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The Operators Along the Coast: A Case Study of the Link Between Gender, Skilled Labour and Social Power, 1900-1930*

IN 1900, THE GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE was ringed by small fishing villages left stagnant by the decline of the 19th century, merchant-controlled inshore fishery. Its legacy was an economy drained of capital, in which a reduced fishing industry struggled on, supported by subsistence production. In these circumstances, each family member's economic contribution was essential to survival. At a time when urban working class families had come to depend more than ever before on wage earning, people in these coastal villages still based their livelihood in a changing mix of resources: income from the fishery, the fur trade on the St. Lawrence River's lower North Shore, wage work, and domestic production. One consequence of this particular economy may have been relatively egalitarian family relationships and, by extension, a minimal degree of male dominance.¹ This supposition, however, rests on a direct link between labour and authority, a link which some anthropologists suggest is by no means necessary. As Michelle Rosaldo writes, "[W]omen's place in social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she [*sic*] does...but of the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions".² By looking at a particular example of women's labour in this economy, we can get a sense of how such labour was valued in daily life. On this basis, however partial, we can assess with some specificity the effect of underdevelopment on gender relations.

The labour examined here is telegraph operating. Many of the villages along the coast and on the islands of the Gulf were linked by the Dominion Government

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1 This possibility is suggested by the work of anthropologist Martine Segalen, *Love and Power in the Peasant Family*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Oxford, 1983). See also suggestions to this effect (though less sweeping) in Hilda Chaulk Murray, *More than 50 Percent: Women's Life in a Newfoundland Outport, 1900-1950* (St. John's, 1979) and Georgina MacNab-de Vries and Pieter J. de Vries, "Subsistence Agriculture, Wage Labour and the Definition of Women's Role: A Cape Breton example", *Resources for Feminist Research*, 11 (March 1982), pp. 8-9.

2 M. Rosaldo, "The Uses and Abuses of Anthropology", *Signs*, 5 (1980), p. 400. Note also pp. 396-401, 414-5.

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Telegraph Service (GTS). Two of the most important sections of the system were the lines along the shore of Cape Breton's Inverness and Victoria counties and the lines running from the Strait of Belle Isle almost to Quebec City.³ The many single-operator stations along these lines were staffed by both women and men, who carried out all the functions of rural telegraph operators usually employed by private firms. Because both men and women acted as operators in the Gulf coast villages, doing the same work, gendered patterns in rewards earned by operators' labour can be linked to the relative social power of the sexes.⁴ A comparison with gender relations among urban operators suggests that the location of the operator's job in a family-based semi-subsistence economy did indeed shape the rewards earned by women's labour.

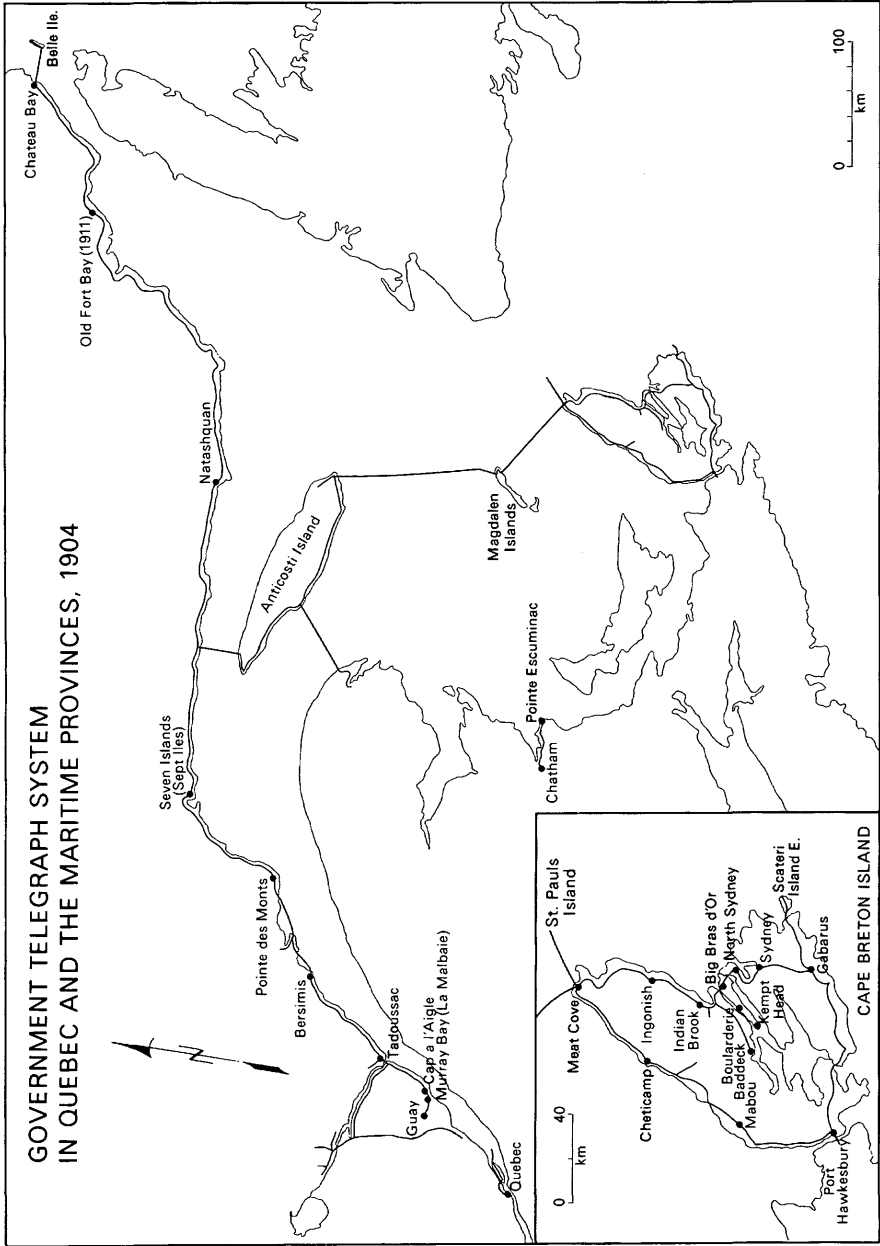
In recent years, relationships between labour, its rewards, and social power have been studied through the political analysis of skill definitions, or skill labelling. From one direction, historians studying urban workers have identified specialized craft abilities as a source of power for workers in class conflict.⁵ Women are often understood to have lacked such abilities, and thus to have lacked the power to resist exploitation.⁶ In this way, a connection has been drawn between skill and power, and differences between men's and women's experiences have been suggested. From another angle, some historians have

