

Canadian Women's Archives

CANADIAN WOMEN'S ARCHIVES is a regular feature of *Atlantis* and is designed to give a voice to Canadian women who, in the past, have had something to say about the role and condition of women. Diaries, letters, oral history and government documents are just a few of the sources that might usefully be tapped to enhance our understanding of women's history. The Editors of *Atlantis* urge readers to search attics, archives and ash cans for such material and submit it for publication.



Hamilton Working Women in the Period of the Great Depression

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Women are not absent from the literature about the depression in Canada but they are definitely in the background. In his popular oral history, *Ten Lost Years 1929-1939*, Barry Broadfoot pays tribute to the women who “scrounged and scrimped and patched and glued and sewed and borrowed....Tens of thousands of mothers lived this life, for years, and we should never forget them.”¹ The book’s main focus, however, is on the men who wasted ten years “alone and poor and on the roads.”² The most familiar photographs from this period are of men lining up at soup kitchens, abandoned western homes teads, and unemployed males riding boxcars. Politicians of the period also focussed on the ways in which the crisis affected men. Agnes MacPhail opposed this one-sided emphasis. In the House of Commons she reacted to a speech by her colleague, T.C. Douglas, by commenting: “I should like to see Canada composed entirely of young men, and see how they would get on.”³

Canadian historians have highlighted tragic, dramatic and unprecedented events in this decade; for instance, the disastrous decline of the price of wheat and other exports, foreclosures on farm mortgages, the unprecedented numbers of Canadians on relief, the formation of new political

parties and movements. Bleakness and extraordinary suffering are suggested in the titles of many studies of this period: *The Wretched of Canada*, *The Winter Years*, *Ten Lost Years*, *The Bitter Thirties in Quebec*, *The Dirty Thirties*, *The Politics of Chaos*, *Politics of Discontent*.⁴ While the misery of those marginalized by the crisis was extensive and deserving of analysis, it should not be magnified out of proportion. More studies of the four million Canadians who found work or continued to work during the depression would be useful to balance the studies of the lives of the two million Canadians who were on relief or the farm workers who abandoned their homesteads or faced foreclosures.

In this paper I propose to analyze the oral histories of several Hamilton women who were working during the decade of the thirties,⁵ and compare their experiences with those of other women workers in this period for whom information is available.⁶ I cannot claim that the women interviewed are necessarily typical or representative. The census of 1931 listed 14,000 women as gainfully employed in Hamilton. The majority occupations for women were manufacturing (3,535); professionals (1,794); domestics



AMY TAYLOR, 1979 (Photo by Cheryl Lean)

(1,674); stenographers and typists (1,495); and sales (1,276). Among those interviewed, five worked in manufacturing during the depression years, two as saleswomen, one as a stenographer and one as a part-time waitress. While their experiences are uniquely their own, these women help to convey some of the values, attitudes and aspirations of working-class Canadians at this time. Not surprisingly, their recollections identify many of the limits, obstacles and oppressive conditions experienced by women workers generally in this period. Narrowness of opportunity, low wages, the threat of layoff and difficult working conditions were the rule for working people in Canada generally and the women interviewed were not exceptions. Those who were working knew that their power to gain better wages and working conditions was severely limited during the depression years. Employers could and did use the unemployed as a weapon to keep their employees in line. What is striking in the testimony of these women, however, is that they did not see themselves primarily as victims. Most described their work experiences during the thirties with affection and pride, and stressed positive aspects such as a measure of independence, respect from family members whom they helped support, and opportunities for social contact with co-workers some of whom became life-long friends.

In presenting the recollections of these Hamilton women, I have attempted to highlight, in each case, significant aspects of the person's comments and experiences and given background information on the firm or industry where available. I have quoted extensively from the transcripts for several reasons. First, transcripts are not as universally available as are more traditional source materials. Moreover, documentary sources on women workers in this period are not abundant, and even where they exist, often provide information along very narrow lines.⁷ The recollections of these Hamilton women, while subject to the distortion of memory lapses, were focussed more broadly on answering questions

about their early lives, experiences at home and at work, and their attitudes as women over a , the rhythm period of time. Thus, how the women told their stories of their speech, the details they remembered or chose to emphasize, are best conveyed through fairly extensive quotations.

