

Between Doorstep Barter Economy and Industrial Wages: Mobility and Adaptability of Coast Salish Female Laborers in Coastal British Columbia 1858-1890

Carol Williams
University of Lethbridge

This essay examines the diversity and ingenuity of Coast Salish women on the Pacific Northwest, as they operated both in and outside labor systems introduced by Euro-Americans. Women's seasonal work was dually constituted as they labored for wages in resource-based Euro-American industries such as fish canneries and agricultural farming operations, but also more informally as they sold or bartered goods door to door or at streetside. This latter form of women's labor is of particular historical significance as it is symbolic of women's independence and initiative as they, driven by the need to support the survival of families, generated a successful "doorstep" entrepreneurial economy. The products women developed as marketable goods included handmade products such as baskets and knitting, as well as foodstuffs such as fish, clams, and berries, gathered by them at traditional harvesting sites. This combination of functional and edible provisions marketed by coastal women was crucial to the well-being and longevity of the Euro-American settlers in urban settlements such as Victoria, Vancouver, and Nanaimo, and this is demonstrated by the frequent comments on the value of these goods made by settler women in diaries and letters.¹ And yet, the discussion of coastal women's essential contribution to the colonial economy barely figures in histories that document Euro-American colonialism. Aboriginal women of all tribal affiliations on the coast generally appear as shadowy, anonymous figures rather than economic actors or entrepreneurs worthy of historical commentary. This essay seeks to reverse this historical neglect by showing that the informal doorstep economy of coastal women contributed substantially to the survival of their families and those of colonial settlers.

The evidence of the determination and adaptability of these laboring and entrepreneurial women may be derived from alternative rather than conventional sources. This essay makes use of historical photographs, anthropological life histories, newspaper clippings, and oral histories as recounted in documentary film. One particularly valuable source is the life history of Rose Sparrow gathered by anthropologist Leona Sparrow in 1975, when Rose was seventy-four years old. Sparrow's memories date back to early twentieth century and fruitfully illuminate the critical role of women's labor, including that of her mother and grandmother, in the day to day survival of families. Rose Sparrow (nee George) was a Coast Salish resident of Kwaw-kwah-a-pilt ((Koh kw'aplat) near Sardis in the Fraser Valley (west of Vancouver, British Columbia—Canada's westerly

¹ My primary sources include unpublished manuscripts, diaries, letters written by settler, missionary, and travelling women, as well as taped interviews of women who resided in coastal villages or in Victoria around the turn of the century. These interviews, the Imbert Orchard Collection (BCARS), were conducted and transcribed in the 1960s or 1970s.

most province on the Pacific Ocean).² As Devon Mihesuah and Angela Cavendar Wilson have forcefully argued in *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians*, oral histories are a much needed and necessary approach to the revision of Native American history, and women's voices are especially necessary if we endeavor towards demonstrating women's economic agency. As Mihesuah emphasized, "If writers want to find out about what Indian women think, they should ask Indian women."³

Two contemporary films based on oral history interviews with individual women speaking about their lives, their economic survival and their entrepreneurialism garner a sense of the extent of women's initiatives. Métis filmmaker Christine Welsh's *The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters* (NFB/Prairie Girl films Inc, 2000) shows how the knitting of sweaters, toques, and socks became an essential source of economic independence for Coast Salish families at Duncan on Vancouver Island. *The Hands of History*, directed by Cree/Métis/Iroquois filmmaker Loretta Todd (Studio D, NFB, 1994) which profiles four contemporary women artists working in Western Canada, includes observations on the importance of basket production for the family economy made by Sto:lo Coast Salish basket maker and cultural activist Rena Point Bolton. Point Bolton, like many other tribal women, exhibits forceful commitment to the revival of traditional methods of Salish and Tsimshian basket making. In the film she recollects how the sale of women's basketry often was the sole vehicle for putting food on the family table, and how women basket makers assumed responsibility for the aggressive marketing of their wares by selling on urban street corners. Although remorse was expressed when baskets were transformed into commodities by their sale in the market place, individual producers of the baskets recognized that the sale of these goods was absolutely crucial to the health and welfare of their families. As Rose Point Bolton observed, the marketing of the baskets was often conducted as family groups transited through large urban centers enroute to seasonal wage labor in the coastal canneries, or the fruit and hop farms of interior Washington and British Columbia along the national borders.