3 This paper is based mainly on the Records of the Department of Public Works (RG 11) at the National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC). This record group contains the correspondence files and correspondence registers of the GTS. The second category of GTS records available are the employee lists published annually in the Department of Public Works reports in the *Sessional Papers* between 1883 and 1921 (hereafter "GTS employee lists"). The eastern telegraph system discussed here was essentially a coastal one, and the lines whose employee lists are analysed can also be taken as representative of the various small GTS lines on Grand Manan Island in the Bay of Fundy, the Magdalens and Anticosti Island in the Gulf, and between Chatham and Escuminac in northern New Brunswick. Some examples cited for hiring practices, wage negotiations, and village operators' responsibilities are drawn from the Vancouver Island operators, whose relation to the GTS resembled quite closely that of the eastern coastal villages.

4 My description of the tasks and obligations comprising the rural operators' job is partially constructed from interview and questionnaire responses which I collected from operators in small town Ontario. Questionnaire 1 was completed by a woman whose operating experience was gained in coastal Gaspé. I have drawn on these to the degree that they are consistent with the evidence specific to the GTS. Interviewees answered the same questions as those given in the questionnaire, as well as sharing their own recollections. Of six respondents and interviewees, all but one had worked as an operator between 1917 and 1930; one man's experience was in the late 1930s. References to information in taped interviews give the location in the interview tape of the relevant information by three-digit tape counter numbers. (Interview tapes and questionnaires are in the author's possession; inquiries are welcome).

5 See, for example, Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (1980), pp. 5-48.

6 Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood* (Toronto, 1976).



Source: *Sessional Paper 19*, Map No. 4. Only terminal stations and stations named in this article are shown; these are a small fraction of the total number of stations. Lines shown on the original map as "proposed or under construction" have been omitted, except for the Boulderier Island line, which was completed in 1904.

considered a contrasting way in which the causal links between skill, gender, and power have operated.⁷ When, for example, work requiring male muscular strength is deemed skilled but labour demanding female manual dexterity is not, “skill” seems to be something other than a straightforward descriptive term.⁸ Power may not simply come *from* skill, but may also enable some workers to establish their skilled status, a status which strengthens further claims to income and other rewards. Skill, then, may not be simply a source of male workers’ power, but may also be a label won in part on the grounds of masculine entitlement.

By considering the telegraph operator’s skill as something defined through the distribution of reward and recognition, we can see how labour may or may not be a source of status and power. The same competencies may be given different social meanings, depending on the markets, cultures, and institutions of a particular historical moment. For the rural telegraphers of the Gulf coast, the local labour market was a key determinant of the rewards their work could command. To hire a sufficient number of operators, the GTS superintendents had to set wages and arrange working conditions that would compare favourably or combine smoothly with potential employees’ other options, resources, and responsibilities (often patterned by gender). In addition, the GTS operators benefitted from their relationship with their communities, a relationship more significantly shaped by geography than by gender. Finally, operators’ “skill” was defined by their place in the power structure of their families. In this last dimension of skill definition, as with the labour market, women operators’ relation to skill was set by their gender.

The GTS operators were employed by a telegraph service that provided both links between neighbouring villages and connections to the “outside” world. The volume of messages transmitted on the system was generally light, but when the lines failed (as they often did in rural services), operators performed marathon sessions to clear the accumulated business.⁹ Sometimes, then, the rural operators had to handle large numbers of messages; however, more than this sort of productivity (highly valued in the urban industry), rural operating required reliability and conscientious devotion to the work. Operators were called upon

7 Some examples of this literature are Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London, 1983) and Sonya O. Rose, “‘Gender at Work’: Sex, Class and Industrial Capitalism”, *History Workshop Journal*, 22 (1986), esp. pp. 119-20. Theoretical discussion and summaries of the literature can be found in Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, “Sex and Skill: Notes towards a Feminist Economics”, *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), pp. 79-88; Jane Gaskell, “Conceptions of Skill and the Work of Women: Some Historical and Political Issues”, *Atlantis*, 8 (1983), pp. 11-25; and Joy Parr, “Nature and Hierarchy: Reflections on Writing the History of Women and Children”, *Atlantis*, 11 (1985), pp. 39-44.

