

in which sachems were appointed by the women and administered power under their watchful eye, by a system of elected representatives. Women were disenfranchised and did not regain voting privileges in the Seneca Nation until 1964. This radical change in political structure which had been advocated and supported by whites (the Quakers prominently among them) was the culmination of the loss of female power. As whites dealt with 'chiefs' — self-appointed or white-appointed spokesmen over whom women at best had tenuous

control — rather than with Sachems — over whom women had direct control — the action of these chiefs was frequently independent of review by either women specifically or the community at large. In negotiations between Indian men and white men, the intervening presence of female mediators was unexpected and unwelcomed by the whites and inhibited the exercise of full control by Indian men, who were observing the independent action of white men in male-oriented American society. ©

Industry's Handmaidens: Women in the Quebec Cotton Industry

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Depuis la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, la main-d'oeuvre pour l'industrie du textile du Québec est surtout féminine. Cet article souligne les problèmes auxquels les femmes ont dû faire face et les changements positifs acquis pour la femme dans le marché du travail.



National Archives of Quebec

The old fashioned spinning wheel can still be found, in use, in rural Quebec.

As nation builders, women have distinguished themselves by the extraordinary diversity of their contribution. They bore and raised the children upon whom the nation's growth and development depended; they frequently organized the embryonic social services which characterized pioneer society; and they acted as the purveyors of culture and civilization.

But more than anything else, women worked. Unpaid or ill-paid, they toiled at dirty, monotonous, back-breaking jobs in the nation's homes, farms and factories. By acting as a cheap and flexible labour force, they greatly

facilitated the transformation of the Canadian nation from a rural, agricultural society into an urban, industrial one.

One of the earliest Canadian industries to make extensive use of women was the textile industry. Women simply transferred their time-honoured spinning and weaving skills from the hearth to the factory. By the late 19th century, the production of cotton cloth was a principal activity of the Canadian textile industry, and was particularly important in the economy of Quebec. Encouraged by the protective tariff set in place by the Conservatives' National

Policy, industrialists chose to locate in Quebec since it offered two abundant and inexpensive resources: hydro-electric power and labour. As Table I indicates, women constituted a significant proportion of the workers employed in the Quebec cotton industry.¹

Writing the history of these and other working class women raises unique methodological problems. Documentation pertaining to the role of women in industry is sparse although some general information can be gleaned from federal census material, government reports and newspapers. Exploring the actual

experience of women workers is even more difficult. For the most part, they lacked the time and educational advantages which allowed their more fortunate middle and upper class sisters to generate historical documents in the form of diaries, autobiographies and letters.

In the case of Quebec's female cotton workers, I have sought to overcome these difficulties by conducting some 90 interviews with women in Valleyfield and Magog. They all began working in the cotton industry before 1951, and while most have already retired, some continue to work at present. These interviews provide a rich source of information regarding the industrial experience of female cotton workers from 1906 to the present, and serve as the main source of information for this article.

The Employment of Women in the Quebec Cotton Industry

Until the end of the 1920s, it would appear that the workforce in the cotton industry in Quebec was almost equally divided between the sexes. By 1931, however, women accounted for only 39 per cent of the province's cotton workers. According to the Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Textile Industry (1938), this reduction was due to a combination of technological changes and economic circumstances. Its author, L.A. Turgeon, noted that there was 'an increasing emphasis on finishing processes, such as dyeing and printing', tasks which women were unable to perform because they lacked the requisite technical training. As well, during the economic crisis, 'employers gave preference to male employees and particularly those with dependents.'² Several of the women I interviewed confirmed the importance of this second trend, for they personally had been dismissed when they married during the 1930s.

There is no doubt that the reduction in the proportion of women in the industry was reversed during the Second World War. Unfortunately, the federal census for 1941 does not reflect this change since the increase in the numbers of women working oc-

curred after 1942, when the labour shortage in Canada became acute. A vigorous campaign was undertaken by the federal authorities to recruit women into the workforce. And one of the areas where women were needed was the textile industry. Male labourers who remained in civilian life had been lured away by the higher wages to be earned in direct war industry. The success of the campaign to attract women into industry is attested to by the frequent denunciations of this effort by clerical and nationalist groups throughout Quebec. By 1951, however, such large numbers of women were no longer required and they were accordingly encouraged to return to the home and family life. In the cotton industry in Quebec, this change is evident in a further reduction of the proportion of female workers to 32 per cent.

In this industry, as in so many others, women admirably suited the employers' labour needs. In times of expansion, such as occurred at the turn of the century and during the two World Wars, women could be called upon to overcome labour shortages; in times of recession, their dismissal was sanctioned by the prevailing ideology which ascribed women to the home.

