

Wealth and Inequality on Ontario's Northwestern Frontier: Evidence from Probate

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This study examines a unique data set of 1,293 estates from probate records of the Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court for the period from 1885 to 1920. The data document a period of sustained growth spanning the years 1885 to 1906, an intense boom over the period from 1907 to 1913, and a post-boom “bust” over the years 1914 to 1920. Real average wealth in 1900 dollars during the boom period (1907–1913) was almost 112 per cent higher than it had been in the previous period and approximately 95 per cent greater than during the post-1913 period. The boom was accompanied by a massive increase in wealth inequality, as the share of the top 10 per cent of wealth-holders rose from 66 to 75 per cent. While the average increases in wealth during the boom were greatest among the top fifth of wealth-holders, this group also sustained the greatest declines in wealth during the post-boom collapse. In addition, the post-boom collapse appears to have harmed women's wealth-holding proportionately more than men's, perhaps because of the greater propensity of women to hold their wealth in the form of mortgages.

Cette étude s'intéresse à un ensemble unique de données portant sur 1 293 successions homologuées par le tribunal successoral de district de Thunder Bay de 1885 à 1920. Les données font état d'une période de croissance soutenue de 1885 à 1906, d'un boom intense de 1907 à 1913 et d'un effondrement écho boom de 1914 à 1920. Durant le boom (1907–1913), la valeur réelle moyenne du patrimoine, mesurée en dollars de 1900, était de près de 112 p. 100 plus élevée qu'au cours de la période précédente et d'environ 95 p. 100 plus forte qu'après 1913. L'écart de richesse s'est profondément creusé durant le boom, la part des 10 p. 100 les plus riches étant passée de 66 à 75 p. 100. Si le patrimoine du cinquième des mieux nantis s'est en moyenne le plus accru durant le boom, il a également diminué le plus durant l'effondrement qui a suivi. De plus, l'effondrement écho boom semble avoir frappé, toutes proportions gardées, plus durement les femmes que les hommes, peut-être

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parce que celles-ci étaient davantage portées à conserver leur patrimoine sous forme d'hypothèques.

IN THE LATE nineteenth century western Canada boomed along with Ontario's westerly frontier region, consisting of the Thunder Bay District and the Districts of Kenora-Rainy River. A substantial literature in Canadian economic history deals with the late-nineteenth-century settlement boom and the impact of the wheat economy on Canadian economic growth and development during the first decade of the twentieth century.¹ Recent empirical work suggests that the wheat boom era saw a shift in the long-term growth rates in income, manufacturing development, and settlement.² As well, literature chronicling the extent of wealth-holding using census, probate, and assessment roll records finds high and persistent levels of inequality in late-nine-

- 1 E. J. Chambers and D. F. Gordon, "Primary Products and Economic Growth: An Empirical Measurement", *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 74 (1966), pp. 315–332; J. H. Dales, J. C. McManus, and M. H. Watkins, "Primary Products and Economic Growth: A Comment", *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 75 (1967), pp. 876–880; R. E. Caves, "Export-led Growth and the New Economic History", in J. N. Bhagwati *et al.*, eds., *Trade, Balance of Payments and Growth* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1971), pp. 403–442, and " 'Vent for Surplus' Models of Trade and Growth", in R. E. Baldwin *et al.*, eds., *Trade, Growth and the Balance of Payments: Essays in Honour of Gotfried Haberler* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); G. W. Bertram, "The Relevance of the Wheat Boom in Canadian Economic Growth", *Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 6 (1973), pp. 545–566; K. H. Norrie, "The Rate of Settlement of the Canadian Prairies", *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 35 (1975), pp. 410–427; W. Marr and M. Percy, "The Government and the Rate of Canadian Prairie Settlement", *Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 11 (1978), pp. 757–767; F. Lewis, "The Canadian Wheat Boom and Per Capita Income: New Estimates", *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 83 (1975), pp. 1249–1257, and "Farm Settlement on the Canadian Prairies, 1898 to 1911", *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 41 (1981), pp. 517–535; C. K. Harley, "Resources and Economic Development in Historical Perspective", in D. Laidler, ed., *Responses to Economic Change: Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada*, vol. 27 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), pp. 1–32.
- 2 M. C. Urquhart, "New Estimates of Gross National Product, Canada 1870–1926: Some Implications for Canadian Development", in S. L. Engerman and R. E. Gallman, *Long Term Factors in American Economic Growth*, vol. 51, NBER Conference on Research in Income and Wealth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 9–94, and *Gross National Product, Canada 1870–1926: The Derivation of the Estimates* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); A. G. Green and M. C. Urquhart, "New Estimates of Output Growth in Canada: Measurement and Interpretation", in D. McCalla, ed., *Perspectives on Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1987), p. 182–199; M. Altman, "A Revision of Canadian Economic Growth, 1870–1910 (A Challenge to the Gradualist Interpretation)", *Canadian Journal of Economics*, vol. 20 (1987), pp. 86–113, and "Revised Real Canadian GNP Estimates and Canadian Economic Growth, 1870–1926", *Review of Income and Wealth*, vol. 38, no. 4 (1992), pp. 455–473; K. Inwood and T. Stengos, "Discontinuities in Canadian Economic Growth, 1870–1985", *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 28 (1991), pp. 274–286, and "Segmented Trend Models of Canadian Economic Growth: Rejoinder", *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1995), pp. 253–261; A. G. Green and G. R. Sparks, "Population Growth and the Dynamics of Canadian Development: A Multivariate Time Series Approach", *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 36 (1999), pp. 56–71.

teenth-century Canada.³ To date, no work has attempted to link the study of wealth inequality directly with the economic boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The impact of the wheat boom era has been studied from an aggregate perspective. The research presented here examines individual welfare using wealth data from estates probated in the Thunder Bay District during the crucial wheat boom period of the Canadian economy. While part of Ontario, the Thunder Bay District was linked to the Prairie wheat economy by the Canadian Pacific transcontinental railway and the trans-shipment function of the Lakehead grain ports.⁴ Moreover, the region was also undergoing a resource boom in forestry and mining, agricultural settlement, and manufacturing development, all contributing to economic diversification. Along with rising wealth during the boom and high and persistent wealth inequality, this study documents the steep decline in wealth that occurred after 1914 and its effects on wealth distribution and composition.

The wealth data considered here are drawn from probate records of the Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court for the period 1885 to 1920. This unique data set consists of 1,293 estates covering the District's initial development and growth, with wealth detailed in a manner not available in any

3 For some Canadian wealth studies using micro-data from probate as well as census and assessment rolls, see G. Paquet and J. P. Wallot, "Les inventaires après décès à Montréal au tournant du XIX^e siècle : préliminaires à une analyse", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1976), pp. 163–221, and "Stratégie foncière de l'habitant : Québec (1790–1835)", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 39 (1986), pp. 551–581; J. P. Hardy, G. Paquet, D. T. Ruddel, and J. P. Wallot, "Material Conditions and Society in Lower Canada, 1792–1835", *Material History Bulletin*, vol. 17 (1983), pp. 1–23; G. Darroch, "Early Industrialization and Inequality in Toronto, 1861–1899", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, vol. 11 (1986), pp. 31–61; F. K. Siddiq, "The Size Distribution of Probate Wealthholdings in Nova Scotia in the Late 19th Century", *Acadiensis*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1988), pp. 136–147; F. K. Siddiq and J. Gwyn, "The Importance of Probate Inventories in Estimating the Distribution of Wealth", *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, vol. 11 (1991), pp. 103–117; L. Di Matteo and P. J. George, "Canadian Wealth Inequality in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Study of Wentworth County, Ontario, 1872–1902", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 4 (1992), pp. 453–483, and "Patterns and Determinants of Wealth Among Probated Decedents in Wentworth County, Ontario, 1872–1902", *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 31, no. 61 (May 1998), pp. 1–33; L. Osberg and F. K. Siddiq, "The Inequality of Wealth in Britain's North American Colonies: The Importance of the Relatively Poor", *Review of Income and Wealth*, vol. 34, no. 2 (1988), pp. 143–163, and "The Acquisition of Wealth in Nova Scotia in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Research in Economic Inequality*, vol. 4 (1993), pp. 181–202; C. Dessureault, "L'égalitarisme paysan dans l'ancienne société rurale de la vallée du Saint-Laurent : éléments pour une réinterprétation", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1987), pp. 373–407, and "Parenté et stratification sociale dans une paroisse rurale de la vallée du Saint-Laurent au milieu du XIX^e siècle", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2001), pp. 410–447; J. Gwyn and F. K. Siddiq, "Wealth Distribution in Nova Scotia during the Confederation Era, 1851 and 1871", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 4 (1992), pp. 435–452; G. Darroch and L. Soltow, *Property and Inequality in Victorian Ontario: Structural Patterns and Cultural Communities in the 1871 Census* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); G. Bouchard, "Economic Inequalities in Saguenay Society, 1879–1949: A Descriptive Analysis", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 79, no. 4 (1998), pp. 660–690.

