

Domestic Service

The YWCA and Women's Employment Agencies in Vancouver, 1898-1915

Robin John Anderson*

Contrary to the negative stereotype created by progressive era reformers and maintained by later commentators, women's employment agencies in Vancouver provided a needed service to women workers before the First World War. More often than not, the agent's interest in profits complemented the domestic and non-domestic worker's needs for security and job flexibility in a local labour market which was in constant flux. These beneficial conditions were less true for the Vancouver chapter of the YWCA which was also in the 'business' of job placement. Rather, the YWCA was committed to the importation, training and distribution of domestic workers for the greater benefit of the city's middle-class employers. Because the women's employment agents did not actively serve the household labour needs of these employers, most were either condemned by YWCA officials and other reform institutions for moral crimes or were ignored entirely.

Contrairement aux clichés répandus par les réformistes de l'ère progressiste et repris par la suite par certains commentateurs, les agences de placement pour femmes, de Vancouver, fournissaient un service essentiel aux travailleuses avant la Première Guerre mondiale. Le plus souvent, la recherche du profit les incitait à défendre les besoins des travailleuses en matière de sécurité et de flexibilité d'emploi sur un marché du travail très instable. Ce n'était pas tout à fait le cas du YWCA qui avait pour mission d'importer, de former et de placer les employées de maison pour le compte de familles de la classe moyenne de la ville. Mais comme les agences de placement en question ne servaient pas vraiment les besoins de cette catégorie d'employeurs, la plupart furent condamnées par le YWCA et d'autres institutions réformistes pour des délits d'ordre moral ou furent purement et simplement ignorées.

Anyone familiar with the moral economy of the progressive era knows the awful reputation of commercial employment agencies before the First World War. Employment agents were accused of a litany of humanitarian and economic transgressions, including fraud, theft, moral degradation and the stimulation of unemployment. The issue of the employment 'shark' became so heated that an international movement calling for the abolition of private job agencies and their replacement by labour exchanges emerged before World War One. This movement offered a 'scientific' alternative to commercial agencies, a language of criticism and an impressive cadre of British,

* Robin John Anderson received his master's degree from Simon Fraser University. He has taught at SFU and at Okanagan College.

American and Canadian experts to carry the message. While these labour exchange theorists and their followers recognized unemployment as an inevitable feature of the capitalist system, the labour exchange was never meant to interfere with industry; rather, the exchange system was a preventative overlay which was meant to assist industry and workers, while preserving, to varying degrees, ideals of self-initiative and personal responsibility.¹ Commercial agencies, North American relics of an unorganized and inefficient world of competitive capitalism, stood in the way of the labour exchange movement and were therefore attacked by American and Canadian reformers after 1910.

Historians have done little to test the negative stereotype of employment agencies constructed by reformers. One immediate problem with the traditional critique is its almost complete disregard of women's employment agencies. The stereotypical agent was male, and his clients were invariably presented as transient male labourers working in casual urban employment or on railway construction. Yet in most Canadian and American cities, up to one-third of commercial agencies were for women workers. This study examines the rise of Vancouver employment agencies for women in the two decades before World War One. At the centre of this discussion is the issue of abuse of workers by employment agents. The evidence presented in this paper, however, suggests that the positive functions of women's employment agencies far outweighed the abuses attributed to them by social reformers. Commercial agencies proliferated, not because they tricked or defrauded workers, but because they served a practical function in the labour market. Women's agencies closely reflected job offerings for women and, in particular, the high turnover of domestic servants. All commercial agencies — men's and women's — thrived on labour turnover; the nature of domestic work promoted such turnover and explained the disproportionate numbers of women's agencies in prewar Vancouver.

The job-find process was not the sole preserve of commercial agents. In Vancouver, the Young Women's Christian Association played an important role in importing and distributing paid household immigrant workers. The

1. The exchange advocates — mostly social reformers, progressive intellectuals and new government bureaucrats — called for a centrally-organized and state-controlled labour market in order to meet three related goals: economic growth through an improved hiring/labour distribution system; prevention of unemployment, under-employment and abusive employment practices; and social harmony through employment control, particularly later during wartime. For a general discussion of the rise of the international labour exchange movement, see Robin John Anderson, "Sharks and White Slavers? The Vancouver Employment Business, 1898-1925" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1991), 9-25; Udo Sautter, "North American Government Labor Agencies before World War One: A Cure for Unemployment?" *Labor History*, 24 (1983), 366-393; John Garraty, *Unemployment in History: Economic Thought and Public Policy* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978); Tomas Martinez, *The Human Marketplace: An Examination of Private Employment Agencies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976); and Bryce M. Stewart, "The Employment Service of Canada," *Queen's Quarterly*, 27, 1 (July 1919), 37-61.

YWCA also operated an employment bureau for domestics, and consequently there developed a tension between the YWCA and commercial agencies over the securing of these women workers. It is argued here that the directors of the YWCA were more closely connected to the domestic employers than the household servants with whom they worked. The stories of commercial agency abuse in fact had more to do with the self-serving motives of reformers and employers, and less to do with the actions of women's employment agents. This study, therefore, begins with a discussion of the overall structure of Vancouver's employment business, examines the relationship between domestic service, labour turnover and employment agency growth and, finally, examines the differing aims and methods of the YWCA and commercial employment agencies. The study of women's employment agencies in Vancouver offers a perspective on the changing job market for women and a revisionist view of job intermediaries before World War One.

The Structure of the Vancouver Employment Business

British Columbia's economy expanded rapidly in the two decades before the First World War with Vancouver as its newborn metropolis. The city's growth came in two spurts: 1898-1906 and 1909-1912. The first period of growth was initially fueled by the commerce of the Klondike gold rush and then sustained by the emergent Prairie demand for forest products. Salmon canning, railroad construction and maintenance, and wholesale merchandizing also tied Vancouver to the provincial and, ultimately, continental markets.² Vancouver replaced Victoria as the regional economic hub, and its population and related residential and commercial construction industries grew accordingly. After a continental economic recession in 1907-1908, Vancouver and the regional economy rebounded with a vengeance. While primary industries and railway construction continued to expand, speculation in urban real estate grew even faster, leading to a second, even larger, construction boom between 1909 and 1912. Vancouver's population doubled from 66,000 in 1906 to over 120,000 in 1912. The city's labour market not only reflected these cyclical trends, but also the seasonal patterns of each economic sector and the segregation of work and workplace based primarily on racial difference (Asian and non-Asian) and sex.

2. For a good overview of Vancouver's economic history for the period 1898-1914, see Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: J. Lorimer, 1980) and R.A.J. McDonald, "Business Leaders in Early Vancouver, 1886-1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1978). Vancouver's changing labour market and its segmented labour struggles are covered in Robert McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver, 1886-1914: Urbanization and Class in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 69-70 (1986); James Robert Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action in the Working Class of Vancouver, British Columbia, 1900-1919" (Ph.D. dissertation, Carleton University, 1986); and Gillian Creeese, "Working Class Politics, Racism and Sexism: The Making of a Politically Divided Working Class in Vancouver, 1900-1939" (Ph.D. dissertation, Carleton University, 1986).

Commercial employment agencies had existed in Vancouver since the city's founding in 1886, but these multiplied in number between 1898 and 1915 in response to local and regional labour demands associated with the rapid growth in resource industries, railway building, city construction, women's domestic service and 'new' service work outside the home. In all, some 138 agencies opened and (often quickly) closed their doors between 1898 and 1915.³ These agencies reflected the racial and sexual divisions within Vancouver's regional labour market and the contours of that market over time. As a result, three distinct agency sectors emerged before World War One: a large group of agencies for white males and two smaller groups for Asian males and white women. Each of these groups was more or less distinct; each tended to locate in different commercial neighbourhoods in order to attract its particular clientele. Women's agencies saw a degree of specialization with the emergence of hotel, restaurant and clerical offices after 1908; however, the strength of women's agencies over the period lay with an almost insatiable demand for household servants — the majority of women's agents in Vancouver placed domestics.

