

“I can’t recall when I didn’t help”: the Working Lives of Pioneering Children in Twentieth-Century British Columbia

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The working lives of children whose families established agricultural settlements in the twentieth century are examined through a case study of a small community in the Bulkley Valley in British Columbia. In the ways in which arduous, endless and mostly mindless work permeated the lives of pioneering children, the inter-war years resembled earlier eras. Their lives, however, were also affected by new notions regarding child health, welfare and education, and especially by a school system that took no cognisance of local rhythms of work. As the children acquired their adult identities in this milieu, they drew upon both the old and the new.

À travers une étude de cas axée sur une petite collectivité de Bulkley Valley, en Colombie-Britannique, cet article traite de la vie des enfants travaillant sur l’exploitation agricole de leurs parents au vingtième siècle. Eu égard à la façon dont ce travail pénible, sans fin et abrutissant avait marqué la vie des enfants des pionniers, les années d’entre deux guerres s’apparentent aux époques anciennes. Leur vie était cependant touchée par les idées nouvelles concernant la santé, le bien-être et l’instruction des enfants et tout particulièrement par un système scolaire qui ne prenait pas en considération les rythmes locaux du travail. Au fur et à mesure qu’ils accédèrent à la vie d’adulte, les jeunes de ces milieux firent appel à l’ancien comme au nouveau.

From the time the apothecary Louis Hébert, his wife, Marie Rollet, and their three children began to cultivate land in New France until the present day,

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I gratefully acknowledge those women and men, themselves both pioneers, and the children of pioneers, who have so generously shared their recollections of their childhoods with me. Readers will soon discover my enormous debt to them. I am also pleased to acknowledge the help of friends and colleagues. Evelyn pioneer Mollie Ralston introduced me to the community and then carefully took me over the ground of the settlement so that I could begin to see it as it had been during her childhood. Her fellow pioneer Lynn Lychak provided me with a list of those who might consent to be interviewed. Lori Hudson, Curator of the Bulkley Valley Historical and Museum Society in Smithers, Celia Haig-Brown, Elizabeth Lees, and Janet Sutherland ably helped me in my research. Jean Barman, Bill Bruneau, Bryan Palmer, Nancy Sheehan, Patricia Vertinsky, J. Donald Wilson and three perceptive readers for this journal commented on earlier drafts of the paper. Lily Kuhn typed its various versions. I am grateful for the generous support accorded to the Canadian Childhood History Project by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by the Faculty of Education of the University of British Columbia.

children have played a central role in pioneering in Canada.¹ By establishing farms at some of its posts, the Hudson's Bay Company initiated agriculture in what became British Columbia. By the 1920s, much of the best agricultural land was already under cultivation, but some parts of the province, most notably along the Grand Trunk Pacific line of the Canadian National Railway between Prince George and Prince Rupert and in the Peace River district, still awaited many of their agricultural settlers. Those moving into these areas extended settlement further into what Isaiah Bowman called the "pioneer fringe" of North America, and which Cole Harris harshly characterized as a "last, if terribly minimal, agricultural opportunity."² As one woman proudly recalled of the 1920s, "we went to the bush and started a settlement!" These agricultural frontiers closely resembled their predecessors of the pre-war and nineteenth-century world. For those with only enough capital to buy their land, or their need to "prove up" their pre-emptions through their own labours, the pressure of work to be done always exceeded the time available to do it; in this environment, children retained their traditional value as integral members of the family economy. In the words of the woman quoted above, "people survived by their children."

This paper is one of a series prepared under the general heading "Growing Up in Modern Canada". It is, of course, a truism to say that, from the moment of birth onward, children play an active and creative role in the unfolding of their own lives. Much of the history of childhood, however, is written in a way that casts youngsters in passive roles, describing not how they act, but how they are acted upon. We learn, for instance, how parents reared them and teachers taught them, how public health officials subjected them to schemes of preventive medicine, and how social reformers planned new ways to care for them in schools, orphanages, asylums and reformatories.³ This

1. For a charming but unsentimental account of pioneering in the 1970s, written from a child's point-of-view, see Ann Blades, *Mary of Mile 18* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1971).

2. Isaiah Bowman, *The Pioneer Fringe*, American Geographical Society, Special Publication no. 13, ed. by G.N. Wrigley (New York: American Geographical Society, 1931); and Cole Harris, "Reflections on the Surface of the Pond: A Review Article", *BC Studies*, 49 (Spring 1981), p. 91. The sequence of modern settlement is mapped in "British Columbia Settlement 1911-1930" and "British Columbia Settlement 1931-1954" in *British Columbia Atlas of Resources* (n.pl.: British Columbia Natural Resources Conference, 1956), pp. 31-2. The political, economic and social context of agricultural settlement after the First World War is described in Morris Zaslow, *The Northward Expansion of Canada, 1914-1967*, The Canadian Centenary Series, vol. 17 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), especially ch. 2.

3. The extensive notes and bibliography in John Bullen's "Children of the Industrial Age: Children, Work and Welfare in Late Nineteenth-Century Ontario" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ottawa, 1989) provide an excellent introduction to the literature on the history of childhood in Canada. See also his "Orphans, Idiots, Lunatics, and Historians: Recent Approaches to the History of Child Welfare in Canada", *Histoire sociale — Social History*, Vol. XVIII (May 1985), pp. 133-45.

series extends this history with accounts portraying the lives of Anglophone children from about the age of four until early adolescence, as they themselves experienced it. Earlier papers in the series have described, for the years between the end of the First World War and the age of television, how urban children participated in their schooling, how they organized their relationships with each other, and how they made substantial contributions to their families' economies through their paid and unpaid work.⁴ Another paper recounts how both rural and urban children grew up within the physical and emotional contexts provided by their families.⁵ This particular paper describes how, over these same years, work permeated the lives of children growing up in a pioneering community, how they looked upon their work, and the role that it played in the formation of their identities as adults. The differences between a pioneering and a long-settled agricultural community is mostly a matter of degree rather than kind. However, a community that is in the throes of creating itself reveals with particular clarity the tensions between the demands placed upon children by their families on the one hand and by an increasingly intrusive state on the other.

This paper employs Evelyn, a small community in the Bulkley Valley, eleven miles northwest of Smithers on the GTP line, as a case study of pioneering childhood in the early twentieth century.⁶ Much of the evidence for it comes from a series of open-ended and relatively unstructured interviews with people who grew up in Evelyn. Adult memories of childhood are our principal source as to the thoughts, feelings and experiences of childhood that children themselves lack the means to express. Some psychologists and historians argue that some childhood events can be reconstructed more reliably than others. While adults can remember only a very tiny sample of all the things that happened to them when they were young, they can recall the 'scripts' of those recurrent activities which structured their lives. Since those growing up in Evelyn shared both scripts and associated feelings, their

4. Neil Sutherland, "'The triumph of formalism': Elementary Schooling in Vancouver from the 1920s to the 1960s", *BC Studies* 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), pp. 175-210, published simultaneously in R.A.J. McDonald and Jean Barman, eds., *Vancouver Past: Essays in Social History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986); Neil Sutherland, "'Everyone seemed happy in those days': the culture of childhood in Vancouver between the 1920's and the 1960's", *The History of Education Review* 15 (1986), pp. 37-51; Neil Sutherland, "'We always had things to do': the Paid and Unpaid Work of Anglophone Children Between the 1920s and the 1960s", *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), pp. 105-141.

5. Neil Sutherland, "Anglophone Canadian Children in Their Family Settings, 1918-1960", a working paper of the Canadian Childhood History Project, 1991.

6. Some Evelyn pioneers told their stories in *Bulkley Valley Stories, Collected From Old Timers Who Remember* (n.pl.: The Heritage Club, n.d.) especially pp. 139-47; 153-6; 167-8; see also Olive Storey, "The early days of Evelyn", *The Smithers Interior News*, 23 April 1980, p. a5.

reconstructions of the past can be compared in the ways historians customarily employ to examine documentary evidence.⁷ Although some spoke other languages at home, they all attended a school in which English was the language of instruction and, as adults, they speak it with complete fluency. Interviews conducted with people who grew up in other parts of British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada, together with printed memoirs and other literature, supplement the Evelyn data and provide a standard against which the representativeness of Evelyn experiences can be tested.

