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“Thread in Her Hands – Cash in Her Pockets”: Women and Domestic Textile Production in 19th-Century New Brunswick

HOME WEAVING TURNED women into drudges, complained a correspondent in New Brunswick’s *Colonial Farmer* in 1865. “Agricola”, a Northumberland farmer, feared the social implications of home weaving. He felt that women’s roles in the household should not run to manufacturing since “if the women are to be drudges, they can have no opportunities of acquiring those little accomplishments and pleasant manners which go so far to make life pleasant, and the consequence is that she makes him a drudge too”. Agricola was also concerned about spending money on equipment for the farm. The purchase of weaving tools would be a wasted investment, for it was “better for the farmer to spend his spare capital in labour saving machinery for the farm, than to invest it in spinning or weaving apparatus, which at best would be of the clumsiest”.¹ Agricola argued that cloth was “better done and cheaper by machinery than by hand labour”. After all, William Park’s cotton mill had just opened in Saint John, and industrial production surely heralded the arrival of a new age in New Brunswick.² Agricola’s commentaries set the tone as Maritime Canada was poised to embrace encroaching modernity with a new emphasis on commercial farming, improved farm machinery and new manufacturing opportunities. Although home weavers in New Brunswick produced 60 per cent of the woollen and cotton cloth made in the province in 1871, within 15 years new cloth factory manufacturers would gradually begin to displace the smaller enterprises based on home production.³

Home weaving was a concern in 19th-century New Brunswick, and a vigorous debate followed in the pages of the *Colonial Farmer*. From today’s perspective, a discussion of home manufacturing in New Brunswick is part of the new interest of

- 1 *Colonial Farmer*, 16 January 1865. “Agricola” was the pseudonym of a Northumberland County, New Brunswick farmer who frequently contributed social commentary on various aspects of farming to the agricultural press in New Brunswick in the 1860s. Although some issues of the *Colonial Farmer* are missing, the correspondents usually were responding to a letter which had appeared in a previous issue. This “Agricola” should not be confused with the Nova Scotia “Agricola”, John Young, who died in 1837.
- 2 *Colonial Farmer*, 16 January 1865. Discussions of women’s work as weavers appeared in the newspaper for at least six months in 1865, including a series of letters from Agricola, two pieces from “Farmer’s Daughter” and one each from “Harry Hudson”, “Susy” and “Rusticus”.
- 3 Kris Inwood and Janine Grant, “Gender and Organization in the Canadian Cloth Industry, 1807”, in Peter Baskerville, ed., *Canadian Papers in Business History*, Vol. I (Victoria, 1989), pp. 22-23.

Judith Rygiel, “Thread in Her Hands – Cash in Her Pockets”: Women and Domestic Textile Production in 19th Century New Brunswick, *Acadiensis*, XXX, 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 56-70.

both rural and women's historians in recovering the often hidden nature of women's contributions to the rural economy and their presence in the marketplace. Domestic manufacture occupies the intersection of economic, rural, women's, social, family history and biography. Scholarship on the history of Canadian rural women's work has been subsumed among other rural issues, while in America and Europe it has become more visible.⁴ A study of domestic manufacturing in 19th-century New Brunswick illustrates several themes, including the challenges of modernity, the rationality and persistence of domestic production and the gender shift within the households of cloth producers. The regional dimension of the gendered division of labour also reveals the particular character of home weaving that persisted well into the late 19th century in rural New Brunswick communities.⁵ Weavers produced more cloth than their households could consume. New Brunswick's local employment patterns in resource industries such as lumbering, fishing and agriculture provided a

- 4 The one exception in Canada is a small monograph by Sophie-Laurence Lamontagne and Fernand Harvey, *La Production Textile Domestique au Québec, 1827-1941* (Ottawa, 1997) which focused on the persistence of home-produced Quebec textiles in the 19th century and the revival of handweaving as an artisanal activity directed towards the tourist market in the 20th century. See also articles in Daniel Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton, 1994) and Daryl M. Haftner, ed., *European Women in Pre-Industrial Craft* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995). For valuable contributions that have been made to the study of domestic manufacture, see Kris Inwood and Janine Roelens, "'Labouring at the Loom': A Case Study of Rural Manufacturing in Leeds County, Ontario, 1870", in Donald Akenson, ed., *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, Vol. VII (Gananoque, 1990), pp. 215-35, Inwood and Grant, "Gender and Organization", pp. 17-31 and Inwood and Phyllis Wagg, "The Survival of the Handloom Weaving in Rural Canada, Circa 1870", *Journal of Economic History*, 53, 2 (June 1993), pp. 346-58. For another recent discussion of textile production in New Brunswick, see Béatrice Craig and Judith Rygiel, "Femmes, marchés et production textile au Nouveau-Brunswick au cours du XIX^e siècle", *Histoire et mesure*, XV, 1/2 (2000), pp. 83-112, and Cynthia Wallace-Casey, "Providential Openings: The Women Weavers of Nineteenth-Century Queens County, New Brunswick", *Material History Review*, 46 (Fall 1997), pp. 29-44.
- 5 Describing the work of textile producers can be problematic as historians have used different terms to denote people who made cloth at home. For example, Marjorie Cohen, Rolla Milton Tyron and Harold and Dorothy Burnham used the term "professional weaver", while Adrienne Hood and Johanna Miller Lewis used "artisan weaver". See Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto, 1988), p. 81, Burnham and Burnham, "Keep Me Warm One Night": *Early Handweaving in Eastern Ontario* (Toronto, 1973), Tyron, *Household Manufactures in the United States, 1640-1860* (Chicago 1917) [reprint ed.] 1966), p. 205, Hood, "The Gender Division of Labor in the Production of Textiles in Eighteenth Century Rural Pennsylvania (Rethinking the Model)", *Journal of Social History*, 27, 3 (Spring 1994), pp. 544-51 and Lewis, *Artisans in the North Carolina Backcountry* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1995). Inwood and Grant used the term "custom/commercial weaver", "Gender and Organization", p. 348. Nancy Dick Bogdonoff used the greatest number of names to distinguish different kinds of weavers: "home weavers", "village/public weavers" and "itinerant weavers". See Bogdonoff, *Handwoven Textiles in Early New England* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1975), pp. 45-56. It is important to note that not all of these terms are interchangeable. Government sources do little to enlighten the inconsistent terminology of handweaving. For example, enumerators for the 1871 Canadian census recorded weavers or cloth production on three different schedules: Schedule 1 (nominative); Schedule 5 (agricultural) and Schedule 6 (industrial). In Charlotte County, enumerators used the terms "handloom" and "weaver" interchangeably on Schedule 6. However, enumerators in Northumberland County used the terms "handloom", "cloth factory", "homespun factory", "weaving establishment" and "weaver's shop" on Schedule 6 to designate home production of cloth.