In the circumstances described by the two films, traditional skills were revived in the process of developing and marketing these goods for the Euro-American urban consumer. Familiarity with the practicality of wool, basic to all knitted products, grew out of the traditional weaving of blankets used for ritual and potlatch, whereas baskets, conventionally functional as part of everyday life of food gathering, storage, and preparation, were miniaturized or made decorative for the street market. Thus women's entrepreneurialism of the contemporary era had unexpected positive effects in reviving and sustaining traditional women's skills and knowledge. Knitting and basketry were reliant on the continuity of women's traditional roles across the centuries.

² Rose Sparrow was originally from reserve # 7 in Coast Salish Sto:lo territory of the Fraser Valley (often listed as Skwala or Sui-a-ala also Squihala).

³ Mihesuah and Cavender, *Natives and Academics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 47.

Looking Back—Women's Early Entrepreneurialism

Prior to 1830, the Pacific economy was dominated by the maritime fur trade (which peaked between 1792-1812), conducted by individual men and women of diverse Aboriginal tribes who interacted with the male operatives of British, Spanish, and American trading companies.⁴ Between 1825 and 1830, the Hudson's Bay Company established permanent fur trading posts along the coast, wherein Aboriginal men and women secured labor as traders, guides, packers, and interpreters. At trading posts coastal and interior, women cohabited with traders and then, alongside their mixed-race offspring, as Cooper noted of northern women and children of the Nisga and Tsimshian, became a valuable substrata of workers in the maintenance of the fort gardens and kitchens.⁵ They also tended to the domestic care and comfort of the traders. As Sylvia Van Kirk and Jennifer Brown's work has decisively argued, Euro-American men gained distinct advantages in trade and commerce by virtue of intimacy and family attachments made with these women. The marriage of Annie Hunt, the daughter of Scottish HBC trader Robert Hunt and Tlingit trader Mary Ebert, to American-born photographer Stephen Spencer who resettled in Alert Bay, to start a cannery exemplifies how one newcomer in the later settlement era achieved rapid economic and social success through his association of marriage.

The discovery of gold in 1858 heralded not only the advent of aggressive settlement in this region, but also a decline in mutually productive relations between Aboriginal residents and Euro-American traders. Gold brought mass in-migration of bachelor men, with 6,000 being one of the lower estimations of this population growth. Day laborers, ranchers, urban-based merchant suppliers, mine and cannery entrepreneurs, and others eager to provision and make their fortunes off the gold seekers also arrived. With this boom in the Euro-American population, the power and status of Aboriginal men and women traders was diminished along with the waning need for their trade associated services.

The arrival of Euro-American women as wives, daughters, and laborers, which followed the precipitous influx of miners and entrepreneurs further eroded the status and authority of coastal Aboriginal women.⁶ By the 1860s, a public call for British women

⁴ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations 1774-1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986). For women's role in the trade see Loraine Littlefield, *Women Traders in the Maritime Fur Trade in Native People Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Métis* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987), 173-185 and Sylvia Van Kirk, "'Women in Between': Indian Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada" in *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* (1977):31-46.

⁵ Carol Cooper, "Native Women of the Northern Pacific Coast: An Historical Perspective," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1992/93): 56.

⁶ On organized sponsorship of female immigration see Barbara Roberts, "Ladies, Women and the State: Managing Female Immigration, 1880-1920," in *Community Organization and the Canadian State*, ed. Roxana Ng and Gillian Walker (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1990), 108-130.

and girls as preferable mates for settlers and miners was dispatched. Henceforth, the moral discourse around social relations became explicitly gendered and raced. Cohabitation or marital alliances with Aboriginal women were increasingly disparaged.⁷ Euro-American female settlers directed the moral climate of frontier British Columbia, injecting the vocabulary of racial and national purity into daily intercourse. Emigration societies, although minimally effective, sponsored the shipment of destitute and working-class British girls to the colony with aspirations towards a “family centred existence,” which, it was espoused, could serve as the “nucleus of Anglican and English society.”⁸ Two societies, The Columbia Emigration Society and the London Female Middle-Class Emigration Society funded “brideships” to import marriageable British women between the ages of twelve and fifteen to Vancouver Island. The first group sailed on April 17, 1862, while the second group, of predominantly working-class women, arrived on the *S.S. Tynemouth* at Esquimalt near Victoria on September 17, 1862. These initiatives stimulated an increased acceptance of race segregation between settlers and Aboriginal residents.