Evelyn is located just below the glacier on Hudson Bay Mountain, which shaded the community in the winter time, making the days very short. In the summer time, on the other hand, "it was very light, even at 10:00 p.m." Its climate was severe, characterized by long, cold winters, with temperatures often dropping to -40°F, and short, warm and generally dry summers. Although white settlers had begun to come into the area even before the GTP was completed, Evelyn really became a community with the establishment of its school in 1920 or 1921.⁸ Evelyn's settlers usually aspired to economic self-sufficiency and a better life for their children. Their family farms would produce much of their own food needs through their crops and livestock. They would sell or sometimes barter their surplus crops and livestock for the food, clothing, equipment and other necessities that they did not themselves produce. The long-term goal of many was to acquire and clear enough of the still readily-available land for their children, and especially their sons, to have farms as well. By the 1920s, one especially industrious Valley family had already assembled three mostly uncleared properties, one of 640 acres, all in a row: "Grandfather's, my uncle's, and Dad's". However, as pioneer Nan Bourgon accurately observed, the Bulkley Valley was "a hard, cruel country, where it had been so hard to get a start, so hard to make a living in

7. Evaluations of the reliability of oral history in general, and of the oral history of childhood in particular, are rooted in research and reflections on memory as conducted by both psychologists and historians. Edmund Blair Bolles, *Remembering and Forgetting: An Inquiry into the Nature of Memory* (New York: Walker, 1988), provides a convenient introduction to the rapidly-burgeoning psychological research. David Thelan, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), surveys historical approaches to the topic. In "When You Listen to the Winds of Childhood, How Much Can You Believe?", *Curriculum Enquiry*, forthcoming, I show how the psychological and historical strands come together when one is investigating the history of childhood.

8. [Della Herman, ed.], *Bulkley Valley School Days* (n.pl.: n.pub., n.d.), pp. 56-62, gives both dates. The school first appears in provincial records in June 1923 which note that Miss E.S. Miller enrolled 16 pupils in the Evelyn School, which had been open for 173 1/2 days over the 1922-1923 school year. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report, 1923*, pp. F86-7. Recollections and other local records show that Miss Miller was preceded by James Muir, Laura Hunter and Kathryn Wilson. Amongst the most interesting of local records is an untitled, profusely illustrated mimeographed pamphlet of some 20 pages, put together for the Evelyn School reunion in 1985, and which lists all of Evelyn School's pupils and teachers.

those early days."⁹ For this reason, most men had to supplement their farm income by such off-farm work as trapping, logging, sawmilling, clearing land for others, hauling, cutting ice, railway maintenance, road work and, probably of greatest importance, "tie-hacking", that is by hand-cutting wooden ties for the railroad.

Although childhood in pioneering areas in the twentieth century closely resembled childhood in earlier eras, the years between the end of the First World War and the end of the 1950s had characteristics that made the period unique. Arduous, endless and generally mindless work remained a central element in the lives of all pioneering children. Like predecessor generations, as Robert Collins put it, they treaded "two endless wheels of labour ... one within the other: a daily round of chores spinning inside the greater circle of seasons' tasks."¹⁰ A transforming society added to these customary burdens. On the one hand, urban publicists of new notions of childhood and of child health, welfare and education laboured to bring children in the most remote areas under the sway of their ideas. School teachers and inspectors, outpost and public health nurses, travelling physicians and dentists, mothers' allowance investigators and missionaries brought the new ideas and practices, and some of the apparatus of the fast-emerging modern state, to pioneering areas.¹¹ In particular, the state incorporated nearly all school-aged children into the laddered school system. It, rather than parents, now held the major responsibility for when and how children would learn their literary and cultural tradition. Much more schooling and school work had to be fitted into the "two endless wheels of labour". On the other hand, rural and pioneering societies have dynamics that may or may not parallel urban ones.¹² Thus, twentieth-century pioneers interested themselves in the effects that social, medical, technological and scientific changes might bring to their lives. The geographer of pioneering in the early twentieth century, Isaiah Bowman, noted, for example, that these pioneers came out of a motorized community and expected its roads and railroads to follow them.¹³ They also expected to eventually employ mechanized farm and other equipment and to own automobiles. Since they were always short of cash, and with the demands of

9. Nan Bourgon, *Rubber Boots for Dancing and Other Memories of Pioneer Life in the Bulkley Valley*, ed. by Marjorie Rosberg (Smithers: Tona and Janet Hetherington, 1979), p. 118.

10. Robert Collins, *Butter Down the Well: Reflections of a Canadian Childhood* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1980), p. 171.

11. See Monica Storrs, *God's Galloping Girl* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1979); Neil Sutherland, "Social Policy, 'Deviant' Children, and the Public Health Apparatus in British Columbia Between the Wars", *Journal of Educational Thought* 14 (August 1980), pp. 80-91; John Calam, *Alex Lord's British Columbia: Recollections of a Rural School Inspector, 1915-1936* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991).

12. Chad Gaffield and Gérard Bouchard, "Literacy, Schooling, and Family Reproduction in Rural Ontario and Quebec", *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*, 2 (Fall/Automne 1989), pp. 214-16.

13. Bowman, *Pioneer Fringe*, p. 69.

farm and family competing for their meagre supply of it, pioneering families were extremely sceptical of anything they regarded as a "frill". As one woman explained, "we didn't have the cash to buy these things [such as a new coat for school] ... because everytime there was cash in our family, there was a threshing machine to buy ... Always on a ranch, it's always machinery and equipment." Nonetheless, and to cite but two examples, most wanted the benefits of recent advances in medicine and education.

Women demonstrated their commitment to modern medicine for themselves and their families by their enthusiasm to bear their babies in hospitals. From the late nineteenth century, social reformers and medical practitioners campaigned to reduce extremely high rates of infant and maternal mortality. Pregnant women were exhorted to bear their infants in hospitals rather than at home. Although the shift from home to hospital was eventually accompanied by decline in maternal mortality, historians do not agree as to whether these events were causally linked.¹⁴ Interviews and other data show that most rural and pioneer women welcomed the shift to the hospital.¹⁵ Before the railroad was completed, one Evelyn woman "walked forty miles to the hospital ... where her first child was born." Later, and despite the presence of a trained midwife in their midst (the "lady who helped when babies were born" as one child thought of her at the time), many Evelyn women chose to go to the hospital in Smithers. One woman, who had an exciting race with time getting to Smithers for the birth of one child, for the next, went early to Smithers and "stayed with a friend ... for three whole weeks before the baby decided to come."¹⁶ Some bore their children at home, even after the Smithers hospital opened. One man reported that he had been "born in the farmhouse. No midwife was present. Since my father had been an amateur vet, he may have helped."

14. Veronica Strong-Boag and Kathryn McPherson, "The Confinement of Women: Childbirth and Hospitalization in Vancouver, 1919-1939", *BC Studies*, 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), pp. 142-174; Norah Lewis, "Reducing Maternal Mortality in British Columbia: An Educational Process" in B.K. Latham and R.J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984), pp. 337-55. See also Cynthia Comacchio Abeele, "The Mothers of the Land Must Suffer': Child and Maternal Welfare in Rural and Outpost Ontario, 1918-1940", *Ontario History*, LXXX (September 1988), pp. 183-205. For a vividly-written account of birthing from the point-of-view of a mother living in conditions at least as harsh as those in the Bulkley Valley, see Elizabeth Goudie, *Woman of Labrador* (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1973), passim.

15. Lewis, "Reducing Maternal Mortality"; "Evalyn [Powell], deciding that it was much nicer having babies in a hospital, went back to Pouce Coupe when the 7th baby was due ..." Cora Ventress, Marguerite Davies, Edith Kylo, eds., *The Peacemakers of the North* (n.pl.: Davies, Ventress, and Kylo, 1973), p. 194.

16. "Mrs. Jim Owens Reminisces", *Bulkley Valley Stories*, pp. 145-6.