More important than the decrease in the percentage of women cotton workers was the shift in their occupational distribution. At the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of female operatives were employed as spinners, spoolers and weavers. For example, at Dominion Textile's Merchants plant in Montreal in 1908, 64 per cent of the workers in the carding department, 67 per cent of the frame spinners, 85 per cent of the spooling department employees, 54 per cent of the slashing department and 50 per cent of the weavers were women.³

Two decades later, the proportion of women in these occupations had declined. According to the 1931 census, only 39 per cent of the carding employees, 64 per cent of the spinners, and 46 per cent of the weavers were female. Ten years later, only 49 per cent of the spinners and 32 per cent of the weavers were women.⁴

Concurrently, there was a proliferation of unskilled jobs for women to perform such as cloth inspectors, folders, wrappers and packers. By 1951, not only were there proportionately fewer women in the Quebec cotton industry, but they were performing less skilled functions than they had earlier in the century.

The Female Cotton Workers

One of the most striking characteristics of these women was their youth. Prior to 1930, many began between the ages of 12 and 14 to work in the mills. Officially, the government of Quebec had enacted legislation in 1893 which prohibited the employment of girls under the age of 14. Repeated labour shortages and employers' desire for cheap labour rendered this legislation ineffectual. Even when employers did demand proof of age in the form of baptismal certificates, employees simply 'forgot' to provide it until they had attained the required age. One woman in Magog stated that in her case, the local *curé* falsified the copy of her baptismal record because he knew that her family's welfare was dependent upon her ability to become a wage earner.

After 1930, it was rare to find girls entering the mills before the age of 15, but this improvement was undoubtedly due more to the difficulty in finding employment during the Depression than it was to a more rigid observance of the provincial legislation. The starting age continued to be young: the vast majority of women entered the industry before they were 20, and most had not proceeded beyond elementary school.

Many of these young women were from rural areas. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, employers actively recruited entire families from the Quebec countryside to work in their cotton factories. The presence of a large number of children of working age in a family was definitely considered an asset by the recruiting agent. According to one woman interviewed, her family moved to Magog so that she and her sisters could go to work to support their large family. Immediately upon their arrival and well before the family possessions had been unloaded from the wagon, they



Notman Photo Archives, McGill University

Spinning class, Roberval, Que.

were summoned to present themselves at the factory.

The collective youth of the female workforce was reinforced until the 1940s by the withdrawal, voluntary or otherwise, of married women from the industry. Many of the women interviewed stated that they would have preferred to continue working, but their husbands were vehemently opposed. As pointed out earlier, companies also were instrumental in keeping married female workers in the minority by firing them or laying them off whenever a slowdown in production was required. As late as 1951, less than 20 per cent of the women in the Quebec cotton industry were, or ever had been, married.⁵

Whatever the date of their entry into the mills, the female worker's principal reasons for seeking employment in the cotton industry remained constant: the necessity to work and the lack of alternative employment opportunities for young women with little formal education. As one Valleyfield worker commented: 'My parents were not wealthy. The only choice you had if you did not have an education was to work in the cotton factory.' In towns such as Valleyfield and Magog, the only other sources of employment were domestic service and retail sales, and both were poorly paid and limited in size.

Working Conditions

The primary textile industry throughout this period was noted for its poor working conditions and low wages. Indeed, one of the recurring themes of the interviews was that, in spite of technological advancements, the general working environment deteriorated with each decade.

At the beginning of the century, the majority of Quebec's cotton workers toiled 60 hours a week. By 1910, the work week had been reduced to a total of 55 hours: 10 hours each day, Monday to Friday, and five hours on Saturday. Beginning at 5 a.m., the mill whistle summoned the workers from their beds, and its shrill call continued to regulate their routine throughout the day. Work began at 7 a.m. and ended at 6 p.m., interrupted only by a one-hour lunch break at noon. Moreover, the provincial legislation which limited the number of hours employees were required to work did allow employers to obtain special permits to extend the normal working day. Consequently, during busy seasons, the workers frequently laboured 12 hours a day.

The long hours remained a characteristic of the industry. In fact, Judge Turgeon noted in his 1938 report that there had been little progress in this regard since 1885. Only in the late '40s and early '50s was there a general trend to

reduce the work week to 45 to 50 hours. To obtain this reduction, the workers were required to forfeit half of their lunch hour.

In addition to the long working hours, the other major complaint of the workers remained the low salaries. In 1928, female textile workers were the first in Quebec to be included in minimum wage legislation. Workers with two years experience could not be paid less than \$12 per week if they were located on the Island of Montreal, or \$10 per week in other regions. However, only 80 per cent of pieceworkers had to earn this minimum wage in order for employers to comply with the law. As numerous studies have demonstrated, there were a number of deficiencies inherent in such legislation and its application: the minimum tended to become the maximum; it was extremely difficult to enforce; and sometimes female workers were replaced by men who were not included in this protective legislation.