8 A concise example concerning textile workers is given in Parr, “Nature and Hierarchy”, p. 42.

9 Questionnaire 1, answers 5, 37; Questionnaire 3, answer 37.

in emergencies — illness, accidents, and disasters — and proved their worth by being ready at their stations.¹⁰ In operating the telegraph, they handled an important vehicle of business between the country people and the rest of the world; both competence in handling messages and discretion concerning the message contents were parts of the operator's job.¹¹ Acting also as cashier and bookkeeper, and even maintaining the chemical batteries which powered the lines, the rural operator exercised a rich variety of competencies in his or her work.¹²

The operators employed by the GTS came from among the local population along the Gulf of St. Lawrence's shores. Unlike the rural branches of commercial companies, the GTS could not get its initial employees from the railroads: when the GTS lines were established in the 1880s, no rails served these remote areas. With high wages, the GTS might have attracted transient operators, as they did later in the Yukon (and as some commercial companies had done in the 19th century). However, in the east the GTS chose instead to train local people.¹³ Potential telegraph operators were abundantly available. The region, by 1900, had long-standing, fishery-based communities along the coast. Families were large, and the weakness of the local economy meant that many people had to

- 10 Questionnaire 1, answer 13; Interview 2, side A, 210-222; S.S. Burke to J.E. Gobeil (General Superintendent), 4 June 1929, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2817, file F523-1, NAC.
- 11 Interview 2, side A, 223-232; reference to politeness as a quality of a good operator, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2820, file F687, 1931, NAC; complaint re: lack of confidentiality of telegrams sent at Old Fort station, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2826, file F841, 1917, NAC; allegation that business messages handled out of Tofino are not kept confidential, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2795, file C779, 1912, NAC.
- 12 Questionnaire 3, answers 20a, 20b; Department of Public Works, Government Telegraph Service, *Rules* (Ottawa, 1889), *passim*.
- 13 Not all eastern operators were trained by the GTS: once one family member had learned, he or she would teach others. Thus, some learned Morse in their childhood, and others were taught by their children. Operators in other areas also learned from family, or from the local railroad operator. Questionnaire 1, answer 3; The McNicol Collection of Books on Telegraphy, Telephony, and Radio, Special Collections, Douglas Library, Queen's University, Item 483, *Canadian telegraph and telegraphers*, clipping from *Maclean's Magazine*, "Great Men of the Key: Prominent Canadians Who Started as Telegraph Operators" (no date), p. 65; McNicol Collection, Item 483, application of Frank William Conn to the Old Time Telegraphers' and Historical Association; Marjory McMurchy, *The Canadian Girl at Work: A book of vocational guidance* (Toronto, 1919), p. 59; McNicol Collection, Item 489, *Early Telegraph Rule Books, Constitution and Laws of Brotherhood of Telegraphers of the United States and Canada* (Chicago, 1883), p. 3; operator Mme. Carré to General Superintendent J.E. Gobeil, 28 January 1929, RG 11, vol. 2820, file F687, NAC; Thomas Raddall, *The Nymph and the Lamp* (Toronto, 1963 [1950]), pp. 22-3 (Raddall worked as a wireless telegraph operator for the department of Marine and Fisheries for a few years after World War I, thus acquiring a general knowledge of telegraphy and telegraphers in the Atlantic region).

move away at least temporarily to other, more prosperous parts of North America.¹⁴ The telegraph operating employment was attractive to some as a means to help a family stay together, or to others as a marketable competency that facilitated individuals' emigration.¹⁵

The operator's job offered a source of income to supplement the revenue from independent commodity production — fish, pulpwood, furs — and the goods produced for subsistence. The economic mix of the North Shore differed slightly from the Gulf coast of Cape Breton: the North Shore residents were more dependent on supplies brought by the merchants to whom they sold fish and furs. Only the most limited vegetable gardens plus the minimally necessary livestock were part of their economy, as compared with Cape Breton, which produced wool, various grains, and even fruit.¹⁶ The North Shore communities were also more remote from larger population centers; no road or railway ran along the 1000-mile coast. Those parts of Cape Breton with which we are concerned here — Inverness and Victoria counties — were also without road or rail along much of the coast. However, the northern parts of these counties were at most 70 miles away by coast from the Sydney or Inverness rail terminuses — a much less forbidding distance than that separating the North Shore residents from Quebec City. In most respects, however, the constraints set by the subsistence/petty commodity production economy were similar for the two areas. In both, the people's partial reliance on subsistence production meant that the purchasers of commodities could pay less than the producers' costs of reproducing their labour power. Purchasers were able thus to exploit local producers because of their nearly total control of market outlets for fish and furs. In the labour market, employers had a similar advantage, because the low-paying, seasonal fishery made available a surplus of potential wage labourers. Hence, the price

14 Province of Quebec, *Statistical Yearbook, 4th year* (Quebec, 1917), p. 79. "Saguenay", the census and electoral district name for the North Shore, had a birthrate of 48/1000 in 1914, higher than all but one of the other 40 "pre-dominantly French-Canadian" counties analysed in this source.

