy Newman, *Employing Women in the Shipyards,* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944) p. 32. Welders were in short supply and required a relatively short training period compared to other shipyard crafts.

[82] Hirshfield, *Rosie Also Welded*, pp. 236-237.

[83] J.S. Marshall, *History of Burrards* (Vancouver, B.C.: Burrard Yarrows, 1964). Copies at North Vancouver Museum and Archives, Vancouver, B.C. and the Public Archives of British Columbia, Victoria, B.C. pp. 214-218. This is an official history of Burrards commissioned by the company. It is a very useful work although it allocates only four pages to "Women in the Yards" in the two volumes.

describes, vividly, his introduction to rivet catching. He tells about his first day, fighting to keep his balance on springy plank scaffolding high above the dock, at the same time as he was learning to catch white-hot rivets. Training was 'on the job' and it was accomplished as quickly as possible. The only exceptions to the 'on the job' training were journeymen, for example welders and electricians.

A shipyard, even a modern one, is a vast, noisy, dirty, and, for the uninitiated, thoroughly confusing place. Trucks rumble along carrying huge loads of steel, often with gangs of dirt-encrusted men perched on top. Enormous cranes glide along railway tracks with little more than a bell to announce their approach. Welding arcs flash, machinery hums, gates and doors clang, and sandblasting equipment rattles incessantly on ship hulls. All this goes on in an area with no discernible plan for people to move about in safety in either daylight or darkness.[84] This was the type of environment encountered by the women who went into the shipyards. Their memories of their first day on the job and their descriptions of their work illustrate the challenges they faced.

Elsie Murcheson was a passer girl in Yarrows #2 yard.[85] Mrs. Murcheson started at eighteen and quit just before the war ended in order to look for work, fearing that all the good jobs would be taken as soon as the war work ended. When I asked her how she got her job in the shipyard, she responded:

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[84]These observations are from personal experience. During a visit to Singapore in 1994 I spent two weeks living aboard an oil rig docked in Sembewang Bethlehem Shipyard.

[85]Elsie Murcheson

> I'm not sure. I guess I went to the unemployment or something and they said they needed girls in the shipyard and I thought I'd take a chance. I didn't know what I was going to do until I got there. Anyway they were hiring girls for the shipyard and I was one of the first ones in. I went in as a passer girl. I stayed there for about three years I guess. Then they were letting them out and they asked me if I wanted to go into #1 yard and I said "No". I was scared I wouldn't get a job with all the rest of them leaving you know so I just left. I went down to Bapco Paint. I guess maybe I should have gone to the other yard but I thought "how am I gonna get another job with all the rest of them going" you know, so I just left.[86]

Another woman, Hazel Smith, recalled vividly her first day in the yard at Victoria Machinery Depot. In response to my question, "Do you remember you first day on the job?" Mrs. Smith burst out laughing. It was clear that it was a day she would never forget, although she would not elaborate beyond what she says below.

> Boy, do I ever! The men didn't want women in. They made it tough, boy oh boy. They put us on the toughest jobs. We had to do everything the men did even if it was going down in those long tunnels underneath, you know. Crawling through and dragging all your gear with you into the dark, scared stiff they might close the hatch and leave you in there you know. Common sense would tell you it wouldn't [happen] because you've got all your wires and that going in with you they'd know

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[86] Ibid.

> somebody was in there. But we had to do everything the men did, no exceptions. And some of the women quit, some of them couldn't make it. But I'm one of the survivors.[87]

For most of my informants, how they got their job in the shipyard was unclear.[88] Most seem to have "...just went down and got it..." either by going to "unemployment" [Selective Service] or down to the shipyard. Daphne Barnes recalled that she and her sister, Sheila Anderson, had seen an advertisement in the newspaper.[89] This is, of course, quite at odds with the federal government's clearly stated objective of mandatory labor registration. What is important here is that the *act* of going and getting a job in a male-dominated industry does not appear to have been significant enough to leave a lasting impression. Unfortunately, Kesselman's work does not address this issue, other than to note that "Women were very conscious of penetrating a male bastion..."[90] Marshall's remarks on hiring women for Burrard's North Shore division indicate that it was simply a process of recruiting workers.[91]

Mrs. Murcheson described the job of passer girl as follows:

> We had to catch the hot rivets and put them in for the "holder on" and the riveter. We got to catch the rivets in a funnel shaped can

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[87] Hazel Smith, (pseudonym)

[88] One exception to the vagueness about how they got their jobs was Hazel Smith. She determinedly set out to take trade school training and become a welder.

[89] Daphne Barnes.

[90] Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities*, pp., 28-29.

[91] Marshall, *History of Burrards*, pp., 214-215.

> and with a pair of tongs in this hand, grab the rivet and stuff it in [the hole]. We had to work fast to get them in the while they were hot. And then we used to get way down in the poky spots way down in the bottom and the "heater boys" would be way at the top and they'd really heave them down and you had to catch them. He put one down my neck once; there's the scar. We got sparks all over us and burns. I did that the whole time I worked in the shipyard.
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> We worked the afternoon and the day shift. We didn't work on the night shift. Some girls did, I think. Like when they brought some boats into the dry dock and they'd have to go and repair them. And they were really dirty and they'd have to go on them, and then, some of them worked graveyard shift. I used to go around and sell Victory Bonds and I saw how dirty they were. Just filthy and you'd have to go put those rivets in that and heat the thing...yeah they were filthy.[92]

This comment about dirt on the ships brought in for repair is a common theme among the women I interviewed. I am not sure why they attached so much importance to the dirt on a damaged ship, but every woman who had worked aboard ships brought in for repair commented on the filth.

Mrs. Murcheson then went on to describe the piece work system:

> There was a lot of climbing around on these boats when we were building, putting up plates and everything. And we used to get

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[92] Elsie Murcheson.

piecework. You'd put in so many rivets and if you went over your quota you'd get piece- work. Of course when you were on the shell [main hull] it was easy. Not much climbing around to do and there were millions of rivets that went around the shell, and all you had to do was catch and get them in as fast as you could. There was one [man] on the side next to me, they called him the "holder on" and he got his gun on the head part and then the riveter was on the outside and then they got to get it right in tight while its hot. It's no good if it's cold.[93]

I asked if there were competitions to see who could drive the most rivets.

Well, I guess there were sometimes but it would all depend on where you were though. Some places were harder to climb around. I'll never forget when I went in on an afternoon shift and this man just had his gun set and then you catch the rivet and you're supposed to get it [the rivet] in there and then he lets go, it was like a power gun I guess and it would shoot up. And if you don't get your hand or the tongs out of the way you'd be caught. I never got caught. I was scared. I'd get the rivets in as fast as I could and get my arms out of there 'cause I could see this thing shooting up.

Sometimes if you got in a really tough spot they'd have to give you another passer girl. Like in a spot where the plate was already down and you'd be underneath it so you couldn't catch it from the "heater" so you have another girl to catch the rivet and then pass it on to you. But you had to get it in the hole as fast as

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[93] Ibid.

> you could. Some of those rivets were heavy, they were big. By the time you caught the darn thing it would just about knock the can out of your hand. But then it was fairly easy to grab it with the tongs and get them in. [Because of the larger size, Mrs. Murcheson explained, the larger rivets were easier to grab with the tongs and put in the hole.] And then when you'd get further up the ship, way at the top they put in little brass ones in and those are tiny little things to get with tongs and you can't see if they are red hot or not in the daylight but if you put them in in the dark they were really red.[94]

To my comment that it was quite an art to catch rivets, Mrs. Murcheson replied, laughing: "You have to, otherwise you get burnt. What else can you do? You get a tight corner.... Oh pray...." Here she laughed again but also some of the sense of desperation and fear came through in her voice. She had to catch the rivet or get burnt. She went on to describe the intricacies of her job:

> Then you'd have to signal the heater boy how many more you'd need of that size or if you needed a flat top or...I can't remember all the signals of course. You can't holler or anything. Its so noisy and the heater boy has to watch you all the time and you gotta keep track as to how many and if you're going to change rivets you've got to motion to the heater boy so he's got time to put the rivets in to heat so they're ready. You don't want to stop.[95]

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

Unlike the detailed description Robin Williams gives of his first day on the job, shuffling nervously along the scaffolding, neither Elsie Murcheson nor the other women I interviewed talked about their training or about their fears on the first day.[96] Rather they recalled isolated incidents from the first hours or days on the job. Their reminiscences often revealed the uncertainty or fear they felt in their new surroundings, not knowing what to do or where to go, but they do not describe the gut wrenching fear that is so clearly illustrated in Williams' writing. I find it difficult to believe that women could have entered the daunting arena of shipbuilding, scrambling up and down scaffoldings and ladders, crawling through manholes and through ship's bilges, without feeling much the same fear a young lad of sixteen felt on his first day. Nonetheless, they did not recall their first days on the job as being particularly memorable in relation to the jobs they performed.

I asked Elsie Murcheson, for example, if she recalled her first day on the job.[97]

> Yes! The first day we went in there we didn't know what we were supposed to do and they [management] spread us all around and

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[96]Robin Williams, A *Vancouver Boyhood,* (Washington: Self published), 1995. Of course Mr. Williams had the luxury of having time to think about his presentation of his first day impressions. For the women I interviewed their responses were immediate and reflect the experiences they recalled the most vividly.

[97] I have drawn heavily on Mrs. Murcheson's reminisces in this section since her information was very succinct. My other informants all reported many of the same problems: The fears they experienced when starting a new job and not knowing what to do. The bitter cold in the open shipyard shops especially on the nightshift or during the winter. The experience of physical exhaustion at the end of the day. But most of all the women recalled their discomfort during their first days on the job when the men stood around and stared at them.

> the men stood and stared at us. Every time we looked up there was bunches of them staring at us!

Another woman, Mrs. Jones, an electrician's helper on the graveyard shift at Yarrows, recounted her first days on the job, in a voice still tinged with disbelief and amazement.[98]

> My girlfriend and I went down to the shipyard and applied and we got a job as an electrician's helper on the graveyard shift the next day. They were so short of help they just started us.

She went on to describe her first night on the job:

> I'll never forget it! Before that we had to go down and buy men's or boy's coveralls. There were no girl's coveralls in those days and we had to buy men's or boy's coveralls. Then we had to buy sturdy boots, lunch buckets and thermoses. We didn't know what we were getting into but we were going to take our food along. Then we had to buy work gloves. We were assigned to the midnight shift. I've never in my life been so cold, so uncomfortable as I was that first day. There was no shelter. The wind was picking up from the water; it was blowing a hurricane through the shell of the ship. Then they asked me if I had any experience with electricity and I said "No, not a thing.". So then the foreman came and showed me and my girlfriend what to do. Lucky they put us both together. We were both greenhorns. From the ceiling we had to run these lead wires so our arms were continually up in the air and I tell you when you've had a few hours with your arms up in the air and your hands trying to bend those flexible wires then you'd wait for the dawn to

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[98]Mrs. Jones (pseudonym)

> come. [The end of the shift] You'd have a supper hour or dinner break or whatever they called it. That was in the morning about three o'clock we'd have our lunch. Then we couldn't wait until the other shift came on so we could go home and have some sleep.[99]

Learning on the job and with minimal information and training is consistent throughout the interviews. While women were not expected to know how to do a job, they were given cursory 'training' and thrown on to the job in much the same way as the men were.

Jean Owen, truck driver and machinist helper at Victoria Machinery Depot, started work at Victoria Machinery Depot (VMD) in 1942 and remained there until the end of the war.

> So I went down to unemployment insurance looking for a job and they said "can you drive?" I said "sure but only passenger cars." So they sent me to get a B class license and told me to go down to VMD and you'll be driving the afternoon shift between plant one and plant two. Plant one was at Ogden Point and Plant two was at Bay Street. Then down to the dry-dock when the ships were in. The guy that was doing it, he was double-shifting. That was pretty tough on you. He was with me for three or four days. Then I took over. But I just went down and applied and I got it. There weren't too many people, and young fellas had gone off to war. There weren't many people who could work those kinds of hours. Actually to me it was a lot of fun because I was only twenty-two. So to me it was just a lot of fun. Boy, sometimes I'd work to three o'clock in the morning from four (in the afternoon). I was pretty

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[99] Ibid.

> tired so I'd sleep just about all day. It got to the point where I got so tired I had to take time off.
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> In lots of ways it was kinda fun. I never ever had to lift anything heavy. As soon as I drove up the guys would be there to unload these big sacks of rivets and nuts and bolts and things. They said "Jean, you're not to lift." Actually the fellows were very good.

How could a job where one worked for upwards of eleven-hour shifts and slept all day be 'fun'? This was a common theme amongst my informants: the work was hard and dirty but it was fun[100]. While the answer to this question is elusive, there are some clues. Firstly, there was the thrill of working in an occupation previously closed to women, the sensation of breaking into new frontiers. Secondly, there was the camaraderie enjoined by working for a common goal, the defeat of Hitler and, later, the Japanese. Thirdly, and perhaps most important for this thesis, women were working in well-paid positions, doing jobs that had a clear end product - a ship. The women also enjoyed a certain amount of autonomy in their work. For example, Elsie Murcheson had to know when to change rivets and when to tell the heater boy so her link in the production chain remained unbroken. Louise Lawson had to understand the workings of the drill press so she could ensure she drilled straight holes. And Jeannie Staley, welding overhead in fresh water tanks, knew just how to strike an arc to avoid getting the rod stuck to the tank.

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[100] It is important to note here that 'fun' as used by my interviewees does not imply amusement or entertainment. Rather they used the word to indicate a sense of excitement, challenge and satisfaction-a job well done.

Part of Mrs. Owen's job was transporting workers between plants.