4 The twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, now Thunder Bay.

other historical source for the time period. Probate records can be used to shed light on material culture, revealing individual holdings as well as trends in portfolio composition, wealth, and inequality. Moreover, the composition of assets can be used to provide evidence on how individuals made use of economic opportunities and their economic strategies.⁵ In the case of the Thunder Bay District, the economic boom resulting from the expansion of grain transport activities led to in-migration that increased real estate values as well as generating opportunities in local manufacturing and services. Over the long term, this increase in wealth would be captured by the probate inventories.

The results suggest that, in terms of trends in wealth accumulation, there were three phases: a pre-boom period of sustained growth spanning the period 1885 to 1906; an intense boom over the period 1907 to 1913; and a “bust” from 1914 to 1920. All things given, real average wealth in 1900 dollars during the period 1907 to 1913 was almost 112 per cent higher than in the previous period and approximately 95 per cent greater than in the post-1913 period. The boom was accompanied by a massive increase in wealth inequality as the share held by the top 10 per cent of the distribution went from 66 to 75 per cent. While average increases in wealth during the boom were greatest in the top fifth of wealth-holders, the post-boom collapse also saw the greatest declines among this group. In addition, the post-boom collapse appears to have harmed women’s wealth-holding proportionately more than men’s.

The Historical Setting

The Canadian wheat boom era is traditionally ascribed to the years from 1896 (when world wheat prices began to rise) to 1914. Canadian quantitative economic historians studying the impact of the wheat boom on Canadian economic development have focused on its effect on per capita income growth and, by extension, the relevance of staple exports in accounting for Canadian economic growth.⁶ One view argues that, while it did raise the rent on land, the contribution of the wheat boom to per capita income growth in Canada was small.⁷ The counter-arguments to this view have centred on revising this estimate upward by moving from a narrow to a broader economic interpretive framework.⁸ Revised gross national produce estimates assembled by M. C. Urquhart show the period 1901 to 1911 indeed to be one of substantial growth.

5 For an example, see Paquet and Wallot, “Stratégie foncière de l’habitant”, pp. 551–581. The results of an examination of inventories *après décès* for Quebec challenge the stereotype of the *habitant* as a conservative peasant oblivious to market signals. The *habitant* was indeed a rational economic agent who chose land as a form of wealth because information and transaction costs hindered the accumulation of financial assets.

6 Growth in output per capita is usually referred to as intensive growth while growth in total output is extensive growth.

7 Chambers and Gordon, “Primary Products and Economic Growth”, pp. 315–332.

8 Caves, “Export-led Growth and the New Economic History”, pp. 403–442; Lewis, “The Canadian Wheat Boom”, pp. 1249–1257. The approach was to add to the analysis such dynamic long-term growth factors as the impact of tariffs and the value of savings and capital brought in by migrants.

Urquhart concludes, “[T]he evidence of our data supports most strongly the presumption that the growth and many of the changes in the Canadian economy were a consequence of the settlement of the Prairies.”⁹

The settlement of the Prairies had a dramatic impact on the economy of northwestern Ontario and the Thunder Bay District in particular.¹⁰ In the early nineteenth century, northern Ontario was viewed as a remote, inhospitable land whose major economic activity was the fur trade. Interest in northern Ontario began to grow in the mid-1840s because of the region's potential mineral wealth, followed by the opening of a canal at the Sault in the 1850s, which improved travel and communications.¹¹ With Confederation, Ontario saw its north and the Canadian west as potential hinterlands, to which the transcontinental railway would provide access. Ontario engaged in boundary disputes with Manitoba and the Dominion government over the jurisdiction of its northwestern region that were finally resolved in Ontario's favour by 1912.¹² Between 1891 and 1911, the previously “barren north” became “New Ontario” and the emphasis was on resource extraction to create industrialization linked to the northern resource base.¹³ Much of the Ontario government's development activity between 1885 and 1914, such as land grants, colonization roads, and railway building, was concentrated in the northeastern part of the province.¹⁴

The 1870s saw a mining boom as well as a growing timber trade. The coming of the transcontinental railway in the 1880s linked the region to the Prairie wheat economy and central Canada. The Thunder Bay District was uniquely juxtaposed between the Prairie wheat economy, for which its major metropolitan centre served as entrepot, and central Canada, as part of Canada's wealthiest province. The Thunder Bay District was directly tied to the Prairie wheat boom through the grain port function of the twin cities of Fort

9 Urquhart, “New Estimates of Gross National Product”, p. 61.

10 Northwestern Ontario is defined as consisting of the Districts of Kenora, Rainy River, and Thunder Bay, though the region can be extended to include all of Ontario west of White River.

11 E. Arthur, *Thunder Bay District, 1821–1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), and “Beyond Superior: Ontario's New-found Land”, in R. Hall *et al.*, eds., *Patterns of the Past: Interpreting Ontario's History* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1988), pp. 130–149.

12 M. Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870–1914* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1971), pp. 151–156.

13 H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines and Hydroelectric Power in Ontario, 1849–1941* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975), p. 51.

14 For further information on northern Ontario's economic history, see L. Di Matteo, “Fiscal Imbalance and Economic Development in Canadian History: Evidence from the Economic History of Ontario”, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1999), pp. 287–327; P. J. George, “Ontario's Mining Industry, 1870–1940”, in I. M. Drummond, ed., *Progress Without Planning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 52–76; P. W. Sinclair, “The North and the North-west: Forestry and Agriculture”, in Drummond, ed., *Progress Without Planning*, pp. 77–90; W. R. Wightman and N. M. Wightman, *The Land Between: Northwestern Ontario Resource Development, 1800 to the 1900s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

William and Port Arthur, known collectively as the “Lakehead”.¹⁵ As well, a substantial portion of the local economy was rooted in manufacturing, resource extraction, and agricultural development.¹⁶

At the Lakehead, grain transport served as a booming sector in the city’s economic development.¹⁷ The increase in demand for labour in this sector raised incomes and stimulated expenditures in the non-grain transportation sector.¹⁸ Because of transport costs associated with the import of goods and the relative isolation of the Lakehead, imports were imperfect substitutes for locally produced goods. Expenditures in the non-grain sector therefore stimulated the development of local manufacturing and service industries and led to greater economic development. The tendency of the booming sector to attract resources from other sectors in the local economy was offset by the migration of labour and capital to the Lakehead. Therefore, while the impact of the wheat boom on the Lakehead was to increase the total size of the economy, migration to the Lakehead meant that the long-run impact on per capita income was small.¹⁹

The District’s population grew rapidly (see Table 1) with the greatest rate of expansion between 1901 and 1911, when the population nearly tripled to approximately 40,000. Most of the population growth during the boom period occurred at the Lakehead, which by 1921 accounted for over 70 per cent of the District’s population. The growth and development of the Lakehead during this period paralleled that of other Canadian cities, particularly in

15 For references on the economic history of the Lakehead, see L. Di Matteo, “The Economic Development of the Lakehead During the Wheat Boom Era: 1900–1914”, *Ontario History*, vol. 83 (1991), pp. 297–316; “Evidence on Lakehead Economic Activity from the Fort William Building Permits Registers, 1907–1969”, *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records*, vol. 20 (1992), pp. 37–49; and “Booming Sector Models, Economic Base Analysis and Export-led Economic Development: Regional Evidence from the Lakehead”, *Social Science History*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1993), pp. 593–617.

