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Realities and Reflections: Women and the Yukon Frontier During the Alaska Highway Period

by

Dawn Dorothy Nickel 

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History

Department of History and Classics

Edmonton, Alberta
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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the many factors that influenced women during the Alaska Highway period is imperative to understand not only how women experienced events but also how women's presence has been historically constructed since that time. An examination of the impact of gender on both women's actual experiences and their retrospective reflections about them is particularly revealing. Women did not necessarily see themselves as playing "support" roles but felt that they were important contributors to what was taking place in that unique time and place. And the Yukon also contributed something meaningful to women in return, leaving a lasting impression that in a struggle with femininity in a vastly masculine arena they had been able to escape traditional gender restrictions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Several very important and special women from the University of Alberta have inspired and supported me through this degree and the one preceding. I am particularly indebted to the late Winnie Tomm, Karen Hughes, Susan Smith and most of all to Frances Swyripa, not just for being there "when the lights came on" but for all of the wiring and engineering she had to do to flip my switch.

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INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE STAGE

> Women played an important support role in the building of the highway. They worked as cooks, clerks, secretaries, nurses and some even drove trucks. Wherever they went along the road they brought smiles and memories of home to the men.[1]

The above quote from the documentary film, *The Alaska Highway, 1942-1992*, typifies how women's presence in Canada's northwest during the Alaska Highway period has been represented in most historical accounts. (It is the only reference made to women in the film.) Although largely a male endeavour, the building of the highway did prompt a significant number of women to migrate north. Their experiences have been largely either ignored in what are essentially accounts of an epic saga or remembered only in terms of what their presence meant to the men along the road.

Alaska Highway women were the second wave of white female migrants to the Yukon. Women had previously travelled to the region at the turn of the twentieth century to participate in the territory's best known "epic," the Klondike Gold Rush, which had begun in 1898. As with their predecessors, Alaska Highway women were drawn to the northwest for a variety of reasons - money, men, and adventure - and similar to the first wave, their numbers fluctuated at different points in time. The major difference for migrants in the Alaska Highway period compared to the Klondike

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[1] *The Alaska Highway, 1942-1992* (Anchorage: KAKM Video, 1992), videocassette.

Gold Rush was that they encountered an existing community of white women.

For the purposes of this thesis, the Alaska Highway era or period falls naturally into two phases. The first is the "American" phase, from 1942 to 1946, when the road was being built under the auspices and direction of the American army and the American Public Roads Administration (PRA). The second or "Canadian" phase began in April 1946, when the Canadian army's Royal Canadian Engineers took over maintenance of the highway. The military maintained control over the highway until 1964 when responsibility was transferred to the Department of Public Works. That both phases, American and Canadian, were military in nature is significant. Highway administration and operations were male dominated and bureaucratically controlled. Women constituted such a minority as to be lost or invisible in the crowds of men (certainly in the historical record), or, conversely, treated (according to the women themselves) as more precious than gold in the Klondike.

An analysis of the many factors that influenced women during the Alaska Highway period is imperative to understand not only how women experienced events but also how women's presence has been historically constructed since that time. An examination of the impact of gender on both women's actual experiences and their retrospective reflections about them is particularly revealing. Women did not necessarily see themselves as playing "support" roles but felt that they were important

contributors to what was taking place in that unique time and place. And the Yukon also contributed something meaningful to women in return, leaving a lasting impression that in a struggle with femininity in a vastly masculine arena they had been able to escape traditional gender restrictions. Women's allusions to the Yukon as "frontier," and pioneering rhetoric in their narratives also established their claim to their place in Yukon history.

In addition to uncovering, identifying and explaining the significance of the Alaska Highway era for white women in the Yukon, this study is important as an addition to Yukon historiography: the only other research that has been done on women's history in the region relates to the gold rush. A consideration of the parallels between the two waves of female migration also provides a useful basis for generalizing about women's northern migration patterns. On a larger scale, the value of the thesis lies in its contribution to mainstream Canadian women's history not just as a means of regional inclusion but also as a case study for the history of Canadian women during World War II.

The discussion that follows begins with an introduction to the social landscape of the Yukon as well as a brief introduction to historical and historiographical issues relating to the topic at hand. Chapter three focuses on women's concrete experiences during both the American and Canadian phases to explore the nature of women's participation and the factors which most heavily influenced women's lives. Chapter four uses women's

perceptions about their place in Yukon history, and the place of that history in their lives to examine how women's experiences and identities were informed by contemporary notions or constructs of freedom and frontier.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND:
"MEN, MUSKEG AND MOSQUITOES...AND A TRUCK NAMED SUZY"

The presence of the Yukon Territory in Canada's national consciousness is associated primarily with one brief event that took place one hundred years ago, the Klondike Gold Rush (1898-1900). To a lesser degree, the Yukon is associated with images of World War II and the building of the Alaska Highway (1942-1944). There are obvious, and even striking, factual parallels between the two events. Both were international phenomena that engaged large numbers of Americans in particular. Both were characterized by mass (largely male) migrations into the Yukon, and in both instances the migrations were for the most part temporary. Despite their short duration, both events greatly altered the human and physical landscape of the Yukon, with the residual population responsible for the establishment of an increasingly white presence in local communities. Just as the gold rush was crucial to the building of Dawson City, so was the Alaska Highway crucial to the development of Whitehorse, with the ironic twist that the growth of the latter led to the demise of the former.[1] Finally, social, cultural and political differences between Canadians and Americans, and the threat of perceived

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[1] See Ken Coates and Judith Powell, "Whitehorse and the Building of the Alaska Highway, 1942-1946," *Alaska History* (Spring 1989): 1-26; and Richard Stuart, "The Impact of the Alaska Highway on Dawson City," in *The Alaska Highway: Papers of the 40th Anniversary Symposium,* ed. Ken Coates (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 188-204.

American dominance by Canadian officials surface as common topics in literature from and about both periods.[2]

While the two events irrevocably altered the direction of Yukon history and the mindset of its inhabitants, they should also be considered in terms of their construction as romantic, frontier episodes in the territory's otherwise quiet history. It is this construction that continues to influence the psyche of northerners and non-northerners alike in regard to Canada's Yukon. The themes that emerge in the literature from and about the gold rush and the Alaska Highway periods support the construction of both events as pioneering epics. For example, the transportation theme, focusing largely on the difficulties, arises frequently and portrays both periods as male-dominated, man-against-nature type contests in the unknown, untamed and untouched land of the midnight sun. The depiction, in contemporary and retrospective accounts, of the hardships and trials experienced by migrant settlers in both periods is also reminiscent of the literature describing life on the frontier in the nineteenth-century American and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian wests.

The literature depicting both the gold rush and Alaska Highway phases of Yukon history is also similar in its omissions. Popular and academic writers did not, until the last decade or so, pay much attention to the history of the aboriginal

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[2] Sovereignty has dominated much of the scholarly literature on Canada's north. See, for example, Morris Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971).

population, women, or ethnic minority groups in the territory. Developments in the late 1970s brought a welcome surge of interest in the history of the aboriginal population but interest in women's and ethnic history has lagged behind. Native people throughout thousands of years of inhabiting the territory have become a focus of anthropological study; the work of Julie Cruickshank and Catherine McClellan is particularly worth noting. Both scholars position natives at the centre of their own history; McClellan concentrates on pre-contact while Cruikshank brings the topic into the twentieth century. Cruikshank's work is especially valuable for what it tells us about the history of Yukon native women and the impact of the Alaska Highway on their communities.[3] Ethnic and cultural complexity and interplay in Yukon society have not received the same attention, except for the demographic analysis of gold rush society provided by Charlene Porsild. She argues that "ethnicity formed the basis" of occupational clusters in Dawson City during and immediately after the gold rush.[4]

While the field of social history is slowly expanding the parameters of Yukon historiography, the literature is driven by more than just the abiding or emerging interests of historians.

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[3] See Catherine McClellan, *Part of the Land, Part of the Water: A History of the Yukon Indians* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1987); Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990); and Julie Cruikshank, "The Gravel Magnet: Some Social Impacts of the Alaska Highway on Yukon Indians," in Coates, *Alaska Highway,* 172-187.

[4] Charlene L. Porsild, "Culture, Class and Community: New Perspectives on the Klondike Gold Rush, 1896-1905" (Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1994), 63.

Key anniversaries of both the gold rush and the construction of the Alaska Highway have provided and continue to stimulate a wide array of popular and academic works. The 1990s have seen a proliferation of celebrations in the Yukon, beginning in 1992 with the fiftieth anniversary of the building of the Alaska Highway and extending through to the final years of the century, which mark the centennial of the gold rush. The Yukon tourist industry's packaging and commodification of these anniversaries aid in the promotion of the history of the Yukon as a pioneering epic, and sometimes inspire a romantic yearning for that pioneer life in the minds of non-northerners.

The Gold Rush

The discovery of gold on 16 August 1896 remains a topic of some controversy in Yukon lore. Myth and fact blend to suggest that the discoverer could have been one of several individuals. Some give the honour to Robert Henderson, an experienced miner from Nova Scotia who told an American miner, George Carmack, that there was gold in Rabbit Creek. The most popular version gives Carmack - camped out at the creek with his two native brothers-in-law, Skookum Jim and Dawson Charlie - credit for the find. Some versions have the wives of all three men present, and a less-often-told story has Kate Carmack, George's native wife, spotting the gold while cleaning up the dishes from an afternoon meal.[5] While who discovered the gold is open to dispute, the facts surrounding the rush that followed are relatively

straightforward. Other miners flocked to the area as soon as they heard of the find, but the real rush did not begin until those who found gold got off ships in summer 1897 in San Francisco and Seattle. The news of the miners' good fortune created the sensation that came to be known internationally as the "great stampede." Migration into the territory began in spring 1898, when the Alaskan and Yukon weather permitted passage over a number of trails. The images of thousands of stampeders climbing and reclimbing the Chilkoot Pass to transport their requisite ton of supplies, and the tales of the few lucky souls who packed equally impressive quantities of gold out of the territory, have long outlived the event.

Stories about the great stampede spread across the world initially as it happened and then as participants published their recollections and memoirs during the first decades of the twentieth century. Accounts written during this century also attempt to characterize the period and to describe the huge impact the gold rush had on the participants themselves. Pierre Berton, in the best known book written on the Klondike, equates the gold rush to a war:

> It was impossible to emerge from it unchanged, and those who survived it were never quite the same again. It brutalized some and ennobled others, but the majority neither sank to the depths nor rose to the heights; instead, their characters were tempered in the hot flame of an experience which was as much emotional as it was physical.[6]

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[5] This version of the discovery appears in Kate Carmack's obituary in the *Whitehorse Star*, 2 April 1920.

[6] Pierre Berton, *Klondike: The Last Great Gold Rush, 1896-1899*, rev.ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), 408.

Berton's dramatic conclusions are in keeping with his style of writing. But they are equally consistent with records and accounts left by Klondikers, most of whom were male, that suggest that for those who participated, the gold rush was often the most defining and significant event of their lives. And the women? Berton restricts his discussion to dance-hall girls who "enjoyed freedom to come and go as they pleased and to pick and choose among the men who lavished attention upon them," and to the prostitutes who were "white slaves in the proper sense of the word."[7]

Until recently, women's participation in the gold rush was constructed in a stereotypical manner, which, if left unexamined, would entrench women historically as bit players in the great stampede, for the most part (as Berton suggests) as prostitutes and dance-hall girls. In the 1980s, however, popular and academic writers alike began the arduous task of "mining" women's experiences of the gold rush. The most recent literature attempts to de-construct the myths and misconceptions surrounding the history of the women of the Klondike.

In *Women of the Klondike*, Frances Backhouse focuses on women's presence and work, concluding that women were "more numerous and more diverse than most historians would have us believe."[8] In his forward to the book Pierre Berton commends Backhouse for her "lively work," and suggests, without giving

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[7] Ibid., 368-369.
[8] Frances Backhouse, *Women of the Klondike* (Vancouver: Whitecap Books, 1995), ix.

examples, that she was able to recreate the female experience because of the surfacing of "more and more new material." Three master's theses and one doctoral dissertation have also addressed women's Klondike experiences, an encouraging sign of increasing scholarly interest in Yukon women's history. Three of these studies attempt to displace the myths surrounding women's gold rush experiences at the same time as they explore the construction of those myths. Much like Backhouse, some of these authors note how tourist literature promotes dance-hall images and stereotypes to characteristize women from that time and place.

The first academic study of gold rush women, Barbara Kelcey's "Lost in the Rush: The Forgotten Women of the Klondike Stampede," describes the activities, occupations and impact of women who participated in the gold rush. Kelcey also notes that while women generally have been stripped from "that short space of time when the eyes of the western world were focused on the Canadian North," the famous (Martha Louise Black) and the infamous (Klondike Kate Rockwell) earned a niche in the literature.[9] Such attention to "great women," or to "women's firsts," is consistent with the initial stages of writing women's

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[9] Barbara Eileen Kelcey, "Lost in the Rush: The Forgotten Women of the Klondike Stampede" (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1989), 3; Martha Louise Black, heralded as the "first lady of the Yukon," received notoriety initially for climbing the Chilkoot Pass during the gold rush and subsequently for her success as the second woman elected to the Canadian House of Commons; see Mrs. George Black, *My Seventy Years* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1938). Ellis Lucia, *Klondike Kate: The Life and Legend of Kitty Rockwell, the Queen of the*

history, which tend to focus on the most visible individuals or achievements. Given the dearth of written records left by gold rush women, Kelcey examines their depiction in male-generated literature. She finds that the men who wrote about their own gold rush experiences rarely mentioned the women whom they encountered. Moreover, the references were very brief, suggesting that for these men "women were simply unremarkable, hence insignificant and generally unimportant." Male writers who did mention women usually concentrated on their "sexual" presence, highlighting the perceived lasciviousness nature of the female Klondikers. Kelcey concludes that "compliments were rare" (and in some cases comments were clearly "uncomplimentary"), with authors making "little effort to portray the true influence of women or to describe their particular sphere."[10]

The questions that direct Kelcey's own research are:

> What was life like for the women of the Gold Rush? In what occupations, paid or unpaid, were women employed? What contributions did they make to the society and economy of Dawson? Were these women "special" in any way? How did their experiences compare with those of their ancestors who braved all the other frontiers of North America? To answer these questions requires an explicit belief that there is not only a difference in experience but that such a difference matters. It also requires an assessment of new sources, as well as another assessment of sources never viewed from the perspective of female participants.[11]

Kelcey's response to these questions is to provide a mainly descriptive account of gold rush women's experiences. The value of her work, which represents the second stage of writing women's

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Yukon (New York: Hastings House, 1962) is the only book-length publication on the person behind one of the gold rush's major symbols.

[10] Kelcey, 8.

[11] Ibid., 26.

history, lies in its unearthing of the lives of "ordinary" gold rush women. According to Kelcey, they "deserve to be part of the history of the Klondike Gold Rush even if their experience was banal rather than scandalous."[12]

Carolyn Moore also found that "in the contemporary Yukon, women's place in history is either glorified or vilified, and limited to the role of the prostitute or the noble frontier wife."[13] Her thesis, "Representation and Remuneration: White Women Working in the Klondike Goldrush (1897-99) and the Decade Following (1900-10)," analyzes the representation of prostitutes and dance-hall women from the perspectives of police and court records and middle-class writers of the period. Moore also discusses women who went to the Yukon in other capacities, as professionals (especially teachers and nurses), entrepreneurs, service workers and wives. She concludes that "salary and adventure were the most compelling factors" that drew women north during that period.[14] Moore is interested in the representation of Klondike women's lives and argues, quite rightly, that using archival sources to reconstruct women's presence during the gold rush can yield only partial truths. To her, the Klondike represents a "site of contestation," a "nexus point" in regards to women's place in society.[15]

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[12] Ibid., 202.
[13] Carolyn Ann Moore, "Representation and Remuneration: White Women Working in the Klondike Goldrush (1897-99) and the Decade Following (1900-10)" (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1994), 1.
[14] Ibid., 6.
[15] Ibid., 140

While the above two theses attempt to broaden understanding of women's gold rush experience beyond prostitutes and dance-hall girls, Bay Ryley's "Gold-Diggers of the Klondike: Prostitution in Dawson City, Yukon, 1898-1908" focuses explicitly on the women of the "demi-monde." Ryley situates her analysis within a discussion of the tourism industry's appropriation and celebration of "the most lascivious aspects of the Klondike gold rush."[16] The work is in part intended as a case study for a larger discussion of public morality, the regulation of sexuality, and its relation to community development. Ryley concludes that the circumstances of the gold rush were similar to those in other resource-based frontier towns (populated primarily by men) that initially tolerated prostitution as a "necessary evil" but clamped down once the community began to stabilize and exhibit more permanent settlement patterns. While acknowledging that the available sources are more "representative of those that rule rather than those who resist," Ryley insists that they yield sufficient insights to reconstruct a reliable profile of Dawson City's prostitutes and dance-hall girls.[17]

In "Culture, Class and Community: New Perspectives on the Klondike Gold Rush, 1896-1905," Charlene Porsild studies the community of Dawson City to determine what the gold rush experience meant for both men and women. Her goal is to explain how a community "is created in an isolated region and how it

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[16] Ibid., 20.
[17] Bay Ryley, "Gold-Diggers of the Klondike: Prostitution in Dawson City, Yukon, 1898-1908" (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1995), 27.

defines itself within the larger society."[18] Porsild employs qualitative and quantitative data to challenge prevalent assumptions about the transient nature of Dawson City. Rather, it emerges as a "stable, stratified, and cohesive community"[19] where both temporary and permanent residents demonstrated a "surprising rate of persistence."[20] This persistence stemmed from the establishment, by men and by women, of the institutions that they required for the well being of their families. In the process, officials, professionals and the service and commercial sector worked to create stable networks based on "culture, class and place of origin."[21] Ultimately, Porsild examines the variegated strands of Yukon gold rush society through the influence of class and culture on experience; gender is a secondary focus. If, as Sylvia Van Kirk, has suggested, "mainstreaming women into Canadian history" should be a goal of women's history,[22] then Porsild's succinct and successful integration of women into her analysis has met that challenge.

The aforementioned works succeed in deconstructing myths about Klondike women, which have, over the past century, been created and commodified for general and specific consumption. Through their empirical recoveries, Kelcey, Moore, Ryley and Porsild have either positioned women front and centre in gold

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[18] Porsild, 4.
[19] Ibid., 3.
[20] Ibid., 5.
[21] Ibid., 294.
[22] Sylvia Van Kirk, "What Has the Feminist Perspective Done for Canadian History?" in *Knowledge Reconsidered: A Feminist Overview*, ed. Ursula

rush history or integrated them into a broadened discussion of the era. Their extension of the parameters of the topic will hopefully invite further investigation and analysis. In the meantime, a consideration of the types of questions posed and general approaches adopted by these four authors is advantageous to a study of women who migrated north during the second big turning point in Yukon history, the Alaska Highway period.

The Alaska Highway

The Alaska Highway construction has itself been "constructed" as a miraculous feat of herculean proportions, carved in images of 30,000 men fighting and cutting their way through the unforgiving wilderness on fleets of diesel tractors, bulldozers, graders, plows, scrapers and trucks. To many, the highway symbolized cooperation between Canada and the United States, an "unbreakable bond of understanding between our lands,"[23] and a welcome idea at a time when most of the world was engaged in controversy and conflict. With the highway, North America stood united against the threat (real or imagined) posed by Japan. More narrowly, the influence of World War II on the Yukon during the 1940s cannot be understated: the building of the Alaska Highway as a defense measure was as important to the territory's development as the gold rush had been over forty years earlier.

Martius Franklin et al. (Ottawa: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 1984), 50.

[23] From an address delivered by American Brigadier General J.A. O'Connor at the official opening of the Alcan Highway, printed in the *Whitehorse Star*, 20 November 1942.

Political pressures following the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor on 5 December 1941 forced Washington to act. Previously it and Ottawa had considered proposals to build a highway to Alaska, but disagreements within and between the two countries over who would pay and which route the road would take had put the project on the back burner. In addition to building what was initially known as the "Alcan" Highway, the two countries formed a partnership for other projects. One was to upgrade existing Northwest Staging Route (NWSR) airfields. The second was to complete the Canol (for Canadian Oil) Pipeline to transport fuel from an oil field in the Mackenzie River valley in the Northwest Territories to a new refinery in Whitehorse before being distributed throughout the region. In an agreement dated 17 March 1942, the United States agreed to build the highway, pay all construction costs and assume responsibility for maintenance until six months after the war, at which time the Canadian section of the highway would become the property of Canada. Canadian authorities agreed to provide the necessary rights-of-way; allow free use of local construction materials; waive import duties, license fees and income taxes on American contractors and employees; and generally facilitate construction.