> Yes, I'd go down to the dock and pick up workers and bring them back to the plant so they could check out. And I'd transfer workers from one plant to the other plant. And I did a lot of pickups around town at all the electrical places and engineering places. And like the saws, that's how I met my husband. They used to sharpen all the saws for Plant two at Plant one and I used to take the saws over there. That's where I met my husband. He was in the joiners shop and he used to see me coming through and he used to come and talk to me. But like I say I was extremely shy and I used to just buzz by. But one day I went bowling [on the company team] and Bud said come on over and meet this guy, he hasn't got a girl to go to the dance with. So that how we finally met.
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> When there wasn't any work to do on the truck they put me to work doing different jobs instead of laying me off. So they'd send me to the machine shop. I'd usually be out on the small boats at VMD [yard number] one. They only had a small ways so they only brought out little boats.

Rather wryly, Mrs. Owen responded to my question about her duties in the machine shop:

> Mostly standing by, going and fetching, a gopher you could say.
>
> Going to stores for welding rod and this kinda thing.

I asked if there were other women working in the machine shop.

> Oh yes, lots. Some of them were full-time machinist helpers and they'd get right in and use the lathes and stuff. Another bunch of girls were on the dock gang scraping the bottoms of the boats.[101]

Both Ruby Sumner and Edith Tataryn worked on the rivet gang. They were among the first five women hired at Yarrows. The other three were two sisters, Sue and Helen Dur, and Audrey Pettigrew.

Ruby Sumner recalled, with brisk good humor, her days as a rivet catcher:

> Well, the way I remember it, we started in Yarrows in October of 1942 and there was four of us girls went in. There was another girl but I don't think she was a rivet catcher. We had a gang, there was seven on a gang and we put the hot rivets into the hole. And then the riveter, actually there was two, we called them a bucker-up and a riveter and we were on the inside. I put the rivet in the hole; the bucker-up held it there with his gun; and the riveter on the outside squashed it. The heater boy threw them to us and we picked them up in a can. It was like a funnel. We had gloves. We picked it out with tongs. You had to be fast because the rivets had to be red-hot. So the job depended on good heater boys and good passers who got it [the rivet] into the hole as fast as possible.

I asked about the noise from the riveting and if there was any ear protection.

> Yes, it was noisy. The first week I don't think I heard anything at home. I don't know how to describe it. Well, it was the noise but I

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[101] Jean Owen.

> don't know why it deafened me for a week but everyone told us "don't worry it'll be all right" and it was. But I was so sore, I thought I was used to hard work. I used to slide down the banister to get downstairs in the morning because my legs were so sore. But once I got moving I was all right. Within the week I toughened up to it and I was fine. But I liked it, other than my muscles and ears getting used to it, I liked it.

In contrast, Edith Tataryn did not like any aspect of her shipyard life. She was emphatic that the Selective Service had pulled her from her job in the hardware store and had sent her to the shipyard. This is the only case, amongst my informants, where it may be that the National Selective Service moved a woman from her prewar job to a wartime job. Curiously, when I questioned Mrs. Sumner about this, she claimed that Mrs. Tataryn was mistaken and that she had applied for the job like the rest of them.

Ruby Noren worked as reamer until her hands became too sore to run the reaming machine. After this, she transferred to a contract painting gang. Mrs. Noren suffered severe hearing damage. A riveter, working on a steel plate above her head, tested his gun. The resulting noise perforated her eardrums. George Edwards writes, "A riveter and a holder-on pounded it [the rivet] into shape, the former utilizing a pneumatic riveting gun that rattled like machine gun fire."[102] Safety equipment, particularly hearing protection devices, was minimal and

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[102]George Edwards, *Waterfront to Workfront* (Vancouver: Privately printed, 1995), p. 22.

probably not well understood. As Ruby Sumner observed about her initial deafness "[They said] don't worry, it'll be alright."[103]

Despite the fact that she suffered severe hearing damage Ruby Noren was able to maintain a very positive memory of her work experience. Part of the reason for the positive memory is revealed in the following quote. Her memory is that of a work process involving challenge, skill level, task range and variety.

> I went into the shipyard when they started taking in women, hiring women as helpers. And I worked on the reaming machine in the boiler room. I did that for, Oh maybe seven months or something like that until my hands got so sore that I gave up. Then I went into the blacksmith's shop hand-burning angle bars and a few things like that. Then VMD started to lay off the women at No. 2 Yard and then I started work for Frank Clarkson, a painting contractor. So we used to go down in the bilge under the lower deck painting. You had to go down a ladder and crawl through and you used aluminum paint. You had your little bucket of paint and paint brush and a chipping hammer, which you used to chip the welding around the rivets. You chipped any slag that was left there from the welders; it had to be cleaned up. Then with a wire brush, brush any signs of rust off. Then the navy would come down and inspect it. Then if they passed it we'd paint it by hand. While I was going down [into the bilge] one morning this riveter was above my head. I was going under the deck he was working on. Anyway he put his gun down to do something with it before he started to rivet--press

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[103] Ruby Sumner.

> it on the deck--well I was right under it and I got the full blast of it and I could feel every bone in my body shake.[104]

Ruby received no compensation for her hearing loss.

While, for the most part, women worked mainly as helpers, there were five who became journeymen (Daphne Barnes, Mrs. Frumento, Mrs. Staley, Mrs. Smith and Sheila Anderson). Mrs. Barnes and Mrs. Anderson were both journeyman electricians while Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Frumento and Mrs. Staley were welders. For these women, work in the yards followed the almost unheard of step of training in trade school.

During my discussion with Robin Williams, I asked how he thought that women were able to break into journeyman's jobs in the shipyards. He explained that welding was so new that it had not yet become associated with the masculinity that was attached to riveting. Historian Joy Parr found this to be the case with industrial knitting after the advent of steam-powered knitting machines The men claimed the more 'complicated' flat bed knitting machines as their own while designating the newer circular machines as the women's. Once men claimed a process or machine and its associated trade it became masculinised, and afterwards could only be 'lent' to women.[105]

There was a hierarchy in the various trade. For example, welding was still the poor relative of riveting in the shipyards. Further, there were still those who thought that a welded ship was not as strong

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[104] Ruby Noren.

[105] Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1990), p. 60 and p. 69.

as a riveted ship. Another reason women got jobs as journeymen welders may also have been related to their perceived ability to undertake fine or detailed work. Women were thought to be much more adept than men at fine or detailed work.

Women also obtained jobs as journeymen electrical workers. Reasons for this are unclear. Wiring a ship may not have been viewed as an essentially masculine job. Basic wiring skills could be taught in a relatively short time. Finally, as with welding, women may have been seen as more adept at the fine detail required in this job. The female electricians in my sample did not work in the engine room, nor did they work on the switchboards. Thus, men were able to retain their identities by 'lending' a less prestigious portion of electrical work to women.

Hazel Smith told, with pride and anger, about her reception when she went to apply for the welding program.[106] She started at VMD in 1942, and then, after an accident, moved on to Yarrows. I asked her how much training she'd had.

> Yes, three months, it was through the government. It was down on ...it's where the Centennial Square is now, where they used to have the city market.

She said she was not recruited through the National Selective Service to go into the school.

> No, I went ...I was the first one, I guess, to ever go in there. I went in there one day and said I'd like to sign up for the welding course. And they hadn't even thought of women then. And the men

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[106]Mrs. Smith, (pseudonym)

> laughed me out of the place! A woman welder! [Here Mrs. Smith's voice shot up with remembered humiliation and anger.] Don't be so ridiculous. But I followed it up and finally I went over their heads and I went straight to the government office and I said, 'Why can I not take a course if that's what I want? If I can't make it I can't make it, but I know I'm a sticker and I will make it."

The trade training school's reluctance to accept women was at odds with the shipyard's willingness to utilize women welders. Several factors may be relevant here. First, in 1942 the Canadian government was just beginning to encourage women to enter industrial work. Secondly, women shipyard workers had just begun to enter the yards. Thirdly, schools are often far behind the reality. The demand for workers was growing so rapidly that management and workers alike had begun to lay aside differences. Women and men were working together for a common cause—the defeat of Germany and later Japan. "Did they make it tough for you in the training?" I asked.

> No, Mr. Dickie, who was the trainer, he was very good. We had to do theory, metallurgy and all that, and written exams. Had to know what we were doing, the different kinds of metal we were working with, the different kinds of rods. Not easy. You have to know what you are doing and the only way you can learn is by experience, that's all. Some of the girls just couldn't get it. There was twenty of us graduated and they sent ten to VMD and ten to Yarrows. Half of them never survived. Maybe five or six at VMD.

When I asked Mrs. Smith to describe her job for me she evidenced some exasperation or irritation. Clearly, she thought I

should have known what a shipyard welder did. Yet, it is out of these exchanges that I began to see what being a woman journeyman in a 1940's shipyard was like. Not only had she fought the education system to become a welder, she was now faced with the formidable task of working amongst men who doubted her ability, not just because she was a 'green' welder, but because of her femininity.

> Welding ship parts, everything everywhere there was welding on the ship. We made the ship's hull, we welded partitions, we welded the floors, we welded everything. In VMD they were building frigates and oil tankers and the steel was that thick, [holding up her fingers to indicate an inch of steel] it would take you a full eight hour shift to do a piece of weld that long [about a foot of weld], you'd put in about twenty to twenty-five pounds of rod. You get over to Yarrows and you were working on corvettes and landing craft and the steel was much thinner.
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> About the third or fourth day they put me down in the cargo hold to put clips on the each side. They're called clips. They hold the hawsers that keep the cargo from moving. This was a big freighter and these clips are thin soft steel and you're welding up against a one-inch-thick steel hull and when you put the arc on it would blow that thing to pieces. And I couldn't get it and I finally slammed my stinger down and said 'I can't make it' and the shipwright was an elderly man and he said, "Don't let them do this to you, I'll clean off the mess and you start again until you get it right." And I did until I

> got it. That man saved my job because I was ready to quit. A lot of the girls did.[107]

While some of the men were clearly unhappy about the arrival of women in their work place, others seem to have been very accepting and helpful. Hazel Smith, Jean Owen, Eva Wood, in fact every one of my interviewees, had been helped and guided by their male co-workers. Undoubtedly, there were male workers who could not or would not accept female co-workers. However, based on the experiences of my interviewees, the incidents of harassment were relatively minor. Two women, Hazel Smith and Daphne Barnes, recounted incidents wherein they believed they may have been targets of physical violence. However, I hesitate to assign the label of deliberate violence to either incident since, in both cases, simple on-site carelessness could have been to blame. Industrial accidents were common in the shipyards—Mrs. Jones recalled that just before she was hired a man had been killed when a steel plate fell on him.

Starting a new job with all the attendant fears and dislocation was one thing but the women entering the shipyards also had a new set of concerns. They were entering a male dominated work environment. Here they worked shoulder to shoulder with men, often the only woman on a team of five or ten men. Harassment and assault were a distinct possibility, yet the incidents were relatively few. Two women recalled incidents with falling objects while others reminisced about minor accidents quite in keeping with industrial workplaces. Sexual harassment also seemed to be relatively rare.

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[107] Ibid.

The feeling of not being wanted on a team was felt by some of the women, especially the outspoken ones or the women who were in positions over men. "Actually most of the men thought we were nuisances down there."[108] On the other hand, several women commented on how helpful the men were. "They trained us...they told us what to do."[109] "The men were real nice to us."[110] Perhaps the most telling comment came from Jean Owen, "Of course, being a woman I got along fine with everybody".[111] Women tend to work within a situation and not draw attention to themselves in order to survive, and this may be true of many of the women in the shipyards. Those women who violated this unspoken and unwritten rule, like Mrs. Smith and Daphne Barnes, may have been targets of violence or discrimination.

Daphne Barnes, a journeyman electrician, described several incidents she experienced during her years in the shipyard.[112] Mrs. Barnes estimated she started in the shipyards about 1940, although this seems to be rather earlier than previous estimates by other interviewees or by newspaper reports.

In the incident described below, she found her wiring job destroyed and, although she could not say for sure it was a deliberate attempt by the men to frighten her, she felt it probably was. On the other hand, Mrs. Barnes may have believed rumors to the effect that

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[108]Mrs. Jones, (pseudonym)

[109]Elsie Murcheson

[110]Ruby Noren

[111]Jean Owen.

[112]Daphne Barnes.

there were German and Japanese sympathizers working in the shipyards and this could have been the result of their work. Whether or not she believed such rumors, she used the word 'sabotage'-a word widely used at the time-to describe the destruction of her wiring, possibly by hostile men. Like other women in this study she takes pride in having persisted-she even 'enjoyed' what appears to have been a hostile work environment.

> There is no doubt about it there was sabotage. It could have been our own people, they were very allergic to having women on the job. They didn't like having us there at all to begin with. And were they nasty to us. That's no doubt why that man was telling all those stories to us [referring here to the filthy stories one man insisted on telling in the presence of the women].
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> But I enjoyed it [the job]. Our boss was a very fine man by the name of Jack Archer, a very intelligent man. He soon saw that they were going to be short of men and he, on his own, went round and he collected women. There was an advertisement in the paper about this. My sister [Sheila Anderson][113] went as well as myself. She went because she needed the money. Her husband was prisoner of war in Hong Kong and she had three small children. She went into VMD and I went into Yarrows. Anyway, Jack gathered us all together and he gave us a very good sound training in wiring. And he got himself into great trouble with the union.

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[113]Sheila Anderson was Mrs. Barnes' sister. Through the kindness of Fiona Hyslop, Mrs. Anderson's daughter, I was given access to a number of Sheila Anderson's papers regarding her time in the shipyards.