unique market for farm women for the kinds of textile products made in rural households.⁶ Textile production, including handweaving and commercial knitting, were valuable adjuncts to the domestic economy of late 19th-century New Brunswick households.

The economic benefits of home weaving for the family were a decided advantage over the niceties Agricola expected from the fairer sex. Rationalization of available time, money, skills and the labour capacity of family members were all important considerations within rural households. In a study of rural Quebec, Elizabeth Turcotte found that women “avoided costs” by producing some of the family’s food and clothing. These savings, while invisible in standard economic calculations, were rational ways in which families saved money. Sales of surplus dairy products and cloth also added extra revenue to the family coffers.⁷ In Leeds County, Ontario rural families rationalized domestic manufacture to supplement low agricultural productivity. Rural families, especially those comprising many females, engaged in domestic production since these women had limited opportunities for income.⁸

Historians have differed in their assessment of the rationality of domestic cloth production in the 19th century. Joan Jensen noted that American women rationalized butter-making instead of cloth-making as a more profitable venture requiring less capital outlay on tools and equipment while providing more variety and a steadier income.⁹ Marjorie Cohen conceded that in Ontario home production of cloth was a less rational way to provide for the family’s needs as alternative and cheaper sources were readily available.¹⁰ Jane Errington also argued that, since weaving was so labour-intensive, “no housewife could hope to tackle the whole process on her own”. She would need the services of several daughters or other capable women in the household to make it worthwhile.¹¹ These arguments fail to explain the prolific weavers in Charlotte County, however, for most artisan weavers in 1871 had little help in textile manufacturing, either through the labour of their own children, their kin or outside assistance.

Responses to Agricola’s diatribe on homeweaving and its implied drudgery included comments about the rationality of producing homespun cloth. “Farmer’s

6	Production of Handwoven Cloth* in New Brunswick in yards				
	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
	622,237	n.a.**	1,125,069	859,928	476,465

* Production of domestic cloth, both flannel and linen

** Only the value of domestic production, not the amount, was recorded.

Census of New Brunswick, 1851, Vol. 4, p. 220; Census of New Brunswick, 1861, Vol. 4, p. 340; Census of Canada 1871, Vol. 3, p. 218.

7 Elizabeth Turcotte, “Balancing the Scales: Women’s Economic Contributions Through Dairying and Textiles, Argenteuil, Quebec, 1831-1861”, unpublished M.A. research report, University of Ottawa, 1996, p. 33.

8 Inwood and Roelens, “Labouring at the Loom”, pp. 225-6.

9 Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid Atlantic Farm Women 1750-1850* (New Haven and London, 1986), p. 79.

10 Cohen, *Women’s Work*, p. 82.

11 Elizabeth Jane Errington, *Wives and Mothers, School Mistresses and Scullery Maids* (Montreal and Kingston, 1995), p. 99.

Daughter” expressed her feelings in these words:

[it] is no hard work for them [women] to make cloth to supply the family plentifully and not make it a drudgery of it either; for I do not think it drudgery, except we make it so, any more than making butter and cheese, or other housework. . . . I know many who prefer it before any kind of house or dairy work; and those who understand it can work with as much ease as they can at most other work.¹²

Both Farmer’s Daughter and another commentator, “Susy”, wove cloth as part of their domestic or household chores. Susy was less enamoured with cloth production than Farmer’s Daughter. In her letter to the *Colonial Farmer*, she informed readers of the 132 yards of cloth she had just finished weaving for the 1865 season:

I feel quite proud that we can do all the weaving ourselves . . . [but] I am real glad that we are going to have a long play spell now. Perhaps the Farmer’s Daughter will have the factory built before next fall, and then farewell to the old loom and its ceaseless clatter and bang.¹³

While Susy was proud of her weaving accomplishments, there were other New Brunswick women who produced far more yardage during their spinning and weaving season. Martha J. Towle was by far the most prolific reported weaver in Charlotte County in 1871. A 46-year-old mother, Martha lived with her farmer husband, Horatio, her 22-year-old daughter Agnes and her 87-year-old mother-in-law on a small holding of 70 acres in the rural parish of St. David. She was perhaps exceptional since her small weaving business reported 1,388 yards of twilled, plain and satinette cloth produced in 1871. This was more than adequate to supply the needs of her household and exceeded that of any other weaver in the county.¹⁴

By 1871, as indicated by census data, female weavers had come to dominate textile production in Charlotte County. In two previous censuses, some males did report weaving businesses in combination with farming operations.¹⁵ Discussions of this gender shift in domestic manufacturing appear only in the scholarship of a few ethnographers and historians. According to David-Thierry Ruddel, men were the principal weavers in Quebec families up to the turn of the 19th century. After 1830 weaving became the universal responsibility of female members of the family.¹⁶

12 *Colonial Farmer*, 26 June 1865.