Flora Livingstone graduated from Westdale Collegiate in Hamilton at the start of the depression. She wanted to be a secretary but there were no jobs available. Through family contacts she got a job as a salesgirl at a bakery, the National System of Baking, a chain controlled by Ogilvie's. With her father unemployed and her mother at home caring for four younger children, Flora lived with the fear of being laid off or fired if she was not a conscientious worker. Her wage was essential to her family's survival. She noted that her boss was brusque and unfair to a number of her co-workers and that her wages were low for the long hours that she worked. When opportunities came in the war years to gain improved working conditions and wages, Flora jumped at them. During the interview Flora noted that from today's perspective her working conditions were worse than she had realized at the time. During the depression years, her point of comparison had been with her mother's experience. Flora's mother had worked as a domestic at Flora's age. During the depression she worked even longer hours than Flora, without any pay.

There were no secretarial jobs available. My mother got in touch with one of the teachers at Westdale. He belonged to the Kinsmen or Kiwanis and so did the manager of the National System of Baking. They took me on as a part-time sales clerk in 1932, working Saturdays. I wasn't there long before I was working full time at the large salary of \$8.00 a week. We worked from eight until six with no coffee breaks and an hour for lunch. Saturdays we worked from eight until eleven at night.

Our first task was to deal with any bread left over from the previous day. The Caroline mission would be phoned and someone would come and pick up what was left over and it would be distributed to the needy. We put the bread on racks ready for sale, made up boxes for orders, wiped off the counter, took orders by phone and served customers in the store. We had kind of a tough boss. We all used to shudder when we saw him coming. He would come once a day, we never knew when. I have no personal beefs about him but I used to feel he wasn't very fair to some of them. If he came in and your uniform didn't look clean or something, you'd be out on the street. You'd see him down in the office and you'd wonder, oh boy, am I next? What have I done? And I'm sure a lot of them didn't know what they had done. I worked hard so I wouldn't get kicked out. I was the eldest of five children and my father, a carpenter, was out of work. That eight dollars a week was really important.

When the war started it was hard to get bakers. I asked if I could make the bread. The boss said my muscles would get big. I finally convinced him that that didn't matter too much. I worked on the bread and made cookies and pies too. By then I was getting \$12.00 a week. My brother who was working there as a baker before the war was earning \$18.00. The only difference which I considered a benefit was that I started at seven in the morning and was through by two. At the front (as a salesgirl) you stayed 'til the store closed.

In 1941 I went to work as a secretary for the chief of police. I got to know a cashier, Elsie, at a restaurant where I used to eat lunch. She went to work for the chief for about a year and then she was getting married. That's how I got it. I don't think it was better pay. But the hours were better. We

had coffee breaks, morning and afternoon. The atmosphere was great. There were all those policemen and only five girls. Working as a secretary was very relaxed and interesting. You typed letters, bulletins to the FBI and RCMP listing missing persons, cars, etc. You would hear all the stories and happenings before anyone else. I worked there for two years. I was married by then and expecting a child in December so I worked until September, 1943.⁸

Anne Sebastian's working career began at the age of fourteen at Turnbull's, a large underwear factory, in Galt in 1919. She was the eldest of twelve children in an Italian immigrant family. She moved to Hamilton in the 1920s where her future husband was living and worked for a period of time at Mercury Mills. During the depression years her husband was able to work as a barber and she worked in men's clothing firms from 1932 to 1941 when she left to have a baby. The men's clothing industry in Hamilton appears to have been less chaotic than in Montreal, Toronto or Winnipeg. Amalgamated had organized the two largest firms, Firth's and Copley, Noyes and Randall, where Anne worked. Only one dispute in Hamilton was recorded in the *Labour Gazette's* monthly summary of strikes and walkouts during the depression years, at Firth's in 1931, and it was settled by arbitration.⁹ In contrast, strikes were a frequent occurrence in the men's clothing industry in the larger cities, sometimes involving thousands of workers at a time.¹⁰ Anne was not aware of more difficult conditions in the men's clothing industry elsewhere. Her life revolved around work and family and her immediate neighbourhood. She enjoyed her work, spoke with pride of her competence and skill and found the various machines a challenge. "As long as it was a machine, I liked it." An advantage which Anne enjoyed as a paid worker was freedom from chores at home. While she was working in the factory, her mother-in-law or a younger sister got the meals and did the housework.