Most Evelyn parents wanted a modern education for their children. After initiating formal schooling in a private home, the community soon built a log schoolhouse.¹⁷ In the half century before the First World War in Canada, the state and community together had gradually lengthened the school year and increased the number of years that children spent there. Twentieth-century schools such as Evelyn's consequently were less able and less concerned to fit themselves as tightly into local mores and work patterns as their nineteenth-century predecessors had been.¹⁸ In the not-so-distant past, local school trustees would have set the dates for opening and closing schools so that they accorded with the rhythms of community life. By the 1920s, schools opened and closed on province-wide dates set by the Department of Education in far-away Victoria.¹⁹ Fewer families followed the time-honoured rural practice of sending their children to school only at those times when they were not needed at home.²⁰ Passing the high school entrance examinations became the goal for city children as well as for many of their rural counterparts. Eight years of ten months' attendance became the norm to which the community, children and many parents aspired; and in families that needed children's work, this proved a sometimes enormous burden. Some families were more successful than others at meeting the goal. As one man reported, "some kids couldn't attend school regularly; they had to stay at home for work." (This was especially so at seedtime and at harvest.) "I did not attend school during threshing time", explained one woman. Although the man quoted above — the son of a particularly demanding father — did not complete his entrance, he nonetheless spent much of each of eight years at school. Another youngster, whose day started at 6:00 a.m. and who sometimes did not complete his chores until 9:00 p.m., "studied to 12:00 at night". In his last year, in the entrance class, he had a "teacher who was determined I would not fail [the entrance

17. While the Evelyn school displayed some of the difficulties discussed in J. Donald Wilson and Paul J. Stortz, "'May the Lord Have Mercy on You': The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s", *BC Studies*, 79 (Autumn 1988), pp. 24-58, it was never an example of "a pedagogical charnel house" of the sort identified in John H. Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord*, The Canadian Centenary Series, vol. 15 (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), p. 156; see also Paul James Storts, "The Rural School Problem in British Columbia in the 1920s" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1988), especially Part II, "The Schools in the British Columbia North Central Interior: Terrace to Vanderhoof".

18. Ian E. Davey, "The Rhythm of Work and the Rhythm of School" in *Egerton Ryerson and His Times*, ed. by Neil McDonald and Alf Chaiton (Toronto: MacMillan, 1978), pp. 221-253.

19. Although the calendar limits of the school year were laid out as early as 1882-1883, rural school districts only gradually fell in line with provincial requirements. School attendance records suggest that nearly all districts had come to comply by the 1920s. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1882-1883, p. 99; *ibid.*, 1920-1921, pp. c 76-99.

20. In 1921-1922, the average daily attendance in graded elementary schools in British Columbia was 87 percent; by 1931-1932, it was 90 percent; and in 1941-42, it was 89 percent. Average daily attendance of all pupils in British Columbia first exceeded 90 percent in 1939-1940. By that time, the Evelyn School had exceeded that figure in 13 of its first 18 years. British Columbia, Department of Education, *Report*, 1921-1922 to 1944-1945, *passim*.

examinations]” so she had him “at school at 8:30 until 4:30”. If there had been school buses into Smithers, he reported, “I would have continued” beyond grade eight. Other Evelyn youngsters did go on to complete their high school. Coming as they did somewhat later in the settlement process, some younger children had more time than their older siblings to attend school regularly.

By the 1920s, many families had assumed the form that was the norm for Anglophone Canadian society from the latter part of the nineteenth century until the 1960s or 1970s. In families located in urban areas, fathers — “breadwinners” — worked away from a home, to which they returned daily, in a blue or white collar job. Mothers managed family economies by keeping house and raising the children. After spending about six years in the care of their mothers, children started school and attended regularly, at least until the legal school-leaving age of fifteen. Although the load of mothers’ and children’s chores in long-settled rural areas was often heavier than that of their urban counterparts, they too followed a similar pattern. Pioneering families also possessed what can be described as an “ideal” division of labour that differed from their long-settled rural counterparts mostly in the much greater demands that it placed on all members of the family. Mother’s work centered on the household. Father’s work centered on the land. Their duties met in the farmyard.²¹ As one person recalled, barnyard chores were “middle ground, fair for either boys or girls to do.” Since pioneer families always had more to do than time to complete it, their children assumed major responsibilities very early in their lives; in the words of one: “I can’t recall when I didn’t help.” In normal circumstances, daughters helped with their mothers’ duties and sons helped with their fathers’. Boys who were called upon to do “inside” chores did so because, as one man explained, “my mother had no daughters”. However, when it came to “outside” chores, there was, as one woman explained, “no such thing as boys’ work; as soon as you could walk, you worked.” In concurring with this view, one man also revealed the fairly common male attitude that the “real” work of farming lay in the male domain. There was, he reported, “no sex difference in chores”, and his sisters could “handle chores like a man”.

In these contexts, then, this paper examines the working lives of pioneering children. It portrays their lives from the point-of-view of the children themselves. It shows how families tried to integrate new notions with traditional practices. It begins by describing the daily round of chores, moves on to discuss “the greater circle of the seasons’s tasks”, and then, considers two sorts of work — house and barn building and land clearing — that were so central to pioneering. The paper concludes with general observations on the

21. Although interviewees variously reported that “Scandinavian women didn’t do that sort of thing [outdoor farm work]” nor did Ukrainian women, apparently such restraints did not apply to their daughters. See also Sharon D. Stone, “Emelia’s Story: A Ukrainian Grandmother”, *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la femme* 7, 4 (Winter 1986), p. 10.

role of work in the lives of the young, including its place in the development of their gender identity.

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Children and adults started early on their daily chores, each made more arduous by the primitive settings in which they were done. As one woman put it, "lots of things had to be done every day, and they had to be done at a certain time." First, someone lit the kitchen stove and other fires, sometimes using curls of wood or a shaved stick — "paper was precious" — to ignite the kindling. "My father got up first", reported one woman, "lit the kitchen stove and stirred up the heater", while another told that her mother "was up first and lit the fire". In the Peace River district, the Anglican missionary Monica Storrs reported that, in one home in which she spent the night, "in the cold dim dawn, the door burst open and ... Melville, aged nine, came in and lit the stove ... and only his face lit up by the flickering glare as he tried to blow the embers into flame."²² Soon, the whole family was up, the younger children to dress by the fire, the older ones, after having something hot to drink or eat, on their way to the first of the morning's chores. "We would have coffee with father", noted one man, "and then, went to the barn to milk the cows, to feed the calves, to feed the pigs." A woman has "fond memories of mornings with cattle bawling and horses whinneying." Until she was herself old enough to help with the milking, she "threw hay down from the hay barn." Meanwhile, mothers and youthful helpers worked inside. They tended the youngest children. They took chamber pots to the privy. They prepared a hot breakfast, which usually included a porridge made from grain grown on the farm and, often, also included bacon, eggs, toast or pancakes. Mothers or children made lunches for those going to school and packed them in each child's lard, toffee, or Rogers syrup pail. "After breakfast, we rushed to school", explained one man, and another noted that he was "up no later than 6:00 and started to school just after 8:00." A third man noted that, "we always liked to go to school, in the sense that it was a relief from ... farming."

In addition to their school work, pupils attending Evelyn School had a round of chores to do there. In winter, after a walk of from about half a mile to over three miles, sometimes through deep snow, the children were cold when they arrived. As soon as he arrived, one of the older boys lit the "drum-type stove in which the logs were loaded from the front." He and the other boys chopped the wood, brought it in from the woodshed, and kept the fire going. Children took "turns bringing milk, cocoa and sugar. The first thing you'd do is make a big kettle of hot chocolate. Everybody would have a drink." Both men and women recalled going, usually in pairs, with a pail to get water from glacier-fed Toboggan Creek, which was a quarter of a mile away. Since

22. Storrs, *God's Galloping Girl*, p. 276.

it was "a good big creek", children had to be careful, especially in the winter when the boys "used an old axe" to cut holes in the ice. They often came back, as one man reported, "with icicles on my pants." The older children also took weekly turns as school janitor, sweeping it out, cleaning the wash basin, washing blackboards and cleaning brushes. Eventually, the school board paid one boy to light the fire and another to fetch the water. Towards the end of the summer, children helped their mothers as they gave the school a thorough cleaning, and their fathers as they brought in or supplemented the winter's wood supply and undertook necessary repairs to the school, barn, woodshed, privies and fences.