13 *Colonial Farmer*, 4 December 1865.

14 Adrienne Hood’s study of cloth production in 18th-century Pennsylvania, based on probate inventories, found households in Pennsylvania needed about 45 yards of cloth per year to replace worn apparel. See “The Material World of Cloth: Production and Use in Eighteenth Century Rural Pennsylvania”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, LIII, 1 (January 1996), p. 49.

15 Of the 145 identified Charlotte County weavers in 1871, only five men reported any weaving activity, and four of them did so on the nominative schedules. The 1851 census for Charlotte County reported nine men and no women as weavers. In 1861, six men and five women identified themselves as weavers in the county. Due to the poor conditions of the census records, St. David and St. James were not included in this assessment. However, in 1871 these two parishes would account for 90 per cent of the total self-identified weavers in the county.

Dorothy and Harold Burnham, on the other hand, claimed that weaving gradually became a woman's occupation only after a serious economic recession in the second quarter of the 19th century. Kris Inwood and Janine Grant's assessment found that women dominated domestic weaving by Confederation.¹⁷

Charlotte County census marshals enumerated more than one hundred weavers, mostly women, who had small weaving businesses in 1871.¹⁸ Another 1,000 Charlotte County households noted yardages on the agricultural schedules.¹⁹ Many of Martha Towle's neighbours were also prolific weavers, producing from 100 to 900 yards of cloth per year.²⁰ Charlotte County's artisan weavers wove 220 yards a year on average, creating a surplus of more than 17,000 yards of homespun country cloth.²¹

- 16 David-Thierry Ruddel, "Domestic Textile Production in Colonial Quebec, 1608-1840", *Material History Bulletin*, 31 (Spring 1990), pp. 44-5. Further work by Ruddel with Adrienne Hood in "Artifacts and Documents in the History of Quebec Textiles", in Gerald Pocius, ed., *Living in a Material World* (St. John's, 1991), pp. 55-91 raised questions about women and professional weaving, persistence, gender shift, evidence of subsistence farming, colonialism and the copying of imported textiles.
- 17 Burnham and Burnham, "*Keep Me Warm One Night*", pp. 8-9 and Inwood and Grant, "Gender and Organization", p. 18.
- 18 The 1871 census schedules in New Brunswick had varying terminology for weaving business, ranging from "hand loom" to "cloth manufactory". Farm households also reported home-made cloth, including flannel and linen on Agricultural Schedule 5. This schedule, cross referenced to the head of household's name, did not indicate who in the family made the cloth or, for that manner, the cheese, honey, butter, maple syrup or any of the numerous other products. "Home weavers" in this article are noted as those weavers who reported only on the agricultural schedules. The Industrial Schedule (Schedule 6) enumerated all individuals who reported some business activity or trade. These schedules noted the amount of fixed capital, the number of months worked, the number of employees and their gender, the amount, kind and value of raw materials and the amount, description and value of the finished product. Any weaver reporting on the manufacturing schedule ran a small business. Therefore, these are considered as "artisan weavers" who produced cloth in their homes for a potential market. Their status was judged not on the volume of their output but on the possibility of outside remuneration and their own self-identification as weavers.
- 19 Aggregate data for the 1871 census for Charlotte County noted 94 weavers. A detailed examination of Schedule 6 revealed 145 weavers in Charlotte county. Due to poor handwriting or insufficient information, a detailed picture can be constructed for just 103 of these weavers. Of the identifiable weavers, only five men declared weaving as their occupation. Only one man, James Murphy, declared himself a weaver on Schedule 6. Of the 4,725 households in Charlotte County, 1,109 reported cloth production on the agricultural returns in addition to the above-noted artisan weavers. In Northumberland County, census takers reported only 68 weavers on Schedule 6, but a further examination of all parishes revealed 384 artisan weavers.
- 20 Production Levels of Charlotte County Female Artisan Weavers in 1871*

Yardages	Number of weavers	Months worked Average	Yards/month Average	Price Per Yard Average
0-49	4	1	37.50	.62
50-99	28	1.21	56.94	.69
100-199	20	2.00	69.30	.69
200-299	19	3.31	85.39	.73
300-399	16	3.46	101.34	.71
400-499	6	4.66	89.28	.69
500-649	5	5.80	93.44	.69
650 +	3	4.60	209.85	.64

* total of 103 artisan weavers

Complete data existed for 103 female artisan weavers in Charlotte County who fitted part-time weaving into the seasonal demands of the agricultural cycle.²² Most artisan weavers in Charlotte County were married women, 43 years old on average, who spent an average of two and a half months a year producing cloth. Some, like Martha Towle with the assistance of her daughter, dedicated four months of the year to weaving. Martha Towle's household in St. David provides an example of the complexity of calculating net income from weaving. She and her daughter reported combined monthly wages of \$34.50 for 1,388 yards of woven cloth over a four-month period. The value added came to \$472. We do not know whether they brought their cloth to the local fulling mill, or what proportion of their cloth was half cotton/half wool or all wool or if one of the women did all the spinning and the other all the weaving. Martha reported using 600 pounds of cotton and woollen yarns. Since the Towles had only a few sheep, they would have had to purchase or barter wool from their neighbours to meet their production.²³