I was making \$14.00 a week when I started there and about \$30.00 when I left. I considered that pretty good pay. It was piece work rates. We worked steady. It was busy at Coppley's. People were buying suits. We worked from a quarter to eight in the morning 'til a quarter to twelve. We went back at one and worked 'til five. Sometimes in the busy season we worked Saturdays 'til noon. We needed the money. In those days a job meant a lot. I thought I was so lucky, which I was. I worked and I enjoyed it. It was very interesting. I worked on invisible stitching machines, doing lapels, padding collars, stitching the bottoms of coats and tacking pockets. Not too many of the girls could do it (work on four different machines each day). There was no such thing as a strike then or anything like that. We were in the union, Amalgamated. People worked there a long time. It was just like home.¹¹

Grace Gravino, a younger sister of Anne Sebastian, began to work in 1936 at the age of sixteen in a rubber factory in Galt. Necessity was a strong motivating factor for Grace and she did not share Anne's enthusiasm for factory work. Looking back, Grace felt that girls of her generation, family situation and class were severely restricted in their choices.

We were a large family. You had to look for a job in those days. At the rubber factory I worked in the inspection room. We used to make balloons, baby pants, crib sheets. I had to inspect them before they were packed. I think people today, anybody with any kind of education, wouldn't work there. It's only people without education that do; they have no choice. My son has had it much easier.¹²

Linda Murray began working at the age of fourteen in 1934 in a canning firm in Grimsby, Ontario. In 1936 she went to work at Tuckett's, a tobacco firm in Hamilton. A year later she

worked a few months at Firth's men's clothing and finally at Dominion Glass. During this period she lived at home and turned over most of her pay to her mother. Linda was not enthusiastic about the work she did in any of the places where she worked. In her view, the disagreeable aspects of the job had to be tolerated and were compensated by the independence and the commodities she could get with the money earned. However, she recalled fondly the fun she had with co-workers, excursions and dances after work hours. She felt she was better off than married men supporting families or a young man whom she knew who was unemployed; "I had this beautiful warm coat and he had just an ordinary suit when it was below zero." She judged that she did not work as hard as girls she knew who were employed in the cotton mills in Hamilton. She recalled a much more carefree existence than Grace Gravino remembered, though the absence of any opportunity for education or training was regretted equally.

I worked at Canadian Cannery in Grimsby. I made sixteen cents an hour cash. Wages were very low. Of course I wasn't experienced, you know. I was just a kid. We peeled tomatoes or cut pears when they were in season. It wasn't really hard, just sort of a dirty job, you know. It wasn't pressured. Nothing like that Simon Legree stuff. Matter of fact, I enjoyed it, I really did. After work we all congregated, cooked our food and about six o'clock all the boys from Grimsby would gather. We'd sit there and talk and laugh. And to me that was a lot of fun.

When I was sixteen I went down to Tuckett's. Other girls who worked in the cotton mills worked from the time they were very young. I didn't work that hard. At Tuckett's I earned \$12.00 a week. My mother let me keep what I earned at the cannery. I didn't make that much. Just enough for a few clothes. I was living at home. When I

was working at Tuckett's I gave most of my money to my mom. I made more than married men did. Men just couldn't get work. Men with lots of kids. And here I was making \$12.00 a week. I was the richest kid in Hamilton practically. At that time you could buy a beautiful coat for \$10.00. I worked there a year at least. I used to stem tobacco leaves. There were different kinds, burleigh, Virginia, Turkish. Burleigh was sickening to work on. But the pay was alright so we didn't mind too much the smell. It wasn't really hard work. We worked up almost in what you'd call an attic. In the summer people used to faint, especially the Italian ladies. They treated us well. We went on picnics, up to Galt, everyone, the bosses and everybody. They paid our way. As long as you did your work that's all they asked. You know, I wouldn't trade that time for all the money in the world. It was a wonderful time.

In 1937 I worked a few months at Firth's but I don't remember much about it. You really have to know something about sewing. I didn't know the first thing about it. We didn't know what we were doing, just working on a machine. We should have been trained. You see kids during the depression didn't have a chance. They had no schooling. We just grabbed what we could.