Commercial employment agencies also reflected sectoral or occupational structures as these changed over time. Thus, as the importance of Asian male domestic labour declined in the new century because of an increase of white women and increased racial exclusion, the women's domestic agency emerged. The economic downturn in 1907-1908 severely hampered the activities of men's agencies, but did not affect women's domestic agencies since household servants were hired mostly by middle-class employers. The 1913-1916 depression, however, forced many employment offices for women out of business when the slight occupational expansion for women into service and clerical jobs outside the home came to a sudden end. After the autumn of 1913, the remaining women's agencies offered little work other than domestic service. Each employment business sector responded to seasonal labour market demands as well. For white and Asian males in resource industries, construction, agriculture or railway building, this activity was fairly predictable: a strong spring, an active summer, fall slowdowns and a dead winter. Women's agencies followed the seasonal rhythms of the home, child-care and the city's social calendar. Thus, in December, when men's agencies were depressed, desperate or dead, women's agencies were bustling with activity as Vancouver's middle class hired on help for the holiday season.

3. Information of the numbers, names and activities of Vancouver employment agencies have been drawn from a number of primary sources. Since employment agencies were such marginal endeavours, no business or personal records are available. However, agents did use classified advertisements in newspapers, and this study is based on an extensive newspaper search over a twenty-year period (1898-1918). Three Vancouver dailies were used: the *Vancouver Daily World*, the *News Advertiser* and the *Province*. Information from these sources was correlated with an exhaustive name and street search drawn from two city directories, *Wrigleys* and *Hendersons*, over the same period.

Employment agencies for women also marked the fundamental segregation of women's and men's work. Employers contributed to and profited from this division by encouraging the recruitment of low-waged women workers into socially-defined women's jobs. Women workers typically earned, on average, between one-half and two-thirds of men's earnings. The average weekly wage for women in Vancouver was sixty-three percent of the male rate in 1911.⁴ Segregation was bound, however, not simply by employer avarice but by an ideology of gender that stressed the domestic role for women as proper, natural and subordinate to the male experience.⁵ As a result, women's wage labour confirmed women's role as primary domestic workers dependent on men — women were not expected or encouraged to be bread-winners. Feminist scholars suggest that this ideology has been an essential aid to capitalist accumulation: women's maintenance of the home has allowed for the growth of male wage labour and domestic ideology has served to legitimize this split.⁶ Areas of paid work consequently deemed appropriate for women before the war were in domestic or servile occupations, including household help, service work in stores, restaurants, hotels and hospitals and, increasingly, clerical-professional jobs as stenographers, typists and teachers.⁷ Women working outside these areas were the exceptions. Women's employment agencies, most of which were run by women, profited from the segregated labour market by bringing together working women and appropriate jobs. Yet within the confines of proper women's work was a changing women's labour force. At the turn of the century, a majority of women previously employed as household workers were moving into new service occupations outside the home.⁸ Women's agencies also reflected this transition, as the jobs offered women by agents kept pace with labour market changes. In this sense, employment agencies performed a function in the labour market by remaining responsive and flexible to employment conditions.

Domestic Service and the Rise of Employment Agencies

While women's occupations expanded slowly within socially-defined limits, a mainstay of employment continued to be paid household labour.

4. See Gillian Creese, "Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the 'Oriental problem'," *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1989), 24-51.

5. *Ibid.*

6. See Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 36-40. See also Veronica Strong-Boag, "Keeping House in God's Country: Canadian Women at Work in the Home," in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 125.

7. *Census of Canada* 1911, Volume VI, Table 5. See also Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver, 1900-1915," *BC Studies* 41 (Spring), 39-41; Creese, "Working Class Politics," 124 and Cohen, *Women's Work*, 135-151.

8. Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1988), 50-56.

Women wage workers made up a minority of the city's total workforce, but their employment agencies took a disproportionately large share of the city's employment business. In 1910, only one out of eight workers living in Vancouver was a woman. However, in 1912, employment agencies dedicated to women's work comprised one-third of all active agencies.⁹ The number of women's agencies therefore was related only indirectly to the number of women workers. Agency totals were determined instead by the nature of domestic labour, the structure of its labour market and the special demands of Vancouver households before World War One.

Employment agencies in general were attracted to areas of casual and seasonal labour where turnover was high, and paid household labour was particularly transient. While space limits a full discussion of the hardships of domestics, British, American and Canadian studies have identified those problems which were universal to household wage work. These included the negative association of housework with woman's work, the often-difficult employer-servant relationship due to an atomized and unregulated workplace, and the gruelling nature of household work itself.¹⁰ As well, many young women used domestic service as an initial point of entry to the work force before taking up other kinds of work; others left domestic service to get married. For these reasons, domestic service was chronically plagued by labour shortages and high turnover from New York to Toronto to Vancouver. To make matters even more volatile, the supply of domestics was always higher in the East than the West. With European immigrants filling the domestic ranks, disembarking ports such as Halifax and Montreal had a supply

9. *Census of Canada* 1911, Volume VI, Table 6. Of the 50,628 working people over 10 years of age listed in the census, 6,452 were women.

10. For the English experience, see Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975) and Theresa M. McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernization of Household Service in England and France, 1820-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1976). For domestics in the United States, see David M. Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Daniel E. Sutherland, *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983); and Donna L. Van Raaphorst, *Union Maids Not Wanted: Organizing Domestic Workers, 1870-1940* (New York: Praeger, 1988). Less has been written on the experience of paid domestic workers in Canada. See Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," in Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard, eds., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1974); Marilyn Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestics for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," *Ontario History* 62:3 (September 1980), 148-172; Varpu Lindstrom-Best, "'I Won't Be a Slave!' — Finnish Domestics in Canada, 1911-30," in Robert Harney and Jim Albert, eds., *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985); Claudette Lacelle, *Urban Domestic Servants in 19th-Century Canada* (Ottawa: Environment Canada — Parks, 1987); and Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled*, 54-55. For discussions of the nature of unpaid housework, see Strong-Boag, "Keeping House," 124-151 and *The New Day Recalled*, 113-144; and Cohen, *Women's Work*, 118-151.

advantage over western cities. The wider gap between supply and demand was reflected in higher wage-rates received by domestics on the West coast.¹¹

The severe shortage of domestic help overwhelmed most middle-class women in Vancouver before the First World War. In 1907, the National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) held its annual meeting in Vancouver and local women used the opportunity to vent their domestic concerns in a passionately expressed resolution: "That in view of the present difficulties surrounding domestic life in Canada, the impossibility of procuring women to help in housekeeping, causing a situation that threatens to entirely annihilate our homes, the National Council appoint a Committee" to increase the numbers of domestic workers.¹² Because domestics also left service due to its poor status, women's groups tried to raise the profile of household work by introducing the element of professionalization offered by domestic science or training. The NCWC's 1907 *Annual Report* claimed that importing servants from "all over the world" would not solve the servant shortage; rather, "things will not be right until our Canadian Women learn to glory in homemaking instead of despising it."¹³ Vancouver's Women's Council was less convinced of the merits of domestic training, fearing that proper training would only raise already 'exorbitant' domestic wages.¹⁴

The domestic's awareness of constant servant shortages probably contributed more to high turnover than anything else. As Lacelle notes, quitting was the most frequent method used by household workers to express job dissatisfaction. "People in service," she writes, "had a sovereign remedy when ill-treated — they changed employers."¹⁵ With the knowledge of a labour market tipped in their favour, domestics might change jobs four or five times a year.¹⁶ Jean Scott, writing in the 1890s, observed that "the majority of servants do not stop long in one place," when "a girl knows that she can get a place at any time."¹⁷

High turnover and publicized domestic shortages drew employment agents into the domestic placement business. This was as true for Vancouver as it was for New York. However, we know very little about Vancouver's

11. For American evidence, see Katzman, *Seven Days*, 56. Canadian historians have largely neglected regional differences in domestic service.

12. National Council of Women of Canada, *Annual Report* (Toronto, 1907), 66.

13. *Ibid.*, 68.