Apparently Mr. Archer was training the women in his spare time and the union was very upset because he had missed two union meetings and they were claiming he was no longer a member in good standing. Although it is doubtful that Mr. Archer initiated the training program, he was the instructor as well as a working electrician at Yarrows. If, as both Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Barnes, amongst others, have indicated, the men were, at least initially, opposed to women in the yards, then this was possibly a punishment tactic directed against Jack Archer.

Hazel Smith recounted an incident she had with falling objects. Again, it would be simple to put her accident down to harassment, but it may well have been exactly what it seems, an accident.

> After my accident at VMD, they dropped an eight-foot long ten by twelve piece of wood two decks onto my head; it was only my helmet that saved me. I was off for a year, then when I came back I went to Yarrows. The welder's foreman, he didn't want any women on his team, he'd got rid of them all. And he didn't want me. He tried to make out my welding was sloppy and this kind of thing and he had me so darned nervous, he was looking over my shoulder while I was doing it and that's awful hard. I said 'for God's sake leave me alone, come back after awhile. I can't do it with you looking over my shoulder.' So he went away and came back and I had all the jobs done. And they put them in a press and they [the sample welds] should break in the metal not the weld. That's how you know you've got a good welder. Of course I passed it and he couldn't refuse. In the end he came to depend on

> me. He said he had one good welder on each shift and I was one of them.[114]

Like Hazel Smith, Daphne Barnes also experienced falling objects. While Mrs. Smith was unsure if this was simple job-site carelessness or an attack against her person, Mrs. Barnes was quite clear that it was an attempt on her life.

> I myself had a peculiar thing happen. I was working down in the ammunition hold and I suddenly heard this sort of rolling noise and I stood back from -- there was big square hole cut in the deck above and suddenly a huge big piece of metal piping flipped over the edge and came down where I was standing. And I always thought it had been done on purpose. Because what would make a piece of metal suddenly start to roll? And we had another thing happen which was very very frightening. This was also in the ammunition hold. And those were about half as big as this room and not as high [here Mrs. Barnes indicated the size of the compartments was about eight feet by eight feet and with quite low ceilings] but we were working with one of those great huge pneumatic hoses and it had a big knob on the end which was the connection, which connected it to this gadget [probably a drill] the men were using. And it broke loose and just whipped around and if it had hit us, it would have killed us.

Both of these incidents have sinister overtones, however there maybe other explanations. Metal pipe can easily roll into an open hold. And, in the case of the broken connection on the pneumatic hose it

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[114] Ibid.

would have killed or injured men as well as Mrs. Barnes. In short, the evidence to suggest deliberate, life-threatening attacks on women is scanty. However, there is some evidence of sexual harassment, not in the stories recalled by the women but in the silences that followed my questions.

There is scant documentary evidence referring to the harassment of female shipyard workers. *The Vancouver Sun* reported on one incident.[115] Mrs. Ethel Harvey, the first woman welder in British Columbia, claimed the union told her she had to quit her job. This was, apparently, in response to a threat by the union's business agent that the male welders would walk out unless she quit. Mr. Alex MacAuslane, regional director for the CCL (Canadian Congress of Labour), stated "...that the Congress is without prejudice in the matter of women workers."[116]

While the female journeymen experienced some harassment, the women engaged as helpers do not seem to have had similar problems. Several factors may be at work here. First, the helpers posed little threat to the men's jobs or masculinity since they were, for the most part, filling jobs usually assigned to boys or to the very young men. Further, it was clear that these women were hired only for the duration of the war and they had no job security. Female journeymen, on the other hand, definitely encroached on male territory. These women had not only taken training previously reserved only for men, but they were filling jobs that had been the exclusive property of men. They were

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[115] *The Vancouver Sun,* May 6, 1942, p. 17.

[116] Ibid.

therefore perceived as a threat both to job security and male privilege. Boy helpers who became journeymen were accepted as equals.

The women's stories provide much evidence of personal growth. These women felt a strong sense of self and pride in the knowledge that they could earn a living and be self-sufficient through their work. As Eva Wood so succinctly put it:

> It gave me a little bit of myself. Going back out into the work force, it made me less timid. I was so timid I let my husband run all over me. And I wasn't like that before I married him. He was big and dominating. The shipyards gave me that push to get on in the world.[117]

Of the women I interviewed most needed to work and consequently appreciated the high wages offered by the shipyards. Nevertheless, they were pragmatic about leaving at the end of the war. In their view, these jobs were short-term positions only. Moreover, they could not transfer these new skills easily to the post-war work world. Positions for welders and electricians remained firmly in the male sphere. Still other shipyard jobs ceased to exist or reverted to male only status.

What comes through clearly in the interviews in this section is women's perceptions of their work experience. Overall, they enjoyed their work in the shipyards despite the hardships, occasional harassment and the knowledge they would be unemployed at the end of the war. The work they were engaged in may have been, for the most part, in the lower skill areas but it allowed the women a sense of

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[117]Eva Wood

accomplishment. When a ship was launched, they could see the results of their work. Through their accomplishments, women gained a sense of independence. For example, Elsie Murcheson's understanding and control of the number and type of rivets needed to work on each section of the ship ensured proper production levels in her section. In effect, she played an essential role in the hierarchy which dominated the shipyard.

CHAPTER III

Men, Unions and Government

This section comprises three themes: first, the men's reactions, both as individuals and as part of the union, to women working in the shipyards; second, the union's response to female workers in an exclusively male environment; third, the government actions throughout the war. In exploring these themes we shall see how women were able to work within patriarchal structures as active agents rather than passive victims.

Women entered virtually every shop in the shipyards, primarily in the capacity of helper. The women who became journeymen appear to have been subjected to some initial discrimination and harassment. However, over time women gained acceptance in the shipyards. In general, the women in 'helper' positions responded in positive terms to my questions about how the men treated them. "They were very good really... " , "they treated us very well...", "they were very nice", or "I think they liked having us around...we were young and pretty" and finally, "they needed donkeys and they got 'em in the women. No back talk, they just worked."[118] Winnifred Green's response about needing 'donkeys' is perhaps the most telling. Women helpers were probably not treated in any better or worse manner than boys hired for the same position. They would be

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[118]Winnifred Green, Louise Lawson, Ida Taylor(pseudonym), Ruby Noren, to give a sample of the responses I received to my question about how the men reacted to women in the shipyards. These replies are representative of all the helpers.

expected to accept the initiation teasing and pranks, such as one woman being sent off to get the classic 'bucket of steam'.[119] They were 'gophers'[120] and as long as they remained in that capacity they were relatively well accepted by the male workers.

Marshall notes that "Some of the men grumbled a little at first, saying the women were a nuisance, that the yard was no place for them, that they were not strong enough for the work, and so on. One sourpuss machinist put it this way:-

> There's lipstick on the drinking font,
> There's talcum on the bench.
> There's cold cream on the surface plate
> Hand lotion on the wrench.
> 'Evening in Paris' scents the air
> That once held Lube Oil Smell.
> I've just picked up a bobby pin.
> Believe me - war is hell.

But the grumbling vanished when the women established themselves and when it was realized that they were releasing men for active service."[121]

Sheila Anderson noted:

> "It was rather an amazing experience when we women first came into the shipyard. The men were quite definitely antagonistic. [stroked out] [It seemed to me as if the foremen were the most

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[119]New employees in shipyards, logging camps and onboard vessels were regularly sent on 'fools' errands as part of their initiation into the job culture. At a time when steam played a large role in powering machinery it was usual to send the new hand for a 'bucket of steam'.

[120]A slang term indicating a person expected to fetch and carry for a more experienced worker, generally someone in a junior position or learning the job.

[121]Marshall, *The History of Burrards,* p.216.

> prejudiced.] We used to hear many caustic comments along the lines of "Women's place is in the kitchen," and "Women doing men's work at men's pay, when their place is in the home". However, after a short while we noticed that this antagonism was dying down, we were being accepted as fellow workers. The men themselves began to assist us tremendously in dozens of different ways."[122]

Other women with journeyman status faced different reactions. Daphne Barnes recalled her testing as charge hand of her electricians.

> I eventually rose to be a journeyman, which, of course, is the higher [status] and you have a crew of men working for you.

"You were a charge hand over a crew of men?" I asked. Mrs. Barnes explained:

> I was a journeyman and that gives you a crew of men to work for you as well as yourself of course. And, I don't know... the man is probably dead now so it probably won't matter saying... but he was the chief electrician off the Empress of Canada. The Empress ships used to come in here to Victoria from Hong Kong every three weeks or so and he was the senior electrical man. Anyway, I gave him a job to do and you never saw such a mess in all your life. It looked as if the spiders had gone crazy! The ends of the wires-- you were supposed to wind them up and tie them neatly and all that sort of stuff -- and honestly, it just was awful. And all the other men on my crew were looking and wondering 'what's she gonna do

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[122]Sheila Anderson, personal papers. This appears to have been a draft of a presentation. Unfortunately the intended audience is unknown.

> now?' And so, I kicked him off our team and told him to go see Mr. Archer and get another job. But, I thought about it afterwards and of course I don't suppose on the Empress of Canada he ever had to do electrical work. He would have men working under him.

When I asked how the men reacted to having a woman boss, Mrs. Barnes was very emphatic in her response.

> They didn't like it. I didn't have any trouble with them but they quite obviously would have liked it if I had failed my 'test'.

Mrs. Barnes is a well-spoken woman with a rich sense of humor, who clearly brooked no nonsense from the men she was in charge of. Her strength and determination probably saved her from repeated 'tests' of her ability to take charge and her willingness to fire an incompetent worker earned their respect, however grudging. Mrs. Barnes' reaction to the man's poor workmanship and her indifference to the censure of the rest of the team are strong indicators that she was not a passive victim of the patriarchal system in the shipyards.

Curiously, there was little evidence of sexual harassment either in the documentary evidence or in the taped interviews. This does not necessarily mean that there was no sexual harassment in the shipyards.

Recognizing that this might be a sensitive issue, I framed my questions in such a way as to allow the interviewee to respond without involving herself. Nevertheless my interviewees remained reluctant to discuss this issue. One possible explanation for the lack of evidence may have stemmed from the women's acceptance of the men's behavior as normal. In considering culturally-determined behaviors like sexual harassment, one has to consider the norms of the day. "[Women]...were conditioned to believe they were over reacting to

friendly overtures, or if that were not so, the situation must have been their fault."[123] Because women were considered, and considered themselves, intruders in the shipyards, an area that was, by definition, men's, they were further conditioned to accept this harassment as a reaction to their presence. Still, conditioning to accept harassment is only one part of the story. Fear of losing a well paying job would have been a major factor in discouraging complaints, as shown by Winnifred Green's remarks.

> The pay was pretty good, we got over a dollar an hour...We thought we were rich. I should of stuck with it I guess. But, it was kinda rough and in those days I was very timid and shy. And I thought it was a little bit tough so I didn't stay.[124]

Eva Wood commented, after explaining how she had been "pawed" by one of the guys "I was actually shy and scared I'd lose my job if I said anything."[125] Another woman remarked, "It was useless to complain. Nothing would have been done about it anyway."[126] As illustrated in Segrave's book, both the fear of job loss and the realization that nothing would be accomplished by complaining, served to silence women then and now.[127]

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[123]Kerry Segrave, *The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace, 1600 to 1993* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, 1994), pp. 1-2.

[124]Winifred Green

[125]Eva Wood

[126]Anonymous. This woman, not a shipyard worker, stated that a woman would not have been taken seriously had she complained about unwanted physical or verbal attention.

[127]Segrave, *The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace*. Chapter 10. As Ms. Segrave illustrates in her survey work the incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace have continued to occur, with alarming regularity up to the present. She further indicates that women's complaints are rarely taken seriously enough to result in disciplinary action being take against

In an effort to present both sides of this sensitive topic I tried to find male interviewees who worked in the shipyards at the same time as the women. Unfortunately I was unsuccessful. The most likely reason for the lack of male interviewees is that most of the men left working in the shipyards during the war were older and have since died. The one or two elderly men I was referred to refused to talk to me. A letter to the local branch of the engineers' society elicited no response despite the fact that there were several members who had worked in both Yarrows and VMD. The one man whom I spoke to was quite candid about the harassment the women were subjected to.

> Some women were blatantly sexually harassed but they wouldn't see it as harassment because they were trained not to see it as harassment. But there were a lot of nasty tricks and immature nasty teasing.[128]

The use of the word 'trained' here is instructive. While most, if not all, women would vehemently deny they were 'trained' to accept sexual harassment as normal, societal norms allowed men to behave in certain ways which were accepted as normal. Thus, women working in the shipyards would accept the men's behavior as normal. This in turn made my questions about harassment difficult for my informants to answer. If the women applied hindsight to their experiences then they would possibly admit to harassment. On the other hand, if they took

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the perpetrator. This is reinforced by a recent incident within the military where a man, with twenty-one counts of sexual harassment against him, was not disciplined but was moved and promoted. My source for this information has requested complete anonymity for her own protection.

[128]Robin Williams

their experiences at face value, then they were not harassed because male behavior was, and may still be, the norm by which society judges all actions.

Although, almost to a woman, my informants denied being subjected to sexual harassment, every one mentioned one or two men they had had problems with. Mrs. Smith recalled that there was one man who would come up behind her while she was bent over welding.

> You're deaf, dumb and blind when you are in those welding leathers. And I was bent over working away and he used to come up behind me...that's a mortal sin you know.[129]

She flatly declined to explain what the man's actions had been.

In another case, reported by Eva Wood, a male co-worker touched her inappropriately.

> One of the boys laid his hands on me and I just smacked him off And some of the other boys saw him and they roughed him up. They didn't kill him but they roughed him up. But it was just the one incident.[130]

Curiously, after telling me this story, Mrs. Wood explained to me that her pet name in the yards had been "Babes" but made no connection between the name and the action. Clearly sexual harassment is perceived differently by each person.