From its starting point in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, the highway wound a distance of over 2,500 kilometres through northern British Columbia and the Yukon before ending at Fairbanks, Alaska. It was built in two stages. The United States Army Corp of Engineers, employing 10,000 troops, went to

work carving out a pioneer road starting in March 1942. Approximately 20,000 civilians followed them, upgrading the highway throughout 1942 and more determinedly through 1943. They did so under the authority of the United States Public Roads Administration (PRA), which hired five large firms as management contractors; only one, R. Melville Smith Co. Ltd., was Canadian. The five large companies in turn had the authority to hire smaller contractors. As with the rush for gold over four decades earlier, the Yukon and its inhabitants were not prepared for the influx of close to 30,000 persons, mostly men, within a period of less than one year.

As efforts on behalf of these huge organizational and administrative undertakings escalated, the winds of war began to subside, and by the end of 1943 it was obvious that the threat of enemy invasion in the northwest corner of North America (if it had ever existed) had passed. By 1944 construction slowed and civilian and military personnel began to return to the United States. The last group of Americans working on the highway departed in April 1946 when the Canadian government took control of the Alaska Highway and NWSR airfields. Facilities for the Canol project were dismantled and shipped to Alberta for use in its growing oil industry. Yet despite the exodus, Canada's northwest emerged from the war years transformed.

At the same time that the highway was being built, participants and observers were recording the experience. Much of what was written had a propagandistic tone, perhaps attempting

to justify the expense of construction in light of persistent arguments that the highway was not really needed as a defense mechanism. The remainder of the literature was similar to that produced by gold rush participants, the writers aware that they were witnessing a unique historical undertaking. And, as in the gold rush literature, what was described was presented as a primarily male event. In fact, the female dimension of the Alaska Highway era is hard to glean from most of the books or articles written on the topic, whether contemporary or otherwise. The stories told are men's stories, with women, on the rare occasions that they are mentioned, reduced largely to the services or delights that they provided to men. Two books written in the early 1940s illustrate this point well. Seemingly as much fiction as fact, they present the building of the Alaska Highway as a hugely heroic and magnificently male American undertaking, and they make only passing reference to women. Appearing as they did, concurrent with the building of the highway, the books provide at least two contemporary male views of women's participation.

In *Road to Alaska: The Story of the Alaska Highway,* Douglas Coe proclaims that "this is the story of a great road, and of the men who built it," and focuses on the trials and tribulations of the army and engineers in their attempts to conquer the geography of Canada's northwest. [24] He makes only two references to a female presence. The first is to a truck named "Suzy," a hard-working

vehicle that "dies" as the construction of the pioneer road comes to an end. The second is to the women of Fort St. John, British Columbia, who opened a Red Cross hut complete with a piano for the American soldiers to sing along and who provided coffee and doughnuts as refreshments.[25] The pencil drawings illustrating Coe's book include the Red Cross hut. One soldier sits at the piano, another is playing drums, five more visit and watch; the cover of a magazine on a nearby table shows a blonde curly-haired woman, and a similar picture hangs on the wall over the piano.[26] The dominant impression is that to the soldiers, or perhaps more precisely, to men like Coe envisaging the lives of the men on the highway, women served two functions: providing comfort (as with coffee, doughnuts and entertainment) and acting (in photographs) as sexual substitutes or fantasies.

Philip Godsell's *The Romance of the Alaska Highway* reinforces this notion of the place and purpose of women in the northwest defense projects as marginal, decorative, and even frivolous, at least from a male perspective. In connection with the Canol Pipeline, Godsell writes:

> Activity literally boiled at Camp Canol. Every day new construction workers arrived from the United States by huge transport planes that winged down out of the sky. Pretty girl stenographers and blonde and brunette clerks tripped ashore, thrilled with the spirit of adventure, adding a touch of life and colour to the dismal background of Quonset huts, mud-encrusted bulldozers, mired tractors and tarpaper-covered construction shacks, as other girl employees had already done at Skagway and Whitehorse.[27]

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[24] Douglas Coe, *Road to Alaska: The Story of the Alaska Highway* (New York: J. Messner, 1943), 13.
[25] Ibid., 94.
[26] Ibid., 91.
[27] Philip H. Godsell, *The Romance of the Alaska Highway* (Toronto:

Godsell quotes one of the Canol supervisors as saying, "Just having girls around to look at has raised the morale of the camp."[28] Godsell also does something that few other sources do. He provides information about the number of women involved in at least one of the defense projects, when he discusses the mess hall at the Canol camp. He states that thirteen hundred men and some fifty women ate in the hall, where the "girls' tables were distinguished by having paper napkins."[29] How accurate this information is cannot be determined, however, since the book has no references to sources.

Arctic Issue, a small book of army cartoons published in 1945 and dedicated to the soldiers and civilians of the northwest defense projects is further proof that the presence of women was trivialized, and even mocked. The American cartoonist, Sergeant Harold Hubbard, devotes a four-page section to "Woman and War" in which each of four cartoons features female janitors pretending to be soldiers. For example, a cleaning woman carries a broom over her shoulder like a rifle above a caption that reads: "Look, Gracie, I'm a Wac!"[30] While this cartoon may reflect the fact that women were employed in varying janitorial capacities by the army and civilian contractors, it also pokes fun at the idea of female soldiers. American military personnel were not comfortable with the establishment of female service

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Ryerson Press, 1944), 205.
[28] Ibid., 205.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Sgt. Harold Hubbard, *Arctic Issue* (n.p., 1945).

corps during World War II, and Hubbard's cartoons may have been prompted by the employment of WACs (Women's Army Corp) in the northwest defense projects. A detachment of WACs, the first to be assigned duty outside the United States, arrived in Whitehorse in fall 1944.[31] The local newspaper described their duties as being those of "typists, radio, telephone and teletype operators, postal clerks, car drivers, Link Trainer operators and air operation specialists."[32] The trip itself aboard a C-46 transport plane was not without its drama: "For many of the girls this was the first time aloft, and rough weather turned some ordinarily peaches-and-cream complexions a sort of pastel green."[33] Again, women's presence on the harsh, predominantly male frontier is defined in aesthetic terms.

While we should not dismiss male-produced and/or -biased sources, we must also be careful to realize that they are in fact a male construction of women's experience. This observation begs the question: How certain is it that a female-authored source would provide a more accurate picture? Published in 1944, Gertrude Baskine's *Hitch-Hiking the Alaska Highway* is the only contemporary account of the era written by a woman. It recounts her experiences as a Canadian "graduate social worker" who spent several weeks in 1943 traveling along the highway researching the

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[31] "First United States WAC's Arrive in Whitehorse," *Whitehorse Star,* 3 November 1944.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Staff Sergeant Herman Silverman, "Wacs in Whitehorse," *Alaska Life* (June 1945), 43-45.

"human element" of its construction.[34] It is not absolutely clear what it was that Baskine did prior to tripping up the Alaska Highway. She does mention lecturing for the Association of Canadian Clubs, and it appears from one of her statements that her lectures focused on women:

> I was let loose upon an unsuspecting population and was telling women across Canada what I thought of them for not ousting men entirely from the political cornfields and taking their places in shaping the future of this planet; seeing that no crowd of even merely bridge-playing females could have made a worse job of it. Consider, two wars in one lifetime![35]

It is likely that Baskine lectured when she arrived in Fairbanks, but she does not mention any speaking engagements prior to then.[36] The first woman to receive a military permit to travel the Alaska Highway while it was under construction, she felt "thrown into a world where a woman, save as an object of interest and speculation, counted for very little."[37] Perhaps it was this sensation that led her to describe, in some detail, the lives of women she encountered in the small maintenance camps and the main administrative centres along the highway: who they were, where they came from, what their jobs were, and how they were housed. Even more usefully, she comments on the attitudes of the women to their circumstances and of the men to women's presence. Baskine's book constitutes an invaluable source for uncovering the female experience of the early highway period.

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[34] Gertrude Baskine, *Hitch-Hiking the Alaska Highway* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1946), 5-6.
[35] Ibid., 1.
[36] Baskine made only one reference to potential lecture dates; when her travel to Fairbanks was held up by poor road conditions, she was worried about her "speaking engagements" (ibid., 110).

Although much of the literature produced in the decades since the early years of the highway's existence continues to construct the period as a male engineering epic, the mid 1970s mark a transition in the way in which the era is perceived. In many respects the shift reflects the growth of social history with its emphasis on ordinary people and factors like class, gender and ethnicity. David Remley's *Crooked Road: The Story of the Alaska Highway* illustrates the transition. His research questions are perhaps representative of the concerns that have come to direct much of the material written about the era:

> When I first drove it [the highway] in 1964, I could not help wondering about the men who had built it. Who were they? How had they done it? Had they known anything of road building in the North, where winter is a world of freezing and crackling white things everywhere? What had they known of bridging glacial, braided rivers, of corduroying bottomless muskegs, of building road on permafrost? What happened? Who were the seven Corps of Engineers regiments, the civilian engineers, and the contractors who had cut the pioneer road through nearly fifteen hundred miles of bush in the short summer months of 1942? Why had they done it? Where were those men today? What were their memories?[38]

While Remley's approach is consistent with earlier accounts, he also claims an interest in the local people of the north and how the road changed their lives. During the 1970s other writers and historians were similarly motivated to start investigating broader aspects of the building of the highway.

Three specific factors influenced the shift in historical focus from a description of man and machine versus muskeg and mosquito to an analysis of the impact of the highway on the lives

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[37] Ibid, 29.

of the Yukon's aboriginal and non-aboriginal residents. First, academic interest in the Yukon's history was spawned in the late 1970s by the mere possibility of a third transfiguring event in the territory - the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, or the pipeline "that never was." Social and political activism spurred the interest that created the pot of money that financed academics and other professionals willing to investigate the potential effects of the proposed megaproject. The best way to predict its impact, thought many, was to examine the historical impact of the grandest of the northwest megaprojects - the Alaska Highway.

The second, and arguably the most important, factor in the adoption of new approaches to Yukon history was the arrival of Ken Coates on the historiographical scene. Coates was the first academic historian to examine Yukon native history in any depth. His earliest work explored native-white relations in the fur trade along the Yukon River.[39] In the 1980s he expanded his research focus to look at native-white relations in the Yukon up to the last quarter of the twentieth century, especially the attitudes of the federal government.[40] Coates has also collaborated extensively with William R. Morrison; together they

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[38] David A. Remley, *Crooked Road: The Story of the Alaska Highway* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), vii.

[39] Ken Coates, "Furs along the Yukon: Hudson's Bay Company-Native Trade in the Yukon River Basin, 1840-1893 (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1979).

[40] Ken Coates, "Best Left as Indians: Indian-White Relations in the Yukon Territory, 1840-1950" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1984).

have been described as the "reigning experts"[41] in the field of Yukon history. Their approach, as they identify it, embraces the two poles from which that history has been written. Coates writes as an insider, a former Yukoner motivated by the absence of historical analysis of the region. Morrison writes as an outsider, concerned with the evolution of Canada's attitudes and policies towards the north. In the last decade, Coates and Morrison have attempted to expand the parameters of Yukon history, arguing in *Land of the Midnight Sun* that it is more than just the product of two historical events, the Klondike gold rush and the building of the Alaska Highway. They address native resilience and white transiency, the boom-and-bust cycles of the economy, and the colonial status of the Yukon and its effect on the Yukon's ability to control its own destiny.

The third influence that has fostered historical analysis of the Alaska Highway period is the "anniversarial" factor. A review of Yukon newspapers from 1967 indicates that the twenty-fifth anniversary of the highway's construction came and went quietly. Perhaps it was simply overshadowed by Canada's Centennial celebrations, or perhaps the highway's American connections in a Canadian nationalistic, anti-American phase made it impossible to celebrate alongside the Centennial. The highway's fortieth anniversary in 1982, in contrast, generated both public and academic interest. A symposium commemorating the

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[41] Desmond Morton, review of *The Alaska Highway in World War II* by Ken Coates and William Morrison, *Canadian Historical Review* (March 1994): 112-113.

anniversary resulted in the publication of a collection of papers (edited by Ken Coates) in 1985. Most of the topics represent issues that have always caught the attention of those writing about the Alaska Highway but new concerns emerge. Five themes prevail: the logistics and physical challenges of building the highway, given the harsh reality of the northwest's geography; earlier road proposals and the military rationale for building the highway; Canadian federal sovereignty in the face of perceived American dominance; the postwar highway; and the previously unexplored social history of the highway, including the impact of its building on aboriginal and white residents. Coates makes no claims to a comprehensive history of the building of the Alaska Highway and hopes his book will encourage research in areas deserving further study: southern perceptions of the highway, implications for postwar northern development, the organization of labour and private contractors, and "many other subjects."[42] Presumably, the role of women who migrated to the northwest fall under this last category.

The fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Alaska Highway instigated another round of public and academic interest in the history of the "great road." Coates and Morrison wrote *The Alaska Highway in World War II*, an analysis of the social and economic impact of the war on the Yukon, its communities and its people. The book, published in 1992, is primarily a case study of the disruption caused by "occupying" armies. In a chapter

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[42] Coates, *Alaska Highway*, x.

entitled "Men, Women, and the Northwest Defense Projects," the authors provide some important information about women's presence in the region, but they focus more specifically on the "pathological side of sex." Given the absence of statistics "on friendly, disease-free, consensual sex," Coates and Morrison use government, police and army medical reports to examine assaults, venereal disease and prostitution.[43] Much of their discussion concentrates on sexual relations (consensual or forced) between native women and the male highway workers. While the authors should be congratulated for including women in their analysis, the manner of inclusion should be considered closely. The fact that women are discussed principally as sexual objects implies that in addition to providing home comforts and a visual distraction to men along the highway (as contemporary sources show), in retrospect they are also remembered or recalled for the sexual services they provided. That Coates and Morrison restrict their analysis to women and sexuality is odd considering the treatment accorded women in *North to Alaska,* Coates's popular account of the Alaska Highway published that same year.[44] There he uses interviews and correspondence with women to uncover some of the gendered experiences of individuals who migrated north to work on the defense projects. The two books share many of the same sources, demonstrating that Coates and Morrison had access details of women's lives outside their sexual experiences. Might

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[43] Ken Coates and William Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 143.
[44] Ken Coates, *North to Alaska* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992).

it be that women's personal recollections are equated with popular literature, while the topic of women and sexuality is more fitting in a scholarly analysis?

Another book generated by the fiftieth anniversary of the highway is *Three Northern Wartime Projects: The Alaska Highway, the Northwest Staging Route, and Canol*. Edited by Bob Hesketh, it consists of selected papers presented at a symposium held in Edmonton in 1992. The focus remains on men and machines, and the brawn and the barracks associated with the period, but new material is provided on the significance of Edmonton to the highway project, and conversely, on the impact of the highway on the city. While women were still not a priority in 1996, when this collection was published, the book broadened the context and arena of the Alaska Highway beyond the Yukon.[45]

The publication in 1985 of the memoirs of two female participants in the Alaska Highway adventure debuted women as actors in their own story. Phyllis Lee Brebner's *The Alaska Highway: A Personal and Historical Account of the Building of the Alaska Highway* is by a former employee of the Canadian management contractor, R. Melville Smith Co., at Fort St. John during 1942 and 1943. In reality, the book is much less a "personal account" than a recounting of military and political considerations in the highway construction period. Most of it is written in the third person and in a style which presents the story as "one of the

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[45] Bob Hesketh, ed., *Three Northern Wartime Projects* (Edmonton: Canadian Circumpolar Institute and Edmonton and District Historical Society, 1992).

most amazing engineering feats of its time."[46] The exception is one chapter (out of eleven) that discusses camp life at Fort St. John. Brebner never discloses much about her own experiences during her year at the camp, but she does provide information about women's work and social lives there. This description, however brief, offers some insight into how gender shaped the experiences of women working in construction and administration camps along the highway.

Hope Morritt's *Land of the Fireweed: A Young Woman's Story of Alaska Highway Construction Days* is a popular retrospective account of her experiences as a clerk for the Canadian Northwest Highway System in Whitehorse between 1946 and 1948.[47] Morritt's forthright style is very similar to Gertrude Baskine's and quite different from Brebner's impersonal approach. Writing so many years after the fact, Morritt depends on documents to assist with her narrative, making aspects of her work both reliable and useful for this study. In several places, however, she resorts to creative license and dramatic flair which, although ensuring a pleasurable read, has necessitated validating some of her information.[48] Generally, her detailed accounts of the nature of the relationships and comraderie among the women working for the

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[46] Phyllis Lee Brebner, *The Alaska Highway: A Personal and Historical Account of the Building of the Alaska Highway* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1985), 7.

[47] Hope Morritt, *Land of the Fireweed: A Young Woman's Story of Alaska Highway Construction Days* (Edmonds, WA: Alaska Northwest Pub. Co., 1985).

[48] I was very fortunate to be able to correspond with Hope Morritt, and her letters were an added source of information as well as a means for clarifying some of her comments.

Northwest Highway System (NWHS) provide a detailed picture of migrant women's experiences during the Canadian regime, just as Baskine was able to reveal what life was like for women during the American phase.

Although existing literature provides a useful starting point for an analysis of women's experiences as migrants to the Yukon in the middle decades of the twentieth century, much work remains to be done. This thesis represents the first scholarly attempt to collect and scrutinize the scattered references from and about women migrants of the Alaska Highway era. Reconstruction of the experiences of women who migrated to the Yukon and surrounding region during the 1940s and 1950s also demands the production of new research materials. Neither task is easy. Most contemporary documents were generated by American and Canadian governmental agencies. Although there are reams of memos, reports and official correspondence by and between political and military leaders, the amount of information on women to be gleaned from these male-based and -biased sources is negligible. One useful contemporary source is *Northwest News*, the newsletter of the Northwest Service Command, which furnishes some clues about American and Canadian women working for the army during the American phase. Newspapers published outside the region, such as the *Edmonton Journal* and the *Edmonton Bulletin*, also comment on developments in the northwest, although inevitably the *Whitehorse Star*, chronicling events as they took place in Whitehorse and along the highway, is more valuable.

Women are not big newsmakers during either the war or the postwar phases, but the small-town approach of this latter publication provides information about the social contexts in which they lived. Its front-page stories range from tanker movements and bombings on the front lines of Europe to increasingly frequent notices of "pretty" or "quiet" weddings taking place in the territory. Organizational records from institutions and women's groups that were either formed or transformed to address and accommodate the growing female population constitute an additional source of information about women's lives. The high level of transiency, coupled with imperfect record keeping and the complexity of the job market, virtually preclude plotting female migation, population and employment figures and trends in the Yukon during the Alaska Highway period, although the Canadian census is somewhat helpful.

One problem, familiar to anyone looking at the recent past, is that primary materials that might have been produced by Alaska Highway women are not yet available to researchers. Women's letters, diaries or other personal papers (if they exist) have yet to make their way into public archives. Such documents may end up with children and grandchildren for a generation or two before being deposited, if at all, with archival institutions. In 1992 the Yukon Archives did see a surge of donations from the fiftieth anniversary celebrations, but the few women donors supplied mainly construction photographs and memorabilia, not personal papers.

Given the dearth of contemporary materials available for analysis, this study must depend both on existing retrospective sources, such as the Brebner and Morritt books, and on related materials that filter past events through the lens of time. The fiftieth anniversary occasioned publication of a special edition of the *Optimst,* a Yukon feminist quarterly. Articles in the June 1992 issue, devoted to "Women of the Alaska Highway," provide useful descriptions of the impact of the highway's construction on Yukon communities and on the lives of both local native women and white women, whether long-term residents or newcomers. Despite its methodological challenges, the fact that the topic is from the not- too-distant past also affords the historian the opportunity to create new "documents" by tape recording interviews and soliciting written accounts through correspondence. Many of the women who travelled to the Yukon during the 1940s and 1950s did so as young women in their twenties and thirties. In the late 1990s many are still alive and well (now in their seventies or older), and willing to share their stories about that time in their lives.

Oral historians have long grappled with (and defended) the validity and reliability of oral history and its methods. Sceptics have questioned the problematic role of memory, arguing that the subjective and selective nature of oral testimony damages its credibility; some even suggest that retrospective

accounts have more credibility when written than when spoken.[49] I would argue that written and oral accounts can be equally influenced by subjectivity or selectivity, but concede that the fallibility of human memory after the passage of time must be addressed in this study. For example, archived tapes and transcripts already existed for several of the women whom I interviewed, and some information that they provided during my fieldwork in summer 1996 contradicted what they had said in the earlier interviews. These discrepancies seem entirely natural and understandable, and ultimately unimportant since they occurred most often in how the women recalled facts; their personal reflections about the past did not change from one interview to the next. Facts provided forty or fifty years after the event were tested against other sources; if the same detail or figure surfaced in three or more instances, I have treated it as true, unless otherwise noted.