14. *Ibid.*, 77. Middle-class women in Vancouver believed they were paying inflated wages for incompetent domestic help. To remedy this situation, a petition was circulated in the spring of 1907 to reduce the Chinese head tax and, thus, increase the supply of household servants. Advocates warned of the dangers of the servant shortage: "Women, unable to pay the preposterous wages now demanded, are giving up their homes and crowding into hotels, flats and boardinghouses; men of means are refusing to bring their wives and daughters to live in a servantless city, and the unfortunate mistresses are losing health, temper and happiness in the struggle." Even in the face of a declining homelife, however, the head tax was not rescinded.

15. Lacelle, *Urban Domestic*, 131.

16. *Ibid.*, 98.

17. Leslie, "Domestic Service", 90.

labour market for paid household servants before the First World War. Was there, for instance, something particular about domestic work or any other women's work in Vancouver that contributed to the success of women's employment agencies? In an effort to answer this question, a study was made of some 1,500 newspaper want ads for women workers over three years, 1911-1913 (see Tables 1 and 2). These years were chosen for a number of reasons. First, they include both boom and depression years and, thus, provide a fuller view of domestic service's changing demands through good and bad economic times. Secondly, these years reflect changes in the wider labour market for women, as clerical, retail and industrial work increased its share of women's employment at domestic service's expense. Of course, the pre-war depression, which made itself felt in the women's service job market by the summer of 1913, reversed this trend until the war economy geared up in 1916; unemployed clerical, retail and industrial women workers threw themselves into the domestic labour market, creating, it would appear for the first time, a surplus of household servants.¹⁸ This study is not meant to back up any quantitative conclusions as to the total numbers of participants in this or that occupational group; the study is a measure of needs, not people. Still, this evidence mirrors the shape of employer demand which, it is argued here, was largely responsible for defining the occupational patterns of paid household work in the city.¹⁹

Of the 1,483 advertisements for female workers recorded between January 1911 and December 1913, 685 (46 percent) asked for domestic servants of one form or another (see Table 1). Of these 685 requests, 437 (64 percent) gave no information other than a 'servant' or 'help' was required and the address or telephone of the employer. The remaining 248 ads, however, specified duties and these were separated into 7 types: general, general/nanny, nanny/nurse, mother's help, cook, cook/general and washerwoman (laundress). Employment related to children — 178 (26 percent) of all jobs — comprised the largest specified group. The second largest grouping — cooks and cook/generals — was specified 55 times. Washerwomen were sought only 14 times. Other than outlining duties, over 200 of the ads contained specific requests or discrete bits of information meant either as inducements or as warnings to applicants (see Table 2). Thirty-seven ads, for instance, asked specifically for 'live-out' servants. Twenty-six wanted half-day workers, 24 asked for half-week duties or less, and 7 wanted to hire full-time domestics for a specific but temporary length of time — from one week to a couple of

18. For a review of labour market conditions for women from boom to bust, see the bi-monthly reports on Vancouver's women's employment conditions in *Labour Gazette*, July 1913 to March 1914.

19. The data for the survey were collected from the *Vancouver Daily World*. The *World* always stressed its 'Help Wanted' service as practical proof of its Lib-Lab bent. As a result, the *World's* 'Help Wanted' section was the largest of any in the city. Spot-checks were made throughout the collection to ensure that patterns of large dismissals and hirings were not developing outside the net. In total, then, 36 'Help Wanted' columns were collected, and a total of 1,483 separate entries were recorded.

months. Other key requests were for specific ethnic (20) or religious (6) preferences, that no washing (21) or care of children (20) was required, or warnings that the employers were single men (19). The most frequent information offered, however, was the admission of a 'small family'. Whether this was meant as an inducement or as a warning against children is unclear.

Table 1 Female 'Help Wanted' Survey, 1911-1913
Domestic Type Requested

Type	1911	1912	1913	Total
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
<i>Non-Domestic</i>	259	301	238	798
<i>Domestic</i>	260	216	209	685
General	163	140	134	437
Nanny/Nurse	27	23	14	64
Nanny/General	29	15	22	66
Mothers-help	13	17	18	48
Cook	5	1	5	11
Cook/General	14	17	14	45
Laundress	9	3	2	14

Source: *Vancouver Daily World*, classified ads.

Table 2 Female 'Help Wanted' Survey, 1911-1913
Comments and Special Requests

Comments	1911	1912	1913	Total
(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)
Small Family	28	22	21	71
Live-Out	16	12	9	37
Half Day	9	11	6	26
Half Week	10	10	4	24
No Washing	10	7	4	21
No Children	7	8	5	20
Ethnic Preference	7	8	5	20
Male Employer	8	9	3	20
Age Preference	2	5	10	17
Temporary	2	3	2	7

Source: *Vancouver Daily World*, classified ads.

This survey of employer requests supports many of the conclusions drawn elsewhere about domestic service. That less than half (46 percent) of the 'Help Wanted' ads were for paid domestic workers, for example, reflects the growth of retail, manufacturing and clerical jobs for women; a similar browse through classified ads at the turn of the century reveals a women's

employment market dominated by paid household work.²⁰ That so many employers specifically asked for 'live-out' workers, rather than resident servants, mirrors the change found elsewhere from live-in to outside help — a change symbolized by the semantic shift from the live-in 'servant' to the live-out 'housekeeper'.²¹ Vancouver, however, might have always had a higher proportion of live-out domestic help; a good deal of the requests came from areas of the city — East and South Vancouver — where smaller houses, less suited for live-in help, were common. Thirty-nine ads, for instance, were placed by apartment dwellers. The oft-made request for a 'young girl' or a 'middle-aged woman' might have reflected more than a concern over wages, susceptibility to training or steadiness: both might have had homes to return to in the evening. Finally, the low number of laundresses requested, coupled with the frequent inducement of 'no washing', was a testament to the growth of steam laundries in the city.

Employer requests showed, above all, the extent to which domestic service in Vancouver was linked to the birth and care of children, and the service's dependence on child-care encouraged labour turnover. Nurses, nannies and mother's helps made up the overwhelming majority of specified ads (72 percent) and a significant percentage of the total domestics requested (26 percent). A healthy portion of the 437 unspecified requests undoubtedly would have been child-related as well. The fact that some ads took space to inform applicants that 'no children' were in the home emphasizes the extent to which child-care dominated paid household work. Most of the child-related requests appear to have been meant as half-time or temporary positions. Many, for instance, required help only mornings, evenings or a couple of days per week. 'Nursegirls' were often requested for a 'maternity period' only — as were some nannies. Some child-related positions were meant to be long term, but most were not.

Edward Starkins' reconstruction of the 1924 murder of Scottish-born Vancouver nanny Janet Smith offers a glimpse into one domestic's working experience.²² Employed by a considerably better-heeled family than most domestic servants, Smith was hired to care for the Baker baby's every need. Smith was on duty whenever the child was awake, and was expected to handle the baby's laundry and mending as well. When weather permitted, her daily pattern included long walks with the pram; her diary tells us that she and other Shaughnessy Heights nursemaids met regularly in local parks where they exchanged gossip about employers, other domestics and male friends. The nannies were irreverent about the families they worked for and the children under their care. Park rendez-vous often sounded like informal union grievance sessions. The group's acknowledged leader, Cissie Jones, usually led them with 'disdainful talk' about employers: "Cissie did not consider it

20. Over 70% of help wanted ads for women in 1899-1902 asked for domestic servants.

21. See Katzman, *Seven Days*, 87-94.

22. Edward Starkins, *Who Killed Janet Smith* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1984).

much of a privilege to be employed by the 'folks'; she was always going on about better hours, more money, and the respect that servants should be given."²³ These nannies hoped to give up their 'general' positions to be employed as housekeepers in even more wealthy homes.²⁴ The Bakers agreed to pay for Janet's trip back to England when her services were no longer needed, her tenure was meant to be temporary.²⁵

The experience of one Vancouver domestic employer also suggests a pattern in which support was particularly sought during certain periods of the family cycle. Robert Martin and his wife (whose name we may never know) came to Vancouver in 1895. Robert Martin was a well-to-do commission merchant (Martin and Robinson Ltd.) whose house in the West end witnessed a parade of some 13 servants through its doors between 1896 and 1907.²⁶ After a 'general' was hired in 1895, the Martins next requested a 'nursegirl' in July 1896. By March 1897, a 'nanny' was required, and in November of that year, another 'nursegirl' was needed — perhaps to help out with another pregnancy. In January 1899, another 'nursegirl' was requested. Between 1900 and 1904, the Martins required a 'general' (1901), 'lady help' (1902), 'washerwoman' (1903), another 'general' (1904) and 'servant' (1904). In March 1905, another 'nursegirl' was needed, and by June 1906, yet another 'nanny' was required in the household. The Martins left Vancouver in 1908 for London, England. While no firm conclusions are possible from such evidence, one could interpret the family's hiring record in various ways. Chronic illness, for instance, might explain the turnover of nursegirls; equally, the Martins may have been difficult to work for — this would explain requests made within a few months of each other. The hiring record also could reflect patterns of child-care in the Martin home; as many as seven temporary servants were needed during two periods, 1896-1899 and 1905-1907.