Daphne Barnes noted that while there was sexual harassment the number of people around probably reduced the incidents. To my question about sexual harassment, she replied:

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[129]Mrs. Smith, (pseudonym)

[130]Eva Wood.

> I never had any, except for the man that told the absolutely [filthiest stories]-- I've never heard such awful stories. I don't remember them, I haven't a clue what they were all about. I just shut my ears...So that was all. Which was odd because I wasn't too bad looking in those days. We were down in the holds of the ship but there was nearly always other people around. You were never really off by yourselves even when we would -- when we were dragging the big, huge cables, it was all the women were down there, it wasn't just one or two. I would have been nervous if we had been one or two down there at night. I didn't care for the night shift...[131]

When I asked if the harassment was more in the nature of jealousy rather than sexual, her response was that it certainly was not sexual but there was definitely harassment.

> It certainly wasn't sexual, it was -- your work would be [sabotaged] or they'd impede you and you wouldn't be able to find things.[132]

However, like all my informants, Mrs. Barnes would not stay on the topic of harassment. She pushed me to move to a different subject, giving me the impression of feeling uncomfortable with the topic. In her case, this was the only topic which she avoided. It may be also that the social stigma attached to being sexually harassed contributed to under-reporting of incidents, even fifty years later. This disparity of opinion and reluctance to answer questions suggests the need for further research in the historical context of work-place harassment and

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[131]Daphne Barnes.

[132]Ibid.

the possible connections to women's general willingness to leave the workplace.

Before attempting to assess the union's role on women's work in the shipyard, it is necessary to understand some background material. During World War I, the Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders Union was considered a progressive union. It led the Metal Trade council campaign for wage increases and cost of living allowances. In 1917, a shipyard strike involving seven lower mainland yards secured an overall agreement with wage schedules. At the same time the Federal Government passed P.C. 1743, giving labour the right to bargain and organize, but effectively outlawing strikes for the duration of the war.[133]

In the post World War I era, the large number of contracts for ships carried the yards over into the early 1920's, creating the illusion that shipyard jobs were secure. By the middle of the twenties the economic decline shattered the illusion and along with layoffs came yard closures. Five shipyards on the lower mainland and three in Victoria closed. As the yards closed or downsized, employment declined dramatically. In 1918, there were 7,155 shipbuilders in British Columbia; by 1923 that had declined to 1,026 workers and by August of 1929 only 780 shipbuilders remained employed. By October 1929, the number had rebounded to 1,142 workers.[134] Union membership declined in relation to employment until many locals were

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[133]Bob Russell, *Back to Work? Labour, State And Industrial Relations in Canada.*(Scarborough: Nelson, 1990) p. 134.

[134]Marine Retirees Association, *A History of Shipbuilding in British Columbia,* p. 24.

reduced to skeletons, with the members seeking any form of work. Firings for minor misdemeanors were routine, as employers took advantage of the massive unemployment to improve their productivity. During the thirties many shipyard workers, like thousands of other workers, found themselves thankful for a day's work here and there.[135]

World War II produced a huge boom in shipbuilding and, naturally, employment, which in turn resulted in enormous growth for the union. For example, Local no. 1 of the Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders Union in Vancouver went from 200 members in 1939 to 14,000 in 1941. Unfortunately, there are no figures for Victoria but it is safe to assume the figures would be comparable.[136]

As unemployment eased, internal strife between the executive and the Canadian Congress of Labour increased. A Boilermakers election in December 1942 resulted in a new executive, which included Communists and other left wing advocates. Aaron Mosher, the President of the Canadian Congress of Labour, decided to void the election, setting up an ongoing fight within the union and with the CCL. Throughout World War II, there were numerous work stoppages and internal divisions in the Boilermakers Union, particularly among the welders and burners.[137]

Perhaps because of the internal strife, the Boilermakers Union was caught unprepared in 1943 when the Quebec Conference of Allied

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[135]Ibid., See for example, Dick Broadhurst's recollections, p. 36. See also the section entitled "The Hungry Thirties" pp. 38-51.

[136] While the Marine Retirees Association had records for the Vancouver locals, none appear to have survived for Victoria.

[137]Ibid., pp. 52-68.

Prime Ministers decided Canada's shipbuilding program should be scaled down. It was not until September 1943, at the B.C. Shipyard Union Conference, that the Union reacted with a resolution claiming labour had not been consulted about the curtailing of the shipbuilding plan. In addition, Malcolm McLeod, the Boilermakers business agent, wanted to know what was going to become of "...all the machinery and the thousands of skilled workers..." [138] Protests notwithstanding, British Columbia shipyards reverted to a five and one-half day workweek. By July 1944, Austin C. Taylor, head of Wartime Shipping in British Columbia, announced that the wartime capacity of B.C. shipyards would be cut by 25% and that by the first years after the war staff would probably be down to 3,000.[139]

It was into this climate of fear and mistrust that the first female workers entered British Columbia shipyards in 1942.[140] Along with the obvious fact that they were replacement workers, they were also women and, as such, they would have been viewed with suspicion. Although the women were hired in the shipyards only to fill vacancies *for which no men were available,* many union men feared that the women would become permanent replacement workers.

The shipyard, like any other work place, has a work culture based on a collective identity, pride in craftsmanship, loyalty to each other, and independence. The union served not only to provide support

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[138]Ibid., p. 65.

[139]Ibid., p. 66

[140] 1942 is the date Marshall, *The History of Burrards,* gives as the first time women worked in Burrard shipyards. My research indicates that Victoria shipyards followed the Vancouver yards' decision in 1942.

for the workers, but to unify worker identity across trade nationally and internationally. Many of the older men had strong links to the Clydeside shipyards and brought with them a sense of international identity in both their trade and through union affiliation. Furthermore, the memory of the depression years, when work was virtually nonexistent and employers held all the cards, would have encouraged many men to support the union. All of this was attached to a belief in men's inherent right to dominance over women and to union fears that female employment was both an economic threat and a threat to male privilege.[141]

While the men reacted with varying degrees of resentment, anger, fear or acceptance, the union, The Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders, reacted in a most unpredictable manner. They decided to accept women as full members with vote and voice[142] and to insist on their being paid the same wages as men.[143] This was a very easy concession for the male-dominated union to make since they regarded the women's tenure in the shipyard as temporary. Furthermore, by accepting women the union maintained its membership strength at a

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[141]For an excellent discussion of women, men and unions see, for example, Patricia A Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987). Also Mary H. Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780-1910* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[142]The term 'vote and voice' as used in this paper means the women were allowed to speak out in union meetings and to vote on union matters.

[143]Although there is not an official date available for the union's decision to accept women as members it is clear from the first newspaper reports that women were to join what ever union their work involved. *Vancouver Daily Province,* September 30, 1942, pg. 3. Marshall, *The History of Burrards,* writes, "Canada was the first in initiating a women welder into the Boilermakers' and Iron Shipbuilders' Union in September, 1942.", p. 217.

time when armed service enlistment was reducing actual union numbers.

There is, of course, a vast difference between accepting women as full members and the actual participation allowed those members, as the following reminiscences show. Some informants recalled the union as helpful and supportive, while others insisted there was no union or that women were not allowed to join. The following is a sample of the responses:

Elsie Murcheson:

> I don't know if we attended meetings or not but I think maybe we had to. I guess we got together and talked about stuff...[144]

Jean Owen:

> Yes, there were various unions, different departments had their unions. But I never went into a union since it was only temporary work while the war was on so we didn't join a union.[145]

Winifred Green:

> Oh no, there might've been but not for us. We were just sort of part time war workers. You never heard union talk during the war. Never heard the word union.[146]

Eva Wood:

> Oh yes there was a union and you had to join or you didn't work. The Boilermakers Union. We didn't have a full membership in the

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[144]Elsie Murcheson

[145]Jean Owen

[146]Winnifred Green

> union. I remember I had a grievance, I don't remember what it was but I was told to sit down.[147]

These replies and others like them came from the women who worked as helpers. The union had a shadowy presence in their minds, neither harmful nor helpful, but something that they had to join in order to work. In most cases the women seemed resigned to the fact that the men continued to dominate the meetings and decision making. These women knew their jobs in the shipyards were for the duration of the war only, so there was little point in becoming involved with an organization that had no part in their future. Second, for most of these women, their work place culture did not include talk of unions. For men, joining a union was an accepted part of entering many workplaces, particularly those establishments where apprenticeships were the normal route to a career. Women on the other hand, usually entered the work force as short-term employees who would leave upon marriage or the birth of the first child. Thus, the incentive to become part of a long-term work-based organization would have little appeal.

Nonetheless, it is important to realize that this lack of interest in unions among women is selective. In her study of female knitters from 1880 to 1950 in Ontario, Joy Parr found women organized and worked for a union and supported union objectives as passionately as did the men.[148] Women also organized themselves within the Knights of

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[147]Eva Wood

[148]Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners.*

Labor.[149] Women, in the shipyards invested little time and energy into union affairs, in this case the Boilermakers, possibly because it would not benefit them over the long term. Women who worked full time and expected to continue working after marriage seemed to show more interest in unionization.

Two of the women I interviewed who had gained journeymen status had very clear memories of the union. They were much more involved in the union both as members and as participants than the women who were helpers. Daphne Barnes recalled:

> Oh yes we had to join the union. Oh my, yes. They didn't like me because well... we had a man, what was his name...oh, yes, Brother Fred. Well, he decided he wanted a trip to New York and he wanted about five thousand dollars to go to New York. [I suspect this is a vastly inflated sum but I have left it in the story to remain true to Mrs. Barnes' memories] Anyway this man got up and said, 'Oh how lucky we are we have this man and he's going to go to New York and going to do this for us.' And then, somebody else gets up and said, 'Isn't that wonderful, he's going to do that for us.' Then I got up and I said 'I don't see why he's going to New York at all, why doesn't he get on the telephone and ring them!' Dead silence then everybody from all different angles, obviously people that had been placed would get up and say, 'Oh no he's a wonderful man and it is really necessary for him to go,' and course it went through. But you could tell who had been placed

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[149]Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), pp., 135-138.

around the place. [Mrs. Barnes felt that the union had carefully placed members who would support this proposal around the room to ensure the motion would be passed.]

Although Mrs. Barnes' memories were very clear about specific incidents such as the one recorded above, she had little to say about the union other than the fact they (the union members) did not like her. She explained that the women did have vote and voice at the union meetings. She noted, however, that the men did not like it when she spoke up. Women who spoke out at union meetings being told to sit down or be quiet is remarked on by several of the women I interviewed.[150]

Memories also varied considerably on the subject of wages. Some of my interviewees were quite specific about their wages while others were evasive and 'couldn't remember' what they had been paid. A few clearly exaggerated their earnings. "We worked for a dollar an hour in VMD (Victoria Machinery Depot) but when I got my three dollars an hour..."[151] "The pay was pretty good, we got over a dollar an hour I know that. We thought we were rich... maybe a $1.70 an hour."[152] According to Marshall wages ranged from .59 cents an hour to .90 cents and hour with a cost of living clause that allowed for an adjustment every three months as protection against inflation.[153] Yarrow's records indicate the average

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[150] Eva Wood, Elsie Watson and Winifred Green.

[151] Eva Wood.

[152] Winnifred Green.

[153] Marshall, *The History of Burrards,* p. 221. These figures are for journeymen mechanics.

wage for a female worker was $32.43 a week.[154] If we use the Royal Commission Agreement on hours as a guideline for calculating hourly pay, then the average hourly wage was 67.56 cents an hour based on a 48 hour week.[155] These figures are fragmentary and based on the assumption that women worked on the day shift only. Further complicating the calculation of wages is a second clause in the agreement specifying that workers were paid for a fifty-hour week on day shift and fifty-four hours on the second and third shifts. A final complication in calculating wages arises from piecework. In this case, riveters were paid based on the number of rivets driven per day. In response to my question about pay rates Mrs. Murcheson replied "...it depended on how many rivets we put in, like if we went over quota...we were on a strictly piece work basis."[156] According to Marshall there were 383,000 rivets in the hull of a 10,000 ton freighter and another 100,000 in each ship's housing so slow rivet-driving made an enormous difference in both the cost of the ship and the construction time. As the photograph in the appendix shows the rivet gangs were small, in this case eight people, but production output was astonishing, 2523 - 5/8 Countersunk Shell Rivets driven in eight hours. Unfortunately, there are no figures for the pay scales for piecework rivet gangs. However, the fact that the

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[154]Yarrows Records, Maritime Museum, Victoria, British Columbia. Un-catalogued collection of Yarrows records.

[155]*Report of the Royal Commission on Production of Ships in the Shipyards of British Columbia,* August 28, 1942. p. 13.

[156]Mrs. Elsie Murcheson.

rivet gangs were willing to defy their union in order to stay on piecework indicates there was substantial financial reward.[157]

Would the women have a 'fortune' when the war ended? By comparing women's wages in similar industries with their estimated earnings in the shipyard, it is possible to gauge the difference in wages. The table below lists average weekly earnings for female employees in six non-manufacturing industries as well as average weekly wages for manufacturing industries. In an effort to illustrate the vast disparity between male and female wages in manufacturing, the average figures for male wages have been included in the Canadian manufacturing section. By comparison, the average female weekly wage paid by Yarrows is $32.43. This is seventy percent more than experienced female workers earned in manufacturing in British Columbia in 1942. Further, $32.43 is 116% higher on average than an experienced laundry worker's weekly earnings. The wages at the shipyards might not have made the women a 'fortune' but they were a vast improvement over the average female wage of the day. Perhaps Mrs. Smith's comment best summarizes the wage debate. "Look, you've got to realize we'd just come out of a depression and jobs were scarce and any wages were worse. The money in the yards was good!"[158]

There is little doubt that 'good' wages contributed greatly to the job satisfaction experienced by the women I interviewed. In addition to seeing the results of their work as each ship slid down the slipway they enjoyed substantial remuneration for their work.