The subjective nature of oral history is a plus not a minus for an analysis which seeks to understand how women perceived their involvement in the Alaska Highway saga. Alessandro Portelli has contended that oral history "tells us less about events than about their meaning" and for that reason has a

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[49] Much has been written on the topic of memory and history, specifically in terms of oral history. See, for example, Jaclyn Jeffrey and Glenace Ecklund Edwall, eds., *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience* (Lanham: University Press of America and Institute for Oral History, 1994); and Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 2nd ed.(New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

"different credibility" than written sources.[50] In a similar vein, Kathryn Anderson et al. claim that "as historians, we are trained to interpret meaning from facts. But oral history gives us the unique opportunity to ask people directly, How did it feel? What did it mean?"[51] The ability to ask such questions is even more important in the present instance, since so-called traditional historical sources are so few.

Oral history is employed in this study both as a vehicle to explore the Alaska Highway period as a female experience and to solicit women's interpretations of its meaning in their lives. Paul Thompson, a leading scholar of oral history methodology, is correct when he states:

> We need to keep always in mind our ultimate objective, which is to use personal memory - the unique power of personal memory - to interpret change over time. We need to keep at the forefront the connecting value of oral history and oral testimony. That to me seems to be its unique quality; oral history is a connecting value which moves in all sorts of different directions. It connects the old and the young, the academic world and the world outside, but more specifically it allows us to make connections in the interpretation of history; for example, between different places, or different spheres, or different phases of life. That is a unique power of oral history.[52]

The methodological and practical justifications for using oral interviews propelled me to seek out, through personal contacts in Whitehorse, women who had migrated to the Yukon

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[50]Quoted in Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, eds., *Interactive Oral History Interviewing* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), vii.

[51]Kathryn Anderson et al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," in *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences*, ed. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 98.

during various phases of the highway era. The snowballing effect of acquiring interviews took place, with different people referring me to women whom I could approach. In the end, fourteen original interviews were conducted. All but two women were Canadian born and most of them had migrated to the Yukon from the western provinces, with the exception of one woman who was born in Whitehorse, and one each from England, the United States and Yellowknife. Five women were single when they migrated, three were new brides, the others had been married for a number of years at the time of their migrations. Twelve of the interviews were held in Whitehorse and the remaining two were conducted in Edmonton. During several interviews I shared newspaper clippings as reference tools, during others the examination of photographs belonging to the interviewee aided in guiding the conversation. Although I took the opportunity to ask for clarification or additional information about some issues that I had researched earlier, for the most part the interviews were conducted very informally using open-ended questioning techniques. Besides sharing their personal experiences, some of the interviewees provided the addresses of other women whom they had worked with or met and I was able to initiate correspondence and receive detailed letters (in one case a woman's memoir) to add to a growing body of retrospective accounts.

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[52] Paul Thompson, "Believe It or Not: Rethinking the Historical Interpretation of Memory," in Jeffrey and Edwall, *Memory and History*, 11.

Joan Sangster emphasizes the need to consider women's "insights" from oral interviews in relation to other available historical sources and cautions that women's personal understandings must be situated within the larger social, economic and political context of the times.[53] To those ends the sources used in this study are examined alongside and against each other to provide as accurate a rendering of women's lives as possible. Chapter three examines the actual or concrete experiences of Alaska Highway women, while Chapter four explores women's perceptions and constructions, both contemporary and retrospective, of the period.

[53]Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, 1 (1994), 20.

CHAPTER THREE

FEMALE EXPERIENCE: "I'VE MADE UP MY MIND, I'M GOING"

Although the place of the Alaska Highway in the history of the Yukon is secured, women's participation in the highway's history remains unexamined. The more general debate as to what World War II and postwar conditions meant for Canadian women has focused on whether they were either emancipated or liberated.[1] Clearly, the Alaska Highway acted as a catalyst for change in individual lives, which in many cases meant increased choices and expanded opportunities for both resident and migrant women. Still, any claim that they were liberated by their experiences on the remote and isolated Yukon frontier would be premature. This chapter utilizes a series of case studies, or profiles, to argue that in addition to gender, women's Alaska Highway experiences were contingent upon whether they were residents or migrants, their nationality, their occupation, and their marital status.

The profiles that follow are divided into wartime (American) and postwar (Canadian) phases, beginning with the American's arrival in 1942 and ending with the departure of the Canadian military in 1964. There were key differences between the two regimes: the former was characterized by the upheaval, chaos and displacement common to frontier societies, the latter

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[1] Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "Pigeon-Holed and Forgotten: The Work of the Sub-

exhibited increasing stability and permanence consistent with the mature stages of frontier settlement. While emphasis on the experiences of women who lived in or moved to Whitehorse reflects the available source material, the lives of migrant women in the maintenance camps and other communities along the highway are also included.[2] The profiles help establish reality for women in the Yukon during the Alaska Highway period to reveal that in most respects they were just as restricted by socially accepted values governing femininity as women in other parts of Canada. However, there were also obvious social and economic incentives or benefits for women living in the region during the period.

On the eve of World War II, Whitehorse was a small but well-established town, joining Dawson City and Mayo as one of three small urban centres in the Yukon. In contrast to the rest of the territory, which was primarily populated by natives, whites dominated these centres almost exclusively.[3] The rhythm of Whitehorse fluctuated with the seasons, slow in winter and active in summer when social and economic activities followed the movements of the White Pass and Yukon Route steamers up and down

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Committee on the Post-War Problems of Women, 1943," *Histoire sociale/Social History* (May 1982): 239-59.

[2] Native women are excluded because they did not migrate *to* the Yukon, generally resided outside of Whitehorse during this period, and were unavailable for interviewing.

[3] Although in the late 1930s natives made up about 31 percent of the Yukon's population, their presence in the three urban centres was restricted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police except for short trips into town to make purchases; to visit the Indian agent, doctor or missionaries; to fill in as temporary labourers; and occasionally to perform for tourists. See Ken Coates and William Morrison, *Land of the Midnight Sun: A History of the Yukon* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988), 206.

the Yukon River. Throughout the 1920s the dominant mining industry's stability began to crack and by the 1930s the negative impact of the Depression forced both the government and private business to focus on a new Yukon industry - tourism. Tourism in the territory had had limited success the previous decade, but its future looked brighter with the introduction of regular air service to and from the Yukon in the mid 1930s. The advent of northern aviation lessened the Yukon's isolation, increased access to the territory and expanded employment opportunities for men and women alike. The slow but steady pace of life in Whitehorse persisted through the declaration of war in late summer 1939, and the first two years of hostilities did little to foreshadow the massive change that would soon disrupt the small town.

Yukon women were affected by and reacted to World War II in similiar ways to other Canadian women. At the same time, physical and psychological distance from the rest of Canada arguably muted the intensity of their activities and the degree of their identification with the national war effort.[4] The *Whitehorse Star* ran wire stories that ranged from battles abroad to women's increasing employment in "men's" jobs in Canada's

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[4] In addition to Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All"*, books on Canadian women and World War II include Jean Bruce, *Back the Attack! Canadian Women During the Second World War - At Home and Abroad* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985); and Carolyn Gossage, *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots: Canadian Women at War, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991). The article literature includes Diane G. Forestell, "The Necessity of Sacrifice for the Nation at War: Women's Labour Force Participation, 1939-1946," *Histoire sociale/Social History* (November 1989): 333-47;

large urban centres. Government propaganda filled the pages of the small newspaper, a good deal of it directing housewives to save, reuse, and recycle.[5] Local columns applauded the volunteer activities of Whitehorse "society ladies" who worked to raise money for the Canadian Red Cross and other war-related initiatives.[6] The paper also regularly announced the activities of the local branch of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) which had served as the chief organizer for the town's social and fundraising events since its establishment in 1914. In addition to raising money and preparing and mailing soldier comforts (notably socks and cigarettes), the IODE also assisted with the sale of Victory Bonds; by May 1941 the Yukon led all of Canada in the value of Victory Bonds purchased per capita.[7] Wedding announcements in the press increased, as did reports of local men leaving the territory to join up. A Miss McTavish, former matron at Whitehorse General Hospital, volunteered for nursing service overseas in September 1939;[8] and Miss Elsie Nightingale, a member of the IODE in Dawson City, joined the women's division of the Royal Canadian Air Force after it was formed in 1942.[9] Generally, however, very few women appear to

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Ruth Roach Pierson, "'Home aide': A Solution to Women's Unemployment after World War II." *Atlantis* (Spring 1977): 85-97.

[5] Catherine Holt, "Ads appealed to duty, glamour," *Optimst* (June 1992): 22-3.

[6] *Whitehorse Star*, 15 and 22 November 1940.

[7] Ibid., 2 May 1941.

[8] Ibid., 15 September 1939.

[9] Helene Dobrowolsky, transcript of panel presentation, session on role of women during highway construction, Alaska Highway Symposium, Whitehorse, YT, 16 May 1992, 5.

have left the territory in search of new careers or jobs opened up by the advent of war.

The early years of the conflict did little to alter the range of employment opportunities available locally to Yukon women. Even in the area of volunteer work, their contributions remained within traditional gendered parameters, while in many other parts of the country women could join female paramilitary volunteer corps. And while women in most other Canadian regions increasingly had the option of moving into non-traditional jobs, women who lived in the Yukon, with very few exceptions, remained in traditionally female occupations. An analysis of the 1941 census confirms this fact. (See Table 1) Approximately 11 percent of Yukon women aged fourteen and older participated in the paid work force, compared to a national participation rate of 20.3 percent.[10] Women remained concentrated in "female" jobs: as nurses, teachers, domestic servants, housekeepers, matrons and waitresses. Two exceptions were one individual in each of the "policemen and detectives" and "labourers" categories. In the field of clerical work, only one woman but forty men were registered as "office clerks," while nine women and one man appeared under "stenographers and typists." There were few professional women in the Yukon in 1941: eight schoolteachers (there were eight male teachers as well) and twelve graduate

[10] The Yukon figure is an estimate since the census categorizes women as fifteen years and older in the population tables and fourteen and over in the employment tables. According the 1941 census, the Yukon had a

nurses in the entire territory. Figures from the 1941 census also point out the small size of the Yukon population. In September 1942, when the Dominion government called for compulsory registration of all single women between the ages of 20 and 24, the number of eligible women in the Yukon would have been about 60.[11]

The seemingly casual acceptance of war by Whitehorse residents and the patterns of female employment were shattered by the attack of Japanese fighter planes on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and the American and Canadian governments' announcement of confirmed plans for the construction of the Alaska Highway which came at the end of the year. The arrival of the American army and civil engineers in March 1942 immediately disrupted the lives of Whitehorse men and women and they remained in upheaval for the frenzied four-year term of what Ken Coates and William Morrison have called a "friendly" wartime occupation of an Allied territory.[12] The town was simply not set up to handle several thousand unexpected guests. It could boast a mere three hotels and almost no other rented accommodations; only a handful of citizens had running water and indoor plumbing; and the stores, already low on stock that late in the season, would see their entire inventories depleted within weeks. By

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total population of 4,914 people; 1,761 were female, of whom 1,156 were aged fifteen and over.

[11] According to the *Canada Census* 1941, there were 58 women aged 20 to 24.

[12] Ken Coates and William Morrison, *The Alaska Highway in World War II* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 4.

June 1942 some 3,000 American troops were based in and around the town, by the end of the year the number had risen to 6,000, and by spring 1943 it stood at 10,000. While the American invasion demolished the relative stability and predictability of wartime life in Whitehorse, it also brought economic benefits. Individuals and families with merchant or retail interests prospered, and youth especially were presented with previously unheard-of options. Pearl Harbor and its aftermath pulled Yukon women, young and old, more consciously into the southern mainstream (as Canadian women working for a common goal). It also literally introduced the north into the consciousness of southern Canadian women, a lure to which they responded.

For local women, formerly predictable choices and patterns of marriage, education and careers were challenged or upset by the new situation. The American army's arrival in the Yukon exaggerated the already uneven sex ratio, which had, for the previous three decades, favoured males over females by approximately 7 to 1.[13] The young women of Whitehorse were for the most part delighted with the changes taking place, welcoming the employment opportunities as well as the influx of unattached men. Young people of both sexes pressured their parents to allow them to quit school to take advantage of the favourable job market, while some girls abandoned the classroom for early marriage after meeting and falling in love with one of the many young male migrants. The impact of the American invasion on the lives of

three Whitehorse women not only provides a glimpse into the personal, economic and social considerations that faced local women but also helps to establish the gendered landscape that migrant women encountered in Canada's northwest. The first two case studies examine the novel opportunities and choices confronting young women raised in the town, while the third shows how the life and routine of a relative newcomer (a professional woman) was greatly challenged and altered by the arrival of the Americans.

Gudrun Erickson is an example of a young woman whose career goals were tested, and social and family life transformed, by the changes in Whitehorse. She recalled the day the soldiers came:

> This particular day, when we heard that the train was arriving, I guess Dad and I walked down to the station and I just can't even remember how many cars there were. But all of a sudden there was just a walking sea of humanity. All these soldiers were just walking all over the place...It was something...it was just something we had never experienced or seen. Other people who had lived elsewhere had, but I'd lived my entire life up here, so I had certainly never seen crowds of people. It was really very overwhelming.[14]

Gudrun was swept up in the excitement and turmoil and within a short time wanted to leave school for a well-paying job. Her parents and teacher were adamant that she finish her education, however, and she graduated in summer 1942, the only grade twelve student in Whitehorse to do so that year. Moreover, she turned down a job working at the airline office and left Whitehorse in the fall to attend first the University of British Columbia and

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[13] *Canada Census* 1921, 1931, 1941.

then the Provincial (BC) Normal School. Although her access to the excitement engulfing Whitehorse was limited to summers spent at home between school terms, those periods left a lasting impression:

> Well, that of course was my teenage years, and I tell you, when you see a lot of young men around... it was a heyday, it was fun. Boy, I think it was just a fantastic time to grow up, I wouldn't have given those years up for anything, because there was just lots of good times.[15]

For teenaged girls, the good times were closely related to the new dating and social opportunities attending the male invasion. The company of young resident women was much sought, and their presence at army and town dances and clubs was encouraged, accommodated and even compensated. At the 98 Ballroom on Friday and Saturday evenings, for example, "stag ladies" were paid $1 for their attendance, while couples were charged $2 for admission and "stags" actually had to pay $3 to enter.[16] There was also any number of military social events scheduled during the week and on weekends, and when Mess or Officers' dances were held, the military would send a bus through Whitehorse to pick up and deliver young women who wished to attend. In addition to an enhanced social calendar, Gudrun's positive experience was likely helped by the prosperity that her family enjoyed as a result of the highway construction. Whitehorse hotels housed the top military brass throughout the

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[14] Gudrun (Erickson) Sparling, interview by Cathy M. Hoehn, tape recording, Whitehorse,YT, 18 December 1990, Yukon Archives 93/95.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Babe Richards, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 23 July 1996.

building phase, and the Erickson family's Regina Hotel was full to capacity (and then some) for a period of several years. Gudrun returned to the Yukon after completing her teacher training in Vancouver, and eventually married a man whom she had first met when he, a civilian working on the highway construction, had been a guest at the hotel.

Joyce Richards exemplifies other life choices that young women (and consequently, their parents) grappled with as a result of the changes in Whitehorse; she left high school for both a job and a man. Joyce's parents only half-heartedly accepted her argument that she needed a husband - a mechanic who worked for Pan American Airlines - to protect her from the thousands of soldiers who had descended upon Whitehorse. And although they finally allowed her to leave school, they stipulated that she earn her living for a while before getting married. As Joyce recalled, her parents never expected her to follow through and get a job, but with all the stores and businesses in Whitehorse hiring, she immediately went to work in the grocery department of Taylor and Drury store. She stayed only a few months until her wedding in July 1942. She was sixteen years old.[17]

From the perspective of nurse Corinne Cyr, the arrival of the Americans also had a substantial impact on professional career women. In late summer 1942 Corinne found herself in sole charge of a public health crisis and red measles epidemic when it

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[17] Joyce Yardley, *Crazy Cooks and Gold Miners* (Surrey, BC: Hancock House Publishers Ltd., 1993).

was discovered that the American army had brought more than change or opportunity to inhabitants of the small native community of Teslin. Corinne had left Vancouver in August 1941 to accept a position at the Whitehorse General Hospital. She took the job because, by her own admission, she was a young woman who wanted to get out of the city and was looking for both employment and adventure. Conditions at the Whitehorse General were fairly primitive, with nurses expected to work eight hours a day, seven days a week, and to fill in as janitors and cooks as required. While career-wise it seemed that Corinne had taken a step backwards, the opposite proved true when she was dispatched to Teslin to deal with the infectious outbreak, assisted only by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer, a Catholic priest, an Anglican minister, and an elderly native. The measles epidemic took six weeks to run its course with most of the 135 native residents of the community eventually contracting the disease.[18] The experience was, according to Corinne, one of her more memorable "adventures." For her, the opportunity to work independently was the best part of northern nursing:

> As a nurse, I felt quite respected in the community. Coming from a big hospital where you had supervisors, to a place where *you were it*, well, you had to know what you were doing.[19]

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[18] Corinne Cyr, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 20 August 1996; and Helene Dobrowolsky, *Law of the Yukon: A Pictorial History of the Mounted Police in the Yukon* (Whitehorse: Lost Moose Publishing, 1995), 156-157.

[19] Corinne Cyr, quoted in Joanne MacDonald, "Epidemic in Teslin," *Optimst* (June 1992), 5.

As was expected in that place and time, Corinne retired from nursing shortly after she married a local man in November 1943.

These three women felt that their lives were enhanced by what took place in their community during the early 1940s. The available evidence indicates that other Whitehorse women also viewed the influx of thousands of newcomers into their small town in a positive light. This attitude is partly explained by their belief that the disruption would be temporary, if not brief. Enterprising individuals anxious to enjoy the economic benefits accruing from the highway construction believed that making the best of such a crazy time was the least they could do in aid of the war. For example, the arrival of thousands of unexpected guests and extreme accommodation shortage in Whitehorse prompted one woman to open up her house to strangers, nightly renting out a bedroom as well as couches and cots in her parlour. She charged between $2.50 and $3.00 per person, suggesting that economic interests competed with her patriotic sense of duty.[20]

How women reacted to the influx of males is one story; how they responded to the arrival of migrant women may tell a different tale. Subtle tensions and patriotic divisions between the two groups of women might be said to mirror, on a small scale, larger Canadian/American tensions in the region around the defence projects. Despite political rhetoric that exalted the uniting of Canadian and American citizens in a common cause, the

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[20] Gertrude Baskine, *Hitch-Hiking the Alaska Highway* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1946), 294.

columns of the local newspaper hint at competition between factions for patriotic dollars and support. For example, while the IODE solicited funds to support the British Commonwealth and the Canadian Red Cross, other women, equally long resident in Whitehorse, aided the efforts of the American Red Cross when that organization opened an office and recreation centre in July 1943. According to newspaper accounts, the centre proved very popular with events attended by "soldiers, both Canadian and American, and gayly-dressed girls."[21] By May 1944 over twenty local Whitehorse women had received American Red Cross insignia pins in recognition of volunteer service.[22] British, Canadian and American patriotic interests may not have clashed, but they did appear to compete for volunteer hours and/or donations.