16 The wheat economy made a substantial contribution to the regional economy. It has been estimated that gross regional product in the absence of the wheat boom at the Lakehead would have been 42% smaller (see Di Matteo, “Booming Sector Models”, p. 611). In addition, there was agriculture: by 1921 there were 24 rural townships surrounding the Lakehead accounting for 1,534 farms and supporting a rural population of 7,397 (Census of Canada, 1921). Forestry also employed thousands in the surrounding region, at sawmills and at the three pulp mills either operating or under construction by 1921.

17 A booming sector is an expanding export sector. Booming sector models were formulated to assess the impact of booming or lagging export sectors on the economy, such as North Sea Oil in the 1970s. For further reading, see W. M. Corden, “The Economic Effects of a Booming Sector”, *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 35 (1983), pp. 441–454; W. M. Corden and J. P. Neary, “Booming Sector and De-industrialization in a Small Open Economy”, *Economic Journal*, vol. 92 (1982), pp. 825–848; F. J. Anderson, *Regional Economic Analysis: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988). For an application to the Lakehead, see Di Matteo, “Booming Sector Models”.

18 An example of the importance of transportation at the Lakehead is provided in the 1921 Census of Canada. Fort William’s occupational distribution in 1921 shows that approximately 33% of employment was in transportation compared to 8% for Canada as a whole.

19 Di Matteo, “Booming Sector Models”.

Table 1 Thunder Bay District Population

Year	Thunder Bay District	% change	The Lakehead	% change
1871	1,480	—	503	—
1881	4,056	174	1,965	291
1891	8,006	97	4,874	148
1901	11,219	40	6,847	40
1911	39,496	252	27,719	305
1921	49,560	25	35,427	28

Source: *Census of Canada*, 1941, vol. 1, p. 565.

Table 2 Comparing The Lakehead's Population to Other Centres

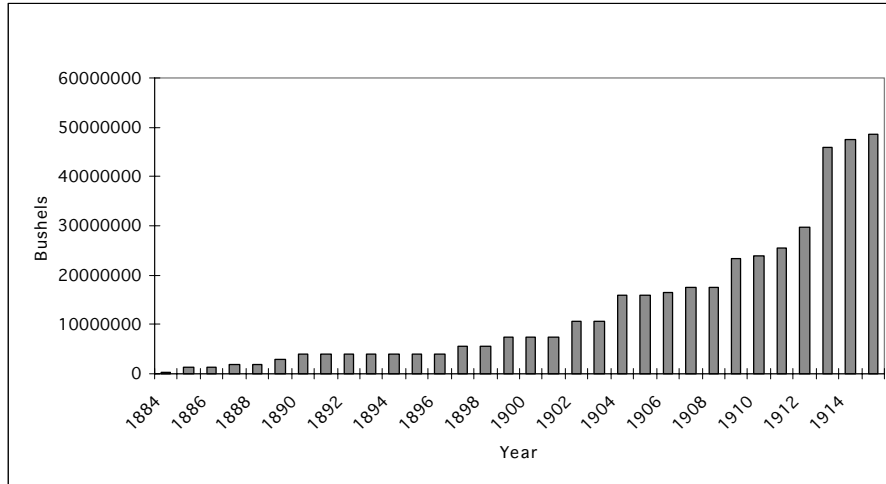
City	Population		% Change
	1901	1911	
Calgary	4,392	43,704	895
Edmonton	2,626	24,900	848
Regina	2,249	30,213	1243
Saskatoon	113	12,004	10523
Brandon	5,620	13,839	146
Winnipeg	42,340	136,035	221
The Lakehead	6,847	27,719	305
Toronto	208,040	376,538	81
Hamilton	52,634	81,969	56

Source: *Census of Canada*, 1911, vol. 3, pp. 350–354.

western Canada (see Table 2). The Lakehead's population growth rate between 1901 and 1911 was greater than that of Toronto or Hamilton and the Manitoba cities of Brandon and Winnipeg, but slower than cities in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

Figure 1 shows the growth of grain elevator storage capacity at the Lakehead from 1884 to 1915, which was a direct consequence of the expanding wheat economy. From approximately 350,000 bushels of grain storage in 1884, capacity grew to 48.6 million bushels by 1915. Approximately 85 per cent of grain storage capacity was constructed after 1900, suggesting that the wheat boom was indeed most prominent in the first decade of the twentieth century. While some of the capacity constructed may have been in anticipation of future transport needs, the construction would nevertheless have affected contemporary economic activity at the Lakehead and, potentially, income and wealth.

The economic boom at the Lakehead came to a halt with the onset of the First World War. Rising interest rates in 1913 tightened farm credit and

Figure 1 Grain storage capacity at the Lakehead: 1884–1915

Source: The History of Grain Elevators in Thunder Bay, Project Booklet No. 42 (1977), Brodie Resource Library, Thunder Bay.

stopped the expansion of the wheat boom. This slowdown was followed by the disruption of the war and a reduction in the flow of immigrants to the west. The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 may have also redirected some of the flow of wheat and commerce away from the Lakehead and to the west coast.²⁰ The value of building permits in Fort William rose steadily from 1907 and peaked in 1912 at just over \$4 million, then fell dramatically for the next four years to reach \$600,000 by 1916. At least a dozen major employers shut down between 1914 and 1922, and the size of the labour force declined. Recovery did not begin until the construction of the first pulp mill in 1917.²¹

The Data

Prior to the creation of the District of Thunder Bay in 1885, estates from the region were probated in the District of Algoma. Under the *Surrogate Courts Act* of 1858, a surrogate court with the power to issue grants of probate and administration valid throughout the province was established in each Ontario

20 K. Norrie and D. O'ram, *A History of the Canadian Economy*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996), pp. 298, 331.

21 J. Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead", in T. Tronrud and A. E. Epp, eds., *Thunder Bay: From Rivalry to Unity* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1995), pp. 44–45; Di Matteo, "Evidence on Lakehead Economic Activity". Growth at the Lakehead was also fuelled by bonuses offered to industry. See T. Tronrud, "Buying Prosperity: The Bonusing of Factories at the Lakehead, 1885–1914", *Urban History Review*, vol. 19 (1990), pp. 1–13.

county, replacing the centralized Court of Probate established in 1793.²² One applied for probate in the county or district where most of one's property was located. Non-residents would need to apply for probate in the district or county in which that property was situated. Probate was an institutional process that transferred property from the dead to the living and served to grant administration over the estate of the deceased as well as to authenticate the will and provide evidence on the character of the executor.²³ In intestate cases (decedents without a will), the application to the court for administration was made by an interested party (usually the widow or next of kin but sometimes a creditor), and once this had been granted, distribution of the estate was made according to law.