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[157]Marshall, *The History of Burrards*, pp. 222-223.

[158]Mrs. Smith (pseudonym)

Average Weekly Wages for Female Employees

	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942
Manufacturing Industry-British Columbia [159]					
Experienced	$14.87	$14.81	$14.84	$15.50	$19.05
Inexperienced	$9.07	$8.67	$9.28	$9.82	$9.40
Male	$21.49	$22.23	$24.82	$27.72	$31.75
Female	$12.10	$12.78	$13.52	$15.05	$17.41
Manufacturing Industry-Canada[160]					
Average					
Male	$21.49	$22.23	$24.82	$27.72	$31.75
Female	$12.10	$12.78	$13.52	$15.05	$17.71
Mercantile Industry					
over 18 years	$13.58	$13.66	$13.66	$13.09	$14.67
under 18 years	$7.76	$10.12	$10.08	$8.84	$9.88
Laundry Industry					
over 18 years	$13.81	$12.90	$12.98	$13.64	$14.96
under 18 years	$9.60	$8.23	$8.23	$10.11	$10.93
Hotel and Catering					
Over 18 years	$13.72	$13.80	$13.80	$14.06	$15.24
Under 18 years	$11.51	$11.34	$11.00	$11.97	$10.78
Office Occupations					
Over 18 years	$18.20	$18.98	$18.22	$18.71	$19.55
Under 18 years	$11.87	$11.44	$11.61	$12.03	$13.47

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[159] Sessional Papers, First Session Twentieth Parliament of the Province of British Columbia, Session 1941-42, Volume One, pp. E 49-E50. Session 1944, Volume One F52.

[160] F.H. Leacy, Ed., *Historical Statistic of Canada,* Second Edition, Statistics Canada, 1983, Table E60-68.

Personal Service Occupations					
Over 18 years	$13.58	$13.87	$13.28	$13.35	$16.13
Under 18 years	$4.13	$7.51	$5.05	$6.15	$8.88
Telephone and Telegraph Occupations					
Experienced	$18.33	$18.16	$18.72	$19.98	$18.96
Inexperienced	$7.76	$10.14	$9.73	$9.17	$10.82

While the men and women in the shipyards worked side by side in an uneasy truce necessitated by the demands of war, the federal government expressed concern about what women would do after the war. Would they return to their homes and raise families? Would those women who wanted or needed to continue to work return to the low-pay low-status jobs? If women refused to return to the kitchens and bedrooms of the nation or to 'proper' women's work, then what? A further concern, not directly expressed by the government, was that if women remained in 'men's' jobs what would be the consequences of high male unemployment in an economy facing short-term shrinkage? It was important that women be convinced to return to their homes either by persuasion--promoting the joys of motherhood and domesticity, or by force--removing the job opportunities, which allowed them financial freedom.

Once it became clear that women would have to be recruited, encouraged, and even conscripted to work in jobs vacated by men going overseas, the federal government also began to plan how to ensure that women's work in wartime industry would be viewed as a short-term contribution to Canada's war effort.

The federal government was very concerned about women entering the paid labor force. These concerns embraced a number of areas: women 'taking' men's jobs, the effect women working outside the home would have on children, the effect women earning good wages would have on their relationship with their husbands, to name but a few. By phrasing all advertising and recruitment campaigns in such a way as to stress the temporary nature of war work, the government hoped to avoid the question of women refusing to give up high-paying jobs. While this strategy was effective to a large degree, there were still some women who did not want to quit work or who could not afford to stop work. The government was counting on a high marriage rate after the war to take care of removing women from employment. However, given the loss of large numbers of young, marriageable men a large number of women were left to fend for themselves.

In March 1941, during a discussion of the War Appropriation Bill, John Diefenbaker, Conservative MP for Lake Center, addressed the House of Commons on the matter of man-power in Canada, in particular the mobilization of women for war work—so long as it was for the duration of the war.

> All of us agree on one thing, that the women of Canada have at this time the will to serve and to sacrifice in even greater measure than during the last war. ...I have no apologies for bringing this matter before the committee because, in my opinion, the time has arrived when the

> women of Canada should be given a greater share in determining the outcome of this war. [161]

He went on to quote, at length, from a work by Peggy Scott, *British Women in War*, which is particularly relevant for the purposes of this study.

> Woman, as a national worker, was an experiment during the Great War. ...The British government was slow to make the woman-experiment in 1914. It held out both hands to acquire her services before the war began in 1939.[162]

Diefenbaker was quick to laud women's willingness to serve and to harangue the cabinet about their training in preparation for foreseeable labor shortages. However, several other members, in particular Mr. Clarence Gillis, the CCF member for Cape Breton South, soon reprimanded him. He rebutted Diefenbaker's concerns with the following:

> I wish to quote from the Hamilton *Review* of September 27, 1940

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[161]Dominion of Canada Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons, Second Session-Nineteenth Parliament, 4-5, George VI, Volume II, 1941, p. 1692.

[162]Ibid., p. 1693. It is instructive to note that, while Mr. Diefenbaker is pro-female labour for Canada's war effort, he makes absolutely no mention of women continuing as workers in postwar Canada .In his view, and to the members he addressed, women as paid workers should serve only for a short-term emergency situation. Throughout the debate there were various references to what type of work women were capable of and whether women should be used to replace men in non-combat positions in the armed services. Mr. Ralston commented that "...with regard to stenographers in uniform and stenographers out of uniform...[there] is some clerical work women might do, but any clerical work having to do with field formations could not be done by the ladies." pp. 1697-98. Just why women could not do field formation clerical work was not explained -- they just could not.

> Too old now to fight for their country, there are Hamilton veterans of the last war with a fight on their hands at home this week. And right now it looks like a losing one....This week six of them were fired. And there may be as many as fifty of these old soldiers discharged within the next week. ... Incompetence is not the reason...Everyone of them is being replaced ...by a young woman who will do the same job for less money.

> I have no objections to the Department of Munitions and Supply utilizing the services of women in any plant, factory or enterprise where there is a shortage of labour...to have them replaced to-day by young girls with no responsibility whatever, will not help the war effort.[163]

Note that Mr. Gillis does not touch on the obvious problem--women working for lower wages--nor does he expand on the rest of the story which showed that the men were laid off for refusing to transfer out of Hamilton. He went on to say:

> I have no objection to the employment of women in any enterprise in Canada, where such employment is necessary, and where it releases men for more important duties...I am informed, however, that men were laid off

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[163]Ibid., p. 1694.

and ...that girls with no responsibility were put in their places.[164]

There were two themes in this debate which reflect continuing government and societal concerns: first, the suitability of women for certain types of work, especially that which was labeled men's work and, second, the release of men for more *important* work. On the first point there was a great deal of worry about what types of work a woman could be expected to perform without ill effects to her health. Of course, no one in government or, for that matter, any employers considered the types of unpaid labor a woman may have been performing. For example, she could have been working in the fields on her family farm, carrying heavy children, packing wood or water, handling teams of animals or hauling feed. This unpaid work was not considered too difficult, nor was it seen as a health hazard. Yet, if this same woman wanted to work in a shipyard or a munitions factory, she was promptly classified as too delicate, unstable or incapable of learning. On the second theme there is the continuing idea that, in some way, men's work was always more important than women's work. This becomes abundantly clear when men were released to perform 'more important' work. Never mind that the job he had been moved from was considered important when he held it. If a woman could do that job it then somehow lost its value

In May of 1941, Victor Quelch, the member from Acadia, demanded to know why the government was not doing more to ensure

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[164]Ibid., p. 1699.

Canadian men were being trained for war work.[165] He used an article from the *Manchester Guardian* to illustrate his point:

> The women, according to the testimony of the factory managers, are doing a good job of work. On the average they do not take long to train. And under the supervision of skilled male machine-setters they prove quite satisfactory. ...What was a little surprising was to see young women operating the great overhead cranes...But the experience of the factory is that the right type of girl can be trusted in the driving cab after about seven days instruction and practice. Now and again a girl has proved herself efficient after four days.[166]

If women could be trained to do these jobs in so short a time, he demanded to know, then why was Canada not training her men, rather than women, for work. While Quelch's comments were not directed at women's employment, it is illustrative of the mind-set of the time. If women could be trained so easily then surely men could be trained in half the time. Curiously, the Canadian government did continue to encourage young men to enter trade training to prepare them for war work despite the certainty that many, if not all, would be called upon to serve in the armed forces. In complete contradiction to their policy of training men, the government both encouraged employers to hire women and warned them of the inevitability of hiring women

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[165]Dominion of Canada Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons, Second Session-Nineteenth Parliament, 4-5 George VI, Volume III, 1941. P. 2545.

[166] Ibid.

workers.[167] By August of 1942 *The Labour Gazette* reported that the Dominion Bureau of Statistics:

> ...stated that there is abundant evidence that Canada's sources of labour supply among men are rapidly approaching depletion....Since future accretions to the nation's labour force must come mainly from the ranks of women, a stock taking of Canada's woman-power is, at the present time, extremely important.

In September of 1942, the Federal government expanded the National Selective Service Regulations to include the registration of women. In a joint presentation, the Honorable Humphrey Mitchell, Minister of Labour, and Elliot Little, Director of National Selective Service, encouraged employers to "...be prepared to make greater use of women, to use their labour more efficiently ..." The first women to be registered for employment under P.C. 7595 were in the 20-24 age group.[168]

Knowing the government had used compulsory registration to attempt to alleviate manpower shortages, I expected my informants to

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[167]See the House of Commons Debates for 1939 through 1943 for examples of the trade training policies observed by the Federal government. Although there are few specifics, most question and answer sections refer to the need to train young men for war work.

[168]Although day care is outside the scope of this study, it is necessary to note that the government was very concerned about the effects of working mothers on the children. In an effort to prevent problems, the first step the government took was to register young women in the 20 to 24 age group, thereby reducing the number of mothers drawn into the work force. At the same time, the Women's Bureau urged the government to not ask mothers to go into the work place since "They can be much more helpful to the Nation by staying home and taking care of the children. It is recognized that in some cases these women find it necessary to work and for them some provision must be made." (*The Labour Gazette*, September, 1942, p.1026) By early 1943 the Dominion Government had decided day care facilities were necessary but implemented them only in Ontario and Quebec. As far as I can ascertain there were no government-sponsored day care facilities in Victoria, Vancouver or Prince Rupert.

have been registered and to have been placed in the shipyards. This did not prove to be the case, with the exception of one female welder and the one rivet catcher mentioned earlier in this paper. According to Mrs. Smith, once the welding course ended, the class was divided between Victoria Machinery Depot and Yarrows shipyards.[169] To my question about how they found their jobs in the shipyards, almost all my respondents replied in one of two forms. They went down to the shipyard and applied or they saw an advertisement, either in the paper or on a poster. A few thought they had gone to 'unemployment' [Selective Service] and talked to a placement officer, but not one woman recalled mandatory registration. Now there is always the time factor to consider here; it has been fifty years since the war, and memories fade. Nonetheless, I doubt that something as unusual as mandatory registration for employment, at a time when women were discouraged from working in paid labor, would have been forgotten. Because the initial registration age for women was restricted to 20 to 24 years some of my interviewees may have been excluded. The oldest was approximately thirty-three years old and the youngest seventeen. However, many of them were within the initial age range imposed by the government. This raises several questions: were the government's efforts at registering all able-bodied workers directed more towards Ontario and Quebec? Was the registration of women less a priority than the appearance of registering them? To date, the women I have interviewed, both for this project and informally, do not

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[169]Mrs. Smith (pseudonym)

recall being registered for work. This includes farm labor, store clerks, and several widows who simply chose not to work.

Another section of the *National Selective Service Regulations* required all persons quitting their jobs to give seven calendar days written notice or in the case of dismissal to receive seven calendar days written notice. According to my research the shipyards complied with this regulation. Some employees, however, did not. Throughout the interviews, my informants recalled quitting at one yard and going to another: or, for example, to the Boeing plant and then returning to the shipyard. When I investigated this apparent contradiction, I was told that there was nothing to stop a person from quitting. Although the government tried to discourage quitting, workers could still change jobs with some degree of frequency.

As soon as the government recognized the necessity of using women-power it began to plan for removing them from the work force. One Member of Parliament was so fearful of women in the work place, he referred to the situation as akin to 'Hitlerism'.[170] While this was, undoubtedly, a case of overreaction, it is safe to say that there was a great deal of fear surrounding the entry of women into the work place. One of the major concerns was, of course, whether the women would leave their jobs at the end of the war. As an inducement to get men to enlist, the government enacted legislation that ensured their jobs would be there for them when they returned. Nevertheless, this protective

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[170]Dominion of Canada Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons, Second Session-Nineteenth Parliament, 4-5 George VI, Volume I, 1942, p. 94 According to Brunell an organization was being formed in England to protect men's jobs against "...the infiltration of women...". It was Brunell's opinion that, should Canada use women in war work, "...it will create an overwhelming after-war problem."

legislation may have also been one of the ways in which both employers and government could ensure that women would vacate the work place. Those jobs "belonged" to others, therefore, once the rightful employees returned, the replacement workers had to move out.