Aside from such partisanship, and inevitable tensions in the region given the magnitude of the task at hand, there was also a real sense of separateness between local and migrant female populations. Their division illustrates, in a historical context, a broader social principle in the Yukon which Charlene Porsild has described as the "inside/outside" dichotomy."[23] Others have also commented on this defining feature of the Whitehorse psyche:[24]

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[21] *Whitehorse Star*, 28 January 1944.
[22] Ibid., 5 May 1944.
[23] Charlene L. Porsild, "Culture, Class and Community: New Perspectives on the Klondike Gold Rush, 1896-1905" (Ph.D. diss., Carleton University, 1994), 38-9.
[24] During my field work in Whitehorse, I encountered some resistance to my research as a result of my current status as an "outsider," despite having lived previously in the Yukon for over a decade. Thankfully,

> A further factor strengthening community life is a mutual sense of isolation and a detachment from the world outside. The expression 'Outside' is a concept common to most settlements in the North and recurs frequently in social and editorial columns of the local papers. This expression is never used in a nostalgic sense as it is in smaller northern communities - a memory of better times and better places - but an expression of the strong local loyalties of the community as a whole with common problems, who share the same rigorous climate and feel an isolation from the rest of the nation and its problems.[25]

The local loyalties that resident women in Whitehorse felt would have been strengthened by the thousands of strangers, including several hundred women, descending upon their town. Although generally made to feel welcome in the Yukon, female migrants were, for the most part, treated as temporary guests by local women's communities. Although their lives were altered and affected (often for the better) by the changes attending the new influx, the women identified by pre-highway residency in Whitehorse collectively maintained a separate "town" identity. Moreover, with the exception of those newcomers who married locally and put down roots, the women who migrated to the region to work specifically for the defence projects did not usually join existing women's communities. There is no evidence of animosity between town and migrant women, but clearly an individual's identity was closely tied to whether she worked for "war projects" (army, airforce, Canol, contractors) or whether she worked or lived as a "townsperson." The distinctions between

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none of the women who agreed to be interviewed expressed any such resentment perhaps because they knew of my previous Yukon residency.

[25] Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *Whitehorse* (Ottawa, 1963), 27.

project and town women persisted throughout the war and postwar phases of the highway.

If adolescent girls and women living in Whitehorse found their lives turned upside down by the arrival of the Americans, women who moved to the region as part of or in response to the highway construction faced even greater upheaval. An investigation of migrant women's experiences during both the American and Canadian phases of the Alaska Highway provides an opportunity to examine women's reasons for migrating as well as the basis for analyzing the issues confronting women while in the Yukon. Generally speaking, the opportunity to participate in what they considered to be a grand adventure, with the added incentive of high wages and an incredibly exciting social atmosphere, helped to diminish most negative aspects of the migrant experience.

Women went to the Yukon for many different reasons. The majority of female migrants were young, single, and childless, although a handful of married women accompanied their husbands or took advantage of an opportunity to earn good wages while their husbands were stationed overseas. Some women sought the opportunity and freedom to explore aspects of themselves that they believed were being stifled elsewhere or hoped that the move would provide a chance for self-improvement; yet others simply wished to pass some time before they settled down and married. But most women who travelled the many miles to the Yukon did so with one major purpose in mind - the assurance of a well-paying

job. Like their resident counterparts, they found employment in jobs traditionally filled by females, most often in the service and clerical sectors. As Ken Coates points out, "there were precious few Rosie the Riveter types along the highway."[26] Indeed, there were less than few, as sources only ever refer to one American woman who drove a truck during the highway construction. The presence of the lone female truck driver is sometimes presented as typical of women's role (as in the film *The Alaska Highway, 1942-1992*) but in fact it is a notable exception.[27]

The American military machine that initiated and operated the war projects in the Yukon and surrounding region necessitated the hiring of a large number of outside support workers in clerical and service positions. In addition, the economic growth stimulated by the highway construction spurred the expansion of locally owned eateries, laundries and hotels in towns all along the highway, which provided employment opportunities for both female migrants and local women. For instance, by the end of 1943 the number of restaurants in Whitehorse had mushroomed from one to ten, and in Fort St. John from one to seven.[28] Some women travelled to the Yukon to establish their own businesses. In

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[26] Ken Coates, *North to Alaska* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 158.

[27] Reference to the female truck driver is found in *The Alaska Highway, 1942-1992* (Anchorage: KAKM Video, 1992), videocassette; Babe Richards, interview by Helen Dobrowolsky, Whitehorse, YT, 7 January 1991, Yukon Archives 93/95; and Hope Morritt, *Land of the Fireweed: A Young Woman's Story of Alaska Highway Construction Days* (Edmonds, WA: Alaska Northwest Pub. Co., 1985), 139.

Whitehorse, for example, the Hi-Way Café and other eateries were owned and/or operated by women; female proprietors also operated Burnie's, a women's clothing store of some renown, and Ivy's Beauty Salon. Such establishments also offered other women a variety of traditional jobs as cooks, waitresses, store clerks and beauticians.

The largest number of women employed in towns or in the construction camps along the highway undoubtedly fell within the various categories of service work, consistent with the rest of the country, which saw 50 percent of all working women employed in the service sector during the war.[29] Despite those numbers, the scholarly literature does not address women's work in wartime service industries, and studies related to earlier periods focus almost exclusively on domestic service in households, not on the laundry, restaurant, and hotel industries.[30] It is unfortunate, but not surprising, that with respect to the Yukon, few contemporary sources discuss the experiences of women who worked as cooks, bakers, waitresses, housekeepers and laundresses during the war. Only the odd newspaper article and one oral interview give these women a "voice." They are not, however, faceless. Some publications contain group pictures of women employed in

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[28] Georgina Keddell, *The Newspapering Murrays*, rev. ed. (Lillooet, BC: Lillooet Publishers, 1974), 181.
[29] Ellen Scheinberg, "The Tale of Tessie the Textile Worker: Female Textile Workers in Cornwall During World War II," *Labour/Le Travail*, (Spring 1994): 153-86.
[30] Frieda Esau Klippenstein, "'Doing What We Could': Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7

kitchen or maid service or as housekeepers; most appear to be in their fifties and perhaps sixties. Regardless of the low status traditionally afforded this type of work, the salaries being paid in the Yukon convinced women to uproot and relocate. One woman recalled her mother earning $150 a month, with room and board included, cleaning barracks in Whitehorse, while she and her sister made only $90 a month working in traditionally male jobs at McDonald's Aircraft in Winnipeg.[31] Even a "glorified charlady" from Quebec City employed in a highway maintenance camp, according to Gertrude Baskine, earned $175 a month.[32]

In addition to the economic incentive, service workers also found that a wide range of available positions meant that if one job fell through they were almost assured of getting another. Thus, and especially in Whitehorse, while most women sought the higher paying jobs with the army, they could easily move between those jobs and others in private establishments. It appears that different job categories earned different social status as well.

The variety of job possibilities and women's mobility in a service capacity is well illustrated by the experiences of twenty-four-year-old Inez Shulist, an American who arrived in Whitehorse on 1 July 1944, took one look down Main Street and swore to herself, "I'll never stay here." She had been hired by the United States Engineering Department (USED) in Seattle to

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(1989): 145-66; Marilyn J. Barber, "Below Stairs: The Domestic Servant," *Material History Bulletin* (Sping 1984): 37-46.

[31] Elva Bottomley, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 18 August 1996.

work as a waitress at the American air base, but with no immediate openings she took a job cleaning barracks. The job, she recalled, was not particularly strenuous since she worked for about three hours a day and was paid for eight. After a couple of months she quit and went "downtown" to the Hi-Way Café, earning less salary than she had at the base, but "tips galore." Inez did later return to the air base and worked as a waitress for several years. When she had been in Whitehorse for four years, her father sent an airline ticket and a telegram: "Come back to the States, you're American." Inez cashed in the ticket and was still living in Whitehorse in summer 1996.[33]

The other category of women's work that saw significant growth during the construction phase of the Alaska Highway period was clerical work. American and Canadian women, with and without training, took advantage of the hundreds to thousands of jobs that opened up in the northwest. This expansion of opportunities in the clerical field was consistent with national trends, which also saw a huge, war-related, increase in women's employment in this sector during the 1940s.[34] Whether their skills were exceptional or just acceptable, women in the northwest do not appear to have received promotions or even regular pay increases. They were still paid less than men doing the same job, and even the social status of an individual woman's

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[32] Baskine, 65.
[33] Inez Shulist, interview with author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 1 August 1996.

work position was equated with the status or military rank of the male for whom she worked.

Women did enjoy some job security in that regardless of whether they were hired by American or Canadian companies or the military, they were expected to sign employment contracts for one- or two-year terms.[35] The shortage of female workers in the region caused employers to think twice about trying to break the agreement. If a woman chose to break the contract herself, the only penalty imposed was that she arrange and pay for her transportation out of the region. Still, women generally appeared pleased with the amount of money they earned and usually compared it to the smaller amounts they would have received outside the region. For instance, a stenographer could earn an average of $175 to $250 per month in the Yukon, compared to $80 to $100 "at home."[36]

The following case studies of two single women (one a recent immigrant) working in the northwest explores important aspects of women's employment and progression in pink-collar occupations during the American phase. They also reveal how the women, both office workers, took advantage of employment opportunities in the north to fulfill personal goals. For one, the choice to migrate was closely tied to her sense of patriotic

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[34] Graham Lowe, *Women in the Administrative Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 48-54.
[35] Mickey McCannel, interview by author, tape recording, Edmonton, AB, 7 May 1996.
[36] Baskine, 65.

responsibility; for the other, the move was one more step toward personal self-improvement.

The idea of going north to work as a clerk for R. Melville Smith Co., the management contractor for the Canadian portion of the highway, both excited Phyllis Lee Brebner and appealed to her as something she could do to "help the war effort." The young Ontario resident arrived in Fort St. John in October 1942 and spent a year in the large communal camp that also served as the headquarters for the United States Public Roads Administration and Okes Construction, the management contractor for the American segment of the highway. According to Brebner, during the peak period of construction, the complex was home to about 100 young women from all over North America, as well as to the men who worked as administrators on the project. Although she does not say how she personally learned of or was attracted to her job, chain migration was an important factor in female mobility:

> As pictures and letters were sent back home and stories about the highway appeared in the newspapers, more girls applied for the privilege of joining the "Alaska Amazons" (as one reporter had called us). The contractors were swamped with applications. Surprised at the ease with which we city girls had fitted into camp life, the contractors accepted our presence, and gradually girls were hired for office work in the construction camps and not just to staff the base camps. Most of the girls ranged in age from 21 to 35, and earned $175.00 to $250.00 per month, with $1.25 per day being deducted for room and board.[37]

Indeed, jobs on the defence projects were much sought, with high wage rates being the biggest impetus to travel so far into

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[37] Phyllis Lee Brebner, *The Alaska Highway: A Personal and Historical Account of the Building of the Alaska Highway* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1985), 55.

the unknown. Female migrants were also keen on gaining clerical experience and regarded the northwest as a place to learn new job skills and perhaps even advance their careers. Still, hopes for significant advancement were rarely realized and previous workplace trends that feminized and proletarianized tasks associated with female office-machine operators[38] continued to operate in the northwest. As an example, some of the first keypunch operators were trained on the large, bulky computer equipment of this period:

> For those who were to man the keypunch operation it appeared to be a new and exciting job skill, and at first they vied for the opportunity to work for I.B.M. Trainees were taught how to feed thousands of cards into the machine, but soon became bored with the job and hoped to be transferred to another department. But it was a necessary job that had to be done, and once trained as a keypunch operator you stayed a keypunch operator.[39]

Brebner maintains that the higher pay seemed to compensate for the monotony of both keypunching and tasks related to the astronomical amount of paper processed during a six-day work week. According to her, the workers joked that "if the forms were laid end to end they would stretch from one end of the highway to the other."[40] Despite the often monotonous nature of clerical tasks, for some women the opportunity to move from a service to a clerical position represented an important career step.

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[38] Graham Lowe, "Women, Work and the Office: The Feminization of Clerical Occupations in Canada, 1901-1931," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History,* ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1991), 278-79.
[39] Brebner, 56.
[40] Ibid.

Gertrude Seidel's story shows how a recent immigrant, determined to improve her situation, advanced from domestic servant in Edmonton to secretary to a top executive officer on a northwest defence project. Her example makes a modest contribution to a scholarly literature that has tended to ignore the influence of ethnicity or race on women's employment experiences in wartime Canada except to focus on their presence in manufacturing[41] and domestic service jobs. Migration to Whitehorse in spring 1942 to work for J. Gordon Turnbull, architectural engineer for the Canol project, marked the end of a very challenging phase of Gertrude's life and the beginning of a brighter, more carefree time. In fall 1938, the Gestapo had held Gertrude (a former resident of Czechoslovakia) as a political prisoner in Dresden, Germany, for over a month, hoping to lure her father, a member of the Sudeten German Social Democratic Party, to the city. Released when the ploy failed, she travelled to Prague where she joined an operation that planned and coordinated the emigration of more than 1,000 Sudeten refugees to Canada in 1939. Gertrude boarded a train out of Prague just two hours before the Nazis took over the city. She joined her parents in England, from where the reunited family made its way to the settlement community of Tomslake in the Peace River district of British Columbia, just 30 kilometres from Dawson

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[41] See, for example, Dionne Brand, "'We weren't allowed to go into factory work until Hitler started the war': The 1920s to the 1940s," in *"We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up": Essays in African*

Creek.[42] Eventually the Alaska Highway construction project would offer employment to many of the Tomslake men, including Gertrude's father, and to Gertrude herself.

Gertrude's ambitions exceeded what life in a small northwestern community could offer her:

> Upon our arrival in Canada I had just reached the ripe old age of 19. I stayed in Tomslake for several months and even though I found the lifestyle of pioneering very adventurous after several months realized that I had to venture further - to get to know the country and also to earn some money. Not speaking the language did not open many doors for me so I did the only thing I could do - entered into service and became a maid in Edmonton, Alberta. The first position was a disaster.[43]

Gertrude's second position as a domestic servant in Edmonton was more positive and she gained enough confidence to enroll in night classes at McTavish's Business College. By her own admission, she had "no intention of cleaning other people's dirt for long," and saved enough money to attend the school full-time for three months in early 1942. Her determination caught the attention of Mr. McTavish, who referred her for an interview with J. Gordon Turnbull. She had worked as an accounts payable clerk for several months when the firm announced that it needed two "girls" to work in its new office in Whitehorse. All the female employees were eager to go, but Gertrude and a married woman were

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Canadian Women's History, ed. Peggy Bristow et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 171-91.

[42] The Sudeten refugee program settled half of the immigrants in the Peace River district of British Columbia, the other half in northern Saskatchewan. See Andrew Amsatter, *Tomslake: History of the Sudeten Germans in Canada* (Saanichton, BC: Hancock House Publishers Ltd., 1978).

[43] Taken from the memoirs of Gertrude (Seidel) Gillis, unpublished manuscript, 1993, personal collection of Stewart Gillis.

chosen. Perhaps the company's choice to send two women, one of them married, was an attempt to ensure some level of physical, and perhaps moral, safety. After several months, Gertrude escaped barracks living when she was invited to share a private two-bedroom residence with Standard Oil's lone female employee. The house came equipped with furniture - and a Phillipino houseboy. Gertrude described her living conditions at that time as a "Shangri-La existence," and no wonder, as within less than two years she had gone from domestic servant to enjoying the services of one herself. Unfortunately, after a few months she was asked to leave when Standard Oil hired more female employees. Over time, Gertrude's determination and hard work paid off, with the result that by the end of her two-year employment stint in Whitehorse, she held a moderately prestigious position as secretary to the officer in charge of the Canol project.

While both Phyllis and Gertrude entered relatively urbanized frontier settings upon their arrival in the northwest, other women found themselves working under much more isolated conditions. Camp Canol provides an example of women's willingness to travel long distances to even the most remote locales in order to participate in the wartime defence projects. An article published in the *Edmonton Journal* in December 1943 offers some insight into the motivation of women who volunteered for jobs at Camp Canol, a work site located 167 kilometres south of the Arctic Circle:

> Another enthusiast for life at Canol is Olga (Tiny) Lewko of Edmonton, who, like most of the girls admits that two

> things - adventure and money - lured her into the northland.[44]

Approximately 100 women worked at Camp Canol between 1942 and 1944, the majority in the offices of Bechtel-Price-Callahan, general contractor for the pipeline. Women appear to have had only minor complaints about camp life; what griping there was came in relation to the inconveniences of extreme isolation and the difficulties in maintaining some modicum of femininity in the frozen north. Olga's greatest complaint was that mail arrived too infrequently. Other women interviewed for the *Journal* article listed Christmas gifts that would help make their lives more pleasant; one desired item was "a combination beauty parlor and dry-cleaning establishment compact enough to stow in the corner of a cosy pre-fabricated 'igloo'." Apparently, despite their extreme isolation, women expected to get "prettied up" to meet the standards of Canol's fairly active social program. The main camp building (shaped like an igloo), complete with a make-shift movie theatre and a juke-box, was the centre of activities. With two thousand men in the camp, there was no shortage of dance partners. In fact, women had few idle moments. Not only did they, like the men, work eleven hours a day up to seven days a week but they also kept busy during leisure time:

> Keeping clean, washing and ironing and keeping up with one's correspondence is almost enough to fill up all time

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[44] "Life in Sub-Arctic Is Far From Dull," *Edmonton Journal*, 15 December 1942. Few historical sources comment on the individual experiences of the women who worked in clerical positions at Camp Canol; however, there is one novel written by a woman who worked at Canol and it is believed to be partially based on her experiences. See Jean Kadmon, *Mackenzie Breakup* (Whitehorse: Pathfinder Publications, 1997).

> after working hours. Besides doing the things that must be done, we have various diversions, such as reading, playing cards, dancing, going to the movies and dating.[45]

The overall propagandistic tone of the *Journal* article, and of other contemporary reports of women's lives in the north during this period, was likely designed to attract women to the idea of a northern adventure, just as other wartime propaganda influenced women's work force participation.[46]

Clearly, since northern women shared many of the same experiences regardless of whether they worked in extreme isolation or in a "metropolis" such as Whitehorse, "place" was probably not as primary a determinant of women's northern experiences as other factors. Evidence suggests that national affiliation and marital status may have played a more pertinent role in the creation of social and economic difference (and even divisiveness). The newsletter published by the American army's Northwest Service Command, especially the column "News in Brief," contained the names and activities of staff (male and female) working on and along the highway. In addition to furnishing clues about women's origins (mainly American) and marital status (Miss or Mrs.) the column conveyed a sense of congeniality among

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[45] *Edmonton Journal*, 15 December 1942.

[46] Ruth Roach Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labor Force in World War II," in *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History*, ed. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), 125-45; and Alison Prentice et al., *"The 'Bren Gun Girl' and the Housewife Heroine," in Readings in Canadian History: Post Confederation*, ed. R. Douglas Francis and Donald B. Smith, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, 1990), 440-62.

all workers, although another image of social and work relations surfaces in other sources.

Unequal treatment of Canadian and American workers resulted in both general jealousy and dissension among the civilian work force. A woman's salary was more likely to be based on whether she was employed by an American or a Canadian agency, contractor or sub-contractor than upon her experience or abilities. That Americans paid significantly higher wages became a serious point of contention between Ottawa and Washington and their labour liaison personnel. In June 1942 the two governments directed American contractors to employ exclusively American labour and Canadian contractors to use exclusively Canadian labour. The policy was instituted to protect the Canadian wage ceiling and to avoid draining necessary labour from the already low Canadian pool; both fears stemmed from the ability of American contractors to pay more. Under the agreement, Americans could hire Canadian labour in cases of emergency, but such hirings had to be processed through the Employment and Selective Service Office in Edmonton. Given the tight timelines and extreme conditions under which the contractors worked, "emergencies" became commonplace and exceptions to the rule occurred on a regular basis.

Labour representatives from both countries battled the issue of differential pay repeatedly in correspondence throughout much of 1942 and 1943. A letter from a representative of the Canadian Wartime Prices and Trade Board to the Secretary,

Department of External Affairs, suggests that skill level did not necessarily determine a woman's pay rate:

> For instance, the Miss Davis mentioned in the first page of Mr. MacEachern's letter to me who is getting paid $160.00 a month, plus overtime (incidentally that is U.S. funds) is without doubt one of the worst stenographers in the country. She did some work for me last spring and it was almost unbelievably bad. We are getting complaints from all sides and unless something is done to stop the Americans paying these salaries, the situation is soon going to be pretty nearly impossible.[47]

If Miss Davis's abilities were as poor as this memo claims, her lasting employment might have reflected the difficulties that the Americans encountered in securing clerical staff and she might have had to suffice in the absence of more qualified candidates. Regardless of her clerical aptitudes, Miss Davis was just one of many Canadian women enjoying the benefits of American wages. In April 1943 the Employment and Selective Service Office in Edmonton reported the following employment figures for the joint defence projects: 208 Canadian women worked for the Americans (government, army or contractors), 42 for Canadian companies.[48]

In many ways, nationality also influenced the organization of women's social relations. Most accounts suggest that Canadian and American women kept "to their own" in the camps and towns where they worked. An American woman recalled that Canadian and American women who lived in the same dormitory (barracks)

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[47] Correspondence Wartime Prices and Trade Board, 6 February 1943, Department of External Affairs, RG 25, Vol 2743, File H463-L-40, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

[48] Secretary of State for External Affairs Ottawa, Employment and Selective Service Office Report, 19 April 1943, Department of External Affairs, RG 25, Vol 2743, File H463-L-40, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

socialized separately.[49] Perhaps employers preferred such an arrangement as it gave workers less contact to compare differences. Phyllis Brebner tries to provide a rosy picture of relations among the workers in Fort St. John:

> A spirit of harmony and goodwill prevailed in camp. The staff had to rely on each other for company, and so were careful that hard feelings didn't fester and cause bitterness. Coming from every part of the United States and Canada, our personalities and backgrounds were very different, yet living and working so closely together tolerance and understanding were quickly learned. The Easterners lost some of their reserve, the Westerners learned to respect and understand that reserve, and even the Torontonians with their "conservative thumbs" were accepted. The harmony was due to a basic fundamental spirit of adventure that had brought them to the Alaska Highway. And the men shared that united spirit of adventure.[50]

Despite its positive tone, references to hard feelings, differences, and the need to acquire tolerance and understanding suggest that women may have had to put some effort into getting along.