Of key importance was the inventory and valuation of property. The inventory was conducted by the estate's executor (administrator in intestate cases) and was legally needed only in response to a request by a legatee or creditor, but in practice the executor provided it voluntarily without awaiting the compulsory summons.²⁴ The inventory provided estimates of wealth grouped into 16 categories.²⁵ A major advantage of this data source is the separate esti-

22 *Surrogate Courts Act, Statutes of Canada*, 22 Vict., Cap. 93, 1858.

23 A. Howell, *The Law and Practice as to Probate, Administration, and Guardianship in Surrogate Courts* (Toronto: Carswell, 1880), p. 155.

24 According to Howell, *The Law and Practice*, pp. 325–326: “The inventory should contain a statement of all the goods, chattels, wares and merchandize, as well moveable as not moveable, which were of the person deceased at the time of his death within the jurisdiction of the court. A proper inventory should enumerate every item of which the personal estate consisted, and should specify the value of each particular. But unless by order of court, or in obedience to a citation, an inventory does not set forth the goods and chattels in detail.” The instructions for probate do not specify how the value of an asset was assigned. In the case of real estate, livestock, and personal property, the evidence suggests that market value determined value. Sometimes property was sold and its selling price recorded in the inventory, whereas more often it was an estimate of what the property would fetch if sold. Fortunately, financial assets by their nature were precisely recorded. Mortgages held, the amount of insurance payments, and bank account balances were usually fairly precise amounts. In addition, real estate was usually recorded net of any mortgages outstanding so that the wealth figure used here is a measure of net wealth.

25 The inventory categories were: (1) Household goods and furniture; (2) Farm implements; (3) Stock in trade; (4) Horses; (5) Cattle; (6) Sheep and swine; (7) Book debts and promissory notes; (8) Moneys secured by mortgage; (9) Life insurance; (10) Bank stocks and other shares; (11) Securities; (12) Cash on hand; (13) Cash in bank; (14) Farm produce; (15) Real estate; (16) Other personal property. For a more detailed discussion of probate, see L. Di Matteo, “The Determinants of Wealth and Asset Holding in 19th-century Canada: Evidence from Microdata”, *Journal of Economic History*, vol. 57, no. 4 (1997), pp. 907–934, and “Wealth Accumulation and the Life-cycle in Economic History: Implications of Alternative Approaches to Data”, *Explorations in Economic History*, vol. 35 (1998), pp. 296–324. For a general evaluation of probate as a source, see B. S. Osborne, “Wills and Inventories: Records of Life and Death in a Developing Society”, *Families*, vol. 19 (1980), pp. 235–247; P. Wagg, “The Bias of Probate: Using Deeds to Transfer Estates in Nineteenth Century Nova Scotia”, *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, vol. 10 (1990), pp. 74–87; B. S. Elliot, “Sources of Bias in Nineteenth-century Ontario Wills”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 18, no. 35 (May 1984), pp. 125–132. For recent Canadian studies that have made use of probate records, see P. Baskerville, “Women and Investment in Late-nineteenth-century Urban Canada: Victoria and Hamilton, 1880–1901”, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 2 (1999), pp. 191–218; K. Inwood and S. Ingram, “The Impact of Married Women's Property Legislation in Victorian Ontario”, *Dalhousie Law Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2000), pp. 405–449.

mates of real estate, financial assets, and personal property over a substantial length of time. Given the tendency of economic booms to attract migration, to raise the demand for property, and to increase real estate values, the probate records with their estimates of real estate holdings are a particularly good indicator of the economic impact of booms.

A potential disadvantage is that the value of an individual's estate at death reflects the accumulation of wealth over a lifetime rather than at a particular point. At the same time, the estate is valued at a point in time and will reflect current as well as past economic fluctuations. Other limitations of probate records should also be acknowledged. First, probated decedents were generally wealthier and of higher socio-economic status than the general population. Not everyone who died had his or her estate probated.²⁶ Secondly, the wealth data may be affected by whether the probated decedents died unexpectedly or had been ill for a long time and therefore had run down their assets.²⁷ Thirdly, the presence of estate taxes may provide incentives for estate administrators to underestimate inventoried wealth. The wealth data obtained from nineteenth-century Ontario probate records do not suffer from such a bias because, even after the *Succession Duty Act* came into effect in 1892, it allowed for numerous exemptions and hence provided no reason to underestimate the value of the estate for almost all decedents.²⁸

A final concern is the occurrence of *inter vivos* transfers, under which an unknown portion of wealth may have been transferred during life and may be unaccounted for by the probate records. Generally, the property liable to duty was quite comprehensive. After 1896 it even included property vested jointly with interest to a survivor. The *Succession Duty Act* applied even to property "voluntarily transferred by deed, grant or gift made in contemplation of the death of the grantor or bargainer, or made or intended to take effect, in possession or enjoyment after such death" if such arrangements had been made in the 12 months preceding death.²⁹ Moreover, after 1896, *donatio mortis*

26 In Wentworth County, Ontario, the proportion of adult deaths with estates probated rose from 23% to 36% between 1872 and 1892. See L. Di Matteo, "Wealth Holding in Wentworth County: 1872–1892" (PhD thesis, McMaster University, 1990), p. 46. Evidence on deaths from the 1901 Census of Canada compared with the number of probated estates for 1900–1901 suggests that about 31% of estates in the Thunder Bay District were probated.

27 Information on cause of death was not available in the probate records.

28 *Succession Duty Act, Statutes of Ontario*, 55 Vict., Cap. 6, 1892. The *Succession Duty Act* did not apply: "(1) To any estate the value of which, after payment of all debts and expenses of administration, does not exceed \$10,000; nor (2) To property given devised or bequeathed for religious, charitable or educational purposes; nor (3) To property passing under a will, intestacy or otherwise, to or for the use of the father, mother, husband, wife, child, grandchild, daughter-in-law, or son-in-law of the deceased, where the aggregate value of the property does not exceed \$100,000 in value." Revisions to the act in 1897 (*Revised Statutes of Ontario*, 1897, Cap. 24) kept the \$100,000 exemption, but this was later reduced to \$50,000 in 1907 (5 Edw. VII, c.6, s.6).

29 A report on the *Succession Duty Act* in the *Welland Tribune* (April 1, 1892, p. 2) asserted: "The act provides for evasion by transfers before death, although the fear of revival makes such attempts very rare." More to the point, for the purposes of studying wealth, is that making an *inter vivos* bequest is

causa, that is, goods and possessions delivered in apprehension of death, were also clearly defined as property liable to duty. More importantly, such transfers are considered a problem if estate taxes present an obstacle to inter-generational transmission of wealth, but the evidence for Ontario suggests that estate taxes were not an obstacle given the generous exemptions.

All estates probated during the years 1885 to 1920 were examined. A total of 1,293 individuals, as well as data on their place of residence, occupation, marital status, number of children, date of death, whether they had wills, and the value of the estates were recorded. For the purpose of analysis, all of the estates were converted into "real wealth" using a general price index with the year 1900 as the base year.³⁰ This was done so that wealth could be compared across different years.

Unfortunately, age at death was a variable not available in the probate records.³¹ However, census evidence suggests that the population of the Thunder Bay District was relatively young compared to that of Ontario as a whole. For example, the 1921 Census of Canada shows that 51.5 per cent of the Lakehead's population was aged 24 years or younger, compared with 47 per cent of Ontario's population. The proportions of the Lakehead's population aged 25 to 44 and 45 to 64 were 35 per cent and 11.3 per cent respectively, while for Ontario these groups comprised 29.6 and 17.4 per cent of the population. As well, census-linked evidence from probate records for all of Ontario in 1892 and 1902 shows that the average age of decedents with probated estates in the northern districts was 54.1 years, while the average for those in the remainder of Ontario was 61.7 years. Again, this result is not surprising given that the north was an area of recent migration compared with the older settled areas of the province.

