

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Women's Work in Whitney Pier

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There were relatively few women in the first years of Whitney Pier. In fact, females (including children) made up less than one quarter of the population at the turn of the 20th century, most being wives and daughters of farmers, fishermen, or skilled craftsmen hired to build the plant. As the decade progressed the relative imbalance of women became even more pronounced as thousands of labourers joined the steel plant work force.

In those early years, catering to the steel plant's work force was the most prominent source of income for women. Almost every household had single male boarders, the work in this "cash crop" being carried out by the female relatives of the owner of the house. Single women also ran boarding houses or "hotels." In 1901, three young women of Scottish descent from rural Cape Breton operated a boarding house on the Shore Road for men from Poland, the USA, Newfoundland and rural Cape Breton. They employed a female live-in domestic, also of Scottish descent and from rural Cape Breton. Other women ran the popular "corner stores" in their homes, selling food and other essential items to workers. They also provided sewing and laundry services. Jewish women took charge of family businesses – usually dry goods and groceries – while their husbands and fathers were out peddling in the countryside.

Women's work opportunities outside the home were limited in the boom period of Sydney's steel industry. The census of 1901 shows that a few women did dressmaking and clerical jobs like bookkeeping. One Whitney Pier woman worked as a telephone operator, another as a teacher. The most common "outside" work for women was domestic service. Indeed, as early as 1909, the demand for domestics in Canada made the entry of West Indian Black immigrant women possible in the face of strict policies against Black immigration. Because of the availability of such jobs in Sydney, West Indian Black women were the first immigrant group to comprise a large number of women in Whitney Pier.

Women began to arrive in Whitney Pier in large numbers after World War I, wives and children coming to be reunited with fathers and husbands. It is the arrival of women and children and their subsequent settlement as families that marks the establishment of Whitney Pier as a "community." The trend continued throughout

the 1920s and 1930s, and again after World War II. Sometimes the new arrivals were barely remembered by the men who had come earlier. Many dreams were crushed.

A rare period of work equality occurred during the Second World War when many Whitney Pier women worked at the Steel Plant. They worked at a variety of jobs from the coke ovens to the bar mill; from crane operation to the machine shop, but they found that they were subject to the same ethnic stratification that applied to the men. When the war was over, those well-paying jobs were taken back by the men returning from the war.

Some young women, faced with the harsh economic realities of the homelands, immigrated as "adventurers," following brothers or cousins, usually to do housework, but in the hope of finding a husband. Others were betrothed to men they had never met. More than one Whitney Pier woman can tell of doing farm work or "in-service," to earn money for passage and to build up a "dowry" of clothes and linens, all in anticipation of marriage to a young man known only by a photo sent in the mail. On the long sea voyage to Halifax, such a woman might meet other young women from all over the world with the same plans. The last part of the journey, the train ride to Sydney, must have been lonesome and filled with doubts, until she was finally delivered to the house of friends from the homeland where she would meet her future husband.

As families became the norm, single women had a particularly difficult time, both socially and in terms of work. One elderly woman, a widow, worked as the janitor at Eastmount School for many years, living in the "attic" with no running water. Her job was to sweep, dust and keep the coal fires going. With extremely limited social services, the single woman with children had to seek out whatever resources she could, the orphanage being the alternative. When the wife of a Jewish merchant was widowed as a young woman, she took in sewing to enable her to support and educate her three daughters. A French-speaking widow from Newfoundland did housework in other peoples' homes in an effort to keep her children with her. In many tragic cases, the single mother was not able to keep her children with her again. As in other male-dominated Canadian industrial towns, some women were forced to turn to prostitution or to operate "bootlegging" establishments. Older residents can still point out the houses of these activities, but there is now a clearer understanding of society's role in the Pier's dark side of survival.

Gradually, as education for women became more widespread, they began to replace men as cashiers and clerks, and they became teachers and nurses, x-ray and lab technicians, and secretaries. The inspiration for these advances came from a variety of sources: the Social Gospel work of Deaconesses of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches who taught English and good health practices; the public health work of the legendary VON Mable Dubbin who delivered thousands of Pier babies; the social work of the sisters of St. Martha and the women of the Salvation Army whose sympathetic interest in family problems saved many from destitution; and the secular and religious teachers of Whitney Pier, almost entirely women until 1960. The legacy

of self reliance and hard work is evidenced every day by the many women in business in Whitney Pier.

Throughout the history of Whitney Pier, women contributed to the family income by using their traditional and business skills; but they were also responsible for managing household finances, for the health of the family, and for the million and one other tasks that keep a family going. The work of women in the home went beyond the care of the family's immediate material needs. Women have preserved the ethnic traditions that remain such an integral part of Whitney Pier's identity. They have maintained this heritage through foodways, the making of clothing for ceremonial occasions, and the maintenance of religious rituals in the home and the ethnic community.

The participation of Whitney Pier women in voluntary work has gone on since the beginnings of the community, but in recent years women are being openly recognized for that contribution. The churches and the synagogue of Whitney Pier have benefited greatly from their fundraising activities, their talent in the performing arts, and their intellectual abilities in drawing together the histories of communities. Benevolent societies, the various altar societies and women's auxiliaries are examples of the many women's organizations in Whitney Pier. Today we see that Pier women have gone beyond local leadership roles to take part in regional and national organizations in religious, professional, ethnic, and educational capacities.

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