Northern women—Haida, Tsimshian, Nisga’a and Kwakw’wakw—were especially burdened by the moral panic construed around the supposed danger of interracial gender relations. In this climate, women’s conspicuous participation in trade of all kinds, particularly the sale of sexual services to bachelor miners, made them morally suspect in the modern imagination of the Euro-American settlers. The mobility and economic independence of these women challenged Euro-American assumptions of feminine virtue and passivity. It becomes evident that what constituted normal or appropriate female behavior was part of contentious debate among citizenry and governing officials well beyond 1880. Israel Powell, the first regional Superintendent of Indian Affairs, held Haida women responsible for the continuing trade in prostitution, which, he determined, accounted for the decline in northern populations. In consultation with Haida men at Skidegate on the Queen Charlotte Islands, Powell recommended, “Some regulation would be enforced, compelling their women to return home and preventing these destructive pilgrimages in future.”⁹ The appetite of the Euro-American traders and miners buying the sexual services from these women was rarely condemned or if criticized, easily forgiven.

⁷ Jackie Lay, “The Columbia on the Tynemouth: The Emigration of Single Women and Girls in 1862,” in *In Her Own Right*, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), 19-41. Letters of Edmund Hope Verney dated August 7th, September 14th and the 20th, 1862 refer to the reception of the women on the Tynemouth, *Vancouver Island Letters of Edmund Hope Verney 1862-65*, ed. Allan Pritchard (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 78-80, 88-91.

⁸ The Church of England, with the assistance of wealthy London patroness Angela Burdett-Coutts and in cooperation with Victoria’s Anglican Bishop George Hills, founded the Columbia Mission Society, Lay, *ibid.*, 21-23.

⁹ Israel Powell, *Report to the Department of Indian Affairs* (1879): 128. Israel W. Powell was appointed the first Provincial Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1872 and reigned until 1890. Inspections were made in naval gun vessels along the coast in 1873 (*HMS Boxer*), 1879 (*HMS Boxer*), and 1881 (*HMS Rocket*). Reports on all of these trips were filed to Ottawa.

The overall effects of the debate were significant for coastal women: race segregation became the social norm; Euro-American women, irrespective of class, were represented as morally superior for the role of wife and mother; and coastal Aboriginal women were subjected to scrutiny and regulation in order to restrict their mobility. These ideologies were entrenched in public policy of the Indian Act which sought to assimilate Aboriginal women into the model of bourgeois femininity. Moreover, as discussed elsewhere, Aboriginal women were consistently perceived as maternally inadequate and in need of moral guidance.¹⁰

The Adaptation to Seasonal Industrialism

Capitalist business interests, however, needed workers and they did not restrict women from the realm of industrialism. Seasonal labor drew entire families into a wage economy, with men, women, and children recruited as laborers in the Euro-American fish, mineral, and timber industries after 1879. Aboriginal women and men were the most available work force for Euro-American industries. Moreover, many possessed valuable regional knowledge of fish stocks.

It is significant that women and children were a substantive component of the early development of what became the basis of wealth for many Euro-American settlers. Kin and clan-related groups, including young children and pregnant women, migrated great distances along the waterways for seasonal opportunities in canneries on the Fraser, Skeena, and Nass rivers, and in southern cities and farms along the US/Canada border.¹¹

As a child Rose Sparrow recalled being tended by her great-grandfather “on the canoe to set net to catch salmon. I used to go along,... he used to have a little place for me in the bow in the canoe and I’d lay there and fall asleep in that canoe. Whatever he did he took me along in this canoe.”¹² Cecilia Joe, of the Coast Salish Esquimalt reserve, similarly recalled how as a child she “accompan[ied] her aunt, cousins and her grandmother to Victoria...by canoe...from Sooke.”¹³ This work relationship extended into

¹⁰ Carol Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹ On women’s roles and wages in the fisheries see Dianne Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada’s Pacific Coast Fisheries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) and Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996). Three videos based on oral histories are also useful: *Native Women: Northern Vancouver Island 1915-1945* (Campbell River: Museum and Archives, 1993); Sara Diamond, *Ten Dollars or Nothing* (Women’s Labour History Project 1989); and *Canneries* (Parker Productions/ Devlin & Insley, 1987). For androcentric assessments of cannery labour see Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: an Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia 1858-1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996), 179-206.