Weavers and other textile producers in New Brunswick participated in the local economy for different reasons. Farmer's Daughter had suggested that cloth making was sometimes more pleasant than other household and farm chores and a way of alleviating some of the family's expenses. Home manufactured cloth was sturdier than

21 Business profile, Charlotte County female artisan weavers, 1871

District	Number of Weavers	Total yards	Average yards
St. James-1	18	4,744	263.50
St. James-2	16	4,475	279.60
St. David	57	10,303	180.75
West Isle	12	3,170	264.10
Totals	103	22,692	220.30

22 Illegible handwriting, insignificant data and the assumptions of the census marshal in one St. George parish permitted detailed information for 104 of the 126 artisan weavers. The census marshal reported that the 12 handloom weavers in his parish were already included in the agricultural returns, making it nearly impossible to distinguish these 12 from the other 122 weaving households. Only 79 of the 104 artisan weavers in this study identified their occupation on the nominative schedules. The aggregate census data noted only 94 weavers in the county, but an examination of both the nominative and manufacturing schedules revealed 145 self-identified weavers in 1871, a difference of 54 per cent. Of these, 126 were artisan weavers and an additional 19 were identified as home weavers on the nominative schedule.

23 See 1871 Census, Charlotte County, New Brunswick, microfilm C10376, sub district H, St. David, p. 9, line 8, Schedule 1 and Schedule 6. The preceding generalizations were drawn from Judith Rygiel, "Women of the Cloth – Weavers in Westmorland and Charlotte Counties, New Brunswick 1871-1891", M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 1998. Weavers noted both a "wage" and "the value" of the finished product. Two components in the value added in cloth production are handspinning and handweaving labour. According to Inwood and Wagg, spinning accounts for 9 per cent and weaving 14 per cent of the value. Inwood and Wagg, "Survival of Handloom Weaving", p. 351. There does not seem to be any direct relationship between the value added and the stated wages. Of the 80 women weavers reporting wages in Charlotte County, 49 reported between \$4-\$7.99 per month, 29 reported \$8-\$11.99, 14 from \$12-\$15.99, two from \$16-\$19.99 and four over \$20 with one person reporting the highest wage of \$25. Charlotte County had 48 sawmills in 1871 employing 906 men: 1871 Census, aggregate data, Vol. 3, p. 346. In 1878 Edward Willis reported that the 737 men working at the St. Stephen mill earned an average of \$7.30 per week. "Report of Edward Willis on the Manufacturing Industries of Certain Sections of the Maritime Provinces", *House of Commons Sessional Papers* (1885), No. 37, p. 58.

purchased cloth and thus a better investment. Acquiring textile skills also had another important economic advantage. Farmer's Daughter noted that weaving domestic cloth provided an opportunity for home employment as farmers were often unhappy with the cloth produced by the few woollen mills in the rural districts. According to Farmer's Daughter, many farmers "preferred hiring help to do it [weave cloth] by hand", especially if they did not have wives or daughters with these skills.²⁴

As suggested by the correspondence of Farmer's Daughter, textile producers sold their labour, skills and products within their communities. Examining diaries, travel guides and agricultural journals reveals that rural New Brunswick women traded their textile skills and products from the beginning of colonization until well into the late 19th century.²⁵ Merchant account books, newspapers and lumber company records also provide evidence that homespun cloth, hooked rugs, handknit socks, mitts and winter underwear were in demand by workers involved in various resource extraction industries.

Government documents, especially the 1871 census, while identifying the volume of weaving activity and the individual weavers, can provide only a partial picture of the extent to which textile producers participated in the local economy. Some counties in New Brunswick, such as Westmorland, reported only two weavers on the nominative schedules and none on the industrial schedules. This under-reporting concealed the activity of more than 3,000 Westmorland County households producing in excess of 166,000 yards of homemade wool cloth and 25,000 yards of linen in 1871. In some rural Westmorland parishes, such as Botsford, more than 80 per cent of households reported homespun cloth in 1871 on the agricultural schedules. In this parish alone, handweavers in 518 households wove 35,805 yards of cloth, or an average of 69 yards per household.²⁶ Although census marshalls did not identify individual weavers in Westmorland County, the sheer number of households reporting large volumes of home-produced cloth in itself reveals an important contribution to the rural economy.

Doing custom weaving for neighbours was one way in which New Brunswick women helped to support their families, especially during times of adversity. An early example of this type of labour exchange can be found in Mary Morris Bradley's diary entry for 1793. Mary's first husband, David Morris, was experiencing severe financial troubles in the lumber industry and was at the point of declaring bankruptcy. Bills were accumulating, and the family despaired of finding the means to meet their debts. Mary was a young, newly married woman, who used her textile skills to pry her household out of financial difficulty. In her diary, she commented:

Just at this critical time, it occurred to me, I will commence the business of weaving. Accordingly I set up my loom, and I notified my neighbours, and soon I had plenty of work. I exerted myself to

²⁴ *Colonial Farmer*, 26 June 1865.

²⁵ The majority of primary source documents in this paper were generated by English-speaking colonists (and their descendants) who came to New Brunswick during the Planter (1760s) and Loyalist (1780s) migrations.

²⁶ In all, 3029 of the 4794 families in Westmorland reported cloth making. Botsford parish had the highest ratio of households involved in cloth making: 518 of the 622 households (83 per cent) wove homespun cloth in 1871. Calculated from the 1871 census for Westmorland County, microfilms C10391-10393, National Archives of Canada [NAC].

the utmost of my power. I took my pay in such trade as was suitable for our family's use, which made the payment easy for my customers. I soon got into the way of helping ourselves greatly. I endeavoured to supply our little wants by my own exertions. We did not raise sufficient grain for our own use, but my weaving in the winter . . . procured for us as much breadstuff as we needed.²⁷

Luckily for the Morris family, David gave up the lumbering business and Mary received a legacy of £10 from her father that paid off the accumulated debts. However, Mary's skill as a weaver helped to keep the family solvent until their fortunes changed for the better.