15 One example of a migrating Maritime telegrapher is a Miss Peebles, whose travels can be pictured from comments in *Telegraph Age* (1 July 1902), p. 279 and (16 October 1902), p. 510. On telegraphy as a ticket out of the North Shore area, see RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2826, file F841, 1917, NAC. On providing employment to keep people in the region, see RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2824, file F760, NAC.

16 Louis Garnier, (C.J.M.), *Dog Sled to Airplane: a history of the St. Lawrence North Shore*, trans. H.A. Nantais and R.L. Nantais (Quebec, 1949), p. 197; A comprehensive picture of Inverness and Victoria county agriculture is given for the 1870s in M.C. MacLean, "Cape Breton Half a Century Ago", in Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, N.S., 1980), pp. 74-5. The continuation of this agricultural diversity into the later period covered in this paper is suggested in the data given by J.L. MacDougall, *History of Inverness County, Nova Scotia* (Belleville, 1972 [Truro, 1922]), pp. 32-3.

offered for work such as telegraph operating was less than a living wage.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, in these circumstances, the people of these coastal areas did not rely on one individual's income to support a whole family. Indeed, any one source of income was usually insufficient even for a single person. As a result, occupation was a changeable and multi-faceted category, and all family members contributed to the family's standard of living, in different ways according to the season of the year or the stage of their life. In this context, telegraph operating, carried on in a convenient corner of the house, was combined with vegetable gardening, child care, school teaching, fishing, or any number of either men's or women's other employments.¹⁸ The operator's job changed hands frequently among family members and among families: approximately 60 per cent of the names on the GTS employee lists changed every three or four years.¹⁹ Although some families kept the office for many years, this overall high rate of turnover suggests that the telegraph jobs were not restricted to a privileged group, but were open to any moderately reliable individual, male or female.

The GTS telegraph operators worked in a situation where the skilled worker's standard of full-time work for a family wage was not the norm. Nor was work divided between the sexes on the pattern of women always working unpaid in

- 17 Patricia M. Connelly and Martha MacDonald, "Women's Work: Domestic and Wage Labour in a Nova Scotia Community", *Studies in Political Economy*, 10 (Winter 1983), pp. 53-4; see also Alicja Muszynski, "Race and gender: structural determinants in the formation of British Columbia's salmon cannery labour force", in G.S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region* (St. John's, 1988), pp. 103-21, which shows how structural inequalities along lines of race as well as gender meshed with partial proletarianization to constitute a low-paid work force which was also hierarchically layered.
- 18 For maritime women's domestic and wage labour generally see Murray, *More than Fifty Percent* (St. John's, 1979), esp. p. 10; and Margaret Conrad, "Recording Angels: The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1750-1950", in Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History Volume Two* (Toronto, 1985), pp. 51-3, 55-6. Re: postmistresses and woman teachers in rural Quebec, see Le collectif Clio, *L'histoire des femmes au Québec depuis quatre siècles* (Montreal, 1982), pp. 290-92, 310; re: postmistress and domestic servants on the North Shore, see Pierre F. Casgrain (M.P.) to J.C. Elliott (minister of public works), 7 September 1928 and Mme. J. Carré (telegraph operator) to F.G. Sims (Superintendent), 8 December 1930, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2820, file F687, NAC. For various men's employments see: Garnier, *Dog Sled to Airplane*, pp. 14, 103; Elwood Hart, "Poaching for Salmon on the Margaree", *Cape Breton's Magazine*, 28 (1981), pp. 25-7; N.A. Comeau, *Life and Sport on the Lower St. Lawrence and Gulf* (London, 1909), p. 7; RG 11, series B2(a), vol. 1278, docket 201741, 1899, and vol. 1470, docket 247677, 1902, NAC.
- 19 GTS employee lists. The labour force turnover figure is based on the lists for 1904, 1908, 1911, 1917, and 1921 (federal election years). Along the North Shore, turnover among telegraph operators was considerably less, owing to the barriers to circular migration posed by the North Shore's greater isolation.

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and around the home and men working for wages away from it. Rather, all family members contributed to the common standard of living through wage-earning, commodity-production, and careful use of resources. Although labour was shared out loosely along gender lines, both sexes could fit the telegraph operator's duties in with their other work. Almost equal numbers of men and women were employed as agent-operators (see Table One).²⁰ In 1904, women were listed as somewhat over a third of operators, and by 1921, they appear as more than half. Moreover, these figures from the employee lists probably understate the number of women working as operators because the listed Agent-Operator was sometimes only the male head of the family, and not the individual actually performing the operator's duties.²¹ This feature of the lists also precludes knowing with any certainty whether or not the apparent feminization of the telegraph labour force was a genuine trend. However, it is clear that the GTS telegraph superintendents in this period were not motivated in their hiring by any preference for male operators. From their long experience in the industry, the superintendents were used to seeing women work in small, light-traffic offices. It is not surprising, then, that the GTS management used both women and men as operators. And neither sex was paid the male urban operator's living wage.