Some selected overall statistics are presented in Table 3 and are also broken down into three time periods for the purpose of analysis.³² Average real wealth for the period 1885 to 1920 in 1900 dollars was approximately \$6,048. Real estate made up the single largest category at an average value of \$2,804 and accounted for approximately 46 per cent of average real wealth. Financial asset value (cash in bank, cash, securities, stocks, life insurance, moneys by mortgage, and book debts) averaged \$2,783, also making up

in principle really no different than choosing to consume one's wealth in some other way before death. It becomes a more serious issue only if one is using the data to study bequest patterns rather than terminal wealth levels.

30 Real wealth means the wealth has been adjusted for inflation. This was done using the Altman Index, Series A (see Altman, "Revised Real Canadian GNP Estimates"), which modifies the index constructed by Urquhart, *Gross National Product*.

31 Data on age could be acquired by linking with census data, but the potential success is limited as only three census years (1881, 1891, and 1901) are available to the public for the time span in this data set.

32 These three periods were selected after exploring the data using a non-parametric smoothing technique known as LOWESS — locally weighted scatterplot smoothing. There was a period of steady growth in wealth from 1885 to 1906, a steep increase from 1906 to 1913, and then a sharp decline.

Table 3 Selected Statistics on Probated Estates by Time Period, Thunder Bay District, 1885–1920 (Wealth Figures in 1900 \$)

Variable	1885–1906	1907–1913	1914–1920	1885–1920
Number of estates	300	393	600	1,293
Average total wealth (\$)	4,391	9,287	4,755	6,048
Average real estate (\$)	1,825	4,553	2,149	2,804
Average financial assets (\$)	1,992	4,185	2,260	2,783
% from Lakehead area	73.7	82.7	82.8	80.7
% male decedents	84.7	81.9	77.3	80.4
% testate	36.7	37.4	53.0	44.5
% married	50.3	52.4	56.3	53.8
% widowed	6.0	7.9	7.8	7.4
% widower	8.3	7.9	7.2	7.7
% single	35.0	31.8	28.5	31.0
Average no. of children	1.4	1.7	1.5	1.5

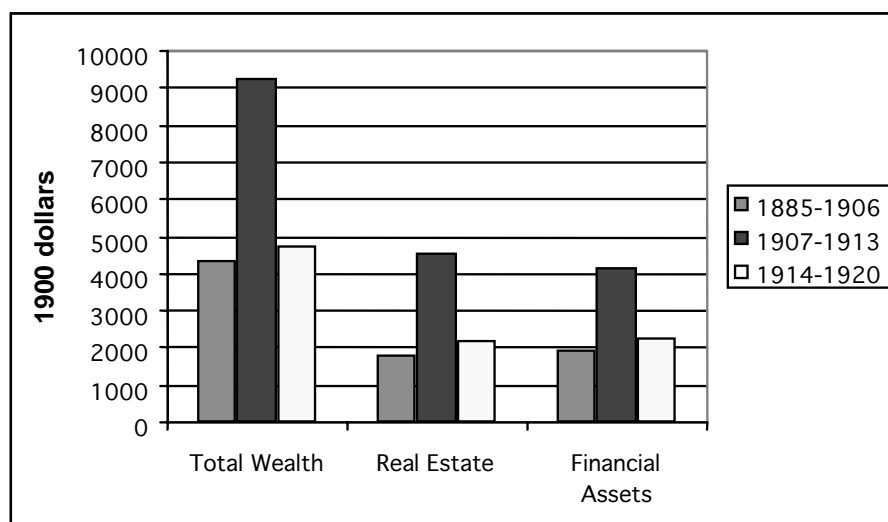
Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

about 46 per cent of real wealth. Average real wealth rose dramatically in 1907–1913 compared to 1885–1906 (see also Figure 2), only to collapse over the period 1914–1920. Average real wealth rose 112 per cent from 1885–1906 to 1907–1913 and then declined 49 per cent from 1907–1913 to 1914–1920. This decline affected both real estate and financial assets.

The average percentage of estates probated from the Lakehead area rose over time. In the Thunder Bay District data, approximately 72 per cent of the decedents were from the twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William. Another 9 per cent were from the rural townships surrounding the Lakehead, extending south to the American border and along the north shore of Thunder Bay to the Sibley peninsula. Another 8 per cent were from the remainder of the District of Thunder Bay. Of the rest, approximately 5 per cent were residents of the rest of Canada, 4 per cent residents of the United States, and 1 per cent residents of Great Britain. Residents of the Thunder Bay District thus make up approximately 89 per cent of the data set.

Data on birthplace or ethnic origin were not directly available from the probate records, though general observation of the records finds that an overwhelming majority of names probated were of British origin with a smattering of Croatian, Ukrainian or Russian, Italian, and Finnish names. This, of course, supports census evidence for the region, indicating that the dominant ethnic group was of British origin — English, Irish, and Scottish. According to the 1911 census, the composition of the Lakehead's population by ethnic origin was 60 per cent British, 6 per cent French, 8 per cent Russian, 9 per cent Austro-Hungarian, 5 per cent Italian, 3 per cent Scandinavian, 6 per cent other European, and 3 per cent Asian and other.

The average percentage of property held by men declined over the three

Figure 2 Average Real Wealth by Period and Asset Category

time periods from 85 to 77 per cent, a trend that indicates an increase in women's ownership of property.³³ Changes in the structure of property laws during the late nineteenth century that enabled more women to own property were beginning to have some effect. Baskerville notes the greater economic role of women as an often-overlooked nineteenth-century trend: "On their own account, women were becoming significant actors in various economic and financial sectors."³⁴ As well, the proportion of probated decedents who were testate, that is, who had a will, rose from just over one-third in the period 1885–1906 to over one-half by 1914–1920. As the tendency to be testate rises with age, this suggests that the population was getting older and the region more "settled" as time went by. This result is also confirmed by an increase over time in the proportion of decedents who were married and a decline in the proportion who were single.

Analysis

Any complete analysis of wealth inequality requires that the data be studied from vantage points afforded by various categories. Of particular interest is wealth and its distribution by occupational group and place of residence. In

33 For other treatments of women's property holding in the nineteenth century, see Inwood and Ingram, "The Impact of Married Women's Property Legislation"; Baskerville, "Women and Investment"; L. Chambers, *Married Women and the Law of Property in Victorian Ontario* (Toronto: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, University of Toronto Press, 1997).

34 Baskerville, "Women and Investment", p. 191.

addition, it is useful to examine the distribution of wealth and change during the boom period by ranking estates by size and then looking at wealth levels and shares by decile. The analysis also includes an examination of the wealth of the wealthiest members of this data set.

The results confirm that the rich were truly different from everyone else, not only in terms of the sheer amount of their wealth but also in the manner in which it was held. As well, wealth by gender is an important topic given the growth in the amount of property held by women in the wake of property laws pertaining to married women enacted in the nineteenth century. The *Married Women's Real Estate Act* (1873)³⁵ allowed married women to dispose of real estate as if *feme sole*.³⁶ The *Married Woman's Property Act* (1884) enabled a married woman to dispose of by will any real or personal property as her separate property in the same manner as if *feme sole*.³⁷ These changes are reflected in the growing incidence of estates held by women in probate records.

Table 4 presents data for the entire period 1885 to 1920 according to occupational structure to show an analysis of the relationship between occupation and wealth. The occupational distribution of the decedents over the period 1885 to 1920 reflects the economic structure of the region, with its emphasis on transportation and resource extraction.³⁸ Approximately 10 per cent of decedents reported agriculture as their occupation, whereas nearly 13 per cent were in transportation (usually railway or grain elevator employees) and 12 per cent were reported as general labourers. Another 10 per cent reported occupations in trade and merchandising, about 4 per cent were employed in manufacturing, and 5.5 per cent were in building trades. About 6.5 per cent reported being retired, gentlemen, or esquires. The “no occupations” category, which contains 22 per cent of the decedents, is composed mainly of women, who usually did not report an occupation.