Examining the experiences of women during the American phase reveals the importance of marital status as well. The majority of female migrants were single when they arrived in the north; many transformed that status during their stay. Regardless of when they took their vows, the experiences of married women working on the defence projects were usually influenced by society's expectations of how married women should behave.

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[49] Coates, *North to Alaska*, 158.
[50] Brebner, 56.

Nationality might have affected relations between different groups of women, but neither men nor women hesitated to cross national borders in matters of love. Ken Coates and William Morrison contend that there were "few, if any, war brides from the northwest outside the urban centers like Edmonton."[51] There is evidence to suggest, however, that many single women met their mates in the northwest and returned home married, or, less frequently, stayed in the Yukon. Although American army personnel needed to get a superior's permission to marry, it is quite apparent that they did so regularly. The *Whitehorse Star* and the *Northwest News* are filled with announcements of the weddings of men and women who met while working in the northwest. The story of the "first" Alaska Highway wedding reappears in various retrospective accounts and confirms that love transcended national boundaries. Rose, a young woman from Toronto working for R. Melville Smith, married Charles, a soldier with the American Army Air Corps. According to Phyllis Brebner, the couple met at a dance at the Fort St. John Red Cross hut and "from that first night wedding bells were inevitable."[52]

To a large extent, the nature, location and conditions of the Alaska Highway project favoured single women and penalized married women. Initially, no regulations prohibited the presence of wives of military or civilian workers, but by the end of 1942 housing shortages prompted authorities not only to restrict the

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[51] Ibid., 129.
[52] Ibid., 55.

migration of dependents but also to remove those already there. Married women with jobs were intended as the only exception, but practical necessity overrode the wishes and proscriptions of the authorities. Within a very short time there were so many exemptions and exceptions to the new rules that by March 1943 the order for evacuation was rescinded. Further attempts to prevent the movement of wives into the region continued to be impractical, given that the same agencies that wanted to restrict women's presence required female labour in order to operate efficiently. Still, the number of men able to have their wives join them represented a minority, and as Coates and Morrison point out, most men in the northwest had to resort to fantasy "for want of female companionship."[53]

Mickey McCannel is an example of a married, professional woman (Canadian) who chose to go to the Yukon to earn good money while her husband was serving overseas. Like many women across North America, Mickey's wartime independence had gendered limits and would be reversed at the end of the war. Despite that, when reflecting on both her education and her sojourn in Whitehorse, she concluded that she lived a "complicated, much advanced type of life" for a woman in the 1940s. She married after completing her third year in the University of Alberta's Bachelor of Science (Honours Chemistry) program, then spent a year in Victoria while her husband was stationed there. When he went to Europe to fight she returned to Edmonton to finish her degree, one of only two

[53] Coates and Morrison, *The Alaska Highway*, 136.

women in a class of five hundred. After graduation, Mickey wanted to join one of the newly formed women's units, (Royal Canadian Air Force-Women's Division, Canadian Women's Army Corps, or Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service) but she was too young to be an officer and did not want to join as a private. Instead, she joined the Gas and Oil Lab of the Alberta Research Council, earning $90 a month. Towards the end of summer 1994 her supervisor informed her that since she was doing a "man's job" she would likely lose her position when the war ended. Eager to continue earning money towards a house purchase, Mickey went to work for the American army as a technician in its serology lab, at a staggering salary of $400 per month. After two weeks, she was asked if she would be interested in leaving Edmonton to manage the laboratory at the American army hospital in Whitehorse. Her salary would remain the same but she would receive free room and board. Mickey had no intention of turning down the opportunity despite some resistance from her in-laws:

> Oh yes, I reacted, in that, well it would be the first time I'd ever been on my own, I'd never been on my own. So I went home and told Mother and Daddy and they said, "Well that's great, it will be good for you." And I hadn't - you know - they were always there and when they weren't there, Gord was there. And I hadn't even played the field, with boyfriends and such, so that's what I think probably must have frightened Gord's mother. She said, "Oh no," I mustn't go, so I said, "Well I'm sorry, I've made up my mind, I'm going. There's no way I can let Gord know, because I have to go next week and all I can do is write him a letter and tell him, but I know Gord pretty well, and I know full well he'd say, go." So it was much against their desire, but I think they didn't trust me. Anyway, I went north.[54]

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[54] McCannel, interview.

Feeling slightly constrained in what she could do as a married woman, Mickey kept mostly to herself during her eight months in Whitehorse. Initially, long work days influenced her decision to stay in her residence room most evenings, but after several months boredom convinced her to accept the odd social invitation. Asked if she had fraternized with the American nurses with whom she worked, she responded:

> To a certain extent, but you know people were working hard and they were out to find boyfriends and what have you, which I wasn't, you know, and they were on their way, partying quite frequently and this sort of thing, and they were all nice girls and I don't mean anything against them, but I think that was why they had gone north. Most of them were in uniform, but not all of them, and they weren't married.[55]

While Mickey's comments suggest that being married had a great deal to do with how she chose to socialize (or not), nationality also seemed to inform her social relations. After somebody at the Canadian air force base found out that there was a Canadian "downtown," she was often invited to fill in as a fourth at bridge or to attend Canadian base dances woefully short of young women, most women preferring to attend the more popular dances held on the American bases. According to Mickey, her occasional socializing "was perfectly legit," but as luck would have it, one of the Canadians at the base took it upon himself to write to her in-laws to inform them of how much time she was spending at the Mess. The letter created some tension between Mickey and her in-laws, and so, believing that her husband would

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[55] Ibid.

be returning home soon anyway, she decided to leave the north. Since she had not stayed the full year stipulated in her contract, she had to pay for her own passage out of the Yukon. She took a ship from Skagway and arrived in Vancouver on VE Day, 8 May 1945.

Throughout late 1944 and the first half of 1945, most of the women who had been employed by the Americans left the Yukon as part of the large outflux of population. Their departure marked the beginning of a new phase for the Yukon and for women who still chose to migrate there. Even though the Canadian phase shared many characteristics with the earlier occupation, much of the literature describes the tameness of Canadian military occupation compared to the volatility of its American counterpart. In important ways, women's experiences in the Canadian phase were similiar to those of their predecessors. Nevertheless, the societal expectations placed on women, especially the presumption that with peace they would give up their jobs and return to the home, coloured their choices and opportunities.

While most of the women employed by the American army and contractors had left by the time the war ended, some stayed and were rehired by the Canadian army. The few who did constantly lamented the changes, citing the American phase as better paid, more bustling with people, and having better dances and cheaper

cigarettes.[56] The Canadians who took over the highway acquired a reputation for being duller and less exciting than the Americans who preceded them. For their part, many resident Whitehorse women were relieved that the chaos had finally subsided, although they appeared to be grateful for the changes that the Americans had brought. In a guest editorial in the *Whitehorse Star* in late 1944, a local woman gave "thanks to the yanks" for their efforts in pushing back the "Canadian frontier" and "paving the way for post-war development" in the Yukon.[57] Gertrude Baskine expressed similar sentiments about the impact of the highway:

> It is no guess to say that the opening of this vast territory, fed primarily by the Alaska Highway, is just as important to this age as was the opening of the prairie farmlands to the people forty years ago. Naturally, all opportunities are still largely of a pioneering nature. They always are when a country is being newly opened up.[58]

By the time the Canadians took over the Alaska Highway on 1 April 1946, observers and participants agreed, the Americans had transformed the Yukon in general, and Whitehorse in particular. The signs of increasing stability and permanence in Yukon communities were obvious, while highway maintenance camps continued to advertise for families to take over the camps, a process that had begun in late 1944.[59]

Of all towns along the highway, Whitehorse continued to experience the highest levels of population growth and to exhibit the most obvious signs of modernization and urbanization. Babe

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[56] Hope Morritt, letter to author, 20 September 1996.
[57] *Whitehorse Star*, 22 September 1944.
[58] Baskine, 312.
[59] *Northwest News*, 28 August 1944.

Richards recalled that after the American phase ended, "A lot of people thought we were going back to the same Whitehorse. But we never did, we never looked back."[60] Although by 1946 the town's population had dropped to 3,000 (from a 1943 high of 10,000), it was still more than four times what it had been prior to the war. The American invasion had also been responsible for upgrading the town's infrastructure - with water and sewage improvements, and new sports, recreation, and medical facilities. Canadian officials worried about the effect of the mass out-migration, and of such steps as the closure of the Canol Refinery, on the local economy. As Coates and Morrison point out, few highway workers settled permanently, which was a "great blow to those who had counted on the wartime workers to remain and form the nucleus of the region's economic expansion."[61] Some Alaska Highway workers did choose to make Whitehorse their home, and the new migration of Canadian workers hired by the Canadian army promised future population growth. In fact, such was the growth of this formerly sleepy riverside town that in 1953 the capital of the Yukon moved to Whitehorse from Dawson City. The centralization of government services in Whitehorse, as well as the establishment of new public health and education programs, ensured a continuing demand for female migrants with relevant service and clerical skills or teaching and nursing experience.

Between 1946 and 1964 an unknown number of women moved to

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[60] Richards, interview by Dobrowolsky.
[61] Coates and Morrison, *The Alaska Highway*, 233.

the Yukon in general, and to Whitehorse specifically. As in the American phase of the highway, the move was temporary for some, permanent for others. Many single women, unwilling to give up the independence and adventure that wartime work and circumstances had afforded, responded to the Yukon's reputation as a land of milk and honey. Although women remained employed in traditionally female positions, most notably clerical work, good wages were still the main attraction; they were lower than during the American phase, but substantially higher than in other Canadian regions. Whitehorse also welcomed a number of young brides who came with their husbands; some of these men were Yukon born, others had adopted the Yukon during the war. From the end of the 1940s through the 1950s, the surest sign of Whitehorse's changing character was the arrival of families (wives, husbands and children), bringing services and programs to accommodate an increasingly stable population in their wake.

During the early days of the Canadian army's occupation, Whitehorse was characterized by a real sense of being a "hand-me-down" or "leftover" society. Evidence of the American presence remained everywhere; migrants, if they were fortunate, inherited American living quarters, while the unfortunate faced accommodation crises similar to those in the earlier phase. Barracks life continued to provide female comraderie, new friends continued to matter, and divisions became less of an issue, although women were still identified by their affiliation with the army, air force, or town of Whitehorse. Women who worked for

MAP 1
WHITEHORSE IN THE LATE 1940s [62]

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HAS BEEN REMOVED
DUE TO COPYRIGHT
RESTRICTIONS.

[62] Morritt, 22-23.

the army seldom mingled with air force women, and socializing with women from "town" often took the form of competitiveness in recreational and sporting activities such as basketball and softball.[63] Increasingly, the influx of single women into Whitehorse created social (and possibly "moral") concern in the community. In 1953, the shortage of housing, especially that suitable for single women (teachers, shop clerks and workers in the hospitality industry), led the president of the Whitehorse Board of Trade to request that the YWCA in Vancouver conduct a housing survey. The thought (or hope) was that the YWCA would find a dire need for accommodation for young women and open a hostel to alleviate the problem. In fact, a representative of the YWCA did travel to Whitehorse and undertake a survey, but the goal of building a residence was not realized until the late 1960s.[64] In the meantime, by 1953 the Canadian army had built three new residences - one for single civilian women, one for single civilian men, and one for single military men - as well as some family housing.

Writing about Canadian women in the postwar era, historians have focused their studies largely on patterns of work and/or marriage and the societal discussions that debated whether women could or should blend both.[65] The pressure on women to choose the domestic option was substantial; young women especially responded

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[63] Morritt, 117.
[64] Marjorie Almstrom, interview by John Cameron and Lesley Buchan, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 29 July 1996, Yukon Archives.

by choosing to marry, start and complete their families at increasingly younger ages.[66] The role of marriage and employment is considered here in relation to Alaska Highway migrants. The following examples illustrate aspects of women's experiences in part to show how they were similar to the American phase; but also to reveal the importance of marriage as a determinant of women's experience. As in the earlier phase, women's postponement of marriage (purposeful or not) often ended during their stint in Canada's north. The first two examples focus on young single women who migrated to Whitehorse in 1946, the second examples examine the experiences of two young brides who migrated during the late 1940s, a third looks at two young single migrants from the early 1950s, and one final example focuses on a married women's migration experiences, also in the early 1950s.

Rena Fraser and Hope Morritt were two single women who migrated to Whitehorse when the town was still struggling to recover from the prolonged visit of its American guests. These women were on the border of the war and postwar transition; Hope, a young woman looking for adventure and Rena looking to fill in some time after leaving the disbanded CWAC's. Their employment and social experiences went beyond fulfilling their expectations; they also set the stage for the rest of their lives.

Hope Morritt was only seventeen in fall 1946 when she passed typing and shorthand tests administered at the Canadian

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[65] Brandt, "Pigeon-Holed and Forgotten"; Pierson, *"They're Still Women"*; and Forestell, "The Necessity of Sacrifice."

army's personnel office in Edmonton, accepted a job in Whitehorse, and left for the Yukon the following day. Once in Whitehorse, the major she reported to told her she could not work for him since she was not an ex-servicewoman and she lacked accounting experience.[67] Luckily, service experience was more a preference than a prerequisite, and Hope managed to secure a clerk's position in the office of the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. A job with the army payroll office was only one of the reasons why Rena Fraser went north in November 1946. The former regimental sergeant major in the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) was restless and not anxious to return to a quiet civilian life in Edmonton after her discharge in September so she took the civil servant tests and headed for Whitehorse:

> I guess I was sort of, "painted with" moving around, going to different places and you know and the excitement of that, and I was so young. My mother still lived in Edmonton, and it wasn't like I was right out on my own you know. I had a home to go to, but I think it was just adventure mostly. I just loved moving around and seeing new things and, uh, I had another girlfriend that was also in the army, but we weren't in the same spots or anything, but a girl from Edmonton, and she was interested in it too.[68]

Hope and Rena became friends soon after their arrival in Whitehorse. They both made the most of their time in the north, participating in the active social life characteristic of the

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[66] Prentice et al., *Canadian Women*, 379.

[67] Hope Morritt, in her book and in correspondence, says that the Northwest Highway System preferred to hire women who had been in the services; Morritt, 139; and Morritt, letter to author, 8 February 1997.

period until they met, became engaged to and married their army husbands. Both women left the Yukon when their husbands received transfers, Rena for Fort St. John shortly after her marriage in summer 1948 and Hope for Ontario in December 1949. Their experience was typical of the many couples that met, married and spent their honeymoon "beneath the midnight sun," but moved on as their jobs or postings ended. Only a few remained in the Yukon for the rest of their married lives, and in those cases often one of the two partners had been resident in the territory before their marriage.

As clearly as marriage precipitated the departure of some women from Whitehorse, for others it ensured that they would make their lives and raise their families there. The experiences of Edna Cooper and Muriel von Finster, two young brides (both nurses) who gave up their careers upon marriage, were similar in some respects. Their different desires and choices concerning their professional lives mirrored the types of choices women were being faced with in the postwar era.

When asked about the circumstances that brought her to Whitehorse, Edna Cooper did not hesitate before answering, "Meeting my husband in Vancouver." Originally from Saskatchewan, Edna was a nurse at the Vancouver General Hospital when she met her future husband George, a young man from Mayo, Yukon. They kept track of one another after George joined the army and were

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[68] Rena (Fraser) Dowling, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996.

married in spring 1946 after his discharge. George had a job as an automotive mechanic at the Taylor and Drury garage and the young couple moved into a small house (owned by his parents) on Main Street in Whitehorse. Edna was called upon to nurse when people associated with the medical system learned that she had training. Although it was a hard decision after enjoying her many years of nursing, she declined the offer (which would have included working nights and shift work) in favour of a stable home life.[69] Edna was not unlike other women of the postwar years who chose home and family over careers, but she was unusual in that in the context of this time and place, she was being asked to step into the public sphere and work force - not out of it.

Muriel von Finster also had a quick and ready answer to a preliminary question about her migration: "Well the circumstance which brought me to the north is sitting out in the patio reading a paper." Muriel was only fourteen years old in 1945 when she met a Canadian soldier on a train between Evesham and London in England. Vern spent his leave time in London getting to know Muriel and they decided to marry before he had to leave for Canada. Juveniles, however, needed the permission of both parents, and Muriel's mother refused to give it. Vern returned to Canada and Muriel started nurse's training, but they continued to correspond. In 1949 Vern sent enough money for a first-class ship fare and Muriel came to Canada. They were married in

[69] Edna Cooper, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 5 August 1996.

Sudbury in June and within days set off by auto for Whitehorse, where Vern had worked for the Northwest Highway System (NHS) maintenance division since his discharge from the army. He had also traded a car and washing machine to a local man in return for six months free rent on a small house, which was to be cleaned and painted by the time he arrived with his new bride. Judging from the details that Muriel recalled from her first impression of her new home, her arrival must have been fairly dramatic:

> So here was my future home. There was a window each side, one of these little nine-paned, army windows. There was another nine-paned window in the bedroom, half the glass was out and there was remnants of what had been mesh there. So the bugs and mosquitoes...nobody sprayed then...came in one window or two windows or three windows, bit us, went out and came round and did it again. The stove ... had only three legs, two bricks under the other leg, the oven door was falling off. The top had obviously been cooking meat right on the cast iron and it was well glazed and quite bumpy, quite repulsive looking actually. Then there was a dirty little old sink and cupboards and the most indescribable mess of stuff you ever saw. There was a kitchen table, but it was rounded at one end and painted, originally had been painted white. There was a very comfortable chair which I am sure was lifted from the officer's mess, one of those leather ones with arms and there was an old chesterfield whose seat was on the floor and there was a piece of pipe going from this stove over to an American army space heater, you know, those funny bulgy things, looks like an Arabian pipe, only it's made of steel. And the ceiling was hanging down in flaps and it had a thick fur of smoke and dust all over it, and here and there there was pieces of wire across it which held it up. And in the bedroom there was a horrible old, it was just made of some kind of metal, the bed was, it was certainly no four poster and an old mattress on this rusty old spring and a very decrepit chest of drawers. This was our home for the next six months.[70]

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[70] Muriel von Finster, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996.

The cultural changes that Muriel had to adapt to were immense, as were the changes encountered by most of the 50,000 war brides who made the long journey to a new life in Canada.[71] After she had recovered from the shock of her surroundings, Muriel was faced with a personal setback. She had hoped to work as a nurse but the hospital refused to accept her British qualifications and told her to go to Vancouver or Edmonton to requalify. The other option was to take a job cleaning the hospital's "lower ward" which housed tuberculosis patients. Muriel initially agreed but found she was pregnant and declined the position before she had a chance to start.

> But anyway that was the way of it and I never did work here, but when we lived on the highway I used my nursing all the time because we had no nurse handy and if anything happened or if anybody had an accident, they would phone up or they would come to the house and I would do what I could do for them. So, years later I ended up delivering a baby at Haines Junction and if anyone came to the house and if I figured if it was something they needed to go to town for, I used to phone the RCMP up at Haines Junction and they would come and pick them up and take them into town...But anyway, it was handy and I used it that way.[72]

Muriel's comments reveal how she was able to reconcile her career disappointment with her lived experiences. Similiarly, Edna believed that her life had been full and satisfying even though it was hard, at first, to give up her career. Both women eventually became very committed volunteers with the ladies auxiliary association of the Whitehorse General Hospital.

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[71] See, for example, Joyce Hibbert, *The War Brides* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1978; and Ben Wicks, *Promise You'll Take Care of My Daughter: The Remarkable War Brides of World War II* (Don Mills, ON: Stoddart Publishing, 1992.)

[72] von Finster, interview.