The complex competencies of telegraph operating commanded an astonishingly low price in the villages around the Gulf of St. Lawrence. On the Cape Breton lines in 1904, most operators were guaranteed \$50 per annum, supposedly paid as a 25 per cent commission on their office's total message revenue. The commission basis was quickly forgotten, because earnings rarely exceeded the guaranteed amount. Each month, the operator received a Department of Public Works cheque for \$4.17. This was the same amount paid in 1880; in 1921, 70 per cent of the GTS cheques still read "\$4.17". Many people may have found that this tiny sum failed to compensate for even the minimum basic responsibilities of monthly bookkeeping and occasional line testing. The North Shore operators were paid twice as much — \$100 per annum — as a straight salary, reflecting both labour market conditions and political circumstances.

The most important distinctive feature of the North Shore labour market was that North Shore families often moved inland during the winter to cut wood and tend traplines. To staff stations on the coast, the GTS had to set a wage rate that compensated for loss of income earned in these inland pursuits.²² One hundred

20 Operators on the GTS employee lists have been identified as women if they use Miss, Mrs, or Mde (or Mme), or if they give an unambiguously female name, like "Annie". If any woman used only her initials, as most of the men did, she was counted as a man.

21 See footnotes 47 and 48.

22 Report of Deputy Minister, 1905, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2851, file 1880-4, NAC; B.J. Banfill,

Table One
GENDER COMPOSITION OF GTS OPERATOR STAFF,
SELECTED LINES, 1904-1921*

	Coastal Inverness & Victoria Co.'s		North Shore West of Bersimis		North Shore East of Bersimis	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Number of operators (exclusive of opera- tor-repairers	115		44		81	
Female operators %		48.7%		31.8%		54.3%
Male operators %		51.3%		68.2%		45.7%
Number of operator- repairers (male only)	—		1		16	
Total operator staff for all three areas = 257						
Female operators = 44.3%						
Male operators and operator-repairers = 55.7%						

Source: Canada, Department of Public Works, "Government Telegraph Service", *Sessional Papers (Sessional paper No. 19)*, 1904, 1908, 1911, 1917, 1921.

* Lines selected were those named, at different times, Mabou - Cheticamp and Meat Cove, Bay St. Lawrence - Hawkesbury, North Sydney - Boularderie, and North Sydney - Meat Cove. Overlapping in the areas indicated by the names reflects changes over time in the extent of the lines grouped under each name. The lines to North Sydney do not include a North Sydney office. Also, please note that these figures do not include any data from the few accommodation offices (non-GTS stations handling GTS business) or from those offices (mainly lighthouses) linked to the GTS line by "telephone only".

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dollars was approximately the wages a man could earn over four to six months' time at a logging camp.²³ As well, the GTS was obliged to serve a political goal. Telegraph jobs had to pay well enough to enable at least a few families to continue living on the Shore. The political motive behind this policy was originally not any attachment to preserving communities, but rather part of the nation-building mentality expressed in the 1873 discussions of the North Shore telegraph line. The transmission of news via telegraph was to bring the area into "a moral or political connection" with the Dominion instead of its "mere material" one.²⁴ Later, in 1918, a critic of the GTS complained to the Minister of Public Works that the GTS "seems to be the principal means of livelihood to the community [along the North Shore]". He felt that the "public" tended to look on the telegraph service as a sort of "benevolent institution".²⁵ A few years later, the GTS General Superintendent defended the North Shore service to that minister's successor by making the same claim, i.e. that the service provided employment.²⁶ The politicians were not at all averse to getting votes for themselves by manipulating the allocation of essential services. As the North Shore's M.P. Joseph Girard said in 1911, "If the inhabitants of Natashquan will not forget me at the next election, you will get a wharf for your beautiful harbour".²⁷ Similarly, in Cape Breton, the sharing around of government jobs "served the people great. Brought in some money".²⁸ It also served the government not too badly, keeping a supply of inexpensive workers on hand and getting votes election after election.

Wages, then, were determined in part by a political attempt to provide jobs for constituents and (on the North Shore) to support the Canadian claim to this

Labrador Nurse (Toronto, 1952), pp. 24, 32.

23 Garnier, *Dog Sled to Airplane*, p. 150. According to Garnier, about 500 men from all along the shore worked in the camps around Pentecost and Manicouagan after sawmills were established at these two locations in 1903.

24 *Journals of the House of Commons Debates, Appendix 9* (Ottawa, 1876), p. 53. This appendix is the proceedings of the Select Committee to study the possibility of a telegraph system "to serve the river and gulf of St. Lawrence".

25 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2824, file F760, NAC. The critic was H.P. Robinson, President of the New Brunswick Telephone and Telegraph Company. He had been commissioned by the minister, F.B. Carvell, to survey the system, and in his report he recommended that most of the lines be sold to the Great Northwestern Telegraph, in which the Dominion Government held a "large and controlling" portion of the stock.

26 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2826, file F841, 1921, NAC.