The farm account books of Lieutenant Colonel Beverly Robinson provide further insight into the ways in which women in New Brunswick exchanged their labour as weavers for payment in cash or barter. The Robinson farm, located near Fredericton, was not self-sufficient and thus the family required the services of various tradespeople. Over a four-year period, Polly Mercereau received more than 250 pounds of wool to spin for the Robinson household. On 14 June 1803 she received 80 pounds of fleece to spin and delivered 69 yards of finished cloth on 10 September. Robinson recorded on that date, "Rcd 69 yards of cloth, 31 which [is] wool fulled. Paid Mrs Polly Mercereau in full of all acct by an order on Fraser".²⁸ She would have needed help as the spinning alone would have taken almost three months of constant labour.²⁹

Another New Brunswick weaver, Sybel Grey of Queens County, hired out her labour to local neighbours in the mid-19th century. She provided cloth for blankets and clothing, yarn for socks and mitts; all items of importance for rural residents "during the winter snows". A recent immigrant from England, Emily Beavan was one of Sybel's new neighbours. Beavan mentioned her own lack of these critical textile skills in her memoirs, *Life in the Backwoods of New Brunswick*:

The manufacture of the wool raised on the farm is the most important part of women's work, and in this the natives particularly excel. As yet I knew not the mysteries of colouring brown with butternut bark, nor the proper proportion of sweet fern and indigo to produce green, so that our wool, on return from the carding mill had been left with this person-lady . . . who was a perfect adept in the art, to be spun and wove.³⁰

Sybel's skills in dyeing, spinning and weaving went further than merely providing

27 Margaret Conrad, "Mary Bradley's Reminiscences: A Domestic Life in Colonial New Brunswick", *Atlantis*, 7 (Fall 1981), p. 93. From this entry alone the amount paid or bartered for Mary's services or the volume of cloth produced cannot be determined.

28 Farm account book Lt. Col. Beverly Robinson, microfilm F369, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [PANB]. Robinson did not always specify how much cloth was made or how much he paid her. For instance, he noted on two entries: "Rcd. the cloth and paid Polly Mersereau in full" (1802) and "Paid PM on all accounts by an order on Fraser's" (1803). Third party barter was an accepted form of payment for services in currency-strapped rural Canada in the early 19th century.

29 Based on my 30 years experience as a weaver and spinner, Polly Mercereau would have spent approximately 165 ten-hour days to spin the yarn and weave this amount of cloth.

30 Mrs. Frances Beavan, *Life in the Backwoods of New Brunswick* ([1845] St. Stephen, 1980), p. 26.

simple textile services. She also knew the complexities of designing plaids, and she saved part of her wool payment to produce a much prized coverlet. This coverlet, commented Beavan, was “a sure mark of industry [and] the first ambition of a back-wood matron”.³¹ Thus, for rural households, such as the Greys, custom weaving would have made a difference in their income levels.

Women’s diaries from New Brunswick give further evidence of both the household’s engagement in and hiring patterns for textile production. For example, Eliza Cox Carter, on the Kingston Peninsula, hired a Mrs. Marstin for a two-month period in 1865. During her time with the Carters, Mrs. Marstin performed both spinning duties and other farm chores such as picking potatoes. Mrs. Marstin, along with the other female members of the Carter household, spun in the autumn of 1865 in preparation for Eliza’s weaving. By early December Mrs. Marstin had left the Carter household to work for another family, the Hardings.³² Janet McDonald, of Gagetown, also gave details in her diary, over a ten-year period, of both the cycle of textile production and the hired help for these and other tasks. For example, Janet had outside help come in to spin and perform household chores.³³ Most of the textile activity, including washing fleece and spinning, happened in the spring between April and the middle of June.

A few weavers placed advertisements offering custom handweaving in New Brunswick newspapers in the 1850-1880 period. A Miss McDonald placed a four-week advertisement in the Newcastle *Union Advocate* in October 1873. She “respectfully notifie[d] the public that she has commenced business in Chatham and is now prepared to take orders for WEAVING IN ALL ITS BRANCHES”. Miss McDonald carried out her business at the residence of Thomas Vanstone of Chatham.³⁴ This advertisement suggests that women, especially unmarried ones such as Miss McDonald, may have aspired to have independent businesses.

Ellen Dunn of Blackville, Northumberland County, neither left a diary nor placed advertisements in newspapers to secure customers. In this case, the story of her weaving activities can be found in the 1861 and 1871 census materials. Here she was recorded as being a weaver and a widow with two daughters. In the 1861 census Ellen reported earning \$207 from her weaving – not a small sum – to support her household. The 1871 Blackville census marshal, in marginal notes, commented that Dunn “manufactures cloth for a number of persons. Material all found [for] her”. Ellen was a fairly prolific weaver producing 259 yards of cotton and wool homespun cloth, aided by her daughters, over a five-month period. Thus, Ellen’s weaving skills enabled her to support her small family within the lumbering community.³⁵

Lumber mill owners, some of the most prominent customers of handwoven cloth, hired weavers’ textile skills and bought their products especially in the rural districts.

31 Beavan, *Life*, pp. 28, 30.

32 Judith Baxter and Beth Quigley, eds., *Life and Times: Recollections of Eliza Cox Carter* (Hull, 1997), pp. 49-57.

33 Janet McDonald’s diary (Queen’s County) 1857-1868. The craft summary was prepared by staff at King’s Landing, New Brunswick. The original document is in the University of New Brunswick Archives and Special Collections [UNBASC], Fredericton, New Brunswick.