Thus, Vancouver's job market for domestic workers was active because of the nature of household work. Perhaps half of all domestic workers were employed to serve half-time, short-term, often child-related demands in middle-class homes. This encouraged turnover, not simply because jobs were task-specific, but because child-care was a difficult task. The frequency within the sample of the warnings 'small family' and 'no children' testifies to an overt tension between domestics and employers' children. How many servants quit their jobs because of the trials of child-care, however, is unknown.

Domestic service, like logging and railroad construction, had its own seasonal patterns. The annual expansions and contractions were perceptible in Vancouver's employment market and they helped to increase turnover. In the

23. *Ibid.*, 13.

24. Janet Smith earned \$30 per month. This was less than most nannies made in the early 1920s. See *ibid.*, 32.

25. *Ibid.*, 38.

26. Data for the Martin home's hiring record was gathered from the *World and News Advertiser* 'Help Wanted' ads, 1896-1908.

three-year period covered by the want ad survey, employment opportunities for household workers were strongest in the spring (a traditional period of housecleaning), declined in the summer and fell even further in the fall to a low usually in November. Bi-monthly reports on labour market conditions produced by the Department of Labour reinforce this conclusion.²⁷ As well as following annual rhythms, domestic employment expanded during seasonal high points, such as Christmas, Easter and summer outings, when temporary help was engaged. Ads for household help, for instance, reached annual lows in November and early December, but by the middle of December, requests would double. Many of these Christmas requests were for cooks and 'dining room girls' in larger West end homes. Thus, along with the very nature of domestic work, seasonal patterns helped to stimulate even further the turnover of paid household servants. The result was a domestic labour market full of motion and, needless to say, an irresistible lure to employment middlemen — or in this case, middlewomen.

The YWCA and Domestic Employment

We do not know how most domestics in Vancouver found work. Many probably found jobs through informal means — through friends, relatives or word-of-mouth. Edward Starkins tells us that Janet Smith came from Britain to Vancouver with her employer. But her many domestic friendships probably ensured her of at least a couple of alternative placements.²⁸ The survey of Vancouver domestic 'Help Wanted' advertisements indicates the importance of direct contacts between mistress and servant through newspapers. Yet the atomized domestic workplace meant that the job market for women domestic workers was managed by commercial and philanthropic agencies to an extent unmatched by any other form of men's or women's work. High labour turnover drew self-interested agents into the domestic employment business, while chronic labour shortages brought in the YWCA and other middle-class organizations. In one sense, the voluntary and commercial forces never competed for the patronage of workers or employers. The YWCA helped to promote and receive single immigrant women into the city, provide them with secure lodging, a morally-uplifting environment and, eventually, place them in an employer's home. After this initial introduction to the local domestic market, however, the role of the YWCA declined and that of the commercial agency grew for women who needed intermediaries to find employment. Commercial agents offered a wider range of jobs, in and out of domestic service, and did so without overt moral aims or the same degree of employer influence.

In another sense, the YWCA and commercial agencies were incompatible. Middle-class protectors of young women argued that commercial agencies could not be expected to shield working women from 'emissaries

27. *Labour Gazette*, 1913-1914.

28. Starkins, *Janet Smith*, 61.

of evil'.²⁹ Employment agencies were widely-held to be uncritical exploiters of young women at best and, at worst, fronts for prostitution and white-slavery. "Many of the female employment agencies in the United States are but agencies for the recruiting of the white slave traffic," declared the *Western Clarion* in 1912; "in Vancouver similar agencies have been established."³⁰ Fraudulent job advertisements placed by 'bogus agencies' were the greatest danger, according to the National Council of Women of Canada. "The insertion in newspapers of misleading and criminal advertisements which lure young girls, looking for honourable employment, into lives of sin and shame, should be suppressed," demanded the NCWC Committee on the White Slave Traffic in 1907.³¹ The NCWC joined the YWCA in 1911 to combat white slavery by placing articles in local newspapers warning women against using employment agencies and/or replying to their want ads.³² For these moral reasons, the YWCA was the first choice of many employers looking for household help, but the association was unable to fill these needs adequately. The huge demand, coupled with the structure of domestic service already mentioned, contributed to the dramatic growth of women's commercial agencies after 1909. The YWCA was more dedicated to the interests of employers than were employment agents; employment agents were dedicated to none but themselves.

In a recent study of English Canadian moral reform before World War One, Mariana Valverde examines the moral panic surrounding the alleged white slave trade. Valverde admits that the trade was likely illusory but necessarily 'constructed' as an ideological site upon which real social and moral fears were expressed and discussed: "The fears that underlay the white slavery panic — young women moving to cities and taking up new occupations, urban anonymity, immigration, the breakdown of traditional networks of support and social control — were the fears of a large sector of the Canadian population. Anglo-Saxon middle-class Protestants were somewhat uncertain about their ability to manage the drastic changes in social, economic and cultural relations taking place in turn-of-the-century Canada in such a way as to preserve their newly won economic superiority and cultural hegemony."³³ Valverde goes beyond this sociological explanation to offer a discourse analysis of white slavery rhetoric and an explanation for its mass acceptance. She shows, for instance, that published tales of slavery followed similar narrative forms, and these often included deception by familiar or apparently benevolent characters, such as matronly women and widows. The women's employment agent fit the stereotype rather nicely; the employment agency —

29. From a speech delivered by Vancouver YWCA President Annie Skinner in 1909. See *News Advertiser* June 15, 1909.

30. *Western Clarion*, March 16, 1912, 1.

31. NCWC, *Annual Report* (Toronto, 1907), 83-84.

32. NCWC, *Annual Report* (Toronto, 1911), 28.

33. Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), 103.

a place of outward opportunity — became a deceptive trap when placed in the gothic tale of female abduction.³⁴ Stories of white slavery commonly were critical of women's new wage work outside of the home, and included restaurants, shops and department stores as sites of procurement and abduction. Reformist studies of white slavery were less subtle, identifying most non-domestic urban experiences as causes of the traffic. Not surprisingly, stories of rescue invariably included domestic training as a means of moral purification.³⁵ The employment agent who offered jobs outside the home did not fare well in this moral economy.

Valverde's presentation of white slavery as a symbolic experience knowable at the level of language is original and revealing, yet there may be, at the individual or community level, a host of supporting material motives that better explain the phenomenon's specific success. For instance, when a commonly-conceived material need and powerful ideological support met, as they did in Vancouver with shortages of domestic servants and tales of white slavery, the marriage between self-service and ideology was inevitable. Much of the strength of the white slavery myth in Vancouver was related to middle-class concerns about domestic servants. The YWCA in particular tried to use this potent myth to overcome unfavourable household conditions.