Then I went to work at Dominion Glass. A friend got me in. I did what they called select and pack. You picked up a bottle, held it to the light to see that there were no cracks or blemishes, then wrapped the good ones. I liked whisky and coke bottles; you didn't have to wrap them. The perfume bottles were murder. We stood. You had to work quickly. If you got too fast, they speeded things up.¹³

Jean Wilson began working at Lennard's, a knitting factory in Dundas, in 1930 and worked there steadily until 1944 when she quit to have her first child. The majority of knit goods factories in Canada in this period were located in small communities in Ontario. Knitting was a branch of the textile industry where concentration was least advanced, in contrast to the large cotton mills in Quebec controlled by firms such as Dominion Textile. Lennard's was typical in size with about a hundred and fifty workers. Jean Wilson recalled making \$10.00 a week and this was about average for Ontario female textile workers. Other members of her family worked at Lennard's and contributed their earnings to support the family since Jean's father was unemployed. Jean recalled her years at Lennard's fondly and emphasized the opportunities to make friends and work at a reasonable pace. Although she noted that the comfort of employees was never considered, she did not describe her working conditions as particularly miserable or oppressive. She preferred working conditions in Canada to those in Scotland, where she had worked in her early teens.

The Lennards were good people to work for. They weren't standing behind you. It was like a big family, the whole factory. You knew everybody; they were all from Dundas. People worked in there 'til they were ninety sometimes. Our forelady, Mrs. Tynan, was well into her eighties and still there. Sometimes we could make our ten and sometimes we didn't. They paid such little wages, but everybody was in the same boat then. You just couldn't save to go on a holiday. There weren't any pensions. In 1950 a union got in, you see. They formed a union and then there were pensions. No, there was no organizing effort while I was there.

In one department they knit yarn. I had a sister who worked in the cutting room. Then it was brought into our room and

distributed to the trimmers or to those who put the lace around the neck or those who did seaming. We used to do a lot of long underwear for the nuns in Montreal. It was a very busy plant. We also made bathing suits, the wool kind. When you went home at night you just had to strip off and take a bath. All the little things from the wool would be sticking into you. No, there was no lung congestion. I never heard of anyone having a problem like that. We did our summer work in the winter and our winter work in the summer. There was no air conditioning then of course. In the summer the perspiration would be pouring off you. Course every factory was the same then. The comfort of the employees wasn't thought of. When I first started, we worked eight hours a day and Saturday mornings. If we were busy we'd go home and then come back and work 'til nine o'clock.

You would go in on a Monday morning and maybe spend half an hour talking about what you did, about the weekend. This friend of mine, she stood up for me when I was married; she was in the cutting room and I used to wander off in there and maybe stand and talk to her for about half an hour. Nobody told you to get back to work. Course you were on piece work. It was your own fault if you didn't make the money, you see.

There weren't many men there, no more than a dozen as I recall. Bert Lennard (son of the owner) was supposed to be the maintenance man in the sewing room but the girls got so they could maintain their own. You know, you've been there long enough and you knew everything that was wrong with the machines. He was quite a fellow in his day, Bert. Rough and ready. Jack, his brother, was a gentleman. I never seemed to get along with Bert too well. If we wanted a needle we had to ask him for it. He'd say,

what are you doing with them, taking them home? So we got smart, we'd go in at noontime and get our own when he wasn't there. And he'd sharpen our scissors for us. You had to have your scissors sharp. That's why I've got that kink on that finger. See that? That's from holding scissors all the time. When you put it through the machine you had to cut the threads off, you see. So you were working with this hand and a pair of scissors in this other hand, constantly. That's why you got bumps on your fingers.

I worked from the time I was fourteen. I started at Coats Thread Mill in Paisley. We came out in 1927. I was only sixteen. The family settled first in Toronto. I worked for the T. Eaton Company there. I was in wrapping. You didn't wait on customers or anything. I started at \$8.00 a week. That was tremendous money then, you know. I stayed there 'til 1930.¹⁴

Anne Mackness, a married woman with a child of seven and a husband unable to find steady work, was forced to accept working conditions in the depths of the depression years far worse than she had experienced a decade earlier. The depression was an important factor drawing her back into paid employment. Anne worked for two and a half years on the assembly line at White Radio in Hamilton. After a period in which her output and that of her co-workers on the line were monitored carefully, she was laid off. Such treatment was a shock, but because she was able to find other employment soon afterwards it did not seem so devastating in later years. "At the time it was a slap in the face. But you know, they say when one door closes another opens and that was true. Things began to pick up and they were okay."