The highest average real wealth was for the occupational category of Gentlemen, Retired and Esquire at \$22,867, followed by Trade and Merchandising at \$14,586 and professionals at \$9,379. Lowest average real wealth was for General Labourers at \$754, the next higher category being Unclassifiable at \$1,987, then Agriculture at \$2,368. In terms of the share of total wealth owned, Trade and Merchandising and Gentlemen, Retired and Esquire together had the largest share of wealth — a share that was greatly out of proportion to the number of decedents in these categories. For example, the Trade and Merchandising occupational category accounted for 9.6 per cent of decedents but 23.1 per cent of wealth. Meanwhile, the Gentlemen, Retired and Esquire category accounted for 6.5 per cent of decedents and 24.6 per

35 *Married Women's Real Estate Act, Statutes of Ontario*, 36 Vict., Cap. 18, 1873.

36 That is, as if an unmarried woman.

37 *Married Women's Property Act, Revised Statutes of Ontario*, Cap. 132, 1887.

38 Occupational classification is based on the 1891 and 1911 Census occupation classification. Manufacturing consists of manufactures and mechanical industries.

Table 4 Average Real Wealth by Occupational Group, 1885–1920 (1900 \$)

Occupational category ¹	% of decedents	Total wealth (\$)	Real estate (\$)	Financial assets (\$)	% share of real wealth
Agriculture	9.7	2,368	1,445	614	3.8
Building trades	5.5	5,570	2,515	2,676	5.1
Domestic & personal service	3.4	5,232	2,978	1,756	2.9
Civil & municipal government	5.6	4,226	2,382	1,542	3.9
Fishing & hunting	0.7	5,755	1,959	3,421	0.7
Forestry	0.8	4,475	1,412	2,930	0.6
Manufacturing	4.0	3,394	1,989	966	2.3
Mining	1.5	5,446	2,796	2,574	1.4
Professional	4.7	9,379	2,388	6,640	7.3
Trade & merchandising	9.6	14,586	6,144	6,129	23.1
Transport & communications	12.5	3,354	1,267	1,855	6.9
General labourer	12.0	754	379	288	1.5
Gentlemen, retired & esquire	6.5	22,867	11,566	10,923	24.6
Unclassifiable	1.3	1,987	1,448	454	0.4
No occupation	22.0	4,244	2,111	1,907	15.5

¹ Occupational classification based on 1891 and 1911 census occupational classification. Manufacturing consists of manufactures and mechanical industries.

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

cent of the wealth. On the other hand, General Labours and individuals employed in the Transport and Communications category, who together account for 24.5 per cent of decedents, only owned 8.4 per cent of the wealth. The distribution of wealth across these occupational categories begins to illustrate the concentrations of wealth existing during this period.

Tables 5 and 6 show the distribution of wealth according to place of residence. Table 5 reveals that average real wealth was highest for residents of Port Arthur at \$8,620, followed by residents of the United States (\$7,272), the United Kingdom (\$5,573), and then Fort William (\$5,419). Real average wealth was lowest for residents of the Other Location category at \$521; the Rural Lakehead Area was next up the scale (\$1,675) and then the remainder of the Thunder Bay District outside the Lakehead.³⁹ In terms of the share of wealth, over half of the wealth probated during this period was held by decedents from Port Arthur, followed by those from Fort William with the next largest share. The Lakehead region in its entirety accounted for about 81 per cent of decedents and 86 per cent of the real wealth probated. The decedents of the remainder of the Thunder Bay District only accounted for 3 per cent of the wealth.

Another interesting comparison is between the rival twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William, presented in Table 6. While both had similar economic activities rooted in resource processing and transportation, the data show that Port Arthur was by far the more prosperous centre. Even more remarkable is that Fort William was actually the larger city in terms of population.⁴⁰ While both cities had approximately the same share of decedents in the data set, those in Port Arthur held 51.5 per cent of the wealth, whereas Fort William only accounted for 31.9 per cent. Differences in some characteristics of the two cities could account for greater wealth in Port Arthur. Throughout the time period under consideration, the proportion of decedents with professional occupations was greater in Port Arthur than in Fort William, whereas the proportion who were general labourers or employed in transportation and communication was always greater in Fort William.

The figures for real average wealth show that, although both cities experienced a boom in wealth during the period 1907–1913, Port Arthur's boom was always greater. Real average wealth in Port Arthur increased by 154 per cent in the period 1907–1913 over that of 1885–1906, whereas for Fort William the increase was only 102 per cent. Port Arthur's greater wealth was

39 The rural Lakehead townships were defined as Conmee, Forbes, Oliver, Gorham and Ware, MacGregor, Stirling, Dorion, Lyon, McTavish, McIntyre, Marks, O'Connor, Strange, Lybster, Gillies, Pardee, Pearson, Scoble, Crooks, Blake, Paipoonge, Neebing, Kaministiquia, and Shuniah.

40 Indeed, by 1921 Fort William was the larger of the two cities with a population of 20,541 compared to Port Arthur's 14,866. In 1881 the population of Port Arthur was greater than that of Fort William, at 1,275 versus 660. Fort William's population lead had developed by 1901, when it had 3,997 people to Port Arthur's 3,214, and solidified by 1911 with 16,449 to Port Arthur's 11,220.

Table 5 Average Real Wealth by Place of Residence, 1885–1920 (1900 \$)

Location category	% of decedents	Total wealth (\$)	Real estate (\$)	Financial assets (\$)	% share of real wealth
Port Arthur	36.1	8,620	4,110	3,780	51.48
Fort William	35.6	5,419	2,463	2,592	31.88
Rural Lakehead area ¹	9.0	1,675	908	404	2.48
Remainder of Thunder Bay District	8.1	2,250	544	1,465	3.02
Canada	5.3	5,370	3,005	2,177	4.67
USA	4.4	7,272	2,937	4,219	5.30
UK	1.2	5,573	2,434	3,133	1.14
Other	0.3	521	213	307	0.03

¹ The rural Lakehead townships were defined as Conmee, Forbes, Oliver, Gorham and Ware, MacGregor, Stirling, Dorion, Lyon, McTavish, McIntyre, Marks, O'Connor, Strange, Lybster, Gillies, Pardee, Pearson, Scoble, Crooks, Blake, Paipoonge, Neebing, Kaministiquia, and Shuniah.

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

Table 6 Comparing Port Arthur and Fort William, 1885–1920 (Wealth Figures in 1900 \$)

Variable	Port Arthur			Fort William		
	1885–1906	1907–1913	1914–1920	1885–1906	1907–1913	1914–1920
Wealth (\$)	5,069	12,866	7,162	3,956	7,992	4,513
Real estate (\$)	2,465	6,448	3,129	1,688	3,447	2,198
Financial assets (\$)	1,687	5,415	3,662	1,924	4,271	1,893
% male decedents	80.9	80.1	69.1	84.3	80.6	77.6
% in professional occupations	8.7	5.6	5.2	3.4	3.7	3.0
% in trade and merchandising	13.9	11.2	6.3	15.7	7.5	8.9
% retired, gentleman or esquire	5.2	7.5	4.7	3.4	7.5	5.1
% general labourers	10.4	14.9	13.1	12.4	20.1	14.8
% in transport and communications	7.0	13.7	6.8	21.3	17.9	11.8

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

Table 7 Real Average Wealth by Time Period and Decile (1900 \$)

Decile	1885–1906	1907–1913	1914–1920	1885–1920
1st	29,292	70,196	35,118	44,997
2nd	5,758	10,112	4,563	6,157
3rd	3,175	4,698	2,736	3,375
4th	1,940	3,155	2,703	2,163
5th	1,258	2,049	1,211	1,454
6th	959	1,383	848	973
7th	710	884	575	695
8th	458	597	357	446
9th	262	367	215	258
10th	97	130	91	96
All	4,391	9,287	4,755	6,048
N	300	393	600	1,293

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

Table 8 Real Wealth by Decile, 1885–1920 (1900 \$)

Decile	Average (\$)	Median (\$)	Share (%)
1st	44,997	20,672	74.23
2nd	6,157	5,888	10.16
3rd	3,375	3,389	5.57
4th	2,163	2,143	3.57
5th	1,454	1,453	2.40
6th	973	979	1.61
7th	695	698	1.15
8th	446	443	0.74
9th	258	259	0.43
10th	96	101	0.16

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

evident also across the separate categories of real estate and financial assets. When the “bust” came during 1914–1920, both cities experienced a decline in real average wealth of approximately 44 per cent compared to the previous period. However, the real estate collapse was more dramatic in Port Arthur.