¹² Sparrow, *ibid.*, 87.

married life as the migration to canneries or other seasonal operations routinely became part of relationships with husbands. As Rose Sparrow recollected:

we'd go to [commercial canneries] Westham Island or...Brunswick they call it, way down below Canoe Pass. We used to go that way to fish. We stayed in this cannery shack...he [Ed, her husband] brings the fish in on the weekends. Then I'd cut the fish. Sometimes I'd do a hundred fish in one day--filet them. And we'd smoke some, and salt some, and I'd can some...that's for our winter supply...we'd go help the farmers pick potatoes. If we didn't want cash we'd get potatoes.¹⁴

Cecilia Joe contrastingly remembers that husbands and wives at times necessarily went separate ways to work, as when her husband fished on the Fraser River and she "worked at the cannery in Kildonan."¹⁵ Nor did maternity interrupt a woman's work life. Agnes George gave birth to her son George during hop-picking season down in Washington territory, although she wasn't picking hops that year. She accompanied the rest of the family because, as she stated, "I couldn't stay home. Nobody home. Nearly everybody gone so I had to go too. My mother in-law used to go with me.... you have to go over there, there's no money at home. Have to live."¹⁶

The wages reaped from labor in the these activities were minor but the work was intense. When Cecilia Joe crossed the international border to Puyallup, Washington hopfields with her grandmother and aunts, "they were paid \$1.00 for a 100 pound box and they were lucky if they picked one between them in a day."¹⁷

Informal Doorstep Trade in Food Stuffs and Handmade Goods

Women and their families travelled afar, often criss-crossing the southern international border between the Washington State and British Columbia to seek out work. They walked or canoed from reserves to urban settlements to market their wares.

¹³ "Cecilia Joe Remembers" by Margaret Williams, *The Daily Colonist* (Sunday, September, 1966): 2 and 23. Cecilia Joe was member of the Sooke tribe born in 1890 on Vashon Island in Puget Sound, where her parents had been hop-picking. She was the daughter of Ellen Speusid (whose father was the last of the original Sooke tribe) and Johnny Charles of Sooke. At the time of the article Cecilia Joe was 76 years old, so her memories recall Victoria prior to the turn of the century.

¹⁴ Sparrow, op. cit., 24.

¹⁵ "Cecilia Joe Remembers," *ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ Interview with Agnes George, conducted by Darlene George, in Colwood, August 3, 1978. Agnes George was 100 years old at the time of the interview.

¹⁷ Margaret Williams, "Cecilia Joe Remembers" *The Daily Colonist* (Sunday September 25th, 1966): 2 and 23. At the time of the interview Joe was living on the Esquimalt Reserve with her husband Chief Edward Joe, a hereditary chief of the Esquimalt band.

For instance, in the wealthier Victoria enclave of James Bay, women often peddled their goods from door to door, where they were received by the Chinese male domestics of the colonial elite. Or, they temporarily camped on the beach with canoes freighted "with salmon and crabs [whereupon] the Chinese [who provided domestic services for the wealthy] would come down to [Victoria's] Wharf Street to buy...in no time the Indians were sold out, receiving 25 cents for a large Coho and sometimes 75 cents for a dozen crabs, sometimes as little as 25 cents."¹⁸

Many women diversified their trade in edibles by selling or bartering handmade goods. Agnes George recalled that she learned "to weave baskets and did crochet work for the white women of Sooke. Later she did housework for some of them...."¹⁹ As Sto:lo Basket maker Rena Point Bolton stressed in Todd's film *Hands of History*, women commonly supported families from the entrepreneurial street sale of their labor-intensive handmade baskets. A male elder of the Sooke Reserve similarly observed the occupational diversity, and by extension emphasized the mobility, of his widowed mother: "She provided for her family by working in canneries on the Fraser River, picking hops in the States, sold crab in Victoria in the spring, made straw and cedar baskets, spun wool and made sweaters."²⁰ Utilitarian crafts, like edibles, were marketed by doorstep peddlers or sold in downtown Victoria along Belleville Street. As one settler noted, "They used to bring us most beautiful work—you know their baskets and things. Their Indian work was really wonderful."²¹ George earned income from her baskets but also received reprimands from family members when she spent long and late hours in production of those baskets. Like the shellfish and clam gathering, the production of baskets was labor-intensive and demanded numerous hours in the retrieval of grasses and construction. "I would never sleep. I would make baskets," stated George. "Big baskets for just a dollar sometimes. But, now it's little fellows for five dollars. Lots of work to get them grasses too...we used to go to Clo-oose [on the west coast of Vancouver Island]."²²