In an effort to deal with the problems of postwar reconstruction, the government established an Advisory Committee on Reconstruction which, in turn, set up six subcommittees, one of which was the Subcommittee on Post-War Problems of Women established in January 1943.[171] The terms of reference for the subcommittee on women were:

> To examine the problems relating to the re-establishment of women after the war and to make recommendations to the Committee on Reconstruction as to the procedure to deal with the problems and other matters relating to the welfare of women in the period of reconstruction.[172]

The report classified women into four groups: married women in the home, single women earning their own living, married women working outside the home and farm women. The report shows that in June of 1939, 600,000 women were employed in industry. By November, 1943, that number had risen to 1,200,000 and of that figure 260,000 were directly engaged in war industry.[173] Here was the crux of government concerns: how many of these women would want to stay in

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[171]The Advisory Committee on Reconstruction subcommittees were as follows: I. Agricultural Policy, II. Conservation and Department of Natural Resources, III. Publicly-Financed Construction Projects, IV. Housing and Community Planning, V. Post War Employment Opportunities, VI. Post War Problems of Women.

[172]*Advisory Committee on Reconstruction, VI,* "Post-War Problems of Women", Final Report of the Subcommittee, November, 1943, frontispiece.

[173]Ibid., p. 7.

the workplace, and if they stayed, would they be willing to move from relatively high paying jobs to traditional 'women's work'?

In order to establish the mood of the country's women, the government, under the auspices of the Advisory Committee on Post-War Problems of Women, distributed a questionnaire to female war plant workers. The *Province* newspaper announced the questionnaire with the headline *"Will They Work-Get Married?"* The article that followed asked:

> Will women be content to give up their pay-cheques, their independence, their industrial jobs after the war is over to go back to their kitchens, their homes and their peace-time occupations?[174]

The questionnaire listed five options, the first two of which involved marriage and homemaking. The third and fourth option, "Return to your old job" and "Work in a factory" offered little chance for change. Only the last option, "Do some other kind of work? What Kind?" gave the respondents any scope for change. The final question, "Would you want to do this if it took six months or a year for training?" indicates that the government was probably not willing to consider helping women train in the professions, for example, medicine, science or law which required far more than six months to a year of training. On the other hand, given the attitudes of the day, few people, male or female, expected a woman to have the tenacity or the ability to accept

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[174]*The Vancouver Daily Province,* May 27, 1943, p. 15.

the discipline and rigors of long-term training and commitment to a career.[175]

In an article the following day, the *Province* reported the results of the newspaper's poll amongst Vancouver women war plant workers. "*Young Women War Workers Don't Want Home and Hubby*" the headline announced.

> A small cross-section of feminine workers' opinion taken by *The Vancouver Daily Province* today following the issuance of a post-war questionnaire from the Dominion Government committee of reconstruction here this week showed that the younger women no longer look upon marriage as a career and that men will have to treat them with care, kindness and consideration to wean them away from their jobs.[176]

The article went on to state:

> Cupid may solve some of the government's headaches about what to do with surplus women workers after the war, but it's apparent it won't solve all of them. For many women workers like their work so well that they'd hate to give up the excitement, the pay-cheque and the freedom.[177]

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[175]Ruth Roach Pierson and Marjorie Cohen, "Educating Women for Work: Government Training Programs for Women before, during and after World War II" in Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey, *Modern Canada 1930-1980s,* (Toronto: Mclelland and Stewart, 1984) pp. 206-43.

[176] *The Vancouver Daily Province*, May 28, 1943, p.16.

[177]Ibid., p. 16

But what of the women I interviewed? Did they want to stay in the shipyards or did they want to go back into their homes and follow a homemaking career? Even allowing for retrospect and change over time, I found that many of my informants went into the shipyards fully aware these were war work jobs, which would end with the arrival of peace. Only five would have stayed in the yards.[178] Approximately 25% of my sample therefore wanted to remain in the shipyards, 15% went on to seek other work while the remaining 65% planned to return to the home. This contrasts sharply with Pierson's finding that between 72% to 84% of women surveyed about their post war employment intentions wanted to remain in the work force. The difference between my sample and the samples used by Pierson may derive from the way the question was phrased. Whereas, I asked each woman directly, in a closed-question style, if she would have remained in the *shipyard* after the war ended, Pierson relied on war-time surveys about their plans.[179]

I asked Mrs. Staley if she would have stayed on in the shipyard as a welder after the war.

> Oh yes. But they laid off the married girls towards the end of the war. A lot of the girls weren't married but I was. They laid us off in the early part of 1945. I started working at the Parliament

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[178]Eva Wood, Hazel Smith (pseudonym), Jean Owen, Elsie Murcheson and Jeannie Staley. My concern with these responses rests on retrospective decisions. In the years since these women were laid off from the yards there has been a great deal of controversy about the treatment women received after the war. Of the women who say they would have stayed on, I felt that probably only one, Hazel Smith, would have really stayed.

[179]Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*, p.78.

> Buildings in the fall of 1945. From being a welder to a secretary...[said with a certain amount of cynicism].[180]

Like Mrs. Staley, Mrs. Wood and Mrs. Smith all remarked they would have stayed on the shipyard because of the good pay and job satisfaction. None evidenced any particular surprise or bitterness on losing their jobs. Elsie Murcheson was asked to stay on and move to #1 Yard but chose to leave with the rest and look for work.

> ...then they were letting out and they asked me if I wanted to go into #1 Yard and I said "No". I was scared I wouldn't get a job with all the rest of them leaving so I just left. I went down to Bapco Paint.[181]

To my question about wanting to continue working in the shipyard Jean Owen replied she would have stayed. However, I am not sure if it was because of the work and pay or because of the memories. "Oh yes. My husband and I got married from the shipyards."[182]

When asked about government studies about their futures, none of my interviewees recalled any survey. Nevertheless, they all said that the Unemployment officers were always available during layoffs to assist in finding new work. This, of course, was the problem -- women were routinely directed into 'women's work', which was notoriously low paid and insecure. For example: Eva Wood became a restaurant hostess, Elsie Murcheson joined Bapco Paints, Edith Tataryn returned

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[180] Mrs. Staley.

[181] Mrs. Elsie Murcheson. Mrs. Murcheson clearly saw that the employment prospects in the shipyards were limited and chose to leave.

[182] Jean Owen

to her job in the hardware store, Jean Owen and Jeannie Staley entered secretarial work.

None of the women, even the ones who would have remained in the shipyards after the war, was bitter about the fact that returned men were given job preference. I suspect this was part of the thinking of the time. These men had gone overseas and fought for the ideals of democracy and freedom, and the women at home felt it was only right that they should have jobs when they returned home.

Were women victims of a patriarchal system that removed them from well paying jobs and forced them back into either low pay 'women's' work or into their homes? Although working in conditions that they did not choose, nevertheless women were able to make some important decisions about their lives— for example the choice to work inside or outside the home. The war-time work these women shipyard workers chose to do allowed them to earn very good money over the short term, money they often saved to ensure a better future for themselves and their families. Although all of my informants cited support of the war effort as their primary motivation for entering war work, all pointed to the high pay as a major motivation. Certainly, they faced a great many constraints, but they chose to work within those constraints and to benefit from them. Only five of my informants would have remained in their wartime positions if given a chance to. Moreover, of those five it is my belief that only one, Mrs. Smith, genuinely wanted to remain within the shipyards. Her response to my question "Would you have stayed on in the shipyard?" was poignant.

> Oh I would have, yeah, oh yeah.. It was too hot in the summer and too damn cold in the winter but I enjoyed it. It's like painting, each

> time you do a pass you hope it'll be better than the last one. But I sure liked it ---I don't think I ever had a job I liked as well. [183]

Overall, the women, at least in retrospect, were fully aware that their jobs in the shipyards were for the duration of the war only.

Although it seems that the system was set up to discriminate against women there are other factors to consider. As already noted, Canada, along with most of the world, was facing massive downsizing in the aftermath of the war and it had to accommodate the returning armed services personnel who were guaranteed their old jobs. Women saw jobs as primarily for men. Unions, still smarting after the great depression, were not willing to risk their war time membership gains by championing the cause of women's employment. Although the Marine Workers and Boilermakers Industrial Union charged North Burrard Shipyard with "rank discrimination" over the layoff of the last fourteen passer girls, the complaint was not so much about the women's loss of employment as much as the pay rates the company was offering the replacement union men. [184]

The reaction of the men in the shipyards to the arrival of women was not surprising. Most people will oppose change of any kind, at least in the beginning. The introduction of women into an all male environment was not only threatening but also, in the minds of the men, highly disruptive. As Sheila Anderson, along with several others noted, in the beginning the men were very hostile, but in time the hostility died down to be replaced by a reasonable level of

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[183]Mrs. Smith (pseudonym)

[184]*The Vancouver Sun*, December 18, 1945, p. 20.

acceptance.[185] Since high numbers of women wanted to marry and start families their wartime gains in industry soon reverted to pre-war levels. While there is no doubt that men have often fought diligently to exclude women from the workplace, there is also evidence, as shown by this study, that men can and will eventually adapt to change.

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[185] Sheila Anderson, personal papers. In one of her presentations Mrs. Anderson noted that the men were "very antagonistic" in the beginning but that after a short time the women noticed they were becoming "accepted as fellow workers" and that the men began to assist the women "in dozens of different ways." This theme was repeated by many of my informants who, after an initial struggle with an almost overwhelming sense of antagonism from their male co-workers, suddenly found the men were becoming much more accepting.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I noted that historians have tended to relegate women to the role of victim in patriarchal society. I argue that women were not victims but were active participants within the system. Although it is clear women did not enjoy equality in either the private or public sphere, my study suggests they were proactive. Women then, much as they do now, made changes within the system, changes that benefited their needs and wants. They did not see themselves as victims, nor did they consider themselves as badly treated by the system--it was the system they lived within which they were quite capable of manipulating to suit their needs.

What were the policies of the federal government towards women workers? This question does not readily yield answers. My review of the literature and interviews provides some clues. The Canadian government was very reluctant to use women in war work. Its excuses ranged from health concerns, through child-care questions, to the biggest worry of all, women would not want to return to the home after the war. In an effort to ensure women would understand war work was for the duration only, recruiting material emphasized the short term nature of war-work.[186] At the end of the war, the Canadian government's efforts to incorporate women into post-war employment

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[186] Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*, pp. 129-168.

were perfunctory as the Sub-committee on Post-War Problems of Women illustrates.[187]

The union response to the arrival of women in the shipyards was remarkably egalitarian. Women were paid the same rate as men in the same jobs. Those women who became active in the unions could and did become shop stewards. However, at the end of the day, the unions did not fight to retain their female members, preferring to return to the status quo.

And what of the overall response of society to the women war-workers? Judging from the popular literature of the day, women were respected for the jobs they were doing for the war effort. The four daily newspapers and the national magazines as well as the two in-house magazines used in this study were solidly in support of women war workers. Lotta Dempsey summed up women's new stature, "It is important you should know what they're [women are] like. Very important. Because if you're not one of them you're going to find them setting the pace and marking the way in the world that lies ahead."[188] Notwithstanding all the support for women's 'new' roles there was also some unease. Would women give up their newfound independence and return to homemaking? This unease became evident when women's responses to the Post-war Reconstruction survey indicated that many women did not want to return to homemaking. While none of the publications surveyed voiced strong opposition to

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[187] *Advisory Committee on Reconstruction, VI*, "Post-War Problems of Women", Final Report of the Subcommittee, November, 1943.

[188] Lotta Dempsey, *Mayfair*, May 1943 in *The Vancouver Sun*, May 22, 1943, p.17.

women remaining in the workplace the general theme was one of expectation that women should and would return to homemaking.

The scholarship on women's involvement in war work during World War II suggests that the mood of acceptance of women in industrial work varied considerably over two wars. Two of the earliest studies rested on the premise that the influx of women into a traditionally male work force altered societal preconceptions of women and, by association, women's vision of themselves.[189] Later studies emphasized women as a reserve army of labor, pulled into the industrial work place in response to war needs.[190] Women, they claim, were only tolerated in industry for the duration of the war. In their view these women were not patriotic individuals who willingly went into the labor force for the duration and then equally willingly moved back into the home or returned to 'women's work'. Rather, they argue that these women challenged the dominant ideology of the time which was overtly patriarchal. This, of course, ignores women's participation within their society. Ruth Roach Pierson who has examined Canadian women's participation in World War II, concludes that women in the armed services were victims of both male dominance and media hysteria, particularly during the infamous whisper campaigns.[191]

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[189]Chestor W. Gregory, *Women in Defense Work During World War II* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974); William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

[190]Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage*, chapters 9 and 10. Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1981). Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940's* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982).

[191] Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*. Pierson's study focuses on the treatment of women in the Canadian Armed services. The 'whisper campaign' was a rumor or gossip mill which circulated stories about 'loose' women, in effect undermining both women's morale and wartime

Maureen Honey has studied the creation of the Rosie the Riveter myth, which helped mobilize women into war work.[192] Honey examined how the media was used to reinforce the public assumption that women were in the work place for the duration only. She explored the idea that the mobilizing propaganda could also be used to demobilize women because it was phrased to ensure the understanding that these jobs were only for the duration. Pierson also explores this theme through the mobilization of Canadian servicewomen.

> ...for even at the peak of the war effort, mobilization propaganda and wartime advertising were delivering another message, less subversive of pre-war gender relations. The self-reliant woman, performing competently in a traditionally male sphere of activity was all right, these other images said, as long as she remembered that "THERE'LL COME A DAY" when the men return to reclaim their rightful place - of privileged access to the public world of paid work and of lordly authority within the private domain of home and family.[193]

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recruitment efforts. While the whisper campaign was undoubtedly real, there is much to suggest it was not only women who were affected. Many women recall being told to stay away from soldiers or sailors or airmen because they were 'not nice'. This can be interpreted to mean the men were eager to participate in sexual relations outside of marriage. But there is no concrete evidence to support this 'whisper' campaign against serviceMEN nor has it been studied. Perhaps it is part of the double standard that only sexual innuendo against women is studied. This is not to deny the whisper campaign since it was sufficiently well known to cause concerns at the Wartime Information Board. (Pierson ,pp. 169-170)

[192]Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

[193]Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*, p. 215.