Children hurried home from school; as one put it, "work was there waiting for us." Probably the most important tasks were caring for animals, of which "choring with cattle" took the greatest amount of time. Except in the winter, cows remained outside, sometimes in pastures but more often "roamed free" as widely as they liked. After school, children would hunt out the cattle to bring them home to the night pasture or barn. Fortunate youngsters would "go on horses for them, sometimes [as many as] four miles." Others, who put in "hours of walking" as they brought home the cows, would "love to have had a pony." Once the cows were in the night pasture or barn, in some families, "Mom and the kids did the milking", while in others, fathers took charge. Children eagerly acquired the skill and the woman who reported that she "learned to milk at six years of age" was not unusual. However, she may, like a male contemporary, also soon have "wished I hadn't started it because it became a regular chore!" After the morning or evening milking, mothers and children ran much of the day's milk through the cream separator. One woman explained that, when she was small, "it took two children to turn the handle." After each use, the separator had to be taken apart and thoroughly washed with water as hot as the hands could bear it (no soap could be used) and then reassembled.²³ Children then fed chickens, calves and pigs with the skim milk, helped to make butter with the hand churn, and then, "moulded it on the wooden 'butter table'."²⁴ In winter, cattle had to be fed and watered. Families grew much of their turnip crop for cattle feed. While some families eventually came to own a turnip pulper, in the early days, parents and children chopped them up by hand. One man reported that "I didn't do a very good job; [the too-large pieces] got stuck in the cattle's throats." As another man reported, this could "kill the cow because cows don't chew, they just swallow." On some farms, children took the cattle from the barn to a creek to drink where holes had been cut in the ice for them and, on others, they filled drinking troughs. "In the very coldest weather", one woman explained, "the water had to be

23. Elizabeth Davis of Tottenham, Ontario, outlines the process as she did it as a child in Allan Anderson, ed., *Remembering the Farm: Memories of Farming, Ranching, and Rural Life in Canada, Past and Present* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 111-2.

24. "The action of the heavy handle made my little arms ache, and it seemed as though the cream would never turn to butter." Ferne Nelson, *Barefoot on the Prairie: Memories of life on a prairie homestead* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989), p. 14.

slightly warmed by pouring in a kettle of boiling water into each troughful, or the milk production went down." Cleaning the barn was also a major daily chore to which both boys and girls were assigned. One man reported, "I escaped the mundane jobs of milking cows by offering to do the 'dunging out', the 'mucking out' that had to be done on a daily basis."

Evelyn farms also kept horses, pigs and chickens, all of which required daily care. In addition to her daily milking and wood carrying, one woman "fed the chickens, looked after the young chicks, gathered the eggs and cleaned out the chicken houses ... Dad killed the roosters, mother scalded them, and the kids plucked them." Another, in a family that kept about 100 chickens, recalls "gathering the eggs, cleaning them for the store, and cleaning the hen house." She may, like other children, have candled the eggs as well. In another family, the daughter whose job it was to look after the chickens selected the older one destined for the supper table, "got the axe, put it on the chopping block, cut its head off, got the hot water, [and took] the feathers off, but Mom would clean it." This woman also had the job of finding the barn cats' litters, "just leave one and the rest I had to drown ... to make sure we weren't over-run with cats."

Girls and boys also had regular meal-time duties. One woman "had to do the vegetables for supper, then all the dishes after the meal." Elizabeth Varley, whose family pioneered in the Kitimat Valley, explained that dishwashing was the worst chore "because of insufficient water" and the fact that, in order not to scratch it, the "enamel porridge pot ... had to be scraped with a wooden chip from the woodshed."²⁵ Helping prepare supper often took one to the root cellar or root house. As one woman explained, "you had to put on ... your boots and your heavy clothes because usually in the winter time, that was quite a chore to go to the root house and make sure you got everything ... Usually, you had to light a lantern to take with you ... because you couldn't leave the door open for light ... [You would get] three or four days' supply" at one time. Another woman noted that "the fruit and vegetables in the cellar had to be picked over carefully", and "any that had started to rot had to be culled out." Mothers seem rarely to have delegated much actual cooking to their youngsters. As one woman explained, her mother would not let her bake because the mother had "lived through the hard times" and, thus, was "afraid I would waste." When the mother baked, "she would use her fingers to scrape out the bowl so there would be nothing left to lick, ... not a thing!"

Most Evelyn pioneers built their homes close to creeks from which they took most of their water. Some also had a "rain barrel" in which they collected rain water for "washing hair and white clothes." Others "melted snow for washing; ... it took more and more buckets of snow." A few had the pump for their well right inside the house beside the sink. Most families used buckets to

25. Elizabeth Anderson Varley, *Kitimat My Valley* (Terrace: Northern Times Press, 1981), p. 111.

bring their water to the house. In many families, for youngsters, "carrying water from the creek was an endless chore, winter and summer." One "household used four buckets every day ... [and] the butter called for an extra couple of buckets." Dave McIntosh, who worked on his uncle's New Brunswick farm, explained that "carrying water from the well was a sort of test of growing manhood. The object was to carry two pails from well to house or barn [about forty yards] without once putting them down to rest."²⁶ Where the creek was far away, parents or children hitched horses to stone boats or wagons and went there to fill wooden barrels, milk cans or drums. On nice days, children found this to be a relatively agreeable task. It was, for example, more pleasant than weeding the kitchen garden or hilling potatoes. In winter, however, it could be one of the most unpleasant chores a child had to do. "We went to the creek with a stone boat, pulled by a horse, with a barrel on it. We [then] chopped a hole in the ice", recalled one woman. Children sometimes put numb hands into water that was on the point of freezing and often accidentally splashed it over themselves. The canvas tops and the ropes to tie them over the barrels to prevent splashing became rigid with ice. Any water that slopped over the edge froze on the side of the barrel, on the stone boat and on clothes. Once at the house, children would "bail water into the reservoir on the stove, or store it in pails in the kitchen."

In her recollections, Nan Bourgon explained that "everything was brown — soil, house, kids, farmers."²⁷ "My Dad was clearing land", another woman recalled, "and I was supposed to take a message to him ... I could see my Dad walking and a black bear was walking with him on its hind legs." In fact, it was not a bear, but another man "who was so black from clearing land doing it by hand." A constant battle with the "brown" and the "black" formed a central characteristic of pioneer women's work. In this, as in all else, children found they had a major role to play. Much of the battle took place inside the house, in the early years, especially in a house often unevenly floored with planks or poles. Fathers and children brought dirt in on their shoes and clothes with the never-ending supply of wood and kindling for the stoves. During dry, dusty periods, it blew in through doors and windows, and stove ash added to accumulations.

Of all the tasks connected with keeping things clean, however, doing the washing was clearly the most onerous. Since hauling water was so difficult, one family built a wash house right on their creek: "It was cold in winter." At one home, about a hundred feet from the creek, the large washing was done "in a large tub on top of a huge block of wood" which sat outside on the back porch. A woman reported that "if a neighbour was sick, my mother [would come] home with a big sheet full of wash. We'd light a fire by the creek rather than [carrying the water]." In another family, one of the boys helped with the

26. Dave McIntosh, *The Seasons of My Youth*, (Toronto: General Publishing, 1984), p. 52.

27. Bourgon, *Rubber Boots*, p. 9.

water; "the night before, I had to make sure that there was enough water to do the washing." After the clothes were boiled, "they were washed on scrub boards" and then wrung out "with a hand-turned wringer." Most people "hung out washing all year round." In winter, they "brought in frozen articles as needed." For clothes and other things that needed ironing, mothers and daughters used "sad" or flat irons. Some families were, as one woman put it, "haphazard about caring for themselves and hygiene." Such families caused distress to some of their neighbours. As members of the first generation acutely aware of the role of germs ("microbes") in spreading disease, to some mothers "dirt ... was often synonymous with disease and infection", and they laboured hard to keep it at bay. What one must marvel at is not the dirtiness and shabbiness of those children and adults who sometimes offended insensitive teachers, public health nurses and other outside observers, but that so many children, at the cost of tremendous labour on their part and that of their mothers, went to school and to community events relatively clean and tidy and remained remarkably healthy.