¹⁸ "Cecilia Joe Remembers," *ibid.*, 2 and 23.

¹⁹ "Cecilia Joe Remembers," *ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ Edward Matthew George the youngest of Mary George's children was born August 1895. This statement was drawn from an interview conducted circa 1968-1970 by Carrie George who provided me with this typed transcript. Edward George would have been between 73 to 75 at the time of the interview. Mary George lost her husband at sea when the sealing schooner *Walter Earle* went down in February 1895. According to another interview conducted in August 1-2, 1978 by Charlene George, Edward Matthew George was born in Steveston, at the canneries where his mother was working at the time. Cecilia Joe was Edward Matthew George's first cousin. Cecilia Joe and Edward Joe had passed by the time of Edward George Matthew's interview in 1978.

²¹ Ford, *ibid.*, 10.

²² Agnes Grant, interview with Darlene George (August 3, 1978), 2.

Basketry skills taught by mothers or aunts in childhood developed into a source of income in adulthood, as Rose Sparrow reflected:

from age seven, they [we] were taught to gather roots and to make baskets...because we knew when we'd get through making these little baskets we were told to go and sell them. We go sell them...money didn't mean anything to us when we were children...but we used to trade for whatever we thought we needed—clothing and all that for our work...I was taught to dig roots and make baskets from seven years old up. We had to learn all those things as we were growing up to fourteen or fifteen years. Then we knew everything what to do then. To dig your root, make your basket, and work on the farm. We learned all that from childhood. We were taught.²³

Rose Sparrow distinctly remembered being excluded from the moneyed economy to the extent that basic items such as shoes were unavailable to Indian families. And yet the informal barter economy created by women provided another vehicle for the acquisition of necessities:

no we couldn't even afford to buy clothes. She [Rose's guardian] used to get clothing from the white people she was working for.... They used to give it to her, the people she worked for gave her clothing for her and her husband. Anything they didn't like they'd give to her. That's how we were clothed. We couldn't buy it no way. Sometimes I used to wear shoes ten times bigger than my feet. That's how poor the Indians were. Not only us, the whole valley up there get used to clothing from the white people for their children to go to school. They [the mothers] used to make baskets...and trade in for clothes for their children so they'd have clothes to go to school in the day school....²⁴

Household Labor

Another significant source of income for Aboriginal women, and one more morally approved by Euro-Americans for obvious reasons of self interest, was domestic service. The diaries of Eleanor Caroline Fellows (of Victoria)²⁵ and Susan Allison (a wife

²³ Sparrow, *ibid.*, 17-22.

²⁴ Sparrow, *op.cit.*, 91.

²⁵ Eleanor Caroline Fellows referred to women she hired as nurses and domestic servants and to Songhees street peddlers from which goods were purchased. Fellows, a British émigré to Victoria in 1862, was the daughter of British postal reformer Rowland Smythe and wife of merchant Arthur Fellows who lived in Victoria and Esquimalt for a relatively brief period between 1862-1866, Fellows, *An Octogenarian's Reminiscences* (Letchwood: Privately published, 1916) and Kathryn Bridge, *Two Victorian Gentlewomen in the Colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia: Eleanor Hill Fellows and Sarah Lindley Crease* (Masters Thesis, University of Victoria, 1982). For another early perspective on doorstep peddlers see Emily McCorkle Fitzgerald, *An Army Doctor's Wife on the Frontier: Letters from Alaska and the Far West, 1874-78*, ed. Abe Laufé (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962).