Low wages continued to be the fate of women wage earners throughout the 1930s. Average weekly earnings for female cotton workers in Quebec were \$8.92 in 1930 and \$9.57 in 1936. Whereas 45.3 per cent of all such workers earned an hourly wage of less than 22.5 cents, only 16.8 per cent of their Ontario counterparts earned

such low wages.⁶ Workers were paid every two weeks and the meagre sums of money were placed in pay envelopes which often bore no more than the employees' numbers. Considering that most women were paid by the piece according to a complicated schedule which was determined by the type of cotton with which they were working, it was virtually impossible for them to verify their wages. To add insult to injury, the back of the pay envelope carried a message exhorting them to publicize the company's products. A Dominion Textile Company envelope admonished: 'Help yourself to steady employment. Buy "Colonial" sheets, "Colonial" Towels, "Magog Fastest" Fabrics. Tell your friends.'

During and after the Second World War, wages tended to rise but salaries for textile workers in Quebec continued to lag behind those of textile workers in Ontario. The average hourly rate for semi-skilled female cotton workers in Quebec in 1948 was 74 cents. One year later, the average hour wage for all wage earners in the Quebec industry was 83 cents while in Ontario it was 88 cents.⁷

Large textile companies such as Dominion Textile prided themselves on the fact that they paid women the same rates as men, and thereby embodied the principle of equal pay for equal work. The main flaw was that women were never considered for the higher-paying jobs to which their male co-workers could aspire. For a man, for example, weaving was usually a preliminary stage in his working career, necessary to enable him to understand the machinery in order that he might become a loom fixer or a foreman. For a woman, being a weaver was the highest position she could attain in the Weave room. There were no forewomen in the cotton mills, not even in departments such as the Cloth room where the majority of employees were female. Thus female employees lacked vertical mobility within the industry and most spent their entire working lives performing the same routine tasks day after day, year after year.

Not only was work in Quebec's cotton mills poorly paid, it was also strenuous, nerve-racking and dirty. Workers emerged from their shifts

in the Carding rooms and Spinning rooms covered in white cotton dust. In the Weave rooms, the noise and humidity were major problems and hundreds of looms clacked away at high speed and overhead pipes continuously spewed out moisture to regulate the tension of the cotton thread. Former employees also vividly recall the high temperatures which prevailed throughout the mills during the summer months. The workers also had to become accustomed to the nervous strain inherent in the surveillance of banks of machines running at high speed.

With respect to these general working conditions, male and female workers experienced many of the same difficulties. In addition, women were more vulnerable to mistreatment by their foremen. Before the 1940s there were no company personnel offices: it was the foreman who hired and fired the employees in his department. Consequently, he exercised a great deal of personal authority over his workers. While most of the women I interviewed felt that the majority of foremen conducted themselves in a just, although stern, fashion, several cited cases of others who definitely abused their positions. Female workers were sometimes exposed to sexual harassment and 'promotions', in the form of obtaining additional and higher producing machines to operate, were often reserved for the foreman's 'favourite'.

There was no marked improvement in working conditions in the Quebec cotton industry prior to the late 1940s, because there was no strong, on-going union movement in the industry before then. Even after the unionization of Quebec's cotton mills became widespread and collective agreements established, most the women interviewed felt that, overall, conditions worsened. Although the work week was reduced and wages increased, the number of employees declined and production increased. Workers were pressed harder and harder that they might achieve the 'bonus' which had been set for them by the time-and-motion experts. Each time they reached their production quotas, higher quotas were set. The unions were much less successful in checking the process of 'speed up' than they were

in improving benefits such as paid holidays, medical coverage and pensions.

Conclusion

From its inception, women provided the labour which enabled the Quebec cotton industry to flourish. After 1930, there was a reduction in the female component of the workforce in this industry as a result of technological change and a reinforcement of public opinion against women working outside the home. Concurrently, there was an important transformation occurring in the occupational distribution of female cotton workers from semi-skilled to unskilled positions.

Low wages, long hours and poor working conditions remained the trademarks of the Quebec cotton industry. In spite of some improvements after the Second World War, the working environment continued to deteriorate. Female cotton workers were reduced from individuals finding a sense of pride and accomplishment in their work to tenders of an ever-increasing number of 'improved' machines requiring little human intervention. ©

Footnotes:

1. Table 1 *Composition of the Workforce, Quebec Cotton Industry*

Year	Male	Female
1891	1716 (45%)	2076 (55%)
1911	2723 (48%)	2986 (52%)
1931	7589 (61%)	4825 (39%)
1941	12071 (67%)	5932 (33%)
1951	12626 (68%)	6055 (32%)

Source: *Census of Canada*, 1891, 1911, 1931, 1941, 1951. Statistics not available for 1901 and 1921.

2. *Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Textile Industry* (Ottawa, 1938), pp. 148-149.
3. Public Archives of Canada, Royal Commission respecting industrial disputes in the Cotton Factories of the Province of Quebec (1908), vol. 2.
4. *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 7, Table 40; *Census of Canada*, 1941, vol. 7, Table 21.
5. *Census of Canada*, 1951, vol. 4, Table 19.
6. *Report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Textile Industry*, p. 175.; Exhibit 1285
7. Public Archives of Canada, Rowley-Parent Collection, vol. 15, files 12, 4.