Both Honey and Pierson argue that within the drive to mobilize women was the implicit assumption that the change was for the duration only. Therefore, by maintaining the theme of work for the duration, women would more readily accept their layoff at the end of the war. While Honey and Pierson's analysis of the themes implicit in the mobilization drives is provocative it neglects to ask how much of the change women internalized and carried forward after the war. My interviews suggest that women may have internalized government propaganda to the extent that they accepted their shipyard jobs were for the duration only. However, none of the women recalled the war-time job propaganda nor did they seem to think it was particularly influential on their decisions. If the advertising campaigns were as ineffective as my interviewees suggest, then it may be that their message to return to the home, was just as ineffective.

Several studies have focused on why women continued to carry the double burden of childcare and homemaking as well as paid employment. Karen Anderson's study examines the role of women in the community as well as their workplace roles.[194] She argues that, since women's workplace roles were limited to the duration of the war, there was neither the time nor the inclination for society to adapt to women's double burden.

Deborah Ann Hirshfield, in her work on the impact of World War II on American shipyards argues that as technology changed to allow the hiring of unskilled labor, women became part of the shipyard labor force. While she presents an interesting analysis of women's

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[194]Anderson, *Wartime Women*. Chapter 5.

roles in the shipyards, she does not explore their roles outside the work place. Eerily reminiscent of Pierson's 'whisper campaign' in Canada, Hirshfield discovered that shipyard communities were filled with malicious rumors about the behavior of women in the shipyards. My study did not reveal any specific gossip about the female shipyard workers in Victoria, although one informant remarked: "I think the people looked down on us because we worked in the shipyard".[195] In addition, another commented:

> When we were in the welding school we used to have to go to down to the shipyards to get scrap metal to practice on. They used to load us on the back of a great big truck and we'd drive right down Douglas Street to the shipyard. And everybody would be hooting and hollering at us. We thought it was great. I think after awhile they got used to us.[196]

Whether the 'hooting and hollering' was in derision of the work the women were doing, or whether it was support for their contribution to the war effort, is an unanswerable question.

The two shipyard magazines used in this study, *The Convoy* and *Wallace Shipbuilder* were both solidly supportive of the 'girls'.[197] In several articles both magazines promoted the value of the work performed by the women in the yards. Not a single issue derided women or hinted that they should not be in the shipyards. This is in

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[195]Mrs. Jones (pseudonym)

[196]Mrs. Smith (pseudonym)

[197]*The Convoy* is the house magazine put out by the employees of Victoria Machinery Depot shipyard. The *Wallace Shipbuilder* is the house magazine put out by the employees of Burrard Shipyard, Vancouver B.C

sharp contrast to Kesselman's findings in the in-house magazines used in her study. The three magazines, *Bos'n's Whistle, Stem to Stern*, and *Porthole*, all ran jokes and cartoons either focusing on women's ineptness or on their sexual charms. *The Convoy* and the *Wallace Shipbuilder* poked fun at all the workers -- at times focusing on Prairie folk, at other times on the rumored romances in the offices and, of course, on the female employees. The following excerpts and the cartoons in the appendix illustrate the nature of the teasing in *The Convoy* and the *Wallace Shipbuilder*.

The first excerpt from *The Convoy* is in a regular section of the magazine dedicated to jokes, silly stories and poetry.

"WE DOOD IT"
by A. Plater

Said the Welding Foreman, with hands on his hips,
"Snap to it girls, we're building ships,
And you haven't got time
To remove the grime
'Til the whistle blows'
So up on your toe,
And forget that you have such a thing as a nose!"

And a girl who was smoothing the edge of her nail
Replied, with a glance of disdain at the male,
"We're right on the beam
When welding a seam,
And we do it as fast
As the lads of the past,
But your boys are afraid that they're being
outclassed!"

And so at the yard was the battle begun
Of trying to prove where the best work was done.
But they built them a ship
To race down the slip
And speed on its way
To a foreign bay

Which proves that our teamwork's essential today.[198]

In the same issue, 'Bill Turnbuckle' the author of *Letters of a Prairie Dog* continues his series of letters home to 'Grasshopper Junction'. In this excerpt he is bemoaning, again, his problems finding his way around the ships.

> I'm still learning about ships, trouble is just when I get the old ones under my hat they go and change them. Now there's a new one-gosh-it took me three hours to find my way out yesterday. But I fooled them next time-I marked X's with circles around them, just like Indians used to blaze a tree-and what do you know-some smart burner went and burned them all out and then someone else shoved pipes through them.
>
> It was a real dirty trick, and was all the bosses sore-gosh-seems like all that there plumbing was wrong-and I got lost again. And the shipwreck I was working for was sore too. Sure is a bunch of grouches here-after all it was ME that got lost.[199]

These two examples of the types of teasing stories in the *Convoy* illustrate that men and women were both targeted. None of the material I reviewed could be viewed as malicious gossip against women. It is important to realize that cartoons and jokes that were quite acceptable even five years ago, much less fifty years ago, are

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[198]*The Convoy*, June 1943, p.14.

[199]Ibid., p.9.

frequently used to point out how badly a group of people was treated. It is only in retrospect that, say, cartoons of women with enormous breasts appear to be an ill-conceived and malicious attempt to portray women negatively. In the Safety Cartoon in the appendix, women are shown wearing skimpy outfits and inappropriate footwear. However, a closer examination of the cartoon also reveals a man wearing a tie, another drunk, and others without their safety hats.

This study of women employed in the Victoria shipyards during World War II, in a similar manner to Hirshfield's study, illustrates the relationship between mass production and the utilization of semi-skilled labour. As Canadian shipyards began to feel the loss of their traditional craft-based labor force to the armed services they were forced to streamline their operations in order to take advantage of an unskilled labor force. Initially, boys were brought in to replace young men called to war. As the demand for higher production levels increased, and boys were sent back to school, the yards soon found women to be a readily available source of labor. Women, recruited as unskilled workers, were easily trained to work efficiently in semi-skilled jobs. A few gained journeyman status most often in the areas of electrical work and welding. The rest worked in helper categories.

Several factors influenced women's inability to rise within the job hierarchy of the shipyards. First, women were late comers to the yards and did not remain long enough to become skilled workers. Second, the rapid decline of the shipyards after the war and the resultant loss of employment opportunities combined with the prevailing attitude of 'jobs for the boys' virtually eliminated women's chances to remain as shipyard workers. Third, from the information

gained in my study, women did not expect to remain in the yards after the war. Indeed, with the exception of the five women noted in this paper, the women were more than ready to go back to pre-war occupations or to become homemakers.

It is the third factor that may have had the greatest influence on women's lack of employment continuity with in the skilled trade such as shipbuilding. Many women saw the war as a brief episode in their lives, and once it was over, they wanted mainly to return to their regular lives. Of course, it cannot be denied that they were encouraged, in every possible way, to leave the workplace. Those women who needed or chose to continue working took appropriate action as the war years ended. For example: Jeannie Staley became a secretary. Eva Wood first accepted employment as a restaurant hostess then went into secretarial work. Elsie Murcheson joined Bapco Paints. Elsie Watson worked alongside her husband in their sweet shop business.

In Hirshfield's view, the shipbuilding industry during the war was a missed opportunity for everyone since none of the groups could carry their war time success into the post-war world.[200] The Canadian shipbuilding industry declined, losing its competitive edge and much of its business to Asian shipyards. Labor unions, struggling to maintain their wartime gains in the face of shrinking employment, largely ignored their female members. As soon as the servicemen returned those who had been employed in the yards were reinstated in their jobs, effectively filling all available openings and displacing women

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[200] Hirshfield, *Rosie Also Welded*, p. 239.

and men without seniority or military service. Furthermore, most women never expected to continue working after the war, preferring instead to focus on marriage and family, rather than on fighting to remain in the work place. All these factors contributed to the temporary nature of women's tenure in the shipyards.

In retrospect women shipyard workers view their war-time jobs as positive experiences. This positive view cannot be dismissed as nostalgia, or 'selective memory'. There were reasons why the experience was a positive one, as this thesis has shown. The reasons relate to the expectations of the women themselves; the nature of the work, which allowed discretion, challenge, and a sense of achievement; the high wages; and the degree of choice that remained to women even in the presence of patriarchal authority and deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about the proper work of women.

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Interviews

All Narrators signed legal release forms permitting the use of their material. Those who wished to remain anonymous have been included under pseudonyms. Telephone interviews where the informant was hesitant about the use of the material have not been included nor have several interviews, where in the opinion of the interviewer, the informants information may have been clouded by illness or medication.

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Appendix I

Interview Questions

Describe how you came to get work in the shipyard.

Why did you go to work in the shipyard? What kind of work did you do there?

When did you first decide to apply for work in the shipyard?

How old were you when you started work in the shipyard?

What were you doing before the war? Had you been employed before the war?

How different was work in the shipyards compared to what you had been doing? Harder, easier, more challenging?

Were you given special training before you started work or was it all on the job training?

Was there a union? Did you join?

Did anyone else in your family or your friends work in the shipyards?

What would you have done if the war hadn't come along? Career? Marriage?

How did you feel about the work you were doing? Was it satisfying? What were the positive or negative aspects?

How do you feel relations between co workers was?

How did the men react to the women working there?

Did any of the men bother anyone you knew? Was there talk, jokes, harassment? What happened to the people involved?

Do you recall government sponsored articles like this one? What did you think of them?

Did you feel less feminine because you were doing 'men's work'?

What did you do after the war? Would you have continued in the same type of work as you were doing in the shipyard if it had been possible?

What difference do you think working in the shipyards made to you in the long run?

List of Illustrations

Unless otherwise noted in the description of the photograph all illustrations are courtesy of the Maritime Museum, Victoria, B.C. Yarrows Collection.

IV Canvassing for 8th Victory Loan. Third woman from left Mrs. Betty Frumento. Reprint kindly donated by Mrs. Frumento

V Machinists 1942 Yarrows.
Photographer: E. Glass, 526 Kelvin Road, Victoria, B.C.

VI Miss Barbara Stanioyck speaking to employees of No. 1 Yard on behalf of the 4th Victory Loan, 27th April, 1943.

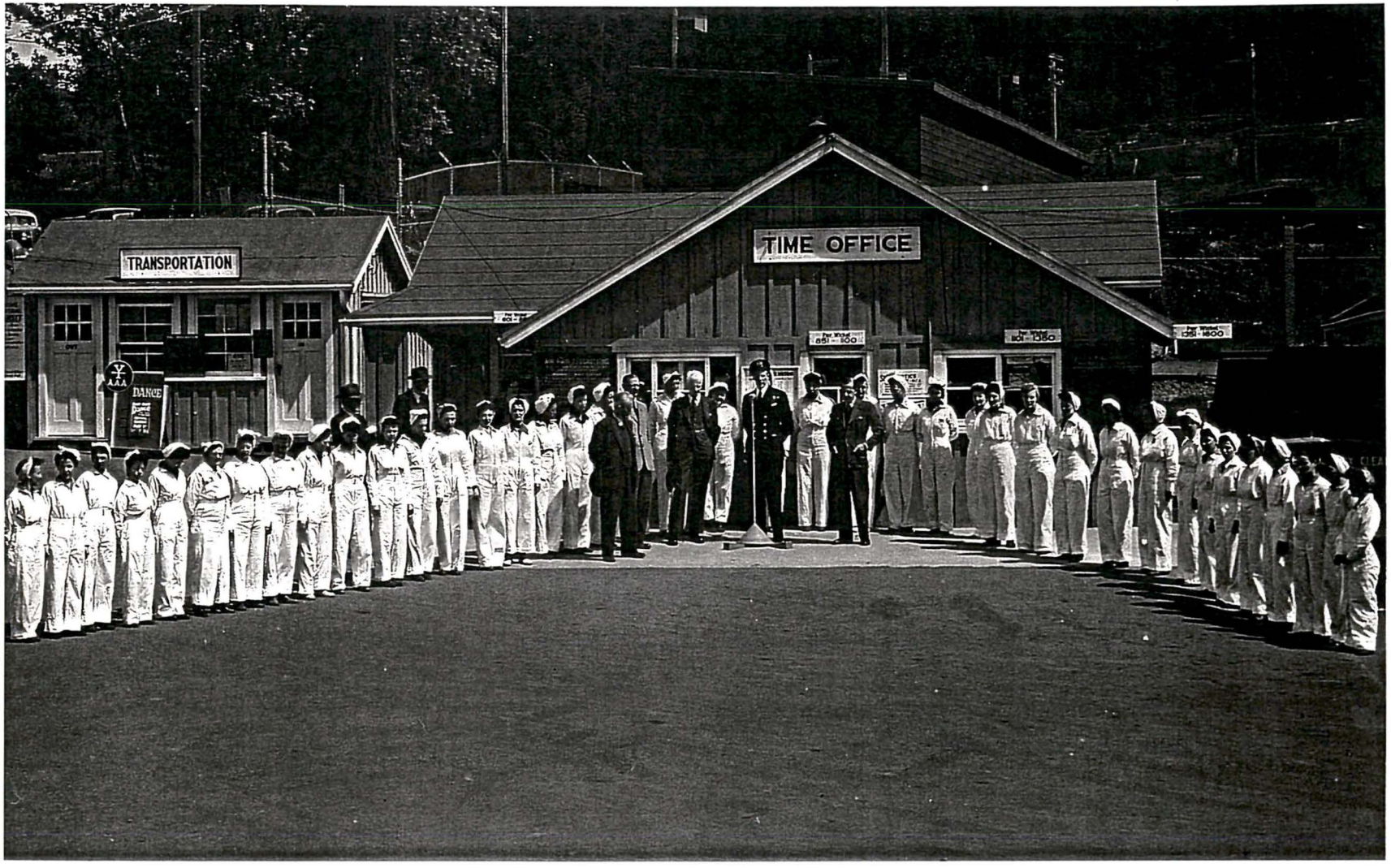
VII Compressor House Installation, #2 Yard, from West Side. May 28, (no year).