27 Garnier, *Dog Sled to Airplane*, p. 134. Garnier reports that Girard "even changed party in order to have his share of the budget and keep the promises he had made".

28 Hart, "Poaching for Salmon", p. 27. Hart was referring to the fish warden job, which was held by a different person each year until the Civil Service reforms of the 1920s.

remote territory. And in light of their generally low incomes, it is tempting to think of these rural operators as powerless, essentially the recipients of government welfare. However, within the structural limits on wages, there was room for operators to bargain. Letters from the operators to the GTS make clear that these people did not see themselves as supplicants, but rather valuable workers with clear entitlements. Some women operators appear to have bargained as assertively as their male counterparts. They made their claims for wage increases on the basis of their record of employment with the GTS. For example, on the North Shore, Madame Carré of Hamilton Cove, by dint of frequent and insistent demands for what she called “a reasonable salary”, managed to have her income raised repeatedly, from \$50 per annum in 1929 to \$360 per annum two years later. She made her claim on the basis of superior competence, reliability, and contribution to the Service, and it was granted on those terms.²⁹

Not only in pressing wage demands, but also in other directions, operators exercised power based in part on their specialized labour. For instance, operator J. Fequet refused on various occasions to send messages for a local merchant, saying that “the telegraph office was privately owned and that he would send off what he liked”.³⁰ The GTS gave the angry merchant no satisfaction: Fequet was not fired. The operator controlled an essential service, and the leverage this gave was enhanced in proportion to the remoteness of the station. One Anticosti Island operator, assisted by the local superintendent, mounted a determined resistance to the projects of the Minister of Public Works himself. When, for some unknown reason, the Hon. J. Israel Tarte commanded that Joseph Stubbert be replaced, the local superintendent Herbert Pope neglected to carry out these instructions. When Tarte insisted, Pope raised various objections, some suspiciously irrelevant. When he intervened again, Pope finally acted. Operator Stubbert then telegraphed Ottawa to say that “Will not give up my office without being dismissed by you and fault proved. My time goes on till October [illegible]. If time not paid instrument will be stopped”.³¹ Only after many months did the minister finally get his way.³²

While specialized abilities played a part in allowing operators to deal with their employer from a posture of strength, another feature of isolated telegraph stations may have contributed to operators’ sense of power. The GTS office, although in fact government property, was often seen as “belonging” to a family. This is particularly clear from the North Shore employee lists, in which the same

29 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2820, file F687, 1929-1931, NAC.

30 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2826, file F841, 1916, NAC.

31 RG 11, series B2(a), vol. 1278, docket 201660, 1899, NAC.

32 GTS employee lists.

husband and wife, father and daughter, or brother and sister teams of male lineman and female operator served year after year at the same station. Among the North Shore's longest-term GTS workers, i.e. those employed for eleven years or more, over half were family partners. The pattern was particularly pronounced among woman operators living east of Bersimis, along the section of the coast where barriers to migration were highest. For example, of the 16 women in this group in 1904, only five did not work with a male family member. Another family pattern was the handing over of the station from one member to another: from parent to child, between husband and wife, or between siblings or perhaps cousins.³³ With this history behind them, many operators must have felt the same pride and entitlement as did Ingonish's Sid Burke, when he reminded the General Superintendent that "This office has been in our family thirty-five years out of the fifty [years since it opened]".³⁴ Burke used this fact as an argument for increased income, just as Fequet and Stubbert had used a vocabulary of ownership in fighting for control of their jobs. Although the GTS superintendents ultimately had the right to take the telegraph office away from whomever they chose, this right was a distant phantom to the operators. For them, the daily reality was that the office was theirs to control.

The confidence that underlay these operators' relations with their employer came, at least in part, from the fact that they did not depend entirely on this one source of income. Madame Carré, like operators M.A. Gagnon and Madame L'Italien, were also paid as telegraph operators for local sawmills.³⁵ Others had additional income from other government departments such as the Postmaster General or Marine and Fisheries.³⁶ Sid Burke of Ingonish for a time did quite well as a merchant, owning a lobster processing factory and employing other men to fish for him.³⁷ A North Shore lineman, François Gallienne, was also an

33 For example, the Bergeronnes at Cap à l'Aigle (mother to daughter), the Poulins at Pointe des Monts (father to son), the Burkes at Ingonish (father-in-law to daughter-in-law to husband), the Livingstons at Big Bras d'Or (mother to son), the McDonalds at Indian Brook (Annie to Sadie...sisters?), the Puizes at Mille Vaches (husband to wife). These examples are drawn from GTS employee lists 1904, 1908, and 1911.

34 S.S. Burke to J.E. Gobeil (General Superintendent), 4 June 1929, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2817, file F523-1, NAC.

35 Burgess to Gobeil, 25 July 1928, and Carré to Sims, 8 December 1930; Couturier to GTS Superintendent, September 1938, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2820, file F687, and vol. 2826, file F841, NAC.

36 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2824, file 760, 1917; vol. 2851, file 1880-4; series B2(b), vol. 2000, subject register 17, December 1902, NAC; Comeau, *Life and Sport* p. 7.