The YWCA was Vancouver's most active charity organization dedicated to the recruitment and distribution of women household workers. The Vancouver chapter's activities were generally the same as elsewhere — and these emphasized safe housing and secure souls. YWCAs throughout Canada, writes Wendy Mitchinson, "were founded to respond to a secular need — to help working women by providing them with a cheap and respectable place to live."³⁶ In addition to its secular concerns, the YWCA's religious avocation was always important. The Y aligned itself early with local evangelical churches as a means, in part, of raising funds and membership. Covering its members in a cloak of common Christianity, it was thought, ensured collective spiritual and moral strength. Weekly prayer meetings and bible classes were held in YWCAs across the country.³⁷ Diana Pedersen has stressed the positive institutional role the Y played in forwarding women-centered urban reform in Canada. According to Pedersen, the YWCA annex represented "a female refuge from an inhospitable male environment and a base from which they

34. *Ibid.*, 96-97.

35. *Ibid.*, 102.

36. Wendy Mitchinson, "Early Women's Organizations and Social Reform: Prelude to the Welfare State," *The Benevolent State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada*, Allan Moscovitch, ed. (Toronto: Garmond, 1987). See also Mitchinson's, "The YWCA and Reform in the Nineteenth Century," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, 12:24 (November 1979), 368-384.

37. The Vancouver YWCA held its bible classes on Sunday afternoons. See *News Advertiser*, March 16, 1909.

could attempt to modify that environment in the interests of women."³⁸ Ultimately, however, the organization was forced to compromise its values in order to gain financial support from local business communities. She also shows that the Y was a window of vocational opportunity for working women: evening libraries, night classes in stenography and business skills, and even university courses were offered at Y annexes.³⁹ Yet against this trend, Vancouver's Y offered a truncated range of domestic education classes, while making little effort to promote job education outside household skills. Domestic training was deemed essential, not only to expand the domestic supply and women's job opportunities within acceptable service roles, but also for the domestic's future roles of wife and mother. "Thus, if women were going to work," writes Mitchinson, "they would be encouraged by the YWCA to do so in a way that least challenged sexual stereotypes."⁴⁰ The directors of Vancouver's YWCA never lost sight of these ideals, regardless of the changing employment opportunities for women. Recognizing the growth of non-domestic work for women by 1914, and the need for 'business women' and 'women from the home' to cooperate in this 'age of conflicting voices', local Y President Peter nonetheless confirmed that the "home woman is of especial value. She views the problems touching young women from a normal standpoint, she knows the community in which she lives in a personal way, and by her example can influence many of those with whom she is daily thrown in contact."⁴¹

From the time of the YWCA's arrival in Vancouver in 1897, the organization wedded its traditional material and spiritual concerns with the housekeeping demands of the city's middle-class women. Most pressing of these was the shortage of competent, reliable domestic help. Many of the local Y's efforts therefore were taken up with channelling newly-arrived women immigrants into local homes. In 1899, the organization opened the city's first employment bureau to deal exclusively with female domestic servants.⁴² The bureau promised employers "competent, reliable and trustworthy" servants, and set about recruiting "efficient, desirable help" from abroad.⁴³ The organization worked closely in its immigration efforts with the British Women's Emigration Association (BWEA) to bring out parties of young women under matrons' care. The BWEA was created to solve the sex ratio imbalance in urban Britain

38. Diana Pedersen, "'Building Today for the Womanhood of Tomorrow': Businessmen Boosters, and the YWCA, 1890-1930," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 15:3 (1987), 227. See also Pedersen, "The Photographic Record of the Canadian YWCA, 1890-1930: A Visual Source for Women's History," *Archivaria*, 4 (Summer), 1987.

39. Pedersen, "Building Today", 228. See also Mitchinson, "YWCA and Reform", 378 and "Early Women's Organizations", 83.

40. Mitchinson, "YWCA and Reform", 378.

41. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1914, 18-19.

42. *News Advertiser*, August 1, 1899.

43. On the central importance of domestic placement activities in Vancouver's YWCA work, see *World*, February 5, 1901, 2; February 21, 1908, 7; and Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1907, 6; 1909, 4; and 1914, 18.

and its colonies by encouraging British working women to emigrate. The British organization would sponsor groups only if the entire route were fully escorted and the travellers were housed in secure hostels at their final destination.⁴⁴ The Vancouver chapter of the YWCA satisfied these BWEA demands. In fact, the two organizations were joined in Vancouver: local Y President Annie Skinner was also the long-time regional secretary of the BWEA.⁴⁵ Just how many women entered Vancouver under joint BWEA-YWCA sponsorship is unknown because of inconsistent record-keeping. However, we do know that the annual number of individual BWEA sponsored parties increased from 7 in 1906 to 17 in 1913. Approximately 10 girls comprised a party, and most of these groups arrived between April and October.⁴⁶ As well as these fully sponsored parties, BWEA agents also recruited domestic workers on behalf of the Vancouver YWCA at immigrant centres in eastern Canada. In 1912, for instance, hundreds of women travelling without BWEA sponsorship were intercepted by BWEA/YWCA agents in Quebec: "Many of these women," writes Skinner, "were advised and helped to obtain suitable positions in Vancouver."⁴⁷ In 1906 (a year for which we have figures), some 350 immigrant women were recruited into household work in this way.⁴⁸ To streamline the process of domestic placement, the local YWCA produced a pamphlet describing the virtues of Vancouver and its domestic employment opportunities to be distributed by BWEA agents in Britain and Eastern Canada.⁴⁹ The BWEA/YWCA network also regularly sent 'profiles' of British girls to the Vancouver YWCA, "so to have a position waiting her arrival in Vancouver."⁵⁰ The BWEA recruitment system was remarkably successful and useful, according to YWCA directors. Both President Skinner and, later, Peter handled this important work themselves — writing hundreds of letters to Britain each year enquiring about domestic help. "We consider this part of our work is most useful to the Province at large," writes Skinner in 1907, "because the need of every kind of women's help is steadily increasing."⁵¹

The Vancouver YWCA was also allied with the Traveller's Aid Society, another British women's organization out of London. "The object of this work," Skinner spoke of the Society, "is to guard young women, when travelling alone, whether in search of employment or otherwise, from the dangers to which young girls are exposed."⁵² The local YWCA sent, on behalf

44. Marilyn Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestic Workers for Ontario Homes," *Ontario History*, 62:3 (September 1980), 154-158. See also Desmond Glynn, "Exporting Outcast London: Assisted Emigration to Canada, 1886-1914," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, 15:29 (May 1982), 209-238.

45. *News Advertiser*, February 23, 1910.

46. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1906-1913.

47. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1913, 12.

48. *Ibid.*, 1907, 8.

49. *Ibid.*, 1905, 13 and 1914, 16.

50. *Ibid.*, 1913, 12.

51. *Ibid.*, 1907, 9.

52. *News Advertiser*, June 15, 1909.

of the Traveller's Aid Society, two uniformed women to meet every incoming train. From there, both sponsored and unexpected travellers, 'young and attractive and utterly unconscious of any danger', were scurried off to the YWCA annex where it was "impossible for any evil influence to lead them astray."⁵³ Like BWEA recruitment work, the local YWCA presidents personally supervised the work of the Traveller's Aid Society, considering it "the most important part of our work here."⁵⁴ According to Y directors, Vancouver's 'special function' in the worldwide YWCA family was the care of strangers.⁵⁵ YWCA officials linked the work of the Traveller's Aid with the dangers of white slavery. Before the advent of the Traveller's Aid, writes Skinner, "there were few lodging places at reasonable rates in desirable localities, and young girls were often compelled to go to cheap hotels, where they were thrown in the way of undesirable acquaintances, often with disastrous results."⁵⁶ For this reason, the Traveller's Aid Society came to an arrangement with the CPR to have a permanent office at the train station and to placard the building with notices warning of white slavers.⁵⁷ Although the total number of travellers met by Traveller's Aid is unknown, it would appear that the agents were kept extremely busy, especially during the summer months. In 1907, for instance, the Society assisted over 500 travellers; this had increased to 600 in 1908 and, in 1909, close to 2,000 women were met by Traveller's Aid.⁵⁸

Whether immigrants or travellers, the women brought to the YWCA annex were encouraged to seek work through the Y's domestic employment bureau or to upgrade their household skills through the Y's Education Department. The bureau was under some pressure by employers to perform its placement function. Part of this pressure was financial. The operating expenses of the Immigration and Employment Department — brought together to co-ordinate the work of the BWEA, the Traveller's Aid and the Employment Bureau — were heavily subsidized by civic and provincial government grants. YWCA directors, always proud of the self-supporting character of virtually all of the organization's other services, were repeatedly irritated by the rising costs of the Immigration and Employment Department. Peter complained in 1912 that the department had "taxed our finances far more than we had anticipated," and that the government grants of \$500 from the province and \$1,500 from the city had been entirely gobbled up by the Immigration and Employment Department.⁵⁹ Government grants, in fact, did not pay for all of the department's expenses; fees charged to women immigrants, including transportation, accommodation and employment fees, made up anywhere from one-third to three-quarters of the department's annual

53. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1910.

54. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1905, 10.

55. *Ibid.*, 8.

56. *Ibid.*, 1909, 3.

57. *Ibid.*, 1907, 7.

58. *News Advertiser*, February 23, 1910. See also *World*, February 21, 1908.

59. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1912, 12-13.

revenues between 1908 and 1915.⁶⁰ The government grants nonetheless ensured a certain degree of accountability which the directors took very seriously — the organization's success or failure was often publicly measured in terms of domestic labour recruitment and placement.

Vancouver YWCA President Peter claimed that the local Y employment bureau was 'one of the largest in Canada', and consistently stressed the close connection between the bureau, immigration work and the placement of domestic workers. But job placement was no easy task. Writes Skinner in 1909: "It has been our great endeavour to find suitable positions for all. I know that many will think of the numerous vacant places here, where help in the home is so badly needed and will say, surely there is no difficulty here. But I can assure you that this, though one of the most important branches of our work, is often the most difficult and perplexing."⁶¹ One of the chronic problems, according to YWCA directors, was the high expectations of women workers who visited the employment bureau. The wages demanded by newly-arrived domestics were always deemed too high, and conditions within homes were never what the women had expected. As a result, YWCA officials warned that 'courage, determination and adaptability' would be needed by immigrant women coming to Vancouver.⁶² Local Y employment officials sometimes complained of incompetent applicants — but these complaints disappeared during periods of severe domestic labour shortages. During shortages, complaints at the YWCA bureau focussed on the labour market. In 1908, for instance, Y officials complained that the Seattle Exposition had drained Vancouver of available domestic workers. Shortages of home help were so bad in 1910 that employment bureau officials tried to convince women to leave non-domestic jobs and take up more 'respectable' work in Vancouver homes.⁶³

To ensure that its domestic recruits had a minimum of household skills, Vancouver's YWCA offered a wide range of primarily domestic education courses between 1906 and 1915. Various forms of sewing, cooking, first aid and home nursing dominated YWCA vocational offerings for young women, while very little was done to promote job education outside household skills.⁶⁴ Courses of a non-vocational character were common as well, such as bible study, literature, choral singing, expression, foreign language (French and German), china painting and physical training. These courses were available for all women who could pay the fees, but were specifically tailored for 'business women' — that is, women who worked in shops or offices. In this sense, Vancouver's YWCA catered quite effectively to the intellectual and

60. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report and Treasurer's Report: 1909-1916*. See also the reports on civic grants, *News Advertiser*, March 13, 1906.

61. Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1909, 6.

62. *Ibid.*, 1914, 16.

63. *News Advertiser*, February 23, 1910.

64. Information on classes was taken from Vancouver YWCA *Annual Report*, 1906-1918.

recreational needs of non-household workers, but made no efforts to increase their numbers through job education. For example, shorthand — the sole business course offered — was given only in 1906 and 1912. Indeed, the two thrusts of the Y's Education Department were towards leisure activities for business women and domestic training for young wives and paid domestic workers. And this 'streaming' was maintained until the middle of World War One. When money was raised to build a new kitchen for domestic science instruction in 1910, directors of the YWCA also lobbied for a 'literary club for business women'.⁶⁵

It is unclear from the YWCA records who actually enrolled in the courses. Class sizes increased steadily from 1906 onwards, when 150 women registered, to 1913 when enrolment peaked at 400. Fees were charged for all classes; the directors of the YWCA were proud that the Education Department was 'on a self-supporting basis'. In 1915, however, the Vancouver YWCA abandoned its leisure education classes for business women entirely, citing competition from commercial and municipal night school programmes.⁶⁶ Those few courses offered after 1915 — home nursing, first aid and 'plain cooking' — were of a domestic bent. The Education Department of the Vancouver YWCA never undermined its fundamental aim of securing an adequate supply and raising the talents of paid household workers. There was nothing in the streaming approach to the classes to encourage non-domestic employment; in fact, courses in household skills would have worked to promote domestic jobs for business women.

The Vancouver YWCA was unable to adequately satisfy employers' needs for paid household help or working women's demands for employment. In terms of employer satisfaction, the household placement rate (number of employer applications compared to number of employers satisfied) began at a high of thirty-seven percent and declined to twenty-five percent thereafter.⁶⁷ The YWCA was somewhat embarrassed by this failure to live up to its civic responsibility — a twenty-five percent employer satisfaction rate was difficult to defend. Skinner blamed other cities (Seattle and San Francisco) for luring potential help away from her city. Certainly, the sponsored trainloads of immigrant domestics from the east offset this imbalance somewhat (although it is unclear from the records the degree to which imported workers were incorporated into the statistics). Even so, such obvious failure at a time of

65. *Ibid.*, 1909, 12 and 1910, 11.

66. *Ibid.*, 1915, 5.

67. The numbers broke down in this fashion for the years 1906, 1908 and 1909 (the only years for which we have statistics):

Year	Applications	Placements	Rate
1906	1,045	391	37%
1908	2,983	764	26%
1909	3,767	1,027	27%

Source: Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1907, 1909-1910.

extreme domestic labour scarcity pushed the YWCA on the defensive. From 1910 onwards, therefore, statistics on numbers of employers applying for help and those supplied with workers were not made public. The Vancouver YWCA avoided the issue of employer satisfaction with the employment bureau and, instead, defended the institution as a service to women workers.

The Vancouver YWCA also failed over half of the women workers who applied for work at the bureau. Presumably because the rates were more attractive, the records of workers applying and those placed were far more complete than those dealing with employers.⁶⁸ Between 1906 and 1915, this placement rate steadily declined from a high of sixty-six percent in 1906 to less than thirty percent in 1915. The 1913-1915 depression helps to explain the low placement rate for those years, but the poor rates during the boom years (1908-1912) point away from the wider economic context and directly at the shortcomings of domestic work and the YWCA itself. Skinner was frank in explaining this failure; women were simply turning down the domestic work offered by the YWCA.⁶⁹ By 1909, alternatives to paid household labour were drawing women out of domestic service, and employers and working women were turning to the 'emissaries of evil' for help with child-care and housework.⁷⁰

Workers increasingly were ill-served by the YWCA's style of labour distribution as well. Part of this failure was ideological. The high moral tone, class condescension and simple interference in the workers' personal lives were likely stifling for many women workers. When Janet Smith became homesick, an employer suggested she visit one of the counselors at the YWCA; when Janet expressed her fear of a Chinese co-worker (later charged with her murder), the counselor at the Girl's Friendly Society listened, but did not suggest changing employers or occupations.⁷¹ Newly-arrived women under YWCA care had little choice but to accept Y control; the veterans of the domestic wars, however, were more apt to exercise their independence, and

68. The statistics available on worker placement at Vancouver's YWCA Employment Bureau are as follows:

Year	Applications	Placements	Rate
1906	591	391	66%
1908	1,141	566	50%
1909	2,083	1,027	49%
1911	N/A	1,064	N/A
1912	2,253	1,334	59%
1913	2,758	1,160	42%
1914	2,640	915	35%
1915	1,716	510	30%

Source: Vancouver YWCA, *Annual Report*, 1907-1916.

69. *News Advertiser*, June 15, 1909.

70. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1910.