of a rancher in the Similkameen valley) offer a perspective on the value of domestic labor of Aboriginal girls, women, and boys.²⁶ Often separated from itinerant husbands or remote from Euro-American neighbors and feeling burdened by the shortage of British working girls, affluent settler women relied on Aboriginal female neighbors for midwifery, child care, and domestic assistance. For example, in 1862 Fellows praised Tu-te-ma, a Nuu-chah-nulth girl who provided casual domestic service as follows:

[Tu-te-ma]...a girl like her parents, had come under the influence of Bishop Demers...and his catholic missionaries...she was as good a girl and as sweet-tempered, capable, industrious as any maid could be. She used to paddle her small canoe across from the village, draw it up, and leave it on the pebbly shore, appearing at our door, punctuality personified.... Lucy was clever at washing the household linen...at cleaning rooms, at doing many odd jobs which made her, very literally, a help.²⁷

This kind of regular day employment may have been less attractive to coastal girls and women, as it meant constant supervision under the mistress's watch and the necessity of being available at all times. Women's inability or disinterest in meeting these demands may have cultivated the appetite for temporary self-motivated entrepreneurial activity. Regular domestic service in settler households was less preferred and therefore expendable. A casual contract, unlike a regular day position, liberated the temporary worker from the continuous supervision, and moral purview, of the employer.²⁸

But this casual labor was indispensable to settler women especially those in remote rural circumstances. Sooke settler Ethel Leather assumed the majority of household tasks associated with the gathering, harvesting, and preservation of food; however, she contracted a local Sooke woman to clean, salt and smoke sixty salmon for the Leather family, a task Leather had neither the skills nor patience to perform herself.²⁹ Rose Sparrow's great grandmother "worked out washing clothes. Every day she'd go work wash clothes for these people. One day she'd be another house, next day she'd be another."³⁰ Allison hired, or bartered, casual domestic labour from local Similkameen

²⁶ *A Pioneer Gentlewoman in British Columbia: the Recollections of Susan Allison*, ed. Margaret A. Ormsby (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1976).

²⁷ Fellows, op.cit., 95.

²⁸ Although Leather reported on the cost of fish purchased from individual peddlers, no mention was made of the remuneration offered for the two days of labour provided by the Sooke woman, who substantially lightened the household burdens of Leather and her sisters.

²⁹ Unpublished diary of Ethel A. Leather who farmed at Sooke-Vancouver Island 1888-1891 (E/C/L48 BCARS), 46.

³⁰ Sparrow, op. cit., 22.

Chuc-chu-ewaa women and children: "the children flocked around and I got lots of help with my housework from them.... On washing day one or two boys would come...these little fellows learned to clean knives, polish stoves, and were a great help and amusement...."³¹ Allison was distant from the urban cash economy paying her laborers in used garments such as stockings, which Allison noted "the (boys) would draw on wet and wear them home triumphantly."³² With the approach of childbirth Allison, who might otherwise have had male relatives or female neighbors for birthing assistance if she lived in the city, sought the healing expertise of Suzanne Cole who administered "whiskey" and "smoothed" her bed in her time of "female emergency."³³ Allison's response to her caregiver was cautious: "Suzanne was very good to me in her way—though I thought her rather unfeeling at the time. She thought that I ought to be as strong as an Indian woman but I was not."³⁴ Allison's appreciation for Suzanne's work and that of her extended family eventually strengthened, especially once Allison realized how dependent she was upon the Cole family for assistance.

Children's Work as Family Work

Allison's comments show that children, as well as women, possessed skills and knowledge of marketable value to settlers and this is also played out in both films. Economic co-operation between children and adults constituted a family, rather than individual, wage. As Sparrow observed above, mothers and grandmothers afforded not only the skills of production but encouraged the marketing of goods: "my great grandmother used to spin and I watched her. She'd teach me how to spin this wool you know and she taught me how to knit socks...we used to knit these socks and sell them in the winter and they'd be cheap but we got our living out of it."³⁵ Interview subjects in Welsh's *The Story of the Coast Salish Knitters* reinforce this assertion; children learned their skills and the market value of knitted sweaters and toques from entrepreneurial mothers, who knitted to put food on the table or to secure other necessities for their families.