34 *Union Advocate* (Newcastle, New Brunswick), 15 October 1873.

35 See Ellen Dunn, 1861 New Brunswick Census, Northumberland County, sub-district Blackville, microfilm C1003, p. 28 and 1871 Census, sub-district Blackville, microfilm C10389, p. 1, NAC.

For example, the Russell Lumbering Company of Chatham bought nearly 400 yards of handweaving from 17 weavers in 1864-65. Eleven of these transactions were for amounts of more than 20 yards. The Russells offered seven pence per yard (about 12 cents) and paid weavers mostly in cash for their product. This cash payment was unusual, as other transactions for homespun in various ledgers for this period showed mostly a combination of barter and small amounts of cash as payment.³⁶

Three generations of the Doak family ran a saw mill, carding mill, grist mill and kiln in the small community of Doaktown, Northumberland County, from 1822 until early in the 20th century. In the late 19th century they frequently hired both married and single women to spin, weave, quilt and perform other textile-related tasks. Family account books show women such as Margaret Lyon spinning for the family each year from May or June into the fall. Ann Harvie Doak noted that Margaret “commenced spinning for the family on June 10, 1868, working for 11 weeks and 3 days” and earned 5s. (about one dollar) per week for her labour.³⁷

Women who worked for the Doak family received both barter and cash for their textile services. The family also maintained a store where another spinner, Rebecca Underwood, spent part of her eleven-weeks pay in 1862 on gloves, stockings, shoes and imported cloth.³⁸ Mrs. Thomas Doak, another local woman, supplied the Doak family with a variety of textile services over an eight-year period starting in the early 1880s.³⁹ Her textile activities included knitting socks and mitts (25 cents a pair), hooking rugs (35 cents per day), preparing wool for carding and spinning (30 cents a day), mending clothes and rugs, as well as quilting (30 cents per day) and making comforters. Her neighbour, Mrs. James Moroney, provided extensive quantities of woven cloth and spun wool for the Doak family during the same eight-year period. Her weaving production varied from a high of 68 yards of blanketing a year to a low of ten yards by the end of 1889. In the same period she also spun between eight and 65 pounds of wool a year. The Doaks paid similar rates for spinning and weaving – ten cents a yard for cloth and 15 cents a pound for spinning.⁴⁰ The Russell Lumber Company paid a slightly better rate, 12 cents a yard, for handweaving.⁴¹ Women who

36 Russell Lumber Company Papers, Chatham, F23-2, New Brunswick Museum [NBM], Saint John. The document showed 17 weavers engaged in 27 transactions with the Russell Company between 1864 and 1865. In 1864, of the 13 entries, 11 received cash payments for their weaving, the other two through other unspecified methods. Three of the entries are for women, although it is uncertain whether their husbands were collecting payment for their wives' work or whether they were also weaving. Preliminary evidence from the unpublished 1871 census manufacturing schedule suggests that weavers in Northumberland County were overwhelmingly female.

37 Doak Family Papers, MC 1055 MS6F3, PANB. The first entry for Margaret Lyons was in June 1867, the last in 1878. There were two Margaret Lyons living in the vicinity of Doaktown as recorded in the 1871 census. One was a 23-year-old single woman who self-identified as a weaver on the nominative schedule and the other was a 52-year-old shoemaker's wife. 1871 Census, film C10389, d-1 Ludlow, and e-2 Blissfield, NAC.

38 Doak Family Papers, MC 1055 MS1K1, PANB.

39 Doak was a common family name in this area of the Miramichi. In 1861 there were seven families with the Doak surname in the small village of Doaktown. Census nominative schedules, Blissfield 1861.

40 Spinning one pound of carded wool would take nearly 16 hours. Mrs. Moroney wove a variety of textile articles in the 1880s including shirting, blanketing, pant cloth and homespun yardages. The evidence suggests that the Doaks might have provided the carded rolls of wool from their carding mill

remained at home during the lumbering season thus found lucrative ways to pass the winter days, both weaving and knitting for a potential market.

Markets other than custom weaving existed for many textile producers. While the end use of cloth made by both artisan weavers and home weavers was not evident in either Charlotte County or Westmorland County census sources, Northumberland County was exceptional in the variety of ways enumerators hinted at the final consumers of artisan weavers' production. Some weavers in the districts of Northesk and Newcastle wove different sorts of cloth, including twill and plain, for "country wear". Other weavers in the rural district of Chatham were more specific in how their cloth would be used. They produced cloth "for the farmer" and "for the country people".⁴²

Historian Marjorie Cohen contends that, once commercially made products became readily available, domestic weavers gave up household production. Homespun cloth, according to Cohen, was a cheap product that did not have a ready market.⁴³ While this description may be appropriate for cloth produced in Ontario, it does not apply to New Brunswick textiles. New Brunswick homespun was viewed as comparable in value to silks and coating material. For example, many customers purchased homespun cloth from the Doak store for 4s. to 5s. per yard (about 80 cents to \$1.00 in 1866). The going rate for homespun cloth in the 1870s ranged between 60 to 75 cents a yard when used in exchange to settle accounts. Moreover, homespun, at even the lower rate of 60 cents a yard, was not a cheap fabric. The cheapest cloth available was unbleached cotton at 6 cents a yard. Wool flannel cloth retailed for 32 to 57 cents a yard, wool tweed for 20 cents, velvet for 30 cents, black silk and silk velvet for 65 to 80 cents, while the more expensive coating materials were also in the 60 to 80 cents a yard range.⁴⁴

When assessing the manufacture and exchange of homespun cloth, historians should take into consideration other factors such as climate, rural occupations of

since there was no indication that these women purchased the raw materials. Since the accounts for these two women and others were entered with their husband's names, they are evidently married and supplementing the family income. There were other women in the Doak account books with no prefix noting their marital status or having no male name, for example Rebecca Underwood and Margaret Lyon. Doak Family Papers, MC 1055 MS8F1, PANB and 1871 Census, microfilm C10389, d-1 Ludlow and e-1 Blissfield, NAC.