37 Bowden Murphy, "24 Years Splitting Fish", *Cape Breton's Magazine*, 34 (1983), inside front cover.

employer as part of his fur trading activities.³⁸ Jackie Fequet, too, was a fur trader, and Madame Carré employed a domestic servant (paying what she felt were extortionate wages).³⁹

Thus, unlike urban operators, the operators along the coast were partially independent of their employer; moreover, some operators were themselves employers and through that experience may have developed their tactics for wage bargaining. Their power as individuals in relation to their employer came in part from their abilities as Morse operators, but was also shaped by the geographic isolation and occupational flexibility of their region. Like one village operator who claims (wrongly) that no telegraphers' union existed during her time in Gaspé (1916-1923), the operators studied here made no use of collective organization.⁴⁰ Unlike operators in the GTS's Yukon Territory branch, the eastern operators were not active in the Commercial Telegraphers' Union of America (CTUA).⁴¹ Perhaps the CTUA's organizing efforts among the less well-paid eastern operators were minimal. Whatever the reason, the power the eastern operators had was based on their individual or family resources.

Their relation as workers to their communities was in part similar to that of village operators elsewhere in Canada, and in part distinctively shaped by the local economy, the geography, and the GTS. Unlike urban operators, those working along the coast shared with village operators elsewhere a comparatively direct and close contact with their customers, opening their homes to a clientele composed mainly of friends, neighbours, and relatives. More particular to the GTS was the fact that many of those with messages to send may well have had the GTS agency themselves for a time, and could judge from personal experience the competency of the operator's work. If an operator was competent by the neighbours' standards, his or her community status would be high. Of course, operators had many diverse sources of status, some of which contributed initially to their appointment to an operator position. Although sources do not permit a thorough description of operators' place among the social strata, it seems that small merchants and traders were well-represented, at least among the men operators. But whatever their other sources of status or power, operators' competent performance in telegraphy could enhance their community status, because they provided many valuable services. Remote villages, being without

38 RG 11, series B2(a), vol. 1278, docket 201741, 1899, NAC.

39 Louise Abbott, *The Coast Way: A portrait of the English on the Lower North Shore of the St. Lawrence* (Kingston, 1988), p. 20. Carré to Sims, 8 December 1930, RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2820, file F687, NAC.

40 Questionnaire I, answer 17.

41 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2824, file F760, August 1918, NAC.

newspapers, relied on the telegrapher for essential information, such as current cod prices or the location of seals.⁴² Also, the GTS allowed their operators to send urgent personal or social messages at no charge.⁴³ As a result, operators were a clearing house for news on travelling conditions and community events, everything from the date of a funeral to the movements of the “beauty specialist” along the coast.⁴⁴ A former operator commenting on small town telegraph offices in Ontario made remarks which probably applied equally to these coastal operators: “You had a certain standing in your neighbourhood, as you were helping people keep in contact”.⁴⁵

The community’s assessment of the local telegraph operator was based largely on direct knowledge of his or her actual performance. Such close links with customers worked to the woman operator’s advantage, militating against the construction of an artificially extreme distinction between masculine and feminine abilities. If gender was relevant at all in assessing the competencies of these operators, it may have biased the customers in favour of women operators. In circumstances where women’s home responsibilities kept them near the key, customers probably found them more reliably available than men operators.⁴⁶ Inasmuch, then, as their labour was rewarded by community recognition, women operators in the coastal villages could be seen as “skilled”.

But another feature of the domestically-based telegraph office undermined this definition. The GTS records offer a variety of indications that, in the family economy, women’s labour was under the control of fathers and husbands. For one, men’s names were sometimes given on the employee lists as Agent-Operator, when GTS correspondence shows that these men’s wives or daughters were actually filling this role.⁴⁷ The prevalence of this practice is confirmed by the observation of one GTS General Superintendent, who wrote that: “in many cases in Cape Breton a man is often appointed Agent Operator while his wife does the actual work”.⁴⁸ Even if the office was in a woman’s name, she did not

42 Garnier, *Dog Sled to Airplane*, p. 54; Quebec City Board of Trade to GTS, 1 March 1890, RG 11, series B2(b), vol. 1995, subject 17, NAC.

43 The Government Telegraph Service, Department of Public Works, Dominion of Canada, *Rules* (Ottawa, 1889), p. 17.

44 Banfill, *Labrador Nurse*, pp. 89, 133, 195.

45 Questionnaire 3, answer 12.

46 Whether or not this was so must have depended on the circumstances of particular families. My sense that it may have been a general pattern is based on the preferences implied and assumptions expressed by a telegraph superintendent familiar with Cape Breton: RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2817, file 523-1, 1922, 1924, and 1927, NAC.

47 RG 11, series B2(a), vol. 1260, docket 198821, 1899, and vol. 1470, docket 247677, 1902, NAC.

48 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2817, file 523-1, 1927, NAC.

necessarily control the income from it. For example, according to the local M.P. for the Saguenay, one Mrs. Villeneuve was trained and given an office as “a way of increasing a salary” — her husband’s.⁴⁹ In an instance from elsewhere on the North Shore, a father clearly thought he had the right to treat his daughter’s labour as another resource at his disposal. Applying for a telegraph office, he offered to supply poles for free and similarly offered to have his daughter work as operator without a salary.⁵⁰ This reveals what Veronica Beechey has argued was the true face of the rural family economy; she writes that “the male head of the household controlled the labour process within the domestic economy, and women were clearly subordinate to their husband’s or father’s patriarchal authority”.⁵¹ For the GTS operators, this paternal control meant not only a limit on their autonomy, but also a loss of income. When the father was listed as the agent-operator, the paycheque was made out in his name, regardless of who did the work.