Table 7 ranks the estates by real wealth from highest to lowest for the overall time period 1885 to 1920 as well as for 1885–1906, 1907–1913, and 1914–1920 and then shows average real wealth by decile. Tables 8, 9, 10, and 11 present the data by decile and by time period, but also include median wealth as well as the share of wealth accounted for by each decile. For the time period as a whole, the average real wealth of the top 10 per cent of the

Table 9 Real Wealth By Decile, 1885–1906 (1900 \$)

Decile	Average (\$)	Median (\$)	Share (%)
1st	29,292	20,085	66.71
2nd	5,758	5,376	13.11
3rd	3,175	3,188	7.23
4th	1,940	1,856	4.42
5th	1,258	1,265	2.86
6th	959	962	2.18
7th	710	726	1.62
8th	458	468	1.04
9th	262	250	0.60
10th	97	103	0.22

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1906.

Table 10 Real Wealth by Decile, 1907–1913 (1900 \$)

Decile	Average (\$)	Median (\$)	Share (%)
1st	70,196	30,416	75.01
2nd	10,112	9,435	10.81
3rd	4,698	4,373	5.02
4th	3,155	3,207	3.37
5th	2,049	2,069	2.19
6th	1,383	1,371	1.48
7th	884	862	0.95
8th	597	610	0.64
9th	367	388	0.39
10th	130	131	0.15

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1907–1913.

Table 11 Real Wealth by Decile, 1914–1920 (1900 \$)

Decile	Average (\$)	Median (\$)	Share (%)
1st	35,118	13,700	73.86
2nd	4,563	4,210	9.60
3rd	2,736	2,747	5.75
4th	1,835	1,843	3.86
5th	1,211	1,183	2.55
6th	848	838	1.78
7th	575	578	1.21
8th	357	351	0.75
9th	215	213	0.45
10th	91	94	0.19

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1914–1920.

estates was \$44,997, or 469 times the average real wealth of the bottom 10 per cent of the distribution. Median wealth of the top 10 per cent was \$20,672, which was 205 times the median wealth of the bottom 10 per cent. The wealthiest 10 per cent of the estates over the entire period of 1885 to 1920 accounted for 74.2 per cent of the wealth.

When the data are examined by time period, the evidence suggests that, when it comes to wealth, a rising tide lifts all boats, but the lift is greater for those more advantaged. However, when the tide goes out, the percentage fall is also greater for those who had previously benefited most. From the period 1885–1906 to that of 1914–1920, average real wealth rose nearly 20 per cent for the first decile but declined by 3.7 per cent for the fifth decile and 6.2 per cent for the bottom decile. Only the first and fourth deciles saw an increase in average real wealth from the first period to the third, while the others all experienced declines. When the data are examined for the separate time periods, the differential effect is even more pronounced. For example, average real wealth rose 140 per cent from 1885–1906 to 1907–1913 for the first decile compared to 63 per cent for the fifth decile and 34 per cent for the bottom decile. However, average real wealth declined by 50 per cent from 1907–1913 to 1914–1920 for the first decile compared to 41 per cent for the fifth decile and 30 per cent for the bottom decile.

The distribution of wealth definitely became more unequal over time, though the period after 1914 saw a slight reversal of this trend. During the period 1885–1906, the top 10 per cent of wealth-holders owned approximately 67 per cent of the real wealth. The share of the top 10 per cent increased to 75 per cent during 1907–1913 and then declined slightly to 74 per cent for 1914–1920. The share of the second decile declined continuously over the three time periods, from a share of 13 per cent during 1885–1906, to 11 per cent during 1907–1913, to 10 per cent for 1914–1920. The share of the bottom five deciles fell from approximately 6 per cent during the first period to reach 4 per cent by 1914–1920. Overall, these results suggest that this period of economic boom and bust in the Thunder Bay District was accompanied by a concentration of wealth in the top 10 per cent of the wealth-holders.

In Table 12, selected wealth statistics are presented by gender. Over the entire period 1885 to 1920, male decedents had approximately 66 per cent greater average real wealth than female decedents. The gap between wealth held by men and women fluctuated over time, growing most during the bust period of 1914–1920. Growth during the boom was more pronounced for men, but the decline in wealth after 1914 was more pronounced for women. From the period 1885–1906 to that of 1914–1920, men's average real wealth rose by 26 per cent whereas for women it fell by 53 per cent. The collapse in women's property holding was particularly pronounced when it came to financial assets and may be related to the greater propensity of women to hold their financial assets as moneys secured by mortgage.

Very often, surviving widows had their share of their deceased spouse's

Table 12 Selected Wealth Statistics by Gender (1900 \$)

	1885–1906	1907–1913	1914–1920	1885–1920
<i>Average real wealth (\$)</i>				
Males	4,427	9,665	5,572	6,560
Females	4,192	7,572	1,965	3,944
<i>Real average real estate (\$)</i>				
Males	1,739	4,923	2,468	3,050
Females	2,299	2,873	1,061	1,795
<i>Average real financial assets (\$)</i>				
Males	2,067	4,138	2,707	2,994
Females	1,573	4,397	735	1,915
<i>Real average real estate to average real wealth (%)</i>				
Males	39.3	50.9	44.3	46.5
Females	54.8	37.9	54.0	45.5
<i>Real average financial assets to average real wealth (%)</i>				
Males	46.7	42.8	48.6	45.6
Females	37.5	58.1	37.4	48.6
<i>Average value of moneys secured by mortgage (\$)</i>				
Males	460	1,741	1,166	1,172
Females	277	2,730	233	942

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

estate invested in mortgages as a directive of the will.⁴¹ What this did in essence was to link their financial assets directly to the real estate market. As a result, women in this data set had a proportionately larger share of their wealth invested in real estate when one factors in both direct real estate ownership and indirect ownership through mortgages. For example, during the boom period from 1907 to 1913, the ratio of average real estate to average wealth for men was 50.9 per cent whereas for women it was 37.9 per cent. However, when the average value of moneys secured by mortgage is treated as a real estate investment, the comparable figures become 69 per cent for men and 74 per cent for women.

41 Indeed, Baskerville argues that married women were beginning to dominate the Victoria land market and widows the Hamilton land market in the late nineteenth century. He writes that “land markets in both cities were becoming, albeit in slightly different ways, increasingly feminized during the later years of the nineteenth century” (“Women and Investment”, p. 198).