- 41 See Inwood and Wagg, "The Survival of Handloom", p. 351, Table 2 for the cost structure of handwoven fulling cloth. Inwood and Wagg's figures are consistent with the average price of 69 cents per yard for homespun found in both Charlotte and Northumberland Counties in 1871. The 10-12 cents per yard only covered the cost of labour and not the other components of cloth manufacture such as carding, spinning, fulling or dyeing. (See also information in footnote 23).
- 42 Comments from 21 artisan weavers in one of the Blackville districts are rare. In this case, the enumerator noted different end uses: "Sold in the market" (1); "This woman manufactures cloth for a number of persons, materials all found [for] her" (6); "Mostly for home use" (3); "All for home use" (4); "For home use/consumption" (7). The average production of weavers indicating "home use" was less than 100 yards, while four of the "market weavers" each wove between 200 and 350 yards of homespun. 1871 Census, microfilm C10389, f-2 Blackville Industrial Schedule, NAC.
- 43 Cohen, *Women's Work*, p. 82.
- 44 Amounts calculated from various store ledgers. See Doak Family Papers MC 1055, especially between 1850-1880, PANB, Trueman Family Papers 1854-1883, microfilm 0102 Mount Allison University Archives, Nancy Ann Harris account book, 1858-1869, MC456 MS1, PANB, Richard Bell ledger, 1837-1879, F 1123-1-1, Centre d'Études Acadiennes, Université de Moncton, John Pond ledger, 1858-1876, L 981.138.7, Woodsmen's Museum, Boiestown, New Brunswick, Hubbard Family Papers 1841-1878, MG H19 Boxes 6, 7, 8, UNBASC.

consumers and the need for other commodities. Homespun was a more sturdy product for the types of occupational activities in the countryside. Many rural people used their homespun to settle their accounts at general stores as well as in exchange for much-needed commodities such as flour and molasses.⁴⁵

The persistence and decline of domestic manufacturing is a common theme in international, but less so in Canadian, scholarship. Regional differences, spatial variances and economic considerations were critical factors in the rationalization of handweaving until the end of the 19th century in Canada. Sophie-Laurence Lamontagne stressed that demographic factors, climate and the integration of auxiliary mechanized operations all favoured weaving in Quebec until the end of the 19th century. As well, poor socio-economic conditions, low farm mechanization and insufficient capital to build mills also influenced Quebec's position.⁴⁶ Research done by Inwood and others on Ontario has added, as positive aspects of domestic manufacture, the flexibility of work, age-transmitted knowledge and appropriateness of domestic textile production to various stages of the life cycle. Also within the Ontario context, families with many females and the presence of immigrants with a knowledge of weaving are especially predominant factors.⁴⁷ Low agricultural productivity combined with high transportation costs could influence the persistence of domestic manufacture in some areas of Canada, especially in counties less suitable for agriculture such as Northumberland.⁴⁸

In New Brunswick the prevailing marketplace was an important consideration in the persistence of home-produced textiles. Why was there such a demand when other types of textile goods were readily available in general stores? Nancy Harris's 1859 store ledger for Blissfield, Northumberland County showed that lumbermen were frequent purchasers of both cloth and men's homespun trousers.⁴⁹ The *Colonial Farmer* carried merchant advertisements in the 1860s and 1870s targeting farm families to supply homespun cloth, mitts and socks destined for men working in the lumber woods. Similar advertisements appeared occasionally in the Saint John papers in the 1860s and frequently in Fredericton and Newcastle newspapers as late as the 1880s. This suggests that homespun remained a popular commodity among certain segments of the population.⁵⁰

Fredericton merchants Tennant and Davies, F.B. Edgecombe, A.A. Miller, P. McPeake and Owen Sharkey all advertised for home-produced textile products consistently in the *New Brunswick Reporter* and the *Colonial Farmer* from the 1860s

45 Store ledgers such as those found in the Doak Family Papers, the Richard Bell Papers as well as in Nancy Harris's account book document this exchange of cloth for commodities.

46 Lamontagne and Harvey, *La Production Textile*, p. 31.

47 Inwood and Wagg, "Survival", p. 347; Inwood and Roelens, "Labouring", p. 216.

48 An ongoing study of Northumberland County found 384 artisan weavers in the 1871 unpublished census, more than any so far discovered for other counties in the province. See also Craig and Rygiel, "Femmes, marchés et production textile".