VIII HMCS St. Catherines "Taking to the Water" December 5, 1942. No. 1 Yard.

IX Interior view of Machine Shop, Yarrows Ltd. No. 1 Yard, March, 1944.

Royal Canadian Naval Photograph, Crown Copyright reserved. Passed by Naval Censor No. (photographic) 22/3/44.

X Safety Cartoon, V.M.D. Convoy, December, 1943. P. 6



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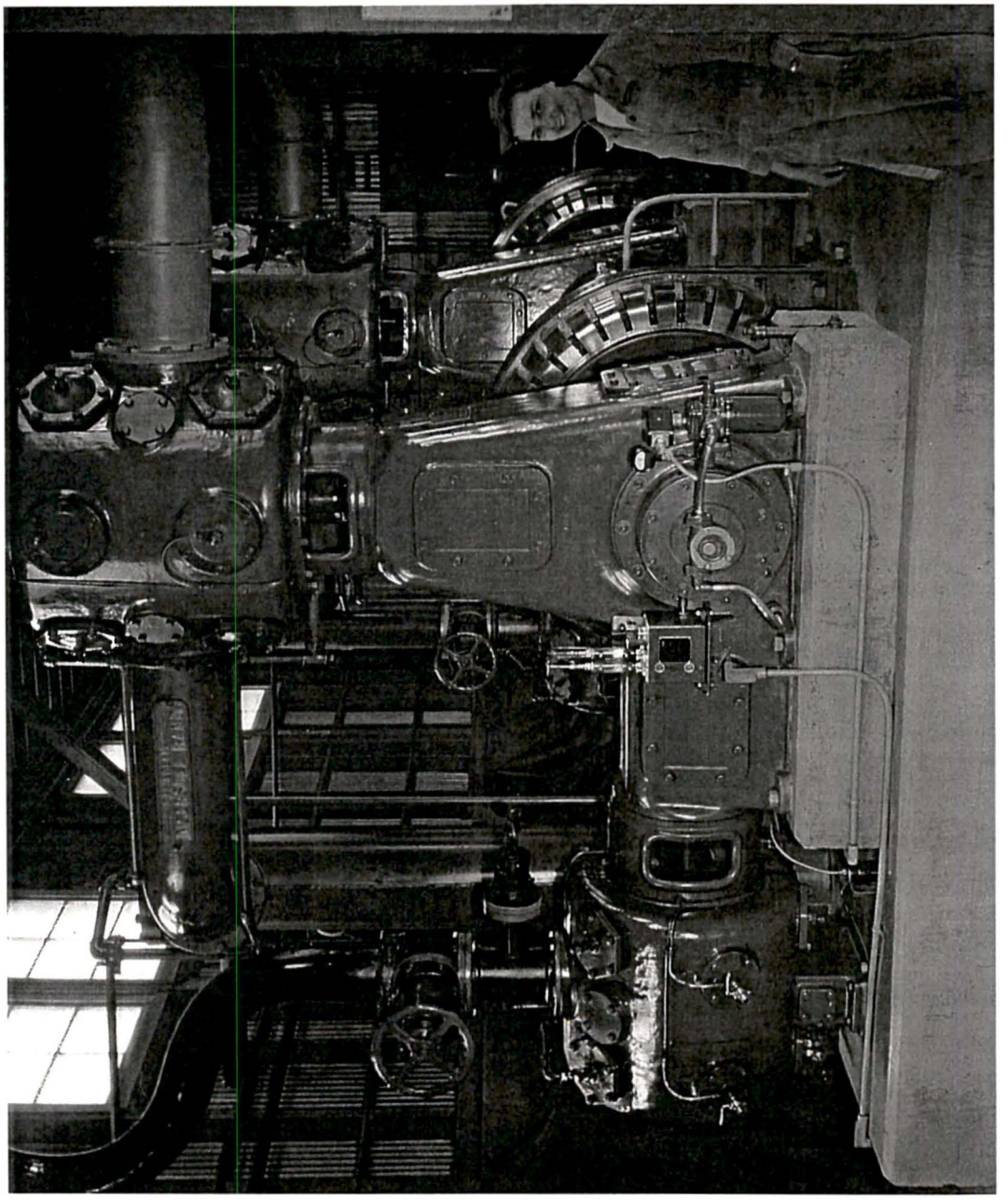
TIME OFFICE


INVEST IN THE BEST
KEEP YOUR DEPT. IN THE RACE
THEY RE OFF • QUOTA
NO. 1 YARD $259.700
NO. 2 YARD $140.500
TOTAL $400.200
NO. 1 YARD
0 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100 110% 120%
1. MACHINISTS - SHOP
2. MACHINISTS - OUTSIDE
3. PLUMBERS
4. PIPEFITTERS
5. BLACKSMITHS
6. ELECTRICIANS
7. RIVETTERS & BUSTERS
8. LABORERS
9. PLATERS & PLATE SHOP
10. SHEET METAL
11. SHIPWRIGHTS
12. JOINERS
13. STAGERS
14. STAGES & COMPONENT
15. FIRST AID DEPT.
16. STAFF
17. WELDERS
18. BURNERS
8
VICTORY LOAN
WORK NOW • SAVE NOW • SPEND LATER
OVER the QUOTA
TIME
PAYMASTER

V



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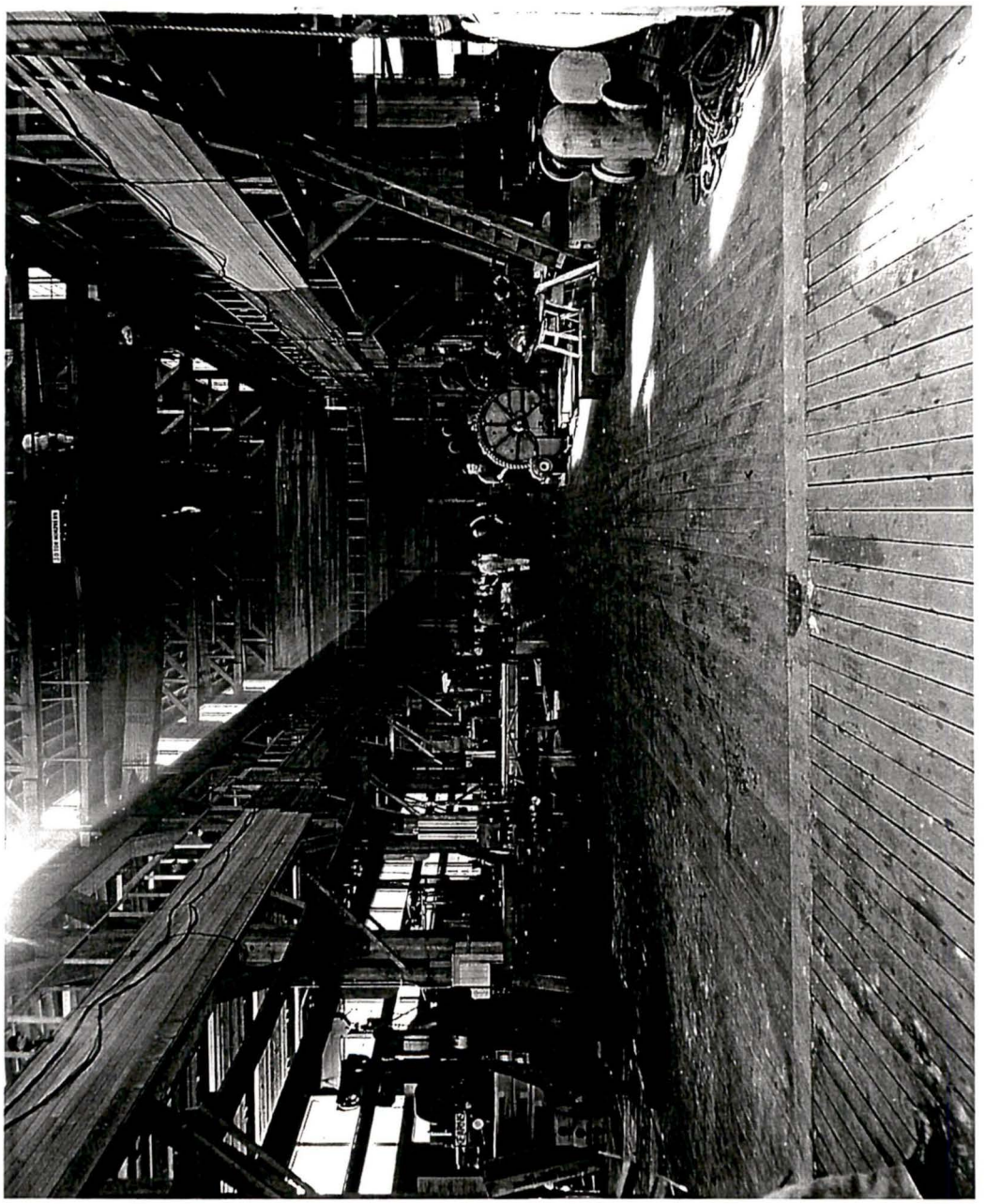

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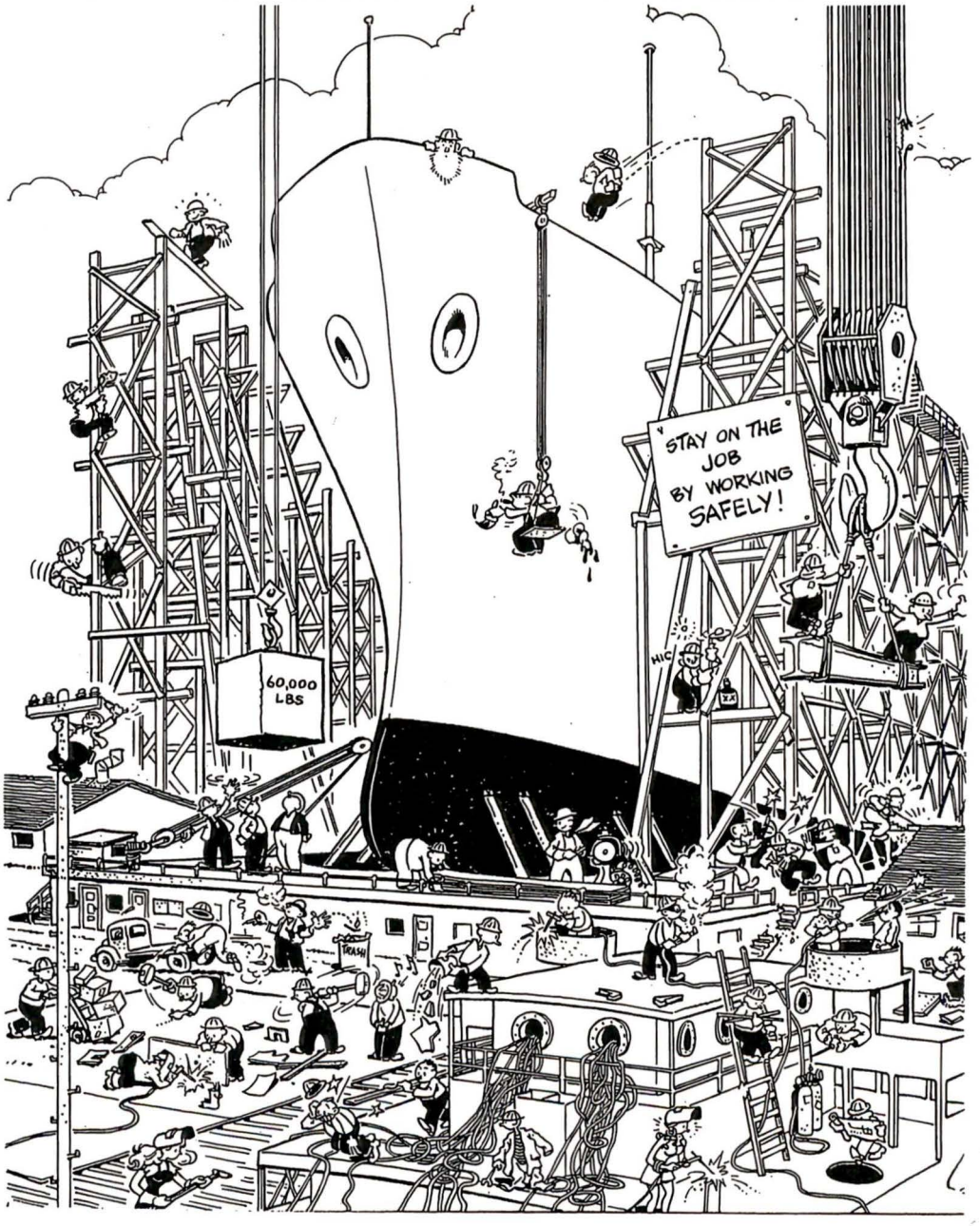

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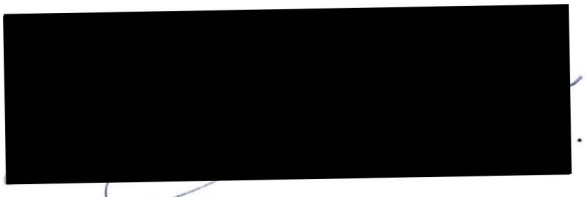
Author  .....

Carole Paula Thornton
January 23, 1998