The experiences of two single women who migrated (separately) to Whitehorse during the early 1950s further illustrate consistency with single women's social and work experiences during both the American phase and the early years of the Canadian phase. They are also significant as examples of the changing accommodation structures that were increasingly constructed to keep up with the continuing migration of single women.

While it may have been difficult for single female migrants to find suitable housing during the early 1950s, as in the previous decade, securing a job was not problematic. Many women seem to have headed north without any prior assurance that they would secure employment. Private accommodations for women not employed by the military continued to be at a premium, not only in terms of availability but also in terms of cost. High costs of living on their own put a definite strain on single women's earnings. Patricia Ellis travelled to Whitehorse from her home in Winnipeg in summer 1953 to join her boyfriend (also from Winnipeg) who was working for relatives. Patricia worked that summer as a secretary for General Enterprises and then went back to Winnipeg to attend art school. The following year she returned to Whitehorse and got a job working in men's wear in the Taylor and Drury store. She was thrilled to earn $200 a month after having earned only $120 a month working at Eaton's back in Winnipeg. The downside was that she had to pay $100 a month for room and board. She stayed at a boarding house run by a woman

named Tennessee Morrison, a widow in her late sixties who opened up her home as a means to support herself. Patricia's stay there came to an end during her second summer in Whitehorse, when she and her boyfriend were married.[73]

Marlene Sudeyko was one woman who took a gamble and headed north without any guarantee that she would secure employment:

> I was twenty when I came up here. I was living in Vancouver, not making very much money, and you could still call those postwar years, you know. And things were not very good down south and I had one friend that came up here and she started to write back to me and tell me the money she was making was probably twice the salary I was making in Vancouver and I, at that time I was working at an advertising agency in Vancouver and we used to get newspapers from all across Canada, publications as well. So I started reading the *Whitehorse Star*, it was a very folksy little paper, you know, the local and general column. And I wasn't going anywhere with my life in Vancouver. My family had left the city, so the fare at that time was $79 one way and so I set myself a goal, I was going to save this $79. And remember I was looking after myself financially, you know, had a room. So finally I had enough money for a one-way ticket, bought myself a brand new set of luggage and headed north. So I left all the security I ever knew back in Vancouver and arrived here. My friend met me and took me to her room in the barracks and I stayed there overnight, so basically I arrived here one day, she took me to the personnel office the next day and I got a job.[74]

In May 1954 Marlene went to work as a payroll clerk for the NHS at a salary of $250 a month, $90 a month more than her previous job in Vancouver had paid. She did not need to worry about housing since another benefit for a young single woman working for the NHS was the assurance of cheap and comfortable accommodation. Women were housed in one of three new barracks

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[73] Patricia Ellis, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 14 August 1996.

[74] Marlene Sudeyko, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 9 August 1996.

buildings built by the army in Takhini, a community along the highway in upper Whitehorse. Room and board (meals were provided at the mess hall) cost only $45 a month.

> Yes, there were approximately ninety single women living in what they called the women's barracks, girl's barracks in the Takhini area and most of them were single and their ages varied from my tender age of twenty to probably sixty and older, you know and they all had jobs with the army in various capacities from the mess hall right to clerical, nothing too high as far as management, because that was all looked after by the army. So out of that many women, there is probably about four of us left in Whitehorse. You know, that married and stayed here. Many married and moved on, they married RCMP, they married army, air force, posted and gone.[75]

Marlene married as well, to a civilian from Alberta working for the army, but did not move on. While in the minority in terms of the percentage of women migrants who stayed in Whitehorse permanently, she was one of the majority in that she married someone working for the army. The fact that both Marlene and Patricia migrated as singles, married other migrants, and raised their families in the Yukon, is evidence that the Yukon was beginning to offer young families an increasingly stable social environment.

By the early 1950s, Whitehorse was definitely in another transition phase, as evidenced by the continuing migration of entire families into the town. Also at this time, and possibly peculiar to this place specifically, the division between married and single women's employment was evaporating and the possibility of married women getting jobs added to families' decisions to migrate north since if married women needed or chose to work

there was usually a job available. This may have been a sign that societal acceptance of the convergence of women's work and family lives was on the horizon; but only in degrees, women were still expected to stay in jobs that had been traditionally assigned to females - and they did. (See Tables 2 and 3.)

The experiences of Joyce Hayden highlight all the above trends. Joyce was raised in northern Saskatchewan, fell in love at sixteen and was married at age seventeen. She and her husband and two young daughters were been struggling to make a living off farming outside Fort St. John when in 1953 her brother suggested that she and her family join him in the Yukon. He insisted that there were many job openings in Whitehorse, which there were, but there was also a severe shortage of housing. Joyce's reflections about women in Whitehorse during the 1950s included information about work, and also reinforced previous evidence pointing to social divisions between women from the various social strata in Whitehorse:

> At the same time, women, for the most part didn't work outside the home, they didn't work for salaries, women that I knew didn't. The stores were staffed by women who were armed forces wives, so that it seemed that women whose husbands were in the armed forces got the jobs in the downtown stores. But it was expected that women who lived here permanently stayed home and raised their children.[76]

Indeed, by the early 1950s the distinction between military and town society in general and perhaps women's ranks in particular, was obvious as the *Whitehorse Star* began to differentiate between

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[75] Sudeyko, interview.
[76] Joyce Hayden, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 22 August 1996.

"Whitehorse" and "Upper Whitehorse" which described the military community built at the top of the hill, just off of the highway. Also important are Joyce's observations about women's expected roles. While her paid employment with Irene's laundry did not last, it would have been societally acceptable since it was within the realms of traditional female work and it was temporary. Similarly, women stationed in Whitehorse with their husbands could take jobs because they, too, were not permanent. Like both Edna and Muriel, Joyce became extremely active in volunteer work throughout the 1950s, an expressive and useful outlet for many bright and dedicated women who chose to or were restricted from pursuing careers in the postwar era.

By the late 1950s, Whitehorse residents could finally take a deep breath and survey what had transpired over the previous two decades. What they saw was a territory very different from what it had been fifty years earlier after the gold rush era had passed. Ken Coates has suggested that men and women who moved to the Yukon during the Alaska Highway period were "stricken with a military version of Klondike fever."[77] And indeed, during the 1940s and 1950s women and men had travelled long distances on a chance that they would find something of value.

The Yukon had been transformed, but had women's lives? The following chapter examines women's own perceptions of their experiences (and status) during the Alaska Highway period. Interestingly, many women suggest that their lives had been

irrevocably and positively altered by their northern migration, regardless of whether it had been temporary or permanent. In addition, most women perceived the Yukon as a place which offered women increased opportunity, economically and socially. Finally, women's reflections suggest that, for them, the Alaska Highway period constituted a female frontier of sorts and they likened their experiences to those of their pioneering foremothers from other times and geographical settings.

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[77] Coates, *North to Alaska,* 46.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOOKING BACK: MAKING SENSE OF THE EXPERIENCE

The lived experiences of female migrants during the Alaska Highway period, examined in the previous chapter, are only a starting point for understanding the gendered aspects of this unique moment in the Yukon's history. Whatever their reasons for migrating, and regardless of whether their migration was temporary or permanent, the women studied in this thesis have isolated that period - or their memory of it - in their minds and placed it high on their lists of other defining moments in their lives. They recount their experiences with vivid recall and portray them as life altering, not only concretely (as when migration resulted in marriage) but also in the most personal (almost spiritual) sense. Women's recollections of their Yukon experiences evoke themes, ideas and images related to notions of women's freedom and emancipation on the one hand and are reminiscent of women's frontier or pioneer narratives on the other.

Accessing women's perceptions of the Alaska Highway period requires that careful attention be paid to the actual words that women use to describe their experiences. Some feminist oral historians take the extreme position that deconstructing women's oral accounts actually interferes with the intended meaning. Women are capable of analysing their own lives, they argue, and therefore any useful interpretation is already contained in what

they have to say.[1] Other women's historians take greater control, grouping women's memories thematically with or without commentary, or using women's own words simply as raw data. This chapter takes a middle approach to examine the importance of women's self-reflection not only for what it reveals about a particular historical moment, but also for what it says about the contribution of personal memory to popular memory, and subsequently how popular memory helps to construct a unique identity for women in the Yukon to embrace or reject.[2]

While individuals are obviously best positioned to evaluate what their past experiences mean to them, women's own perceptions (whether contemporary or retrospective) do need to be examined in the context of other evidence. This is especially important for reminiscences, given the possibility of distortion by the passage of time; human memory is, after all, fallible. Likewise, the subjective nature of women's memories needs to be acknowledged, although not necessarily dismissed. Joan Sangster, a strong proponent of oral history methodology, addresses some of these issues:

> Rather than seeing the creation of oral sources as biased or problematic, this creative process can become a central focus for our research; we need to explore the construction of women's historical memory. Asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns

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[1] Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 137.
[2] Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1988), 12-13.

they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.[3]

It is precisely the relationship between individual perceptions of women's own experiences and the impact of those perceptions on Yukon women's collective memory and identity that guides and informs this chapter. It is particularly intriguing to notice how individual women who migrated to the Yukon during the 1940s and 1950s invoke notions of freedom or liberation in their narratives, even in the clear absence of material substantiation.

Concepts of freedom, gendered or not, have previously been considered as dominant themes in relation to the Yukon, and to the north in general.[4] Additionally, concepts of freedom have been examined in the context of the war and postwar period and what it meant for women's emancipation. Thus, given the time and place, it is not surprising that women's perceptions about their Yukon adventures during the Alaska Highway period are often presented in terms of freedom or liberation.

On a larger scale, questions about whether or not certain events or periods in the past translated into some degree of emancipation for women constitute a never-ending historiographical debate. For example, Jan Noel's examination of the role of women in New France led her to argue that the

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[3] Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review*, 3, 1 (1994), 6.
[4] L.E. Hamelin, "Images of the North," in *Interpreting Canada's North: Selected Readings* ed. Ken Coates and William Morrison (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1989), 7-17; Melody Webb, *The Last Frontier: A*

shortage of women in the region opened opportunities and broughtspecial privileges in their private and public lives.[5] Noel's critics accuse her of broad and sweeping generalizations particularly for failing to distinguish between women's experiences in the different periods of New France's development, and point out that any "liberation" occurred within the bounds of a male-dominated society.[6] Caution against making unwarranted generalizations must be exercised in the present study. Because it focuses on the perceptions of individual women, their views are not intended to be representative of all women who lived in or migrated to the Yukon during the Alaska Highway period. Also, women who enjoyed or otherwise benefited from their participation, whatever its nature, in the events of those days, are more likely to have documented their experiences or be willing to share their memories in an interview. Presumably some women had negative experiences; the probability that they would either record their memories or agree to discuss them is doubtful since not enjoying the experience, or not meeting the challenge, may have been looked upon as a failure of sorts. Finally, the period encompasses the war and postwar years; different social assumptions about women's rightful place influenced their choices and experiences.

History of the Yukon Basin of Canada and Alaska (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985).

[5] Jan Noel, "New France: Les Femmes Favorisées," *Atlantis* (Spring 1981): 80-98.

[6] Micheline Dumont, *Atlantis* (Spring 1982): 118-30.

Inevitably, an examination of the potentially liberating effects (or not) of the Alaska Highway period on female migrants' lives raises some of the same questions posed in other studies about the impact of the war and its aftermath. Women's labour force participation during World War II was generally constructed as emancipatory until Ruth Roach Pierson's research into government policy and gender ideology and the repercussions of both on women. Pierson concluded that while the war shifted the boundaries of gendered work divisions to a degree, it did not fundamentally challenge "the male-dominated sex/gender system."[7] She stressed that her work was not intended to generalize about all Canadian women's wartime experiences in all contexts, and maintained that the larger debate over whether women were liberated would likely remain "arguably inconclusive."[8] Clearly, women's Yukon work experiences during the period do not reveal any clear departure from accepted gendered divisions of labour. In fact, women in the Yukon were less likely to participate in non-traditional work than were their counterparts in other Canadian regions; munitions factories, for example, simply did not exist in Whitehorse. Nevertheless, women's comments about their war and postwar experiences contain repeated references to personal freedoms, expressed more in terms of "carefree" social life than larger political or economic issues.

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[7] Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 216.
[8] Ibid., 219.

Female migrants' perceptions about the carefree nature of the Alaska Highway period seem to be almost interchangeable with notions of fun and fraternization. By all available accounts, it was a great time and a good place to be a young, single woman. The active social life in Whitehorse (aided considerably by the ratio of men to women) apparently left very little room to complain. Amusements ranged from dances and parties almost every night to playing baseball at midnight on the summer solstice (with the "sun riding the horizon") or hitch-hiking to the Whitehorse Rapids in May "wearing shorts and throwing snowballs."[9] Whitehorse, it seemed, was perpetually in party mode:

> We just had no worries. When I look back now ... the two years I spent in barracks were probably the most two carefree years of my life. I didn't realize it then, but you never worried about anything and you always had someone to talk to and it was a good time. And then you knew everybody, you see, because the single people ate together and they always ended up partying at the same bars and dances and you were never without a date if something came up. Whether you knew that person or not, it didn't, it wasn't a big deal, you know, you just went.[10]

Whether women's presence in bars shocked old Whitehorse or not, it appears to have been a new experience for the migrants themselves:

> One of the things, I guess, and remember I was twenty-one years old by that time, so the nightlife in Whitehorse was very attractive. I had never been, I think I had been in a pub once or something before coming here. In Whitehorse a lot of the social life was around the bars, around the pubs and there were dozens of them and the thing that you did was go pub-crawling all the time. You'd go from one to the other and drive around town quite drunk. I think, pretty

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[9] Dori Simpson, letter to author, 21 April 1997.
[10] Marlene Sudeyko, interview with author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 9 August 1996.

> sad when you look back, but those were the standards of the day.[11]

Perhaps women perceived that their accepted presence in drinking establishments was liberating in the sense that they were able to invade previously "male-only" territory. Proximity to masculinized space, in other words, was "emancipating."

Indeed, the large numbers of men and the dating opportunities they afforded young women obviously appealed to the female migrants. Some interviewees regarded the largely male population as an added bonus to their already satisfying lives:

> I loved it up there, it was paradise for a young girl, with all these men around. It would get that you had a date with a different fellow every night.[12]

> Of course, there was limited women here, maybe part of it is it's the first time in my life I've ever been popular, I always had a date for Saturday night which was something that never happened before.[13]

During the war years especially, when many Canadian towns were saying goodbye to their young men, Whitehorse would have been a pleasant change for women who came from one of those "manless" centres. Although excluding themselves, some interviewees contended that women were in the region to catch a man:

> Generally speaking, you look back over the girls, if they didn't get a man in a year, two years, they were gone.[14]

> Everybody was on the make...there were girls quite seriously trying to find a husband.[15]

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[11] Joyce Hayden, interview with author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 22 August 1996.
[12] Stacia Gallop, quoted in Ken Coates, *North to Alaska* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 142.
[13] Rena (Fraser) Dowling, interview with author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996.
[14] Corinne Cyr, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 20 August 1996.

For some young women, dating was a fairly new experience and the opportunity to fraternize away from the watchful eyes of their parents or other authorities was an added attraction. Young women all over North American had their first taste of independence during this era. Prior to the war, it was socially unacceptable for young women to live on their own or with other young people under limited supervision; they usually left home only if went to another family or a husband or to boarding school.[16] Paradoxically for many young women in the Yukon, a carefree existence was as much due to their dependence on their new employers as it was to their independence from their families. "I really just had a good time," remembered Marlene Sudeyko:

> I mean, it was just such a carefree life, you didn't worry about tomorrow, because you were always fed, you know, and we had a lot of fun in the barracks. You never closed your door, you might plan to stay at home a night to wash your hair but somebody would say, well, so and so is in town, they want to go out and have some fun, and off we'd go.[17]

Similar accounts of women's sense of security during the war years have surfaced in other sources. One example is a former member of the women's services who complained about the trials of returning to civilian life after having had her clothing, food and scheduling matters taken care of for several years.[18]

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[15] Mickey McCannel, interview with author, tape recording, Edmonton, AB, 7 May 1996.
[16] Alison Prentice et al., eds., *Canadian Women: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996), 379.
[17] Sudeyko, interview.
[18] Carolyn Gossage, *Greatcoats and Glamour Boots: Canadian Women at War, 1939-1945* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1991), 199.

While the provision of room and board would have lessened women's worries considerably, and supervision of their activities would have been less stringent than at home, the fast-paced social life (and perhaps even the overwhelming numbers of the opposite sex) possibly translated into too much freedom for some. Freedom itself could, in a subtle way, be threatening:

> An esprit de corps existed which I have never felt before or since and a carefree feeling which at the end of the year I felt I must leave - it is a fool's paradise I am caught up in. It was even said if you stay too long, you will never leave.[19]

Another interviewee's comment about Whitehorse life being "too carefree at times"[20] further suggests that the absence or abandonment of clearly prescribed social norms might have been disconcerting.

For some female migrants, the most liberating aspects of migration would have been the decision to uproot and relocate and the actual experience of travel itself. Individuals were in part attracted to the Yukon by the stories that circulated about the "adventures" that women like themselves were having. Since perception is also influenced very much by expectation,[21] women who cited adventure as an element which drew them north sought to realize their expectations in that regard. Women who were searching for freedom tried to find it where they could.

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[19] Simpson, letter.
[20] Dowling, interview.
[21] John W. Bennett and Seena B. Kohl, *Settling the Canadian-American West, 1890-1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 67.

Expectations about how long they would stay in the Yukon also coloured women's attitudes and experiences.

In her book on women and the American frontier, Patricia Riley Dunlap suggests that for women who migrated to the western states in the nineteenth century, believing that their situation was temporary made them "treat their western experience as an adventurous tour and, in many cases, gave them a rather unique sense of abandon."[22] Similar attitudes were likely held by those Alaska Highway women who also expected that their migration would be temporary. In fact, knowledge of the temporary nature of their sojourn, and its characterization as carefree and adventurous, suggests that some women treated their move north as a holiday, albeit a working one. In that light, women's perceptions can examined for what they tell us about female travellers or tourists on the northern frontier.

The small but growing body of literature on female travellers notes how they have been neglected in works on the history of tourism, except for the select few who participated in the exceptional practice of "adventure tourism."[23] During the Alaska Highway era, although few women had the luxury of migrating solely as adventure-seekers, most were able to combine the opportunity to work with an opportunity to play tourist. In assuming the role of tourist, these women were also likely to consider their experiences in terms of freedom from convention or

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[22] Patricia Riley Dunlap, *Riding Astride: the Frontier in Women's History* (Denver: Arden Press, 1995), 53.

constraints. If we consider female Alaska Highway migrants for what they tell us about women tourists, their experiences in the Yukon reveal important parallels with women travellers from other periods[24] and add to what we know about the gendered nature of the female tourism experience during the twentieth century. Writing about nineteenth-century Niagara, Patricia Jasen says:

> The relationship between tourism and personal freedom created special opportunities for women, for it raised questions of identity related to gender as well as to class...At Niagara early in the nineteenth century men and women were drawn by the new fashion for wild places, and both hoped for an experience of the sublime that was as wonderful, passionate, and liberating as those they had read about. At other tourist destinations the evidence suggests the ready participation of women in most activities, although the pride they sometimes displayed in certain achievements (such as running rapids), along with the need felt by some men to comment on their presence, imply that certain restraints were being consciously challenged.[25]

That the Yukon offered the same wilderness experience as Niagara over a century earlier is illustrated by Hope Morritt's backward glance at the adventurousness of female migrants:

> The women who worked for the Northwest Highway System in those early days were adventurers. There was a bold fearlessness about them. They were conscientious workers on the job. They kept telephone lines operating day and night, Army accounts balanced, hospital records straight, all-important communication channels open between Whitehorse and Ottawa...Whitehorse and Edmonton. (One woman - Dorothy Miller - drove a diesel truck full-time up and down the highway.) And after work, these women climbed

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[23] Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 22-23.
[24] Clara Vyvyan, *The ladies, the Gwich'in, and the Rat: Travels on the Athabasca, Mackenzie, Rat, Porcupine, and Yukon Rivers in 1926,* ed. I.S. MacLaren and Lisa N. LaFramboise (Edmonton : University of Alberta Press, 1998); Lisa N. LaFramboise, *Travellers in Skirts : Women and English-language Travel Writing in Canada, 1820-1926* (Ph.D. diss., University of Alberta, 1997); Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North: An Account of a Woman's 1908 Journey through Canada to the Arctic,* rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).
[25] Jasen, 151.