71. Starkins, *Janet Smith*, 82-83.

apparently they did. Women workers were also ill-served by the YWCA in a vocational sense as well. Vancouver's YWCA training courses and job referrals pointed towards paid household work at a time when working women were rejecting domestic service for ideological and material reasons. That only one-half of those women who applied to the YWCA bureau accepted the work it offered underlined the shortcomings of available domestic work. As women's work changed before World War One, the YWCA was slow to follow. The directors of the YWCA, in particular, remained devoted to the promotion of domestic service, but commercial agents were more pragmatic.

Women's Commercial Employment Agencies

The story of women's commercial agencies must be told in terms of the history of changing women's work in Vancouver. Agencies reflected the expansions and contractions of acceptable vocational roles for women. Elsewhere, especially in large eastern American cities, women's agencies acquired a loathsome reputation for raising the cost and lowering the efficiency of help, for encouraging labour turnover and shortages, and for being fronts for prostitution and white slavery.⁷² Whatever reputation preceded agents, it was ignored by employers and women workers in Vancouver. After the 1907-1908 recession, women's agencies grew rapidly in response to the rising demand for women workers. Most offered a wide range of then-acceptable vocations and were very sensitive to their change. Unlike the YWCA, commercial agencies for women were less concerned with their client's respectability. The extreme imbalance between the demand for domestic workers and their supply also meant that women's agencies supported their worker-clients even more than men's agencies did. Finally, commercial agencies offered working women a measure of independence that the YWCA did not. If the YWCA was interested in converting working women into loyal, hardworking Christian servants, the 'emissaries of evil' simply wanted to increase their own profits — and this often depended upon the freedom of working women to choose.

Women's agencies were slow to develop in Vancouver in part because of the early influence the YWCA had on the recruitment and distribution of domestic servants. An early attempt, The Ladies' Exchange, opened and closed its doors in 1898. Men's agencies would, from time to time, advertise for domestics, but these skid-row agents were badly situated to attract employers. The first agency to specialize in domestics was the Elite Intelligence Bureau, which began business in 1904. The Elite was located on the West side to serve middle-class employers, and dealt almost exclusively in household workers. Women ran the majority of women's agencies; Sadie Stone ran the Elite. The shortage of domestic help hurt the agency, as Stone

72. See Martinez, *Human Marketplace*, 25-31. The classic study of women's agencies in the United States is Frances A. Kellor's *Out of Work: A Study of Employment Agencies, Their Treatment of the Unemployed and Their Influence upon Homes and Business* (New York: Knickerbocker, 1905).

was always in need of women to fill positions. In 1905, she began to advertise for Chinese male household help in order to satisfy demand, but this was short-lived. Stone also advertised to fill non-household jobs, all of which were service occupations in restaurants and hotels.⁷³

The women's employment business mushroomed after 1908 in response to city residential growth. Of the 21 women's agencies that appeared before the war, 17 opened in 1909 or later. These agencies opened to meet the demand for household workers, but advertised non-domestic work as well. Some even became specialists in certain types of new women's work. The Germaine Agency (1912) and The Dominion Employment Bureau (1911-1912), for instance, exclusively dealt in hotel and restaurant help. Germaine's claim, that it was "not here for the short term, but expected to make Vancouver home for a good many years," was not enough to ensure a sustained trade; the agency closed in the same year that it opened. Other offices specialized in what would replace domestic service as the mainstay of women's wage work: clerical and office jobs. Most of these agencies were office equipment companies that ran employment offices on the side. Clarke and Stuart was an early example; in 1904, the typewriter sales and service company promised to furnish women stenographers without charge.⁷⁴ After 1908, a handful of other typewriter firms opened employment offices. The Remington Typewriter Company foreshadowed the modern 'temp' agencies in the summer of 1911 when it claimed it "pays to do substitute stenographic work during the vacation season."⁷⁵ A year later, United Typewriter and The Vancouver Typewriter Company both opened employment bureaus. None of these companies charged employers for the service (it is unclear whether the stenographers paid fees), all promised to 'screen' applicants, and all probably offered the employment service as a way of selling more typewriters. For these reasons, The Remington Typewriter Company called itself a 'public service company'.⁷⁶ Commercial colleges in American cities are known to have placed their graduates in clerical positions. The only example of this in Vancouver before World War One was Vogel Commercial College which ran such ads between 1902 and 1904.⁷⁷

The most active, numerous and enduring women's employment agencies were not specialists, outside of their dependence on domestic workers. Twelve such companies operated between 1909 and 1915. Eight of these were run by women, as were all of the most durable; six were open for three or more years. Little is known about these agencies. The owners' backgrounds, for instance, are unclear, but we do know that the proprietors tended to be widowed, divorced (or separated) or single, and that many came from working class

73. See *News Advertiser*, November 15, 1904 and May 16, 1905.

74. *Ibid.*, December 1, 1904.

75. *Ibid.*, July 15, 1911.

76. *Ibid.*

77. For instance, see *News Advertiser*, October 18, 1903.

families. The majority lived on the city's poorer east side. Like the owners of white male agencies, most women agents were newcomers to the city. Even so, some became so well known that their own names preceded that of the company's in promotional advertisements: Alberta Crawford, Bertha Kirk, Sadie Stone, Emma Smith and Emily Brown. Women's agents were most likely working-class women like their working clients.

The placement and fee system used by women's agencies is also rather sketchy. We do know from advertisements that it differed from the procedures commonly used by men's agencies. Rather than relying upon the casual use of daily bulletin boards, women's offices employed a registration system, whereby the employer and domestic paid a fee to place their names on the agent's books. When an appropriate match developed, employer and domestic met for an interview at the agent's office. Many temporary household workers in Vancouver probably skipped the interview process and simply turned up at the employer's door. Kellor's 1905 study of eastern American agencies found that the employer's registration fee was about double that of the domestic's. While the fee structure of most of Vancouver's agencies remains a mystery, some offices appear not to have charged fees to domestic workers at all; the employer paid the entire fee. The West End Employment Agency, for instance, boasted a 'free Registry' for domestics throughout 1912 as a means of enticing scarce domestics away from other offices.⁷⁸ Emily Brown's Dominion Employment waived its fees to workers in the summer of 1912 as well.⁷⁹ No agency other than the typewriter sales companies advertised a free registry to employers. The unbalanced labour market for household workers obviously helped domestics in this respect. The fact that employers' fees made up the bulk of the office's earnings suited the agent admirably; the employer often combined desperation and a large pocketbook to the agent's great advantage.

One of the most successful of these agents was Katherine Maloney of the Universal Female Employment Office. Maloney's activities tell us about the changing nature of women's work, how those changes were accommodated by the employment agents, and to what extent agents served the interests of women wage earners or employers. The Universal bureau was one of the most enduring employment agencies — men's or women's — in the city's early history. Maloney began business in 1910, closed in 1919, and in the interim, moved her office only twice. The Universal was indeed a fixture in Vancouver's employment scene.⁸⁰ Maloney arrived in Vancouver in 1909 with her husband John H. Maloney (a machinist who died the following year) and her son, who worked as a janitor at Sam Sell's 'Canadian Pacific Employment Agency' (for loggers).⁸¹ Universal was located adjacent to the financial district

78. *Ibid.*, June 14, 1912.

79. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1912.

80. See Henderson's, *Greater Vancouver Directory* (Vancouver: Henderson Directory Ltd.), 1911-1920.

81. For information on men's employment agents, see Anderson, "Sharks", 40-75.

for the comfort of middle-class employers and women applicants. In 1912, perhaps bouyant times or ill-health forced Maloney to take on a clerk, Alberta Crawford, and a year later, Crawford left Universal to set up her own agency, Central Female Employment. From then on, Maloney ran the office alone until she retired in 1919.

Because Maloney regularly advertised in newspapers, we can begin to chart the long-range patterns of her business. Universal began in 1910-1911 by placing domestics, then expanded its business beyond household help in 1912-1913 and, with the depression of 1913, returned to the domestic trade until Maloney's retirement. Maloney's business roughly mirrored the changing labour market for women until the wartime economy accelerated in 1916. The domestic jobs Maloney offered in 1910-1911 were often related to children, and many required temporary (either daily or weekly) rather than permanent help to reflect the structures of household work.⁸² During the 1912-1913 period, Universal expanded to place non-household workers: waitresses, dishwashers and restaurant cooks, hotel chambermaids and hospital workers, seamstresses and tailoresses, and stenographers, bookkeepers and office help.⁸³ Maloney's business was not limited to Vancouver during this expansive period. She sent restaurant cooks to Victoria, cannery workers up the coast and, on one occasion, teachers to Australia.⁸⁴ Maloney's business clearly profited from the apparent expansion of women's employment.