The accounts of these women's work and their significance to first the trade and then the settler and industrial economy conclusively explode the longstanding myth of the Aboriginal worker as immoral or lazy, unwilling or unable to adapt to the work ethic of modern industrial capitalism. All the women presented in this essay participated in the seasonal labour force of commercial industry earning profits for the Euro-American economy. They supplemented these periods of short-term, intense labour by marketing skills learnt at a young age: "early training in traditional Aboriginal activities...included

³¹ Allison, op. cit., 27.

³² Allison, *ibid.*, 27.

³³ Allison, *ibid.*, 28.

³⁴ Allison, *ibid.*, 28.

³⁵ Sparrow, *ibid.*, 18.

collecting roots, making baskets and socks to trade or sell.”³⁶ This latter informal trade constituted a significant component of family-provisioning, demonstrating that family welfare was a co-operative effort and a pattern of work distinct from the Euro-American ideal of a single male wage earner as responsible for the family income. By sustaining a “daily and weekly routine” which “revolved around family,” all these women subscribed to “family oriented and life sustaining work which is not particularly related to earning money or accumulating goods and wealth.”³⁷ Balanced between informal and industrial labor and frequently dependent on a barter rather than moneyed system of exchange, the economic agency of coastal women of the northwest diverged from the ideal worker of modern capitalism, but obviously was no less demanding.

Conclusion

Aboriginal women exhibited versatility and adaptability as they sought and performed a wide variety of labour in contact culture. The provision of sexual services to traders and miners, associated with the intimate relations established in the early era of trade was an economic strategy which benefited certain women; however, the involvement with financial gain through prostitution became the grounds on which the mobility and commercial ambitions of women were restrained in public policy.

Economic survival mobilized women’s participation within an informal “doorstep” economy which provided handmade utilitarian goods and temporary domestic services. These services catered to an emergent market of affluent Euro-American female householders, who experienced a shortage of non-Aboriginal servants to perform such tasks. Within an industrial economy Aboriginal women and children performed tasks in the salmon and clam canneries, at hop fields, at fruit and vegetable farms and processing plants. The wages from this industrial labour contributed to a family, rather than individual, wage. Moreover, another aspect of their earning power came when they responded to the rising demand of tourists and travellers for “curios,” and they accommodated this demand by producing products for this new market. Lastly, within their own families, women provided primary care in addition to passing on marketable skills to children. As a result of women’s involvement with itinerant, seasonally-driven labor, small children necessarily travelled with them or else with male family members, and entire families resided in temporary camps and rental cabins adjacent to the industrial workplace.³⁸ Husbands and wives were often separated to assume gender-distinct roles in the industrial workplace, and children, as well as pregnant women, were incorporated into the stratified industrial workplace.

With frequent absences from rural villages or reservations, subsistence and gathering activities became intermittent. Yet, despite heightened mobility and the

³⁶ Sparrow, *ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ Sparrow, *ibid.*, 26.

³⁸ Sparrow, *ibid.*, 73 and 97.

adaptation to introduced systems of industrial labour, money, and manufactured goods, women never entirely abandoned the patterns of customary subsistence or gathering and barter. The cultivation of the Euro-American female consumer, whether tourist or householder, for products sold on the doorstep enhanced the survival of this behaviour. Moreover informal or casual activity afforded the continuity of women's self-sufficiency, financial independence, and control harmonizing with earlier pre-contact roles. As entrepreneurs, women's daily work schedules were self-determined; the skills and energy of children could help family survival; and these activities sustained the use of customary gathering sites for grasses, berries, and shellfish in the face of modernization. Women, as a consequence, secured a greater distance from the culture and regime of industrial labour introduced by modern capitalism after 1870, and selectively participated in the new economy on the basis of family needs and responsibilities. Significantly, as Sarah Carter has observed of women on Prairie reserves, "it was the more traditional work of women in diversifying the economic base of the community that saw the people through these lean years."³⁹ From the earliest times of contact, the ability of women to adapt, perhaps more effectively than men, to introduced economic change was impressive as they combined self-provisioning informal labor with occasional seasonal wage labor. Women's laboring versatility across two culturally divergent economies guaranteed the survival of families and the continuity of subsistence-based traditional culture.

³⁹ Sarah Carter, "First Nations Women of Prairie Canada in the Early Reserve Years, the 1870s to the 1920s: A Preliminary Inquiry," in *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength*, ed. Christine Miller and Patricia Chuchryk (Winnipeg: University of Winnipeg Press, 1996), 56.