I was going up to market this day and I saw a sign in the door of this place (White Radio), Help Wanted. I had been told this

place was not hiring married women. I wore gloves so he wouldn't see my wedding ring. When I went in I told him I was anxious to get something. He said, well, what can you do? What do you know about mica? Not a thing, I said, but I'm not so dumb that I couldn't learn. Well, he said, what I'm after is a supervisor. And I said, well, I might fit in there too. I had had twelve years experience at the Bell Telephone. I was really desperate so I said to him, well now, would you give me a chance? I'm willing to bargain with you. If you let me try this job and I'm so dumb that I can't catch on to it, you don't owe me anything. But if I am satisfactory, why, I would expect the job. Seven dollars is what we got. (At the Bell, as a supervisor, she recalled making \$25.00 a week during the 1920s.)¹⁵

May Hoyle worked as a stenographer at Eaton's in Hamilton for "nine years and six days to be exact." Although the Royal Commission on Price Spreads investigated Eaton's thoroughly there were no attempts to gather evidence from women workers who worked in sales or in clerical departments specifically. The women called before the Royal Commission in 1934 all worked in the clothing factory in Toronto. In the final Report of the Royal Commission there was evidence which corroborated May's recollections of the cutbacks at the Eaton's store in Hamilton. Between 1930 and 1932 Eaton's sustained operating losses in a number of their stores and factories. The first indication of an operating loss in the Hamilton store was in 1933 and a larger deficit was chalked up the following year. It was likely that these losses led to the layoffs of the other stenographers and the reduction of her wage, which she noted.¹⁶ There is further evidence in the Report of the pressure under which department managers operated.¹⁷ These were the people for whom May worked directly. The evidence confirms her recollections regarding the pressured atmosphere of her work. On the whole,

May enjoyed her work and regretted having to quit when she married. She spoke fondly of her summers at the Eaton's camp where she made friends and enjoyed the sports and meals. She had no direct experience of the harsher conditions under which Eaton's women garment workers suffered. Eaton's was the first permanent job that May held; for approximately six months before obtaining her job at Eaton's in February 1929, she had worked at a number of placements found for her by the Canadian Business College in Hamilton.

They kept me. The depression started at the end of that year and I was lucky to get in beforehand. I was hired as an assistant stenographer at \$12.00 a week. I was working just with one stenographer and later with five or six girls. In 1932 or '33 they cut us down and I was the only girl working for the managers of the departments in the basement, main and second floors. We didn't do invoices. The general office on the sixth floor did those. I took dictation, typed letters, went to get them signed, ordered stock whenever they needed; you never got a coffee break, you just ran. I'm telling you, you just ran ragged. Course we didn't expect it. We worked from twenty to nine to twenty to six with an hour for lunch. You had to work two years to get one week's holidays. Three years to get two. I went to the Eaton's girls' camp, it cost \$5.00 a week for Eaton's employees. I really enjoyed it. It was all girls of course. The woman in charge walked us over and walked us back from the lake, imagine, people who were out working. There was swimming, golf, horseback riding, and very good meals. I corresponded for years with a woman I met there.

As the depression got worse they gradually weeded people out that they felt weren't pulling their weight. I was just fortunate to be one of the ones who made it. As I said, I

started at \$12.00. Later, wages went up to \$14.00 and then they started to cut again down to \$12.00. Nobody thought anything about it, we were all in the same boat.

The odd time they'd drag us out of the office to help, to work as salesgirls. I didn't like that at all. I said to another woman, gee, I didn't come here to work as a salesgirl. I came here to work in the office. Don't let them hear you say that, she said. They'll let you go and get someone else. So I never said it out loud again. But I thought it, I tell you, to myself. I didn't know the prices, and I just loved the typewriter. Salesgirls had to wear black or dark brown, no colour or jewelry to speak of.