The woman operator in the coastal villages around the Gulf clearly made a significant contribution to the family’s prosperity. To earn even as little as \$50 was to provide a substantial proportion of the cash at the family’s disposal. But unlike their urban sister operators, these village telegraphers often lacked even the option (however difficult) of living on their own income outside the family. The rewards of their labour were likely to be directly appropriated by the male family head. For a woman thus submerged in the family, the measure of skill was set in part by her father, who stood in her place as Agent-Operator for the purposes of negotiating with the GTS. In this way, the power relations in the family economy in effect severed the tie between labour and authority, and broke the tenuous link between ability and the rewards of skill.

However, the situation of these women telegraphers was not thoroughly degraded. For in another way, their labour was more readily rewarded than that of their urban counterparts. Women telegraphers encountered in city offices a craft sub-culture in which women’s abilities were routinely compared unfavourably to men’s. So-called “women’s Morse” was described as “nervous”, “jerky”; or “unmusical”.⁵² In large part, these descriptions corresponded to gender

49 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2820, file F686, 1916, NAC.

50 RG 11, series B3(c), vol. 2807, file E205, 1910, NAC.

51 Veronica Beechey, “The sexual division of labour and the labour process: a critical assessment of Braverman”, in Stephen Wood, ed., *The Degradation of Work?: Skill, deskilling and the labour process* (London, 1982), p. 58; This is also the view taken by le collectif Clio in their chapter entitled “Travailleuses invisible ou presque”, in *L’histoire des femmes au Québec*, p. 311. By “patriarchal authority”, I take Beechey to mean, in this context, authority based in entitlements systematically associated with the position of father and husband, and accruing to all men by virtue of their apparent candidacy for these social/biological positions.

52 My discussion of urban operators here summarizes chapter two of my “Canadian Telegraphers,

stereotypes, and were dismissed by some women operators as such. To some extent, though, they had a basis in fact. Women operators had fewer opportunities for training in their youth, and were less likely to have continued working after marriage. In general, then, women operators in urban offices were likely to have had less experience than their male peers. Only practice could make an operator fast, fluent, and precise; therefore, barriers to women operators' acquiring experience helped create *de facto* support for the assumption that women could not be highly skilled. The actual existence of female exceptions to this rule was a source of perplexity to which male operators responded with reflections in prose and poetry, most often re-asserting the "natural" order of gender hierarchy.

Women operators in the coastal villages were spared the denial of their skill in this particular ideological form. The conditions for a craft sub-culture were absent in the GTS. The woman operator shared the circuit with people who, like herself, were not defined occupationally as a telegrapher, pure and simple. Around the Gulf, telegraphy was not a "fraternity" from whose status-granting ranks she could be excluded. Recognition of her skill came from those she served. The GTS paymaster might remain ignorant of her existence, but her neighbours knew who did the operator's work and how well that work was done. Moreover, her neighbours had no legitimate reason to expect women to be inferior operators. Unlike their urban peers, these women operators were likely to have learned Morse as children in the corner of the house where their mothers, brothers, or older sisters handled the key. Equally equipped with training and experience, the women operators of the coastal villages could expect, if not the full financial rewards of skill, at least a good measure of recognition and respect.

If skill is defined as competencies which are granted social and economic rewards, then these women operators seem to have been granted skilled status in their communities. It seems likely that appreciation of their work was closely linked to the quality of performance, rather than denigrated in craft culture. As well, they shared with their male fellow operators an ability, although a limited one, to claim from their employer the economic rewards of skill. Yet, in status, power, and income, they were clearly different from the skilled worker with whom we are familiar from histories of urban printers, metal workers, or railway running trades, at the turn of the 20th century. The rural operators' status had less to do with an occupational identity than with the service they gave; their power lay, not in craft organization, but in personal dealings and, very likely, party loyalties; their income was a small fraction of their urban counterparts'. Undoubtedly, they exercised complex competencies in their work; however, they

did not share the strategic resources of skilled workers elsewhere. So when women telegraphers achieved skilled status in the impoverished periphery of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, they did so in a context where the political-economic category “skilled worker”, as it was known elsewhere at the time, did not exist.

Lacking the opportunities for craft-based power afforded in Canada’s industrial centre, women operators shared with their community the undervaluing of their labour. The wages paid women telegraph operators were not different than men’s; they were equally low. Even so, women’s wages were a necessary part of the family income, and these women had every reason to take pride in their contribution to their family’s economic well-being. But pride in one’s economic role, although potentially empowering, has no necessary connection to control over conditions of work, wage rates, the ownership of one’s income, or even the choice of occupation. In the first two of these issues, the women coastal telegraphers’ power was constrained in part by limits imposed on women and men alike by the facts of the region’s economic history. In choice of occupation and control of income, however, the family-based semi-subsistence economy exacted particular costs from women.