> mountains, hitchhiked the length of the road, canoed down rivers, skied across valleys.[26]

Inherent in Morritt's and other descriptions about the type of women who travelled north during this period is the sense that they were taking a vacation from reality, extending their boundaries (physical and psychological) beyond what they could have previously imagined.

Indeed, imagination played a key role in women's experiences, both en route to and once in the Yukon. As they participated in, and decades later reflected on, events, a sense of awe characterized their reactions. For many, the actual experience of travelling the long distance to the Yukon, as well as short trips or excursions undertaken locally, created and reinforced the belief that they were tourists on a grand adventure. Transportation - with attendant mishaps and adventures related to planes, trains and automobiles - figured prominently in women's reminiscences. Most of the women travelled to their new lives on military airplanes (often on freight "scheds"), no doubt a thrilling escapade for young women experiencing air travel for possibly the first time in their lives. Apart from the newness of air adventure, the flights themselves were often thrilling, if not terrifying, and challenged social etiquette. Mickey McCannel recalled her flight in September 1944 upon an American military freight plane:

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[26] Hope Morritt, *Land of the Fireweed: A Young Woman's Story of Alaska Highway Construction Days* (Edmonds, WA: Alaska Northwest Pub. Co., 1985), 139.

> There were thirty nine other soldiers and myself and we sat in a line on either side of the plane and we came to the first stop... anyway all I know is that all the men got out and then came back in, and I had to go to the bathroom too, but I didn't have enough nerve to squat under the plane which I was pretty sure they were doing. So I hung on and hung on and after the plane had started again, I went up to speak to the pilot...and I said, "I imagine that the, all of your patrons were going to the bathroom at the last stop," and he said, "Yes," and I said, "Would you mind asking everyone to keep their seats at the next stop and let me go out because I don't know if I can hang on." And he said, "Sure, I'll do that." So he did and I had the reddest face in the world and went down underneath the plane and then came up and said, "Okay boys, it's all clear." And you know this is somebody that's never been on her own ever and I really was, but anyway, that was only the beginning. We got in the mountains and in those days it was about an eight hour trip, and we got in the mountains and the announcement came over the thing, "Please put your parachutes on, please read all the instructions because it looks like we may have to go down."[27]

The passengers did not have to use their parachutes, but fire engines and ambulances were standing by at the Whitehorse airport in case the plane caught fire on landing. Mickey's dry comment on the ordeal was that it had been "exciting." The flight was only one of her many unusual excursions during her Yukon tenure. Another trip involved a fright on a return trip to Whitehorse from Skagway when the White Pass train came to an unexpected and sudden halt. The passengers were informed that the conductor was inebriated and they would need to stay at the trestle stop to allow him to sober up. Perching on the summit for several hours might have been a bit unnerving on a train ride that involved switch-backs, steep inclines and other elements of navigating a treacherous mountain pass. After the war, the Canadian army offered similar thrilling excursions. Dori Simpson's memorable jaunts included flying from Whitehorse to Watson Lake for a party

[27] McCannel, interview.

which involved "racing around in a crash boat at 3:00 am (daylight) and getting back in time to go to work the next day." But she was most amazed by her arrival in the Yukon aboard an RCAF DC3 during a blizzard in January 1948. "Flying out of the blizzard into brilliant sun and untouched snow covering the mountains was thrilling."[28]

Capers on four wheels matched the thrill and excitement of airplane, boat and train travel. Once the highway opened to civilians, some women drove to their new lives. Muriel von Finster recounted the trials of travelling up the barely drive-able highway to Whitehorse in a second-hand Plymouth coupe as a young bride:

> Well, the highway then was not as the highway now. At the bottom end there was all kinds of goopy mud and in places the road literally wound back on itself, and back on itself, and back on itself. And it was dreadful. And everywhere there was a steep end or a deep end the road had been corroded with logs underneath so you went "rat-a-tat-tat." Sometimes you could see the logs pushing right through, especially where it was a boggy place, and in some places there were only two ruts and in some there were three.[29]

Clerical workers (during both the American and Canadian phases) were often required in the course of their duties to travel up or down varying lengths of the highway; they were usually transported by military men and machines. The same vehicles were borrowed (not always with permission) for recreational purposes. Rena Dowling remembered a jeep ride that she and Hope Morritt had been taken on:

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[28] Simpson, letter.
[29] Muriel von Finster, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996.

> Well I remember one of my favorites was Hope's husband, Danny Cameron. And he was working out, well a good part of the time, out at the Donjek [the Donjek River bridge was one of the larger highway projects initiated by the Canadian army] and when he came to town Danny used to go screaming wild you know. Not hurtful and not really drunk but just having a wonderful time. So he borrowed this jeep somewhere and said he was going to take Hope and I for a ride, and he did. Well, that was a scary story but I didn't know it then, but I think back on it it's a wonder we weren't all killed you know, because Danny drove just like mad.[30]

Rena, who stated that she had been drawn to the Yukon "for adventure mostly,"[31] likely had her expectations fulfilled if jeep rides were any indication.

The "adventure" rhetoric or imagery that women use in their reminiscences does more than offer insights into their perceptions of their experiences as travellers, on a safari as it were, in Canada's north. It also raises issues of danger and women's vulnerability in the face of the harsh elements of nature, as evidenced by one woman's description of an outing from Whitehorse to Carcross for a work-related meeting. The vehicle that Gertrude Seidel and two male colleagues was riding in got stuck when it fell through an ice-covered rut in the road. With the temperature hovering at minus thirty degrees, Gertrude and one of the men stayed with the vehicle while the other one went to find help. They were (for good reason) worried about falling asleep and set an alarm clock to go off every ten minutes. When their friend failed to return after several hours, Gertrude and her partner set off in the direction of barking dogs to be welcomed by a native family in a one-room cabin. They were

[30] Dowling, interview.

eventually "rescued," and Gertrude later concluded that none of them suffered "any ill effects."[32]

Despite some close calls with real danger, or perhaps because of near disasters, women's recollections impart the sense that they would tackle anything in return for the opportunity to participate in the grand adventure of the Alaska Highway. Hope Morritt contends:

> Whitehorse changed the lives of women who worked there in the 1940s. It introduced us to an untamed, mountainous country that still lures us back; it forced us to fight for survival in a wilderness that could kill in a moment if we let our defences down; it made us self-reliant. And many of us met our future husbands there.[33]

The last sentence is somewhat anti-climactic given the preceding heroic rhetoric. Moreover, while their experiences could be life-affirming, and the weather and the terrain pose serious threats, the most fighting that the majority of women did was against blackflies and mosquitoes.

The greatest challenge for women, it seems, was not defending themselves against the natural elements but negotiating their own gendered notions of femininity and reconciling them with what was practical and acceptable for life in the north. Women's reflections reveal that their social conditioning dominated as they often strove to retain or re-establish conventional gender roles. Gendered distinctions and qualifications highlight the complexities of the freedom theme in women's perceptions of their experiences. Furthermore, there is

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Taken from the memoirs of Gertrude (Seidel) Gillis, unpublished manuscript, 1993, personal collection of Stewart Gillis.

an obvious tension that positions notions of femininity alongside or against notions of masculinity in the context of that time and place. Women reflecting upon the period, in contemporary and retrospective accounts, stressed their attempts to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable - femininity in a starkly masculine, even wild, setting.

Women's preoccupation with clothing in their interviews or written accounts is one measure of the importance of gender to material considerations. In many instances, women's attitudes about how they dressed remained firmly traditional. Some women recalled their relief at having brought a "good" dress to Whitehorse, given the active social life they enjoyed. Others were grateful for the existence of Bernie's Apparel on Main Street when they needed a new outfit:

> I only had to buy one thing and that was ... a black suit to get married in and I found it here. It was a black gabardine and I had it for years ... and I felt pretty spiffy. Of course I wasn't the size I am now.[34]

Some women made relatively dangerous judgments in the name of vanity when they chose to go outside in dresses, light coats and high heels even when the temperature dropped to more than 60 below.[35] Other women adopted more practical dressing habits. Mention of the standard "long red underwear" surfaces in several

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[33] Hope Morritt, letter to author, 20 September 1996.
[34] Dowling, interview.
[35] Inez Shulist, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 1 August, 1996.

interviews, and Dori Simpson recalled that the women she knew were "avant-garde in dress, wearing jeans for roughing it."[36]

The manner in which Gertrude Baskine emphasized femininity in her book on women and the Alaska Highway leaves a distinct impression that her purpose was to promote and/or defend women's presence in the north. Whether it was intended to or not, her writing served as propaganda to help convince reluctant parents and others to allow young women to go north to work. One of her tactics was to argue that women could retain their femininity in the far north, even when they chose to act like men. After witnessing a drinking party that involved two women matching drinks with their male companions, Baskine was surprised to note:

> The next morning here were these two women without a wrinkle, without a headache, without the least trace of sleeplessness, looking perfectly sweet and wholesome in their girlish dresses. As indeed they were. The performance of the night before was a mere incident in the lives of self-reliant, efficient and hard-working women. Naturally it is not to be advocated for all women. Very few of us are blessed with such resilience and that kind of gastric juice.[37]

The stress on sweetness and wholesomeness despite not-so-sweet or -wholesome implied that femininity could survive in the rugged north but also confirmed women's ability to look out for themselves. Baskine's also wanted to convince her readers that women were guaranteed "freedom" from physical or sexual harm. She insisted that the Alaska Highway environment was entirely safe for women workers by repeatedly stressing the gallant, chivalrous, nature of the male employees, and by expressing shock

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[36] Simpson, letter.

"at the mildness of their jokes and stories, at the absence of swearing."[38] Some of Baskine's comments are reassuring but her coquettishness takes some of her statements about the propriety of male and female relations in the region right over the top:

> Good God, here I was, a lone woman with three brawny respectably-married men and not one of them dared to put his arm around me to keep my chattering bones in place! Why they'd let me freeze before their very eyes! Talk of the wolves of the Yukon! You were so respected and safe in this country you could petrify before convention was broken![39]

With women's honour assured, Baskine proceeded to allay fears about women's sexual safety:

> To know the extreme gentleness, patience and kindness, the true gentlemanliness that is the core of the average man's heart, perhaps one has to be a lone woman amongst hundreds of them.[40]

If Baskine's book is seen in part as a promotion or defence of women's presence in the north, her presentation of the Alaska Highway men as nothing short of saints makes sense. Yet fifty years later some individuals portrayed men in the same light. One woman claimed that she felt "perfectly safe all the time" during her one-year stay in Whitehorse.[41] Another woman made a sweeping statement about men's chivalrous nature:

> I was the only girl in the messhall - surrounded by hundreds of men and as safe as I have never been before or after. They all looked after me. Considering that they were such a mixed bag of men, it was a wonderful experience.[42]

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[37] Gertrude Baskine, *Hitch-Hiking the Alaska Highway* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1946), 36.
[38] Ibid., 85.
[39] Ibid., 173.
[40] Ibid., 76.
[41] McCannel, interview.
[42] Gillis, memoirs.

Outside of images or ideas about sexual purity and physical safety, women appear to have been generally glad that there were men around to take care of them and generally accepted that men would fill the "gentlemanly" roles expected of them. Rena Dowling's remarks suggest some surprise that the men welcomed women's presence:

> You know the thing that I recall very vividly that I haven't mentioned was the fact of how kind the male population was to us. How helpful they were if you ever needed anything in the barracks or anything. They didn't resent us one bit.[43]

Baskine's approach and Rena's surprise may have been grounded in the fact that during the initial highway construction phase the Yukon was not considered an acceptable locale for women. Rena's attitude might also have stemmed from her previous experience as a CWAC, since public resistance to the idea of women in the services was widespread in its initial stage.

Regardless of whether they remembered men as being gentlemanly or heroic, female migrants generally recall feeling safe for the duration of their Yukon visit. So many men - so little trouble? In fact, available evidence reveals that some women were confronted by drunken military men in the streets and/or in their barracks,[44] the daughter of a prominent local businessman narrowly escaped an attack by three soldiers in an alley,[45] other Whitehorse residents and military visitors were bothered by the presence of a "peeping tom," [46] and a woman who

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[43] Dowling, interview.
[44] Coates, *North to Alaska*, 53.
[45] Department of External Affairs, RG 25, Vol 2743, File H463-1-40, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.
[46] Ibid.

was a teenager during the early American occupation of Whitehorse recalled being cautioned against walking the streets alone.[47] The possible disjunction between the realities and perceptions by women about their personal safety may be explained by the idea that individuals sometimes construct an "idealized past" as a means of understanding the present.[48]

In addition to length of stay and gender, women's perceptions about personal freedom were contingent upon factors such as age and marital status. The "carefree" terminology surfaces most often in accounts by single women who were temporary migrants. Other women, like Joyce Hayden, clearly felt that while the Yukon offered personal gratification and new challenges, their lives were still dictated by conventional gender standards of the day. Joyce's impressions were likely influenced by her involvement in the feminist movement in the Yukon starting in the 1960s, yet her final conclusions about the boundaries imposed on married women are not unlike those expressed by Whitehorse women with more traditional views about women's roles:

> There again, you go where your husband's work is and I adapted myself to all the boating and fishing, the outdoor part of it that I had never done before, but there it was and I adapted to it and I loved it. Oh good heavens, I had over forty years of it, boating, fishing.[49]

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[47] Babe Richards, interview by Helene Dobrowolsky, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 7 January 1991, Yukon Archives 93/95.
[48] Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 27.
[49] Edna Cooper, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 5 August 1996.

> Oh I don't know, a lot of women here came for the normal, usual reasons. I came with my husband, because he was transferred here, a lot of women did that. In my day you went where your husband went, it was just normal, you didn't say no my job is here and I'm staying, you know, we didn't have jobs, we had children to raise.[50]

When considered together, women's perceptions about the nature of their Yukon adventure or lifestyles during the 1940s and 1950s reinforce Ruth Roach Pierson's contention that whether or not women were liberated by their wartime experiences will remain inconclusive.

Another area which highlights the influence of gender on experience appears in women's reflections about the Yukon as a frontier. Many women compared their experiences to pioneering on the prairies a generation or more earlier; they were also influenced by a common frontier ethos existing in the Yukon since the days of the gold rush. The rhetoric of "pioneering" which surfaces in the recounting of women's experiences confirms the existence of a female frontier in the Yukon during the middle of the twentieth-century. Alice Patnode, for example, said it was a pioneering spirit that called her north.[51] Another woman described Whitehorse as "a frontier town of no crime and no locked doors where everyone knew everyone else, a strong sense of community."[52] Edna Cooper reflected that conditions in Whitehorse

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[50] Flo Whyard, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 21 August 1996.
[51] Alice Patnode, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 14 August 1996.
[52] Margrette Veerman, quoted in Jo-Ann Badley et al. *Yukon Women* (Whitehorse: Yukon Status of Women Council, 1975), 31.

in the 1940s called to mind the experiences of homesteading women on the Saskatchewan prairie.[53]

One important distinction between the Yukon and the homesteading frontier was that the northern frontier had always been resource-based, so that the incentives for women's northern migration had never included the kinds of permanency associated with prairie settlement. Land in the Yukon was judged in terms of its aesthetic appeal or resource potential, not in terms of farm families. Alaska Highway women also entered an urban, not a rural frontier, even though their recollections of Whitehorse suggest that the town fit their image of what pioneer living was all about:

> There was very little in Whitehorse at that time. Main Street, when it rained, was just like a sea of mud, it was just horrible, it was a dirty place, everything was dirty.[54]

> I remember I didn't like it, and I looked at it and I said "Well, it's going to take more than a little bit to change my mind. This looks like something out of nowhere - crooked old buildings and dirt and mud and you don't know what else." I said, "It just needs a good scrub-brush."[55]

The dust and the dirt and the shambled remains of the American army buildings in the postwar period were a great disappointment to women who had anticipated a metropolis of sorts:

> I had no expectations of it other than what my brother had told me and he had painted a rather rosy picture. He talked about this "city" and of course, in 1953 it had grown just enough to be called a city, you know, rather than a town. And so I expected something like Edmonton, I guess, I don't know what I expected. But I can remember driving down the Two Mile Hill, which was pretty rough, you know, a bunch of shacks alongside the old army buildings,

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[53] Cooper, interview.
[54] Sudeyko, interview.
[55] Winnie Shandro, interview by author, tape recording, Edmonton, AB, 3 May 1996.

> alongside the Two Mile Hill and my heart sinking and thinking, "Oh my God, what are we coming into?"[56]

Women's reactions to, and indeed their ability to adapt to, a semi-frontier lifestyle would have depended greatly on their prior life experience and cultural reference points. Migrants from developed urban centres would have felt that they were taking a step backward when they arrived in Whitehorse and encountered water delivery, primitive sewage systems, and no electricity in their homes:

> Well when I was married in '43, pioneer conditions was how it was. I had one room, as the children came along we added rooms. I must have had three kids before we had running water.[57]

Women from rural backgrounds, in contrast, had a greater chance of being familiar or comfortable with the somewhat primitive conditions. One woman believed that growing up on a Saskatachewan farm prepared her for life in the Yukon; being "born into" pioneer conditions, she said, enabled her to adapt more easily than a "city dweller" could.[58] Women without personal exposure to frontier conditions adopted other frames of reference. Their first encounters with the dogs and the dirt of Whitehorse reminded some of scenes from Hollywood westerns, which, in turn, might have influenced their understanding and construction of their own experiences as being frontier-like:

> The town itself was like a movie setting, board sidewalks, muddy streets, trappers coming in off their lines - playing Ace Away and drinking their money away. Frame houses without foundations as at that time they had not solved the

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[56] Hayden, interview.
[57] Cyr, interview.
[58] Cooper, interview.

> problem of permafrost, husky dogs roaming, overfed from the mess halls.[59]
>
> I had let my home in Victoria and arrived to find a dusty Western-style town of wooden buildings and board sidewalks. Now if Hop-Along Cassidy were to walk down Main Street I wouldn't have been surprised.[60]

Whitehorse did have a personality all its own, and female migrants portray themselves as right at home with the easy existence of town life:

> I loved the townspeople, especially the monstrous dogs lying in the main street. All sorts of weird things you know, people walking down the street drinking a beer or something you know, but you know, the freedom, you know, nobody ever did us any harm because of these dogs or people getting drunk or anything. But it's just that people just lived and that's all.[61]

Women appreciated the strange personalities as they might have enjoyed the characters in a play or a Hollywood movie. Their reflections often are expressed as though they were simultaneously participants in, and spectators at, the events of the Alaska Highway period. The stereotypes of the frontier that women brought to the Yukon coloured their reactions to the setting. It seems less likely that they had specific stereotypes as points of reference for what it meant to be frontier women at that time and in that place.

The concept and language of the "frontier" is important to an understanding of how frontier imagery, and all its implications, shaped not only women's individual experiences, but, just also a unique Yukon women's identity. Some

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[59] Dori Simpson, letter.
[60] Lynn Ward, quoted in Jo-Ann Badley et al., *Yukon Women* (Whitehorse: Yukon Status of Women Council, 1975), 32.
[61] Dowling, interview.

contemporary sources confirm that frontier or pioneer in relation to women was already at work during the early years of the of the Alaska Highway period. Two commentaries in particular lauded women's involvement in the Alaska Highway project, ultimately equating it with broad nation-building themes. Gertrude Baskine considered the motives of female migrants and concluded that their desires to go north were closely related to personal, not material, interests:

> Yet money did not seem to be the main objective that had impelled these women workers to leave comfortable homes for the hazards and rugged conditions of life in the North. Rather, it would seem, a spirit of adventure, a desire for new fields, or a widening of their horizons. Many of them having heard of the construction of the Alaska Highway and of the difficulties and obstacles that had to be overcome in such a short time, had been fired by a romantic interest and wished themselves to be part of this novel experiment.[62]

An article, published in the *National Home Monthly* magazine in August 1943, drew direct parallels between previous and then-current generations of pioneer women:

> We Canadians have the frontier in our blood. As children we listened big-eyed to the stories a grandmother or a neighbour told us of crossing the prairie in a covered wagon while the buffalo roamed and the Indians whooped. Today we are producing a whole new crop of pioneers and their stories stack up very well with the ones our grandmothers told us. Many Canadian women have left warm comfortable homes, their friends and family and the bright lights of civilization to take jobs in the northland; helping to build those new highways which will do so much to open up new territory and provide us with trade routes to other countries when the war is over.[63]

Both authors contend that women would leave "comfortable homes" and sacrifice a "civilized" life in favour of the Yukon wilderness if it meant being a part of something that would

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[62] Baskine, 56.

benefit the nation as whole. It is as though the authors mobilized grand and heroic imagery to encourage women's participation not only because it would be personally gratifying, but also because it would be a worthy contribution to the country. Discomfort and difficulties would be a small price to pay.