After children completed all of their post-supper chores, they sometimes had school work to finish. As one woman remembered it, she had homework only "occasionally"; it was not a "ritual that you had to do a certain amount when you got home." A man recalls having to do "lots of memorizing", while another did "no homework; never!" Once homework was done, families might read, sing, or play games or musical instruments. In later years, they might gather around a battery radio to listen to such distant stations as KGO, San Francisco, or to "Mr. Goodevening" who read the news from CKWX in Vancouver. On evenings and weekends, girls learned the ancient arts of sewing, knitting and embroidery. One woman, for example, had "knitted myself a sweater by the time I was twelve." Since early rising also mandated an early bed time, this relaxing time was not as long as most youngsters would have liked. Children generally slept in unheated rooms in their uninsulated, drafty houses. As one person reported, "there was frost around the edges of the floor in the house", and another explained that, in her bedroom, sometimes there was "snow on the windowsills inside." Thus, going to bed in the winter time involved certain routines. One woman recalled that she wore "long johns, pyjamas, her housecoat, a nightcap, and took a hot water bottle with her." In another home, the kids "all moved down [from upstairs] to the living room beside the heater" when it got really cold. Cold bedrooms and outdoor privies, in turn, led to constipation, the consequent pain and then one of the popular treatments.²⁸

The many chores relating to the wood supply fitted into both daily and seasonal rounds. To pioneer children, their family's need for wood seemed insatiable: ("It seemed like there was no end to getting wood"). Families often started out with a single stove, adding more as their households grew. Some

28. See Norah L. Lewis, "Goose Grease and Turpentine: Mother Treats the Family's Illnesses", *Prairie Forum*, 15 (Spring 1990), pp. 67-84.

homes had "air tight" heaters which "took a whole block of wood" and kept the house "warm all night." The Bourgon house, in Hubert, which was a few miles south east of Evelyn, eventually had seven stoves.²⁹ Since "green" wood was difficult to light, produced a low level of heat and copious amounts of smoke as it burned, and built up heavy deposits in stove pipes and chimneys, most families organized themselves so that they always had a plentiful supply of dry, well-seasoned firewood. Therefore, on the short days in the midst of winter, before the sap started to run and the ground was frozen hard, they cut enough trees to provide firewood for the whole of the next year. "On weekends", reported one man, he and his father "went to the woodlot. We cut the wood and, with horses and sleighs, would haul it in." Next, in the wood area near the house, they cut the logs into stove-length rounds. In some families, fathers and sons placed it on the saw horse and "bucked it by hand with a cross cut saw." In families in which the father worked away from home, or where there were no boys of an appropriate age, mothers and daughters undertook this task. One woman recalled being "on one end of a cross-cut saw with one of my brothers on the other." Some families cut up their wood with an unprotected circular saw mounted on a frame and driven by a gasoline engine. Victor Carl Friesen vividly described this dangerous work. "My brother, or sometimes my mother, dragged the logs to the saw. At the saw stood my father, who repeatedly pushed each log into the whining blade ... I stood right next to the open blade and grasped the end of the log ... and followed it through its journey into the biting blade until it was severed. Then I threw the piece of wood over my shoulder ..."³⁰ After it was sawed off, each round had to be split, a process best done while the wood was still "green". Over the summer, many families tried to get ahead in their wood splitting, creating enormous wood piles outside and then stacking it in sheds so they had a good supply on hand for the winter, and especially in case of heavy storms, serious illness, or other emergencies. As one woman explained, the children in her family "had to spend a half hour each day stacking up the cut wood in the shed so that it would dry for the winter." Other families cut their wood over the winter. A man recalled that he and his father each spent an hour a day splitting wood: "Sometimes, on the weekends, we might get a little ahead." One woman recalls that by the time she was six, she was splitting wood and kindling. Since, in even the warmest months, families needed to use their stoves for cooking, preserving and heating water, wood and kindling chopping and carrying had to be done over the whole year: "We packed wood in every day", reported one man; and a woman recalled that "one night, I went to bed without cutting the kindling. My father rooted me out at midnight to do it."

29. Bourgon, *Rubber Boots*, p. 113.

30. Victor Carl Friesen, "Sawing the Winter's Fuel", *Bank or British Columbia's Pioneer News*, August/September 1988, p. 10. See also Anna Friesen and Victor Carl Friesen, *The Mulberry Tree* (n.pl.: Queenston House, 1985) for a fine account of Mennonites pioneering in Saskatchewan.

Evelyn farms grew various combinations and proportions of hay, oats, wheat, barley, turnips and potatoes as their principal crops. In addition, families — usually mothers — planted “kitchen gardens” in which they grew radishes, lettuce, beets, cabbages, cauliflower, carrots, peas, spinach, beans, rhubarb, parsnips (“I hated parsnips”), other vegetables and some small fruits for their own use. Both the major crops and the kitchen garden involved children in a succession of tasks that began early in the spring and only came to a halt in the late fall. Spring in Evelyn was often accompanied by flooding, or the threat of flooding, as melt water rushed down the hillsides over the still-frozen ground. As soon as the ground thawed and dried out, the family prepared it for planting. Fathers and sometimes the oldest boys did the ploughing, but all children helped with the later stages of the preparation of the soil.³¹ As one woman explained, for her, “there was always disking and harrowing ... [and she] used to harness and unharness the [part Percheron] horses by the time I was twelve.” Children also helped get the kitchen garden ready, by digging, raking and planting the seeds, the latter often done on or near the 24th of May school holiday. One family put in “a large garden; one acre of potatoes, one-half acre of small vegetables — it seemed like more than that —and one half acre of turnips.” Another planted “at least three acres of potatoes” and a third had “a large vegetable garden of almost an acre.”

Of all the chores they had to do, children remember weeding with the most distaste. It was, recalled one man, “a wearisome sort of thing.” Another remembered that “we had a vegetable garden. I had to weed and thin the bastards.” “I’ll never forget the long rows of turnips I had to weed”, noted one woman: “It seemed like there was no end to them.” Some farmers with large crops employed a horse-drawn cultivator to weed between the rows, but in many families, and especially in the early years, such work was usually done with a hoe. Boys and girls also would “crawl on hands and knees pulling weeds out of the garden.” Weeding also seemed never-ending: “Everything that grows is more weeding than gardening”, as one person lamented. During and after rainfall, damp soil clung to boots, building up into large clumps on the soles. These made walking even more difficult and uncomfortable, but were hard to dislodge and grew again almost immediately. Weeding went on over the late spring and summer, which were also the seasons of black flies and mosquitoes. As one woman explained, “holidays were from school only; that is when parents got the most out of you.” After one woman had her tonsils out, she was absolutely delighted to hear the doctor instruct her father that “I wasn’t to pull weeds. I remember it very clearly. I wasn’t to work in dirt!” In

31. Mary Henderson of Unionville, Ontario, reported that she began to learn to plough at the age of nine or ten. Annie Donald, oldest of seven girls and the “boy” of a family pioneering in Alberta, was, at age eleven, “taken out of school and became the full-time ‘hired hand’” who drove “a team of oxen which, in turn, pulled the plough and other farm implements.” No Evelyn women reported learning to plough. Anderson, *Remembering the Farm*, pp. 58-9 and “Resident of the Month — Mrs. Annie Donald”, Evergreen House, [Lions Gate Hospital, North Vancouver, B.C.], *Residents’ Newsbulletin* (September 1988), p. 2.

addition to the weeding of vegetable gardens and root crops, children also cleared grain fields of such noxious weeds as wild oats and stinkweed.³² In one family, the father “made each child responsible for a certain area. Dad checked it at night.”

If children remember weeding as their most distasteful chore, they fondly recall berry-picking as their most-liked spring and summer activity. As one man explained, “I liked ... picking huckleberries up on the hillsides ... There were kind of endless dreamy days like that, and you had bright, sunny weather.” Another recalled that “in the spring time, for greens you gathered nettles, pigweed ... and dandelions for salads.” A woman explained that to pick wild strawberries in June “was a thrill ... We would take a lunch ... We were picking them for Mom to make jam with; that was a serious business.” A man explained that “children picked wild strawberries, raspberries, low-bush blueberries and huckleberries. Sometimes, we would take two or three hours to walk to a site for picking.” His mother “put them up in jars; if it was a good year, we often had berries for dinner.”³³ While picking berries, children had to keep a wary eye out for bears, especially those with cubs. Children called out to each other regularly, or shook “a tin with stones in it to keep animals away.”