I left Eaton's in 1938; I worked there nine years and six days to be exact. I really enjoyed being a stenographer. I loved it. I really hated to leave work but in those days you just didn't work once you were married. It was the war changed all that. I went with my husband for eight years before we were married, because those were depression days. He was working but his father wasn't. For quite awhile he was on relief.¹⁸

Ruby Stephens' first job, a part-time position as a salesgirl, was in the linens department of Eaton's in Hamilton. It wasn't work she liked, but she took it in the spirit of other young women whose working lives began in the depression period, "you worked at what you could get." The war opened up opportunities in manufacturing for Ruby Stephens that were not available earlier. Although most of the positions made available to women at Wallace Barnes proved temporary, Ruby's career there was continuous from 1941 until her retirement in 1973.

My first job was at Eaton's. I worked part-time in the linens department. I didn't like dealing with the public one bit. But you worked at what you could get. My brother

was working at Wallace Barnes. He got me in in 1941. I was 18 at the time. My first day I did it all wrong. I was setting out springs. It's done by machine and you have to turn the ends a certain way or they wouldn't compress. You measured it before, then you banged it down. If it took a set it would come down below a certain line. Otherwise you had to repair it. All this was done by leg work. We sat on stools. Our machines were electric. You put the coil on and then you kicked the pedal and if you didn't take your hand back, this guard—it would move every time you put your foot down—would whack, just whack your hand and knock you for a loop. But that's better than having it off. Boy, you learned to take your hand off. 1000 coils an hour was the standard. This was hard to keep up with. As time went by they could see that we just weren't meeting it. You worked. You could make your standard and have leisure time, or if you wanted to make money which we were there for you worked like heck.

I would say there was two hundred workers there when I started but they were just hiring like mad. There were fifteen hundred in no time at all. After the war they laid them all off. Whether I proved myself I don't know. (Ruby continued to work there until 1973). They just found out by working through the war that the women could do the men's jobs. I worked in the noisiest department, terrible, the "pounding department" we called it. We started at thirty-three cents an hour, I think. Wages went up during the war but I can't remember just when and how much they did.

The place was like a family and yet we got our work out. I don't recall overtime during the war. The men may have worked overtime. The place—a guy would whistle a tune and before you knew it we were all singing. Rosie the Riveter, all those songs.

The crazy ones we really liked. We were afraid of the foreman, we were, but I must say he was fair. When I got into the production department and I had to go out and tell him what to do I used to ride him about how miserable he was with us during the war. You could more or less kibbitz with him then when you were in a stronger position. But really, it was just like a family. There was nothing wrong with having a bit of recreation, that's how we worked. We were a great team.¹⁹

Vida Richard lived and worked in Saskatchewan during the depression years. She remembered the period as a "rough" one, when employers "used to tell you, if you can't do this for this price, we'll get someone who can. They were quite right. There was always someone willing to work for ten cents an hour less, no matter what you were getting." Vida expressed the strongest feelings of any of the women interviewed about the discrimination she faced as a woman, and of those interviewed, worked at the least satisfying and most poorly paid jobs during that period. Her bitterness changed to enthusiasm when she spoke of her experience as a war worker in Hamilton. The opportunity to work as a machinist at Westinghouse, although a temporary one, was a high point in her life. The broader opportunities of the war years which Vida, Flora and Ruby emphasized illustrate perhaps best of all how narrow and meagre their options had been during the depression.

I was about 18 or 19 when the depression came. I was trying to get my first job. Things were sure rough. Sometimes I used to clean a woman's house once a week, for my room. I would babysit for her, twenty-five cents a night. Then I got a job as a cashier in the evening in a little cafe, two nights a week, twenty-five cents an hour. I got steady work for awhile in a restaurant. There was no way of walking in unless you knew someone or were someone's child

who had influence. During the depression they used to tell you, if you can't do this for this price, we'll get someone who can.

When I went to get a job at 16 and I was told by some smart-aleck man, and not just one but many—why don't you get a man and get married?—I didn't say the things I would have said today. It wasn't just that he was belittling me, he didn't even know he was belittling me. You don't mind if you're not smart enough or strong enough or your work record isn't good enough. But if it's just because you're a woman, you mind.