By the fall of 1913, Universal's diversification ended. The depression squeezed Maloney's business and forced her to take some desperate measures. In August 1913, she experimented with commissioned salesmen roaming the city to drum up new employers. At the beginning of September, Maloney tried placing men, and changed her name to reflect this new venture. This was unsuccessful. The Universal's advertisements began to reflect desperation: 'AT ONCE' read a September entry: "Thanking my numerous patrons for past favours — hope for the continuance of same."⁸⁵ Domestic service was the only work available for women after the summer of 1913, and Maloney slowly realized this. In October, she abandoned the scheme to place men and changed her name to Universal 'Domestic' Employment Office.⁸⁶ Virtually all of Maloney's itemized advertisements after October 1913 were for household workers.

We may never know how women workers or employers were treated by Katherine Maloney, Alberta Crawford, Emma Smith or the other owners of Vancouver's women's employment offices. There are no records of their correspondence, few comments were made by them or about them in the press, and they were totally ignored by the 1912 BC Commission on Labor — the

82. See *News Advertiser*, May 7, 1911.

83. For instance, see *ibid.*, October 16, 1912; November 15, 1912 and February 1, 1913.

84. *Ibid.*, June 17, 1913.

85. *Ibid.*, September 2, 1913.

86. The emphasis is mine.

same body which had investigated at length the activities of men's employment agencies.⁸⁷ What records we do have of these agents suggest they performed a needed service for women workers and, because profits and not morality motivated them, they did so without the degree of interference that characterized charity agencies such as the YWCA. That these agencies provided a needed service is unquestionable. Domestic workers looking for new homes and better positions found a welcome seat in Maloney's waiting room. While the YWCA stressed permanence, Maloney and the other agents thrived on turnover; agent and domestic both gained from the servant's drive for improvement. As well, women wanting to escape the trials of domestic service could never do so at charity agencies. New employment choices, however, did exist at the Universal as long as those jobs were offered in the labour market. The employment office provided a glimpse of change for domestic workers seeking non-domestic work.

Evidence also suggests that Maloney and the other women's agents were more apt to support their worker-clients than the employers who entered their offices. Certainly, American employers thought so. Historian Carol Lasser stresses the positive role of the employment agency in the domestic's manipulation of the labour market in nineteenth-century Boston. Employers were increasingly resentful of being at the mercy of the seller's market for servants; women's agencies, argued employers, conspired against 'domestic peace' and the 'unity of interest between mistress and maid'.⁸⁸ Domestic agencies in New York City in the 1880s were blamed for recirculating women unfit for employment: the independent, poor, unhealthy, aged, dishonest or inefficient. One angry employer complained to the *New York Times*: "Several times I saw in these offices servants whom I know had been discharged for theft, intemperance, inefficiency from their last places, and heard the persons in charge of the office testifying to their possessing the opposite valuable qualities. When remonstrated with, the agent replied: 'The girl must live and if we don't find her a situation some other office will do so.'"⁸⁹ American employers also believed that agencies persuaded applicants to demand high wages in an attempt to gain better commissions from employers. "Increasing profits," writes Tomas Martinez, "often involved coaxing the applicant to require as large a salary as the employer market would tolerate."⁹⁰

Canadian evidence, while sketchy, supports this favourable view of women's agencies as well. Finnish domestic agencies in eastern Canada, argues Lindstrom-Best, "were the key to the domestic's flexibility. They were quick to advise the women not to accept intolerable conditions [and] they kept

87. The 1912 British Columbia Commission on Labour was originally constituted to look into general labour conditions in the province, and the activities of men's employment agencies were a key focus. For information on the Commission, see Anderson, "Sharks", 64-75.

88. Carol Lasser, "The Domestic Balance of Power: Relations Between Mistress and Maid in Nineteenth-Century New England," *Labor History*, 28:1 (Winter 1987), 17-20.

89. Cited in Martinez, *Human Marketplace*, 27.

90. *Ibid.*, 30.

close watch on the 'greenhorns' who were most vulnerable to exploitation."⁹¹ While Vancouver's domestic-agent relationship lacked the ethnic connections and motives of the Finnish women's community, there is reason to believe, given labour market conditions, that Vancouver's agencies were also supportive of their worker-clients as long as their pocketbooks and the economy would allow. When the labour market for women reversed itself in the fall of 1913, for instance, some commercial agencies were forced to drum up business for themselves and their domestic clients. In mid-December 1913, the Universal urged employers to take on temporary help: "Mrs Maloney," ran the ad, "will furnish on short notice reliable women to keep house where parties going to theater or otherwise require house and children taken care of. Employers call me up for Christmas catering, cooking, waiting and dinner parties."⁹² Another agency asked homeowners to hire part-time help after the Christmas season. Of course, domestic agencies were not selfless in these efforts. Profits and service sometimes merged in the worker-agent relationship. Significantly, the YWCA bureau was silenced by the 1913 depression. The glutted market for domestics aptly demonstrated the extent to which the YWCA was employer-controlled; the Y's employment bureau advertisements for help, now unnecessary, were pulled in the fall of 1913. Nonetheless, the YWCA and women's employment agencies could not create work for the unemployed; both proved useless to working women during bad economic times.

Women's employment agencies provided a needed service to women workers before the First World War. At times the agent's drive for profits inadvertently complemented the worker's needs for security and occupational flexibility. This service, however, only proceeded as far as society or the economy would allow. An expansion, change or redefinition of women's occupational roles could be facilitated, but never initiated by women's agents. Commercial agents were interested in money, not reform. This was not true of organizations like the local YWCA, which manipulated working women for specific moral and material reasons. Because women's agencies did not actively serve the interests of employers, moreover, most were condemned by the YWCA.

When studied at all, employment agents have been cast as the arch miscreants of the progressive era. This article, it is hoped, has shed some new light on these 'villains' by looking closely at one sector of the employment business in one community before World War One. The structure of women's agencies, the motives of their agents and the demands placed on them complicate the prevalent, simplistic, and largely masculine image of the omnipotent employment 'shark'. There clearly was a gap between the experiences of employment agencies and the criticisms raised against them.

91. Lindstrom-Best, "I Won't Be a Slave", 44-45.

92. *News Advertiser*, December 15, 1913.

The critique of women's agencies was never as loud as that of men's; but it was no less self-serving. Women's agencies had grown in response to the nature of women's work, particularly domestic service where turnover was stimulated by the grueling nature of housework, the often difficult employer-servant relationship, low wages, long hours and, in Vancouver at least, the need for temporary child-care. Women's agencies also emerged because their profit structure served the needs of working women — those who desired a new household and those who wished to escape household labour entirely. Rather than recognize and work to complement the role women's agencies played in placing working women in domestic and non-domestic jobs, charities like the YWCA either condemned agents for moral crimes or ignored them altogether. The YWCA's indictment of the female employment agent was self-serving. The Vancouver YWCA was itself in the business of domestic placement (part of its civic grant was tied to the success of that service and it charged its clients fees for Y services) and the commercial agent's offerings of new non-domestic jobs was contrary to the Y's social and economic commitment to domestic labour and its employers. Vancouver's women's employment agencies were small, marginal, delicate businesses which operated in an intensely competitive environment, only during periods of labour shortages, and whose operators emerged from and, often, returned to the same social background as their working clients. The employment business was not lucrative, but because it demanded no special skills and few start-up costs, the business attracted those hoping to escape wage labour. Most eventually failed, yet in the meantime, chronic shortages of female labour, competition and geographic proximity forced agents to cultivate a reasonable relationship with workers, the success of which was demonstrated to YWCA officials and middle-class employers on a number of occasions.