Evelyn residents began the very labour intensive chore of harvesting in the summer and continued until late into the fall. Long hours of sunlight made hay ready for cutting by mid- to late July. At haying time, reported one woman, “it was always hot.” While families might scythe hard-to-reach patches — “I used a scythe a little bit for hay among the trees” —, they customarily employed a horse-drawn mower to cut the hay. With a wary eye on the lookout for rain, families then left their cut hay laying in its swaths to dry, then used long-handled or horse-drawn rakes to rake it together, and then, their hands or pitchforks to make haycocks. From there, it was pitched onto horse-drawn hay ricks to be carried to sheds, barns or large outdoor stacks. “Haying was a ... family job. Dad did the mowing and I [and the other children] stooked and cocked it.” Another woman reported that, at age twelve, she ran both mower and hay rake, and drove the hay ricks. Older children pitched hay onto the wagons, while the younger ones rode on the wagons, stamping the hay down. “At about [age] nine or ten, Dad had me on the hay rig”, reported one man, while a woman recalled that she didn’t like “tramping the loads; ... it was hot,

32. Clearing fields of noxious weeds displayed prudent farming practice and respect for the law which compelled that they be controlled. See “Noxious Weeds Act”, R.S.B.C. 1924, c. 272. For wild oats and stinkweed as examples thereof, see Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Farm Weeds in Canada* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1923), p. 28, pl. 3 and p. 80, pl. 27. Although the presiding judge stated “that he had never seen or heard of a case of this nature in any court”, in 1934, he sentenced an Evelyn farmer to six months imprisonment after a jury had found him guilty of deliberate sowing a large quantity of seeds of noxious weeds on the fields of a neighbour. *Interior News*, 20 June 1934, and *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 14 September 1934.

33. “We picked quarts and quarts of summer’s bounty, to be spooned from Mama’s Mason jars when the winter winds blew and summer was only a memory.” Nelson, *Barefoot on the Prairie*, pp. 66-7.

dusty work." When the rick reached the barn, in one family, an eight-year-old girl drove the "fork" that lifted the hay off the rick and unloaded it in the hayloft. Adults and older children did the very heavy work of distributing the hay and children then "tramped the loft" to level it out.

Grain — oats, wheat and barley — were harvested later on in the year. Fathers or older children drove the three-or four-horse binders, which cut and bound the grain into bundles. The rest of the family would follow behind and stook (sometimes "shock") the grain, that is, stack the bundles upright, leaning in towards each other. As one person explained, "we made a field of these [stooks] because if it rained, it ran off and did not rot the grain." Since threshing called for considerable heavy labour, parents employed only their older children directly in the operation. "As soon as I was old enough, twelve or thirteen", reported one woman, "I joined the team of threshers." Younger children, as another woman explained, helped "mother feed the hungry workers and to carry drinks out to the fields." If threshing was done early in the season, two or three teams pulling wagons with racks on them took stooks from the fields directly to the threshing machine. Two "field pitchers" pitched stooks onto the rack while the driver loaded them, heads in, butts out. After the driver had taken a full load to the machine, he or she helped the "spike pitcher" spike them onto the belt and into the machine. Twelve-year-olds could load, drive and help off-pitch the stooks. If the threshing machine was not to come until late in the season, or even after the first snow, then families worked together well beforehand to bring stooks to a central point and stack them. Stooks were pitched from the wagon to the stack builder. Although throwing up stooks was too heavy for most girls and younger boys, they could load and drive the wagons. When the threshing machine arrived, two pitchers on the stack threw the stooks onto the belt. Grain came out of the machine via a spout into sacks or a bin. Only older children could help with these tasks and were often kept out of school to do so.

In the Bulkley Valley, "potato picking" and "turnip picking" were the last major harvesting operations of the year. Children helped with all phases of this work. "We had a large potato field", one woman recalls. "We did the potato picking in the fall. I would come home from school and change. We would load sacks onto the stone boat and ride it home to the root cellar." Another woman explained that "potatoes [were] ... always picked in October ... and it was so cold. I can remember crying at the cold ... picking them." Children rewarded themselves by turning one of the largest turnips into a Halloween jack-o-lantern.

In addition to mothers' already onerous round of daily and weekly tasks, which included child-minding, cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, mending and tending the kitchen garden, summer and fall brought the added burdens of preparing, preserving and storing as much food as possible for long months of winter and early spring. In the summer, children helped clear out the root cellar to make it ready for the new crop. Then over the late summer and fall, fathers

and children placed cabbages, potatoes, turnips, carrots and other root vegetables directly onto storage racks in the cellar. Together with the wild berries, mothers canned (in glass sealers) such vegetables as cauliflower, peas and beans. If chickens, pigs, or cows were slaughtered over the summer, then the meat had to be preserved by pickling, smoking, or canning. "We would", one man reported, "kill one pig for ourselves and the rest were sold ... All the meat was canned; jars and jars of canned meat." His "mother did all the canning and since she had no daughter, I helped with whatever was necessary." A woman recalls "slaughtering time ... and then the meat was hung ... and then brought into the house, and cut up, and canned." If the weather were cold enough, some meat was allowed to freeze untreated. As one man reported, "we would eat a milk cow in the fall if Dad didn't get a moose; ... [we] had to wait until it was cold ... to kill a moose or other animals." Over the summer, a woman reported, native people from their nearby village of Moricetown "came with horses and wagons to sell salmon, big beautiful salmon ... and Mom would can it ... [which was] lots of work ... [since it] had to be cooked on the wood stove and the house would be hot." Another woman explained that their "ham was smoked and cured ... in a little smoke house ... [which] need some special kind of bark ... and a salt mixture ('Habicure') you rubbed into it."

Evelyn and other pioneers had to integrate their daily, weekly and seasonal rounds into the on-going process of settling in.³⁴ Families often spent the first summer and sometimes longer periods on or near the new site living in a tent, shed, or abandoned cabin. While her father built their house, one woman explained, he lived in a tent on the site while the family lived in a vacant cabin, "five miles away through the bush ... We would take a lunch down and watch as he used horses, and a block and tackle to build ... It had to be built before cold came." The first home was usually a small log cabin, chinked with clay or moss, and roofed with poles covered with canvas, sod, shakes, or corrugated iron. At first, these cabins contained but a single room with sometimes a sleeping loft at one end and perhaps a lean-to on the side. Hard-packed dirt, poles, or rough planks served as the floor. If a family had animals, then it would also have to construct a barn before the first winter: the Evelyn woman quoted above explained that "Dad built the barn before the cold came." Those with a little capital as well as their labour to invest in their homes built a permanent home right from the start, or only after a brief stay in the cabin which could then be converted to other uses. Others, whose time was completely absorbed by the need to clear, or to work elsewhere, lived in their gradually-extending initial home for many years. Some families thus spent most of their child-rearing years in the cabin with only the youngest children spending some of their youth in the second, "permanent" home. Nan Capewell

34. The urban centre tried to exert its influence even on the design of "outpost" houses. See, for example, Canada, Department of Health, *Beginning a Home in Canada*, and *How to Build the Canadian House*, No. 7 and No. 8, in the "Little Blue Books Home Series", written by Helen McMurchy, Chief of the Division of Child Welfare.

married Joe Bourgon in June 1915 and moved into a little house with a lean-to kitchen on their partially cleared farm. Only after very considerable family stress — Nan left Joe for a time — and the birth of their first child, did they move into their permanent home in the spring of 1917.³⁵

"School holidays! No one asked where you were going for holidays. You knew you were going to do your part to help clear the land during Easter Holidays", wrote one Evelyn pioneer, one of those whose "family was starting out from scratch."³⁶ For most, "trying to make a farm" in a heavily-wooded area was a long process and some were still doing it when they died or sold their farms. As with their other work, children "began [helping] earlier than I can remember." They helped cut down and cut up the trees, pile them and their branches on the fire, pull the stumps or gather up the pieces after they were blown with stumping powder. As one woman explained, "if they blew stumps, they ... would blow three at a time ... and you would count so long and wait for the bang ... a boom you would hear for miles and ... feel it too." She would then "pick up sticks for hours." One boy "got a wagon as a toy, but used it to pick roots." Root-picking (and rock-picking) went on for years, with children spending hours and hours collecting them, especially during ploughing season. Lena Capling of Evelyn recalled "picking rocks from the fields" and putting them into a stone boat drawn by a "huge ox".³⁷ As one man summarized the experience of clearing and preparing the land, "each year the fields got a little bigger and each year the boys got a little bigger." They cleared "a couple of acres a year" and by the time of his father's death, had cleared 125 acres.

* * *

By June 1946, when Evelyn School closed, war-time prosperity enabled British Columbians to look to the future with a sense of hope which had been uncharacteristic to them since the end of the 1920s. Rural school consolidation, long advocated but only very partially implemented, became a post-war goal and a province-wide plan, for it was laid out in the Cameron Report.³⁸ Thus, in September 1946, Evelyn children travelled by taxi to school in Smithers. They continued to do their allotted share of the daily, weekly and seasonal routines on farms, most of which still lacked such amenities as running water, electrical power and tractors. "We got our first tractor in 1950", reported one man, and another noted that "we got our first electricity in '57."

