

UNIVERSITÉ DE SHERBROOKE

Faculté d'Éducation

Département de Pédagogie

BEALS

History of Canadian Domestic

Jean-François Dubreuil-Brodeur 06 842 045

Analysis presented to Roxanne Rimstead

For the class

ANG 553

April 2nd 2009

The History of Canadian Domestic Servants

« I'd rather pick rags and keep my self-respect! » (Salverson 1981 [1939]: 319)

This kind of reaction was common among Canadian women who were faced with the prospect of becoming a domestic servant in the early twentieth century. The Canadian literature we have on the history of domestic servants would probably back up Laura Goodman Salverson's conclusion that she was speaking for most young women of her generation. However, there were some real and observable advantages to being a servant, even more for young immigrants, who used domestic service as the best path of entry into Canada and its labour markets. Actually, in 1901, thirty-eight percent of women who had paid labour occupations were servants. Domestic service even attracted more women than the entire manufacturing sector.

However, historians emphasize the disadvantages of the occupation from the employee's perspective. Indeed, whether they were Canadian-born or immigrant, young women worked in a job that required long hours, lack of liberty, solitude, and susceptibility to exploitation and mistreatment. It was pretty common in the bourgeois community to link domestic servants with criminality, especially theft and prostitution. Even though the actual respectability of

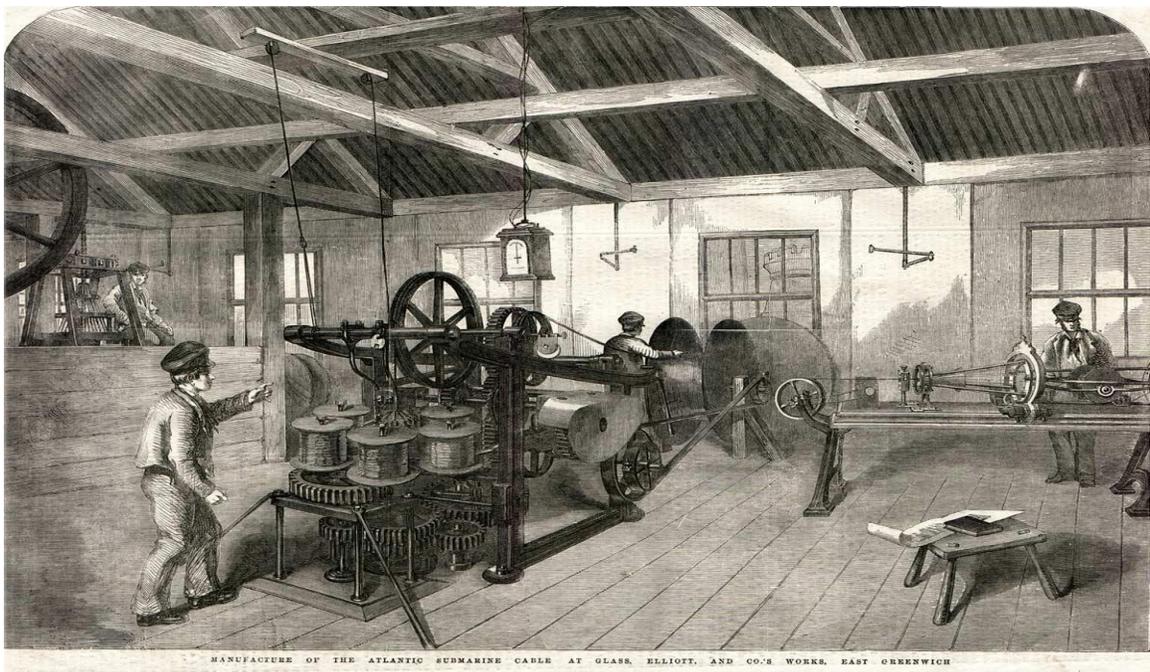
Immigrants for domestic services [Quebec, QC]/Groupe d'immigrantes pour le service domestique [Québec, (Québec)]. (1911)



working in a bourgeois home could mean domestic servants were respected, the stigma of inferiority was inescapable.

In Canada, it was pretty common to see young women avoid domestic jobs. It was mostly just those who had no choice that entered that service; those who had a choice, according to Marilyn Barber (1991) preferred working in factories, offices, or shops, even though wages were comparable. The changing economic structure of the first half of the 20th century meant that more women could act on their preferences and find paid labour on their own.

Unlike most workers, servants usually received room and board. Even though the food offered and accommodation varied from home to home, it is reasonable to realise that what other workers had to pay for, servants got for free. This was a major factor in the estimates of real earnings of domestic servants in Canada.



MANUFACTURE OF THE ATLANTIC SUBMARINE CABLE AT GLASS, ELLIOTT, AND CO.'S WORKS, EAST GREENWICH

Works Cited

Barber, Marilyn (1991) *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*. Booklet 16. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association.

Salverson, Laura Goodman (1981 [1939]) *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.