49 Nancy Ann Harris ledger, MC 456 MS1, PANB.

50 *Globe* (Saint John), 29 October 1862. A merchant, Thomas Jones, addressed his advertisement to "Lumbermen, Mill Owners and Shipbuilders", *Globe*, 17 October 1866. Most of the newspaper advertisements selling homespun products in the *Globe*, the *New Brunswick Reporter* and the *Colonial Farmer* mentioned "lumberman" somewhere in the copy.

until the early 1880s. For example, in the fall of 1879 Edgcombe stressed his “CAMP SUPPLIES”, which included homespun jumpers, shirts and pants, socks, mitts and horse blankets, and he continued to place similar advertisements until 1882.⁵¹ Dever Bros. placed advertisements in November 1877 requesting 10,000 yards of homespun cloth as well as 500 dozen pairs of socks and mitts.⁵² Edgcombe encouraged customers to “bring in all the socks, mitts, drawers, yarn and homespun you have . . . and exchange them for dry goods at cash prices”.⁵³

Of the Fredericton merchants, A.A. Miller and Co. was by far the most aggressive. Miller’s advertisements, directed at “Lumbermen and River Drivers”, announced the availability of homespun shirts, pants and drawers, camp blankets, grey, check and white homespun as well as socks and mitts. In early June 1880, in an advertisement in the *New Brunswick Reporter*, he asked his suppliers to “LOOK SHARP – Buy your cotton warps at A.A. Miller and make up Homespun Cloth, Socks, Mitts, etc. early in the season and you can be relieved of all such Domestic goods at the store . . . in exchange for dry goods. We want about 4000 yards of Cloth”. Exactly three months later he announced that he wished to purchase “Homespun cloth of all kinds in large quantities, also 2000 pairs of socks and mitts, 1-2 tons of woollen yarn, oversocks, home knit drawers, shirts, pants &c. in exchange for dry goods”. Miller placed a similar advertisement in the *Maritime Farmer* in June 1880 directed at the agricultural sector.⁵⁴

Advertisements for country homespun appeared as well in the Newcastle and Chatham newspapers well into the 1880s. William Murray, for instance, placed an advertisement in the *Union Advocate* in 1873 wanting “Oats, Socks, Homespun, and Cash, particularly the latter, in exchange for first class [dry and fancy goods]”.⁵⁵ In September 1876 Sutherland and Creaghan announced the latest arrivals of merchandise in their store:

We have received this week from the Country 1500 yards plain and double twilled HOMESPUN for lumbering suits. Also 150 dozen Homespun Socks and Mitts, Shirts and Jumpers. Parties going to the woods should call soon and secure bargains.⁵⁶

These advertisements and others which appeared in New Brunswick newspapers between 1850 and 1880 speak more convincingly of the place of homespun in the rural New Brunswick economy than Agricola’s acerbic comments about women making cloth. Homespun cloth was in demand because it fulfilled a need for warm

51 See for example Edgcombe’s advertisement in the *Maritime Farmer*, 13 September 1882 and A.A. Miller’s advertisement in the same paper on 10 June 1880. The *Colonial Farmer* became *The Agriculturist* briefly in the late 1870s before being reorganized into the *Maritime Farmer* in the 1880s.

52 *Colonial Farmer*, 7, 12 November 1877.

53 *New Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser*, 8 December 1880.

54 See advertisements in *New Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser*, 26 November 1879, 10 March, 8 September, 10 November, 8 December 1880, 7 September, 23 November 1881. See also Craig and Rygiel, “Femmes, marchés et production textile”, pp. 99-100.

55 *Union Advocate*, 24 November 1873.

56 *Union Advocate*, 20 September 1876. See also Craig and Rygiel, “Femmes, marchés et production textile”.

AUGUST 19th, 1880.

WANTED

AT

A. A. MILLER & CO'S
Opp. City Hall, Fredericton,

HOMESPUN CLOTH
of all kinds,
SOCKS, MITTS, YARN,
OYER-SOCKS,
KNIT DRAWERS,
Homespun Shirts, Pants, &c.



We Want
1500 Pairs!
of
Socks & Mitts.
A. A. MILLER & Co.

We are daily receiving

NEW GOODS,
and can, with confidence, re-
commend our stock of

DRY GOODS

to be as good value as can be
found in Canada.

A. A. MILLER & CO.
Fredericton, August 19, 1880.
CITY HALL.

Figure One

A Fredericton Merchant's Advertisement

Source: *Maritime Farmer* (Fredericton), 19 August 1880.

durable clothing. Men who worked outdoors, either in the lumber camps, on the log drives, on fishing boats or on the land depended on sturdy and warm fabrics for their clothing. Homespun, produced only by home weavers, was the denim of the 19th century.⁵⁷ The demand for homespun cloth persisted in New Brunswick because of local needs unique to a resource-based economy. In Ontario, homespun production peaked by 1860 with a rapid decrease by 1881. However, in Quebec and New Brunswick the popularity of homespun declined more slowly.⁵⁸

For handweavers and spinners, the demand for homespun cloth and handspun yarn called upon their skills and knowledge to produce a desirable commodity which in turn fulfilled a market need. Women, even in small rural communities such as Doaktown and the farm and lumber districts of Charlotte and Northumberland Counties, could earn additional income through both their labour and their domestic textile production. If they considered weaving drudgery, as Agricola suggested, we may never know. What we do know is that homespun, commercial knitting and handweavers were a vital part of the rural New Brunswick landscape and economy in the 19th century. Earnings realized from looms, spinning wheels and knitting needles could make a difference in the comfort level of rural households. Weaving, regardless of the social discourse surrounding it in the 1860s, made women active participants in the well-being of their families and perhaps also contributed to the means to “acquire those pleasant manners” that Agricola alluded to in his letters to the press.

57 By the end of the 1870s merchants started to advertise cloth that resembled homespun but was manufactured in the new woollen mills. These advertisements usually noted the mill designation, for example, “Mispeck Homespuns”, “Golden Grove Homespun” or “Oxford Mills Homespun”, for their textiles.

58 Lamontagne and Harvey, *La Production Textile*, p. 19. In Quebec, homespun reached its maximum production of 4,899,176 yards in 1871; New Brunswick also peaked in 1871 with the production of 1,125,069 yards of homespun. Ontario dropped from 2,130,089 yards produced in 1861 to 1,440,197 yards by 1881.