35. Bourgon, *Rubber Boots*, pp. 49-68.

36. Beryl Jones, "The MacMillans Settle at Evelyn", *Bulkley Valley Stories*, p. 155.

37. Mrs. Jim Capling, as told to Marjorie Rosberg, "A Long Time Ago", *ibid.*, p. 140.

38. Maxwell A. Cameron, *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Educational Finance* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1945.) See also F. Henry Johnson, *A History of Public Education in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Publications Centre, University of British Columbia, 1964), ch. 9.

Many families continued to add to the store of cleared land. Nonetheless, the closing of the Evelyn School can be said to mark the end of the initial phase in the history of the district. The "pioneer fringe" had passed beyond post-war Evelyn, and the Bulkley Valley as a whole, leaving behind a relatively prosperous agricultural and lumbering region with well-established patterns of seasonal work. If the workload of Evelyn's post-war youngsters remained similar to that of earlier years, for most of them, there was little of the sense of desperate urgency that had characterized the lives of their predecessors.

At this point, I must re-emphasize that, as a case study, Evelyn does not exemplify all aspects of pioneering childhoods in Canada during these years. A different landscape, different crops, a harsher or milder climate; each might structure children's tasks in ways that were somewhat unlike those followed in Evelyn. Thus, some Peace River pioneers did not have to clear their land, but all were farther from markets for their products than those in the Bulkley Valley. Despite accounts of childhood illnesses and accidents, the Bulkley Valley seems to have been a reasonably healthy place to bring up children. Its rates of infant and childhood mortality seem to have been lower than those which Cynthia Comacchio Abeele discovered for "Outpost" Ontario during the same period.³⁹ Nonetheless, pioneering children anywhere else in Canada, in these years, would have had in common with their Evelyn contemporaries a heavy load of work, would have taken a major share in what Elizabeth Varley, a pioneer child in the Kitimat area, calls "the rush to get things done."⁴⁰ Descriptions of pioneer life in the Peace River district, for example, contain many Evelyn-like accounts of youthful work such as that of Stanley (Punch) Landry. "When I was nine and my brother Waldo ten", he wrote, "I remember helping thresh oat bundles with Tremblay's machine when it came to our area ... It was operated with 12 horses and, to save power, had a feed table and a straw conveyor ... Waldo and I were band cutters even though we had to stand on boxes to reach the bundles."⁴¹

Even as a case study, this description of Evelyn is incomplete, since it is built almost entirely on success stories. Families who failed usually moved out of the district. Siblings and neighbours occasionally encountered difficulties in their lives, but it is impossible to distinguish causation. Except for occasional observations of neighbours or teachers, rural and pioneer children with ephemeral or permanent "problems" do not appear in records in the way in which some of their urban counterparts did. Thus, in "the winter", Nan Bourgon wrote, "I would see some of the children coming to our Hubert School so poorly clothed that it worried me. I always begged shoes and warm

39. Abeele, "The Mothers of the Land Must Suffer".

40. Varley, *Kitimat*, p. 47.

41. Lillian York, ed., *Lure of the South Peace: Tales of the Early Pioneers to 1945* (n.pl.: South Peace Historical Book, 1981), p. 180.

clothes from my friends in town for them."⁴² In the Peace River district, Monica Storrs took an interest in "Gladys, a girl I am rather sorry for. She is about sixteen, and is a 'hired girl' at the store, i.e., general slavey to the storekeeper's wife. She has no mother and her father has just gone to prison for distilling moonshine, liquor... The poor girl is terribly shy now, and I think feels a sort of outcast." Gladys' brother, Hughie, was twelve "and he is the most delightful little boy in the school; desperately eager, full of fun and completely unselfconscious." A year later, Storrs wanted to recruit Hughie to attend a summer camp. Hughie lived "as chore boy with some people who are very kind to him, but alas, said they were too busy and could not spare him. Poor Hughie said nothing at all through the conversation, but stood at the door and stared and stared at us. He was the life and soul of the camp last year. But, of course, there was nothing for it but to say, 'Better luck next year Hughie', to which cheap comfort he made no reply, but only went on staring till we had gone."⁴³

In a companion paper on the labour of urban youngsters, I argued that children played such a major role in their family economy, both because they had to and because they wanted to.⁴⁴ Creating a farm out of the "bush" would have been an extremely difficult enterprise, if not impossible, without the free, and generally freely-given, labour of children. Bowman's research demonstrated that boys and girls were useful at eight and ten years, and by sixteen, they could take the place of men and women.⁴⁵ In Evelyn, children of both sexes seemed to be more than "useful" at eight, and capable of working as adults when they reached school-leaving age or very soon thereafter. The interviewees clearly were proud of the fact that as girls and boys, they had done "a man's work". As one woman put it, "you did [any job] if you could possibly do it." One man was even more explicit, arguing that "any most physical work ... as soon as you were able you did it... It was partly that I liked doing it, I liked this responsibility, those chores." Elizabeth Varley "was proud, too, to be doing adult work with the adults, and felt very grown-up", despite the fact that her mother said she would "ruin my hands, make them coarse and rough."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, a few of my informants conveyed the sense that parents, and especially fathers, aspired to more than they had or could reasonably acquire through their own efforts and that of their children. Such families pushed their children into more work than they really had time to do, and more than could be fairly asked for in the circumstances. One man noted that although "he never stayed out of school for farm chores", certain other

42. Bourgon, *Rubber Boots*, p. 97.

43. Storrs, *God's Galloping Girl*, pp. 93, 95, 215.

44. Sutherland, "'We always had things to do'".

45. Bowman, *The Pioneer Fringe*, p. 5.

46. Varley, *Kūimat*, p. 75.

Evelyn children were sometimes kept out of school and “worked like a bugger” by their fathers.⁴⁷

The family's role in the education and career choices of Evelyn's youngsters was central. Parents encouraged sons, and especially daughters, to use the school to provide opportunities beyond the local community. For those Evelyn children who went on to secondary education and then to trade, semi-professional and professional training, the school assumed a major role in their vocational education. Nonetheless, even for those entering such practical or semi-practical fields as nursing or the mechanical trades, their home training often provided them with a substantial base in practical experience onto which their later theoretical learning could be built. The student nurse who had helped butcher the family pigs had a head start in anatomical studies (and the control of squeamishness) over most of her urban counterparts. For those Evelyn young people who embarked on careers as farmers, loggers and the wives of farmers and loggers, their childhood and youths had provided them with most of the practical knowledge they would need in their working lives. Boys and girls could use and repair tools and machinery. Both could care for livestock. Both knew the seasonal routines of planting and harvesting. Both could do most of the domestic chores involved in running a household. Both knew the local vagaries of weather and climate and how to incorporate this knowledge into their seasonal planning. In short, both possessed the full complement of what they needed to know to succeed, even to thrive, in a rural environment. If they married, they could base their family economy on a farm or ranch. Especially after 1939 and in an economic climate of fairly continuous development, wives could manage much of the farm work and husbands could work at land clearing, logging, saw milling, rough carpentry, and as construction labour with virtually equal ease. Serving their own needs as well as those of a capitalist society, many such families did and do reasonably well, shrewdly customing a good standard of living out of their land, their wide range of abilities and their mastery of the informal economy.⁴⁸ In roughly analogous situations, other families, less skilled or perhaps less adept at the ways of the world, lived or live sometimes despairing lives just above or even below subsistence.

Whatever their eventual fate, Evelyn youngsters had acquired their substantial fund of practical knowledge and skills in time-honoured ways. As they grew older, they relinquished the simpler duties to younger brothers or

47. Martha Ostenso's, *Wild Geese* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961), first published in 1925, gives us a clear view of the role of children in families where the father's desire for land goes beyond the more customary need to use it to provide for his family and for his old age. As I understand the Evelyn experience, no father there employed the brutalized tyranny the lightly fictional Caleb Gare exerted over his wife and children.