Women at the end of the twentieth century continue to be attracted to the Yukon for what it symbolizes in the way of a pioneering lifestyle. Audrey McLaughlin, former national leader of the New Democratic Party, moved to Whitehorse in 1979:

> When my Toronto friends learned what I planned to do, many of them were flabbergasted. "Why the Yukon?" they asked. I told them I was attracted to the North because I saw it as a different culture, a new world to experience. I suppose, like many people, I had romantic notions that it was some sort of last frontier.[64]

Romantic notions aside, each new generation of female migrants reassesses the Yukon for what it might provide them in terms of widening opportunities and personal gratification. Each aging generation reflects on how their presence changed the Yukon and how the Yukon changed their lives. One of the most intriguing issues in Yukon society today is the controversy over whether or not women deserve to be recognized as pioneers. Despite women's presence and contributions, the definition of "pioneer" has been officially masculine, as reflected in eligibility for membership in the exclusive Yukon Order of Pioneers (YOOP).

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[63] Marjorie Winspear, "Highway Women: Social Life on the Alaska Highway," *National Home Monthly* (August 1943): 44-46.
[64] Audrey McLaughlin, *A Woman's Place: My Life and Politics* (Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter & Ross, 1992), 13-14.

In 1988, Dawson City resident Madeleine Gould filed a complaint with the Yukon Human Rights Commission (YHRC) after the YOOP denied her application for membership on the basis of gender. Gould had lived in the territory since 1946 and was a partner with her husband in the family's mining operation. The YOOP, which dated back to 1893, only admitted males who had lived continuously in the Yukon for at least 20 years. Gould's case eventually reached the Supreme Court of Canada, which ruled in March 1996 that she had not been discriminated against. The two female judges on the bench dissented, one of them arguing:

> La Forest J. (para. 85) asserts that the honour and public recognition associated with having one's name on the Order of Pioneers' historical records is not critical to being recognized as a Yukon pioneer, but only to being a member of the Order. With respect, the record suggests otherwise. The Order has assumed an important role in defining the pioneers of the Yukon, and that recognition as a member of the Order and recognition of a person as a Yukon pioneer are largely synonymous in the mind of the public. [65]

The controversy and court case left the territory divided and scarred. Yet many women did not let others dictate who or what they were. Their identity as Yukon pioneers has nothing to do with how they are defined in a courtroom and everything to do with how they interpret a lifetime spent in the Yukon. For example, the Ladies Auxiliary to the YOOP, which was formed in 1975, continues to prosper and attract new members who are either satisfied with their legal status as "auxiliary" pioneers or who still believe they can change that status in the public's mind if not the courts. While declining to discuss the Gould case, they

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[65] For the complex legal arguments and full decision, see Gould v. Yukon Order of Pioneers (1996), *Canadian Human Rights Reporter*, 25.

did express their satisfaction and pride in their membership in the Ladies Auxiliary which, by most accounts, operates quite independently of the YOOP. Joyce Hayden, who moved to the Yukon in the early 1950s, eloquently articulated the ideas that many of the Alaska Highway interviewees raised with respect to women's pioneering spirit and their contributions to Yukon society:

> Anybody that complained about the weather or the conditions or the life in the north in any way, we believed they were not hardy enough to be in the north. It took a special breed of, and particularly women... of people to live in the north...So there is that spirit that is kindled by hardship and I believe it's what has carried us through the years, what carried Yukon women for the most part.[66]

Joyce also commented on women's ability to create domestic havens for their families that both shut out and "civilize" the wilderness:

> One of the prides of Whitehorse in the early days was that a house might look like a terrible shack on the outside but inside it would be just beautiful and of course, the inside was the woman's domain. And so we created, I think, each of us, our little haven within these little shacks.[67]

In the final analysis, women deserved recognition as pioneers because of their contributions to the establishment of physical and social structures that bettered life for people, especially women and children. As she provided details about those and other accomplishments, Joyce reflected on the importance of women's contribution during the preceding decades:

> It seems that women have been willing to step out in front and take the risks that many times, men haven't in the territory. I suspect that that was true in the early days in Dawson, I know it has been true over the years in Whitehorse. If you really want to find where the change

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[66] Hayden, interview.
[67] Ibid.

> has happened in Whitehorse, look for the women involved at the time. We just went ahead and did what had to be done.[68]

While official society may deny women the mantle of pioneer, women who have been part of Yukon history for the past fifty years and longer see themselves as part of the regional pioneer myth and claim recognition as builders of their society.

[68] Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: NOT THE END OF THE ROAD

This thesis has demonstrated that women were active participants in the Alaska Highway and other defence projects in Canada's northwest during World War II, and in the activities carried out in the upgrading and maintenance of the highway in the postwar period. Although they understand that the majority of men in the region appreciated their presence, women were not content to be mere aesthetic fixtures on the landscape. They explored and experienced all that the Yukon had to offer in the way of adventure and excitement, and they earned good wages while they were at it.

Oral history interviews reveal important information about women's lives in the Yukon during the Alaska Highway period, and not just about concrete or material facets. Kathryn Anderson has remarked that oral historians cannot be as concerned as psychologists when they examine an individual's self-concept and consciousness, but they can become better at documenting "questions of value and meaning in individuals' reflections upon their past."[1] In this study, women who had lived in the Yukon before the war or settled there as a result of the Alaska Highway shared their understanding that their contributions to Yukon society mattered. Women who migrated temporarily, regardless of

[1] Kathryn Anderson et al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," in *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in*

whether they spent several years or a relatively short time in the Yukon, also expressed very strong feelings about their experiences:

> The richest part of my life. And I didn't want to go, remember. Ended up being the richest part of my life. I wouldn't have traded those years for all the money in China. The challenges were of little or no consequence.[2]

The words of one migrant herself best capture the essence of women's memories of the period:

> But anyway it was a time in my life that I never would have wanted to miss. The respect you got from the people you worked with and the interest in other people because they were all so different from different places, you know, it was something special.[3]

Women's own assessment of their Alaska Highway experience must be stood alongside the historian's more detached analysis. Paying close attention to women's memories in this study added layers of complexity to the history of the Alaska Highway period, introducing new insights which enhance existing themes and/or challenge biases of both Yukon and Canadian women's historiography. The arising complexities seem rooted in notions and realities pertaining to "region." Despite the fact that the Yukon had a higher concentration of military personnel than any other site on Canadian soil, the Alaska Highway story is not usually considered in historical accounts of the Canadian homefront during World War II. Likewise, the region has never, until now, been examined for what it might reveal about women's

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the Social Sciences, ed. Joyce McCarl Nielsen (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 98.

[2] Winnie Shandro, interview by author, tape recording, Edmonton, AB, 3 May 1996.

work during World War II. In a region where military operations and expanded opportunities for women in non-traditional war jobs would have seemed an obvious outcome, women remained, almost without exception, employed in traditionally "female" jobs. Why? How did the intensity or concentration of a "masculine" presence hinder women's opportunity to expand their employment horizons in the Yukon during the Alaska Highway period?

Future research directions might include these questions and others that follow naturally out of the present thesis. For instance, what was the profile of the average female migrant and what was it that drew her to the region? Did she migrate for primarily economic reasons, or were adventure and personal fulfillment really her goal? Finding answers would require that many more interviews be held with women asked more specific questions about their places of origin, their age, their employment record, and their family, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Finally, of course, questions about women's perceptions or reflections on their lived experiences would need to remain a key focus of the history of those women who have through the years, chosen to make the Yukon their home.

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[3] Rena (Fraser) Dowling, interview by author, tape recording, Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996.

Table 1

Female labour force in the Yukon, 14 years of age and over, by occupation, age, and sex.

Occupation	Total		Age Group											
			14-19		20-24		25-34		35-44		45-64		65+	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Telephone Operators	1	2	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
Owners, Managers Retail	43	4	-	-	-	2	4	1	5	-	11	1	23	-
Salespersons in Stores	26	5	-	1	5	3	10	-	4	-	5	1	2	-
Musicians,Music Teachers	1	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nurses, Graduate	1	12	-	-	1	1	-	7	-	1	-	2	-	1
Teachers - Schools	8	8	-	-	3	1	1	6	1	1	3	-	-	-
Policemen and Detectives	19	1	-	-	2	-	12	1	2	-	3	-	-	-
Postmasters	6	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	4	-
Owners, Managers Hotels	17	4	-	-	1	-	3	-	1	-	7	3	5	1
Barbers,Hairdressers,Manicurists	4	3	-	-	-	-	-	3	1	-	1	-	2	-
Charworkers and Cleaners	2	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Cooks	42	9	1	1	2	1	6	1	10	1	19	5	4	-
Domestic Servants	14	19	1	6	1	6	4	3	1	1	3	3	4	-
Housekeepers, Matrons,Stewards	10	26	-	-	-	3	-	7	3	6	6	10	1	-
Laundrymen and Laundresses	-	4	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	2	-	-
Lodging/Board House Keepers	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	-	-
Nurses Practical	5	2	-	-	1	-	1	1	1	-	-	1	2	-
Waiters and Waitresses	14	18	3	2	5	9	1	7	1	-	4	-	-	-
Office Clerks	40	1	2	-	3	-	18	-	6	1	8	-	3	-
Stenographers and Typists	1	9	-	1	1	1	-	5	-	1	-	1	-	-
Labourers	95	1	3	-	14	-	23	1	17	-	27	-	11	-

Taken from the *Census of Canada*, 1941.

Table 2

Female labour force in the Yukon, 14 years and over, by occupation.

Occupation	1951	
	F	M
All Occupations	533	3,784
Owners, Managers Transportation	5	32
" " Retail Trade	11	64
" " Community Service	1	4
" " Recreation Service	1	4
" " Personal Service	14	43
Accountants and Auditors	5	24
Artists, except commercial; art teachers	2	-
Laboratory Technicians	3	1
Librarians	1	-
Musicians and music teachers	1	-
Nurses, graduate	22	-
Osteopaths and chiropractors	1	-
Photographers	2	-
Religious workers	2	3
Teachers, school	25	10
Teachers and instructors	2	-
Bookkeepers and cashiers	30	16
Doctors and dentists attendants	4	-
Office appliance operators	2	-
Office clerks	30	74
Stenographers and typists	62	1
Hunters and trappers	11	260
Bakers	2	6
Dressmakers and seamstresses	2	-
Jewellers and watchmakers	1	-
Transportation agents and ticket sales	3	9
Messengers	1	-
Telephone Operators	14	2
Commercial sales clerks	45	39
Insurance agents	1	5
Barbers, hairdressers, manicurists	3	8
Charworkers and cleaners	2	-
Cooks	36	75
Hotel, café and private household workers	38	16
Housekeepers, matrons, stewards	16	11
Janitors and sextons	2	24
Launderers, cleaners, dryers	24	3
Nurses, practical	7	2
Waiters and waitresses	65	43
Other personal service	3	-
Guards, watchmen	1	31
Officers, armed forces	61	10
Other ranks, armed forces	2	623
Policemen and detectives	1	42
Theatre ushers	1	-
Labourers	2	187
Not stated	14	28

Taken from the *Census of Canada*, 1951.

Table 3.

Female labour force in the Yukon, 14 years and over, by occupation.

Occupation	1961	
	F	M
All Occupations	1,406	4,836
Managerial Occupations		
Credit managers	2	1
Office managers	3	12
Postmasters	8	5
Owners and Managers		
Transportation, communication, utilities	1	45
Retail trade	23	97
Finance, insurance, real estate	2	11
Community, business and personal services	49	94
Health and welfare services	2	4
Motion pictures and recreational services	2	3
Services to business management	2	2
Personal services	42	84
Miscellaneous services	1	1
All other industries	1	4
Professional and Technical		
School teachers	94	25
Teachers and instructors	9	7
Nurses, graduate	66	-
Physical and occupational therapists	1	-
Pharmacists	1	2
Medical and dental technicians	5	-
Lawyers and notaries	1	7
Nuns and brothers	1	-
Religious workers	5	5
Artists, commercial	1	1
Artists, art teachers	1	-
Authors, editors and journalists	5	-
Musicians and music teachers	1	1
Accountants and auditors	2	20
Social welfare workers	6	2
Librarians	3	0
Science and engineering technicians	1	58
Other professional occupations	4	9
Clerical Occupations		
Bookkeepers and cashiers	93	39
Office appliance operators	5	1
Stock clerks and storekeepers	8	51
Shipping and receiving clerks	2	12
Transportation agents and ticket sales	4	11
Stenographers	107	2
Typists and clerk-typists	40	-
Doctors and dentists attendants	4	-
Other clerical occupations	169	78
Sales Occupations	88	73
Service and Recreation Occupations		
Guards, watchmen	2	41
Commissioned officers, armed forces	2	14

	1961	
Service and Recreation Occupations cont'd.	F	M
Other ranks, armed forces	5	283
Lodging and boarding house keepers	11	-
Housekeepers (except private household)	20	3
Cooks	74	68
Bartenders	10	17
Waiters and waitresses	109	7
Nursing assistants and aids	28	9
Babysitters	17	-
Maids and related service workers	119	57
Athletes and sports officials	1	-
Barbers, hairdressers, manicurists	11	10
Launderers and drycleaners	26	5
Janitors and cleaners, building	24	66
Guides	1	23
Attendants, recreation and amusement	3	-
Transport and Communication Occupations		
Inspectors and foremen, transport	2	10
Telephone operators	10	3
Telegraph operators	6	-
Fishermen, Trappers and Hunters	6	69
Miners, Quarrymen and Related Workers	1	571
Craftsmen, Production Process and Related	23	1,297
Labourers	8	333
Occupation not stated	70	186

Taken from the *Census of Canada*, 1961.

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Cyr, Corinne. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 20 August 1996. [Corinne Cyr continues to live in Whitehorse, where she has lived since 1941 when she moved there to nurse at the Whitehorse General Hospital and subsequently met and married her Whitehorse born husband.]

Dowling, Rena (Fraser). Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996. [Originally from Edmonton, Rena Dowling was a member of the CWAC prior to going to Whitehorse to work for the Canadian army in the payroll office. She stayed for two years and then moved to Fort St. John with her new husband in 1948. She still visits the Yukon occasionally - I was able to interview her while she was there on vacation in summer 1996.]

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Hayden, Joyce. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 22 August 1996. [Originally from Northern Saskatchewan, Joyce Hayden moved from northern BC to Whitehorse with her husband and children in 1954. Although she left for a period of several years, she and her husband returned to Whitehorse and have been resident again there for over two decades, several years of which Joyce Hayden served as a Member of the Yukon Legislative Assembly.]

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She returned to Edmonton after six months and is still a resident in that city.]

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Richards, Babe. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 23 July 1996. [Babe Richards was the only woman who I interviewed that was born in Whitehorse. She spent some of her married life in Watson Lake, but has been continuously resident in Whitehorse for the past three decades.]

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Shulist, Inez. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 1 August, 1996. [Inez Shulist was the only woman that I interviewed who was originally from the United States. She moved as a young single woman to Whitehorse in 1944, married and continues to live there today.]

Sudeyko, Marlene. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 9 August 1996. [Marlene Sudeyko went to Whitehorse as a young single woman in 1953. She married a young man from Alberta and continues to live in Whitehorse.]

von Finster, Muriel. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 13 August 1996. {Murile von Finster was the only woman who I interviewed who migrated from overseas. Originally from London, she moved as a young newlywed to Whitehorse in 1949, lived in various Yukon communities throughout the years and currently lives with her husband in Whitehorse.]

Whyard, Flo. Interview by author. Tape recording. Whitehorse, YT, 21 August 1996. [Flo Whyard moved with her husband and children to Whitehorse from Yellowknife in 1953. A former editor of the Whitehorse Star, and former mayor of Whitehorse, Mrs. Whyard continues to live in Whitehorse.]

NOTE: At the time of completion of this thesis, the tapes and transcripts of the above-noted interviews were in the author's possession. It is intended, if the interviewees give permission to do so, that the tapes and transcripts will be deposited with the Yukon Archives in Whitehorse, Yukon.

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IMAGE EVALUATION
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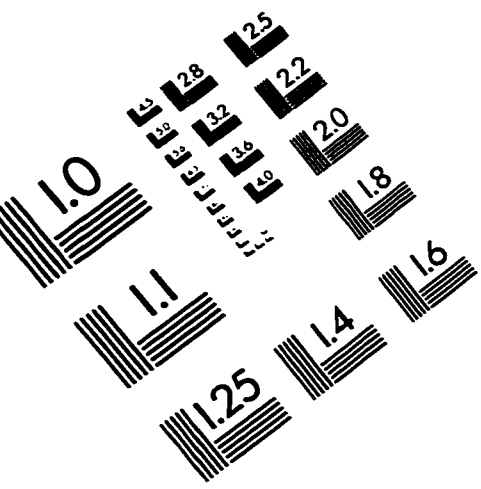

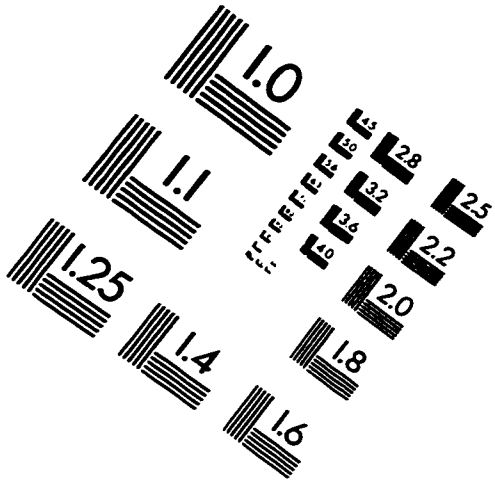

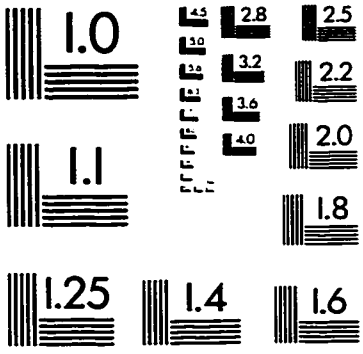

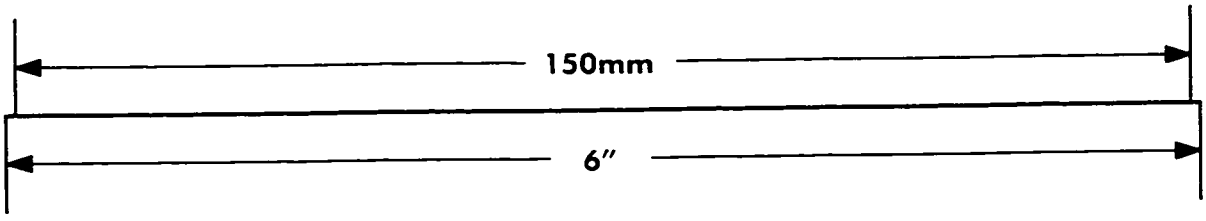

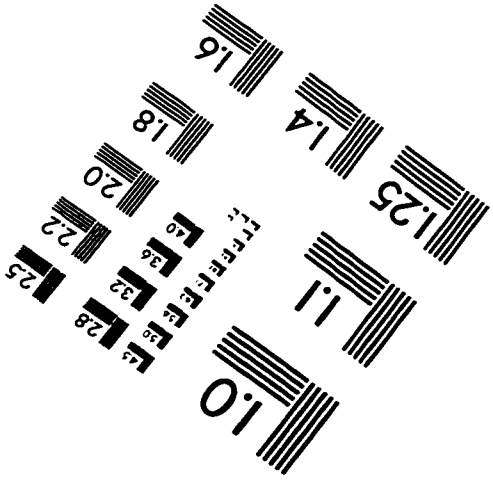

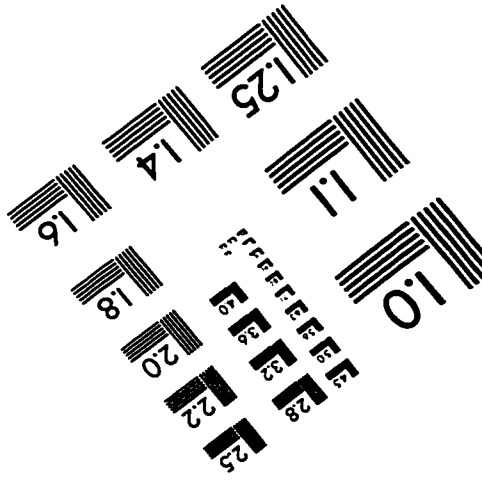

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