In 1942 I read a newspaper ad which said that technical education for women who wanted to take war work up was being offered. My personal life was such that I felt I would need a steady job after the war. I had two boys to help support. I took a course at the technical school in Saskatoon, a three month course, in machine shop. Those of us who passed, they had men come out to talk to us and offer us jobs. I was thirty-two at the time. I left my two boys, eight and twelve, in a convent residential school 'til the end of that school year and came down to Hamilton to work at Westinghouse. I had really good marks on the lathe at the school but by some great magic I ended up working on a shaper at first and then on a milling machine that I'd never seen before. The girl I was put on with to learn the machine wouldn't talk to me or teach me. She said, we're so hurt that you're getting thirty-five cents an hour and everyone in Hamilton starts at twenty-five. I said, well, I wouldn't have undertaken that long tiresome trip and left my kids behind for anything less. That was the very least and sometimes I thought that that was very meagre. There were wage and price controls then. The upper limit was \$1.29 an hour. That was the top. Before I left I

was making that. Men, they got ten cents an hour more than we did because they were men.

I love machinery and it was surprising to me to see what you really could do with a good machine if you were careful and treated it nicely. I remember one machine. We profiled steel, you know, silhouetted steel by hand. Oh man, that was really a machine. It was really lovely to have those machines. Most of the women enjoyed it thoroughly. It was a nice change from cleaning and so on at home. Here we just cleaned our machines and that was it. Three or four of the younger girls told me how much they liked it because, they said, this is more something to do. You really think you've done something when you finish the day. And you had. It was creative.²⁰

Experiences and attitudes similar to those described in the interviews with Hamilton working women during the depression have been noted by researchers who have analyzed the recollections of women workers in other localities. Gail Cuthbert Brandt's research on female cotton workers in Quebec led her to conclude that the need to contribute to the family's economy was a primary motivating factor, that they did not express a strong sense of having been exploited, and that they placed a high value on having time to be sociable with co-workers and on maintaining a reasonable rate of production.²¹ Tamara Hareven's interviews with women workers in Manchester, New Hampshire (many of whom were French Canadians) revealed that these women shared many of the same values and attitudes towards paid employment as the Hamilton women a generation later: pride in their work, interest in machinery, eagerness for training and education, and realism about obstacles that limited their advancement. They too valued opportunities for sociability and work at a steady rather than a pressured pace.²²

Few women workers recorded in any detail their experiences as workers during the depression. The records that exist and the recollections of women years later give us glimpses rather than a clear overview of those sectors of economic life that did not grind to a halt during the crisis. We know, of course, that working women of the depression era had to accept work in traditional occupations open to women, low wages (and often cuts in pay) and few opportunities to learn new skills. Arbitrary firings, long hours and intensification of work were noted by the Hamilton women as well as in sources like the Royal Commission on Price Spreads and the Royal Commission on Textiles. Efforts to unionize and strikes to protest deteriorating conditions did occur, but infrequently. Employers took swift and drastic action to defeat those who challenged them in these ways. Eaton's, for instance, fired thirty-eight women, some of whom had worked more than twenty years for the company, when they opposed the intensification of their workloads. A similar fate befell women workers at two garment factories in Victoriaville, Quebec when they participated in strikes over long hours and low pay.²³ Women workers in Hamilton and elsewhere seem to have endured the grimmer aspects of their work lives, but did not engage in a great deal of self-pity. They took pride in being productive, enjoyed work in the company of others, a benefit which paid employment offered over the isolation, drudgery and boredom of housework they knew to be the lot of other women in their families, and kept alive the hope that wider opportunities would reward their efforts in time. The fact that most of the women were relatively young during the period under discussion may have influenced their outlooks somewhat, but the evidence suggests that paid labour, no matter how difficult or how badly paid, was a positive feature of their life cycles.