48. In turn, they are part of what H. Craig Davis and Thomas A. Hutton call the ROP (Rest of Province) economy in British Columbia which they separate out from the “metropolitan” one. “The Two Economies of British Columbia”, *BC Studies*, 82 (Summer 1989), pp. 3-15.

sisters whom they had trained, and moved on to the more complex chores that they had in turn learned from older siblings or parents. As Elizabeth Varley put it, "we were like all primitive people and those in frontier places learning almost everything by working with our parents."⁴⁹ After describing how she had helped with the birth of a calf — "I was asked to put my smaller hand in to pull the foot forward and the calf was born instantly" —, one woman expressed amazement "at what six year olds can learn." Such learning could, of course, be dangerous. H.A. (Bud) Cole recalled, for example, that when he was less than five, he all but cut one finger off "while trying to chop kindling."⁵⁰ In this regard, we must note that my informants reported remarkably few youthful injuries. They also explained that, while certainly not fool-proof, farm machines of the era were much simpler and less dangerous than their modern counterparts.

If pioneering in Evelyn was a way of life that employed girls and boys almost interchangeably as workers, it also encouraged both sexes to see themselves as growing into sex roles characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵¹ As one man accurately observed, Evelyn "was a chauvinistic society." In childhood, Evelyn girls and boys, like other children, had their mothers and fathers to model appropriate forms of adulthood and gender role for them. If they looked more widely in the community, they could see the different sorts of life possibilities portrayed by such locally visible occupations as store-keeping, teaching, nursing, medicine, preaching, agriculturalist and some of the railway trades.⁵² In their parents, the youngsters saw the very considerable range of overlapping skills, which each parent possessed, the tremendous contribution which each made to the family enterprise, and what each felt about the experience. In one family, for example, the daughter recalled that "Dad was happy: he was working towards his dream. Mother not so much ... It was a full day's work just to cope with the family's needs."⁵³ They also saw the distribution of power in the family. In some, while each parent exercised it in his or her own sphere of the family's activities, fathers possessed a sometimes residual but nonetheless final overall authority. In others, fathers, even less than really provident ones, exercised an overtly patriarchal domination over their families. One informant, for example, recounted the time when "father would not permit mother to go to Smithers" when she wanted to and unhitched the horse from the wagon when

49. Varley, *Kitimat*, p. 71.

50. Marilyn Wheeler, *The Robson Valley Story*, (n.pl.: McBride Robson Valley Story Group, 1979), p. 199.

51. Adult gender identities in an urban environment over these same years are carefully delineated in Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

52. Ferne Nelson, who grew up on a prairie homestead, vividly describes the "Rawleigh lady" [*sic*] who "had a husband and a houseful of kids at home ... [who] spent her days bumping over rutted roads, making a living. An early independent business woman." *Barefoot on the Prairie*, pp. 27-9.

53. Capling, "A Long Time Ago", p. 141.

she persisted. Fathers held the final authority in matters of discipline and usually administered the still widely-prevalent corporal punishment. Within the framework set by the seasons, they allocated the tasks, and decided whether or not sewing or harvest took precedence over schooling. They judged whether new machinery was more essential to family welfare than new clothes or further schooling. They conducted most of the families' dealings with the outside world, making most of the trips into town. Finally (and discussion of this is beyond the range of a paper about childhood), it was against fathers that many of the youngsters, and especially the boys, came in their adolescence to rebel.

Most pioneering boys and girls, thus, had modelled before them males who, though they were by no means sole "breadwinners" of the sort then becoming common in urban society, were clearly dominant figures in their families. For most boys, there was an easy continuity between their practical education and their developing identities as males of their time and place. As they acquired "male" skills through their chores, boys also learned to value such supposedly male characteristics as bodily strength, stamina, stoicism in the face of pain, an aggressive sense of self, and the vulgarity that permeates all-male environments. Evelyn boys, for example, absorbed some of this last quality as they told dirty stories to each other or conducted urinating contests behind the school privy. After school consolidation, however, Evelyn boys, in the early grades, found that their clothes, haircuts, and lack of experience of such village phenomena as running water subjected them to teasing. In high school, however, "things turned around" and their status in the male hierarchy rose sharply. As one man explained, "farm kids were stronger, could win at arm wrestling and the like ... Later, we could get jobs, we knew how to work hard, we had the skills and could go to work right away."

On the other hand, Evelyn children saw women who, although they worked at least as hard as men, generally played a distinctly secondary role in the management of the family enterprise. For most girls, who possessed virtually the same range of skills as boys, and some of the other "male" characteristics as well, there was some discontinuity between their practical education and experience and their developing identities as females of their time and place. The local cultural ethos valued and reinforced paternalistic patterns that called girls to a sense of nurturing and sustaining womanhood. No matter how severe the weather, they wore girls' clothes to school and usually when they worked outside as well. Their mothers modelled appropriately female roles (they always addressed each other as "Mrs."); their parents and teachers instructed them in sexually appropriate ways of behaving; peers influenced them at school and in the neighbourhood; and books, newspapers, Sunday School papers, magazines and other printed material expounded traditional modes of female behaviour. Many girls employed cut-outs from the venerable Eaton's catalogue to play out a variety of customary adult roles for themselves. A few who were pioneering children told of mothers who regretted where their lives had led them. In these cases,

however, the fault was usually seen as a failure to choose a spouse wisely rather than being rooted in the structure of the traditional family situation itself. Capable as they clearly were, none of the Evelyn girls seem to have aspired to be farmers, rather than farmers' wives. (However, one woman recalled that "when war broke out in '39, I thought what I could do would be to run a farm if necessary.") Those who moved off the farm entered such "women's" occupation as waitressing, nursing or teaching.

By concentrating on the work of children, this paper may suggest a somewhat bleaker picture of pioneering childhood than was actually the case. Although one of the first children in the Evelyn area recalled that "there was no time for childhood", most youngsters found release from their work in family and community activities in the culture of childhood and in school.⁵⁴ Most families read books and newspapers and took an interest in public affairs. They made occasional visits to Smithers to shop and to visit. They celebrated birthdays and Christmas. They came together for church services in the school, and then in the community hall that they had banded together to build. The United Church minister from Smithers, for example, "came to the school house every other Sunday" and some children attended regularly. Most of the women attended meetings of the informal Evelyn Ladies Club. Families gathered for dances at the community hall; one woman remembers "sleeping on top of coats as my parents were dancing." For children, the school Christmas concert, the school closing activities and, especially, community picnics were social high points of the year: "every family in the community went" and, in the words of one man, "boy, it was fun!" One woman recalled, "we had races; sack races, running races, three-legged races; ... we made ice cream [to which] everyone shared in contributing cream, eggs, ice." They finished the day with a pot-luck supper. Especially with those teachers whom they liked, some children found pleasure in the generally informal and relaxed atmosphere of the Evelyn School. While one man felt "school was something you had to do, and worse than working by far", another "looked forward to going to school because it got you out of the boredom of being at home." Evelyn children also got together with other children in the "culture of childhood." They walked to school together, they played together there before school, at recess and over the lunch hour; except at peak times, in the seasonal round, they found time to roam the countryside, to fish and to hunt. They went horse-back riding, sledding, skiing, hiking, and skating. Sometimes, they made pocket money cutting wood for sale, doing the school chores, collecting bottles, trapping, or shooting crows and other creatures on which the province paid a bounty. When she was about ten years old, Elizabeth Varley took complete charge of a flock of chickens and the next year, of ducks. With her profits from the sale of the former, she bought her "most precious possession", a .22 Winchester rifle.⁵⁵ As Evelyn became more established, it also entered

54. *Ibid.*

55. Varley, *Kitimat*, pp. 175-7.

into more organized sports. "When all the chores were done, we played ball; ... once a week, there were community ball games."

There is a bittersweet quality to nearly all recollections of Evelyn. As one woman explained, "our life was hard ... hardest on Mom." Another woman noted, "Mom did real well with very little." A third expressed regret that her mother "died before I showed her any appreciation." But these are judgments in retrospect. At the time, the pioneering children knew that their lives were very similar to that of their peers: "We didn't know any different", as one explained. Like children everywhere, they took life as it came; its dimensions were given. All had moments of acute boredom, of weariness, of despair, of hatred, of anger, of love, of exuberance and of great joy. Only from the context provided by adulthood can they now compare their own experience with that of people who grew up in different families, or in different environments. Indeed, until asked, few seemed to have reflected much on their childhoods, and the interview itself may have prompted some to make their first evaluation of their childhood.⁵⁶ Thus, there was more than just a touch of irony in the voice of the woman who reported that her hard-driving father had told her that "we were among the luckiest... We never have to worry." On the other hand, I could not detect any irony in the voice of the woman who stated that the childhood experience of Evelyn children "was good for us", or the other who explained that "as children we had a good life."

56. Sutherland, "When You Listen to the Winds of Childhood."