Table 13 Top Ten Estates Probated in Thunder Bay District Adjusted for Inflation

Name	Sex	Occupation	Location	Year probated	Real wealth (1900\$)
G. A. McVicar	M	Gentleman	Port Arthur	1913	450,798
M. Silles	F	None	Fort William	1913	266,482
P. J. Manion	M	Gentleman	Fort William	1913	263,856
A. A. Vickers	M	Gentleman	Fort William	1914	205,579
J. Conmee	M	Contractor	Port Arthur	1914	198,044
R. A. Ruttan	M	Realtor	Port Arthur	1912	195,551
J. G. King	M	Warehouseman	Port Arthur	1910	185,945
W. H. Hamilton	M	Physician	Fort William	1918	185,360
G. O. P. Clavet	M	Merchant	Port Arthur	1909	174,106
L. Walsh	M	Coal merchant	Port Arthur	1920	170,450

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

When the economic bust arrived, women were hit hard first in their real estate portfolios, as were men, but then a second time because of their dependence on mortgages as their primary financial asset. During 1907–1913, the ratio of the average value of moneys secured by mortgage to average wealth for women was 36.1 per cent while for men it was 18 per cent. The decline in the real average value of mortgages caused a drop of 33 per cent for men and 91 per cent for women. It is possible that the boom saw women extend themselves into more marginal property investments under the artificial security conveyed by rising land prices. Another factor is that the proportion of female decedents who were widows also declined during the “bust” period, while the proportion who were married rose. The wealth of widows tended to be much greater than that of married women.⁴²

The divide between male and female wealth holding is also illustrated in Table 13, which lists the real value of the top 10 estates. Of the 10 top estates, only one was held by a women, though its value ranked second highest. The Silles estate was, however, extraordinarily large for women's holdings, as is evident from Table 14, which ranks the top 10 estates held by women. The average real wealth of the second wealthiest female decedent is just under one-third the value of average wealth possessed by the ten wealthiest male decedents.

Finally, Table 15 presents wealth by asset category value and share for the top 10 per cent and for all estates during the entire period 1885 to 1920. Again, the table dramatically illustrates not only the great range in average wealth between the wealthiest individuals and the overall set of decedents but also the differences in the composition of that wealth. The average real

⁴² For the period 1907–1913, 50.7% of female decedents were married and 42.3% were widows. For 1914–1920, 60.3% of female decedents were married and 29.4% were widows.

Table 14 Top Ten Estates Probated by Women in Thunder Bay District Adjusted for Inflation

Name	Occupation	Location	Year probated	Real wealth (1900\$)
M. Silles	None	Fort William	1913	266,482
M. Merrill	None	Port Arthur	1911	51,717
A. Thompson	None	Quebec City	1905	29,736
M. Cordingly	None	Fort William	1900	28,031
J. Vigers	None	Port Arthur	1913	27,097
M. L. Gibbs	None	Port Arthur	1903	25,733
E. Flaherty	None	Port Arthur	1893	20,038
M. Richardson	None	Port Arthur	1920	19,533
V. McVicar	None	Port Arthur	1900	17,709
M. J. Stevenson	None	Fort William	1910	12,966

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

Table 15 Wealth Composition of the Wealthiest 10 Estates and All Decedents (Wealth in 1900 \$)

Asset category	Top 10 estates		All decedents	
	Average \$	% share	Average \$	% share
Household goods & furniture	915.68	0.40	88.96	1.47
Farm implements	8.20	0.00	10.30	0.17
Stock in trade	3,660.95	1.59	190.83	3.16
Horses	68.85	0.03	16.61	0.27
Cattle	6.07	0.00	7.64	0.13
Sheep & swine	0.00	0.00	2.11	0.03
Book debts & promissory notes	9,787.39	4.26	162.20	2.68
Moneys secured by mortgage	78,069.89	34.00	1,126.77	18.63
Life insurance	2,419.03	1.05	412.55	6.82
Bank stocks & other shares	23,730.05	10.33	526.25	8.70
Securities for money	1,349.38	0.59	87.02	1.44
Cash on hand	68.27	0.03	31.82	0.53
Cash in bank	13,397.54	5.83	436.07	7.21
Farm produce	0.00	0.00	2.98	0.05
Real estate	94,832.73	41.30	2,804.44	46.37
Other personal property	1,303.04	0.57	141.09	2.33
Total wealth	229,616.96	100.00	6,047.65	100.00

Source: Probate records, Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court, 1885–1920.

wealth of the top 10 estates in the Thunder Bay District was \$229,617 compared to the average for the entire data set of \$6,048. Relative to all decedents, the top 10 estates owned 60 times the value of book debts and promissory notes. As well, these decedents owned 69 times the value of moneys secured by mortgages, 45 times the value of bank shares and stocks, 31

times the value of cash in bank, and 34 times the value of real estate. The top 10 estates also exhibited an above average propensity for these decedents to keep their wealth in moneys secured by mortgage. The propensity of the very wealthy to keep a large percentage of their wealth in mortgages also helps account in part for the greater percentage declines in the average real wealth of the top deciles after 1914.

Conclusions

Wealth data from the probate records of the Thunder Bay District Surrogate Court offer an intriguing regional snapshot of the effects of the wheat boom era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century on individual wealth and welfare in a region of recent settlement characterized by a relatively youthful population. The results suggest a pre-boom period of sustained growth spanning the years 1885 to 1906, an intense boom over the period 1907 to 1913, and a post-boom "bust" over the period 1914 to 1920, which was accompanied by increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of the top 10 per cent of the distribution.

Wealth during the period 1907–1913 was substantially higher than it had been in the pre-1907 period and much greater than in the post-1913 period, with heavy concentrations in the hands of those in trade and merchandising. Moreover, the boom period was accompanied by a massive increase in wealth inequality as the share of the top 10 per cent of the distribution went from 66 to 75 per cent. While the boom saw the greatest increases in wealth in the top fifth of wealth-holders, the post-boom collapse also saw the greatest declines for this group. In addition, the post-boom collapse appears to have harmed women's estates proportionately more than those held by men. In both cases, the declines appear to have been associated with a tendency to invest in mortgages during the boom period.

The subsequent end of the boom and the accompanying decline in real estate prices in the end also harmed those who had invested in real estate mortgages. This suggests that the composition of one's portfolio could have effects on one's wealth. Like today's investors, individuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century faced the potential loss of their wealth as the result of volatile market cycles as well as their investment choices. Moreover, the progress that female wealth and property holders had made during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may have been delivered a severe setback after the end of the wheat boom period.

These results illustrate the important uses to which probate records and their inventories can be put if an effort is made to invest in their collection and analysis. A unique contribution of this study is that these records provide evidence of wealth and asset holding not only at points in time but over a lengthy period. Canadian probate records have been a relatively untapped source of historical data, and this type of study and analysis could usefully be applied to other regions and time periods. Along with their use for understanding individual economic behaviour and economic strategies in the past,

these records have the potential to shed light on aggregate economic behaviour and welfare. In the absence of regional time series estimates of historical GDP for the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, probated estates may provide the best source of data on regional trends in economic growth and wealth accumulation.

More broadly, this research documents the regional impact of the Canadian wheat boom on wealth accumulation and distribution in a region connected to, but geographically removed from, the wheat-growing areas of the Canadian economy. In some respects, the massive collapse in wealth after 1913 suggests the transitory nature of boom periods on wealth accumulation for large segments of wealth-holders. While generalizations from the Thunder Bay District cannot be easily made to Canada as a whole, some insights from the economic impact of this period on individual wealth can likely be drawn. Canada's economy also boomed during this period and experienced a severe downturn after 1913, suggesting that some of the features of wealth accumulation and distribution in the Thunder Bay District may also find parallels across the country.⁴³ At the very least, the possible implications for personal wealth accumulation, wealth distribution, and women's wealth-holding in post-1913 Canada definitely merit further research. The potential existence of a national setback in women's wealth accumulation and property holding in the wake of the boom is a particularly intriguing question.

43 Norrie and Owram argue that the war period had mixed effects, and the initial one was to make the post-1913 slowdown worse. Construction collapsed, immigration ceased, railways cut back their operations, and large numbers of workers were let go. See Norrie and Owram, *A History of the Canadian Economy*, p. 298.