NOTES

1. Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years 1929-1939* (Toronto, 1973), p. 274.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Academic histories give some attention to the situation of women but it is limited. For instance, Michiel Horn, ed., *The Dirty Thirties* (Toronto 1972) contains two sections in which women speak of their experiences: letters from eleven women to Prime Minister Bennett, and sections from the testimony of women before the Royal Commission on Price Spreads. Comments about women include a poem by F.R. Scott about the long hours that shop girls worked during the Christmas rush, a survey of average incomes for men and women workers produced by the League for Social Reconstruction and a letter from a man arguing that women should be prevented by law from working and taking jobs away from men. L.M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, eds. *The Wretched of Canada* (Toronto, 1971) contains 168 letters addressed to Prime Minister Bennett, of which 70 were from women. Sixty of these were from mothers, mostly farm wives, burdened by the fear of losing their homes, worried about ill health or about how to feed and clothe their children. All the essays and memoirs in Victor Hoar, ed. *The Great Depression* (Toronto, 1969) are by men.
3. Doris French Shackleton, *Tommy Douglas* (Toronto, 1975), p. 98.
4. L.M. Grayson and Michael Bliss, eds., *The Wretched of Canada* (Toronto, 1971); James H. Gray, *The Winter Years: The Depression on the Prairies* (Toronto, 1973); Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years 1929-1939* (Toronto, 1973); Evelyn Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties in Quebec* (Montreal, 1975); Michiel Horn, ed., *The Dirty Thirties* (Toronto, 1972); H. Blair Neatby, *The Politics of Chaos: Canada in the Thirties* (Toronto, 1972); Ramsay Cook, Craig Brown, Carl Berger, eds., *Politics of Discontent* (Toronto, 1967).
5. Nine interviews were conducted in cooperation with the Labour Studies Program at McMaster University during the period June 1979 to March 1980. Photographs and interviews were being sought for a pictorial history of Hamilton workers then in preparation. The nine women volunteered as part of that larger project. The interviews were on average an hour in length. Tapes and transcripts are in the collection of the Labour Studies Program at McMaster. The staff at the Labour Studies Program were of great assistance and Wayne Roberts, in particular, offered many suggestions and criticisms of the first draft of this research paper.
6. Primary sources include: *Evidence and Minutes of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads* (Ottawa, 1935); F.R. Scott and H.M. Cassidy, *Labour Conditions in the Men's Clothing Industry* (a brief submitted to the Royal Commission on Price Spreads, later published separately); *Report of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads* (Ottawa, 1935); *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Textiles* (Ottawa, 1938); 1931 Census; 1941 Census; *Labour Gazette* (1929-1945 monthly summaries of strikes and lockouts). Secondary sources include: Janice Acton, et al., eds., *Women at Work* (Toronto, 1974); Irving Abella and David Millar, eds., *The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, 1978); Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "'Weaving it Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experiences of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec 1910-1950," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981); Marjorie Cohen, "Women at work in Canada during the Depression," paper presented to the Blue Collar Workers Conference, University of Windsor, May, 1979; Sara Diamond, "You can't scare me. I'm sticking to the Union. Union Women in B.C. during the Great Depression," *Kinesis*, June, 1979; Evelyn Dumas, *The Bitter Thirties in Quebec* (Montreal, 1975); Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City* (New York, 1978); Marie Lavigne and Jennifer Stoddart, "Les travailleuses Montrealesaises entre les deux guerres," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1977; Ruth Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the recruitment of women into the labour force in World War II," *The Neglected Majority* (Toronto, 1977); Louise Watson, *She Never was Afraid* (Toronto, 1976).
7. Women workers at Eaton's in Toronto called as witnesses before the Royal Commission on Price Spreads in 1934 were cross-examined by a panel of commissioners primarily interested in uncovering abuses and practices which might be illegal. The information supplied by the women, with few exceptions, was conveyed in short sentences in response to specific questions. Ex-employees were franker than those still in the employ of Eaton's. The presence of Mr. Kellogg, counsel for Eaton's, who aggressively cross-examined the witnesses, may explain in part the greater cautiousness of the Eaton's women. In the case of the Quebec women workers called as witnesses, questions and answers were filtered through an interpreter, making their responses on average even shorter. Several of these women were questioned solely on their experience of working longer hours than their time cards recorded.
8. Interview with Flora Livingstone, Ancaster, January, 1980.
9. *Labour Gazette*, December, 1931, 1313.
10. *Ibid.*, August, 1932, September, 1933, July, 1934.
11. Interview with Anne Sebastian, Hamilton, January 1980.
12. Interview with Grace Gravino, Hamilton, March 1980.
13. Interview with Linda Murray, Hamilton, February 1980.
14. Interview with Jean Wilson, Hamilton, June 1979.
15. Interview with Anne Mackness, Hamilton, January 1980.
16. *Report of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads*, pp. 487-88.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9.
18. Interview with May Hoyle, Hamilton, February 1980.
19. Interview with Ruby Stephens, Hamilton, February 1980.
20. Interview with Vida Richard, Hamilton, December 1979.
21. Brandt, "'Weaving it Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec 1910-1950," *op. cit.*
22. Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City*.
23. *Evidence and Minutes of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads* (Ottawa, 1935).