

SECTION SIX

**THE BORDERLANDS OF  
WOMEN'S WORK**

THE ARTICLES in this section cross a number of unmarked boundaries in western histories. Historians Laurie Mercier and Cynthia Loch-Drake cross a temporal boundary to write about the period of World War II and the decades after it, rather than the frontiers of European colonization and settlement. They also explore a marginalized borderland of western labor history as they bring women's work and gender relations to the center of western working-class communities. Focusing on women's ties to one international labor union, the articles probe women's paid and unpaid labor, as single women and wives, during a pivotal period of change in women's work.

U.S. historian Laurie Mercier's prize-winning book *Anaconda* illuminated the importance of gender in the union community of one smelter city, Anaconda, Montana. Here, Mercier explores the ways that women's auxiliaries of the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine Mill) responded to Cold War pressures on both sides of the border during the 1950s. Cynthia Loch-Drake's article, which comes from her

University of Calgary M.A. thesis, represents some of the newest Canadian scholarship on women workers. Loch-Drake chronicles some of the few women who belonged to Mine Mill as union members and labor activists during the 1947 strike at the Medalta Potteries in Medicine Hat, Alberta. The strike revealed a great deal about how gender operated in the potteries, in the union, and most of all in the Alberta justice system, which treated male strikers as dangerous brutes and jailed them, but portrayed militant women strikers as helpless victims who needed protection.

Like those Alberta officials, most labor historians before the 1970s focused on labor unions and the minority of male wage earners who organized unions and waged strikes. Historians ignored the vast majority of people who worked because those people did not work for wages or belong to organized labor. This included most women, who, until recent decades, worked outside the public wage system. Older labor histories might, at most, mention the few women waged workers who labored in unionized industries like textiles and shoe making.

If women workers were absent from traditional labor histories, they entered most western histories only as overworked pioneer helpmates.<sup>1</sup> The few historians who focused on cross-border histories recognized that workers regularly crossed the 49th parallel to mine, harvest, thresh, herd cattle, and cut timber.<sup>2</sup> They often belonged to the same international unions, like Mine Mill, that operated in both the United States and Canada. Because so many of these industries employed only men, women became invisible, though their work was essential to western industries and communities. Not until quite recently did historians suggest that western workers, like workers throughout North America, responded with a variety of strategies to changing industrial work conditions, nor did they consider the significance of women's work in male-dominated industries.

Since the 1970s, new histories have shifted the focus from organized labor to workers, including women, and to an expanded understanding of work that includes women's domestic labor, the work involved in bearing and raising children, and unpaid service work that organizes and maintains social institutions. This enlarged understanding of work

encouraged new research on the women who provisioned the fur trade, served as cultural intermediaries, tanned hides, raised chickens and made butter for market, labored on family farms and ranches, and others who sold food, lodging, or sex to the men who outnumbered women on resource frontiers. In western mining towns on both sides of the 49th parallel women provided the service work, paid and unpaid, that supported the male workforce in a key western industry. The first histories of mining town women recognized their unpaid household labor, as well as the boardinghouse keepers, laundry workers, cooks, and sex workers who provided “domestic” services for the unmarried male majority. They highlighted, too, how women supported the miners’ unions through their purchasing power, by organizing working-class social life, and with crucial strike support. Most of these histories focused on fabled boomtowns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Mercier and Loch-Drake both explore women’s roles in Mine Mill (1916–1967), a union that long preoccupied labor historians who struggled to explain why western workers were weird exceptions to a moderate mainstream. Organized in 1893 as the Western Federation of Miners (1893–1916), the union endorsed the Socialist Party, helped found the Industrial Workers of the World, and waged the strikes chronicled in dramatic labor histories. Changing its name in 1916 to the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (1916–1967), the union emphasized its commitment to organizing all workers in the mining industry, regardless of job or skill. That commitment to industrial unionism led it, in the 1930s, to help found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Mine Mill advocated organizing all workers regardless of skill, industry, race, or gender, but, as Mercier and Loch-Drake demonstrate, it had some difficulty at times extending that egalitarian vision of labor unity to the masculine bastions of the mines and smelters and to the women of western mining and smelter towns.

Both articles illuminate a key transitional period in women’s work as increasing numbers of married women entered the paid workforce during and after World War II, first to take the places of men in military service, and then for the same reasons most people work for wages: to

support themselves and their families. That historic shift was particularly stark in mining and smelting towns, where paid work in the only local industry had been restricted to men. Mercier and Loch-Drake take us far beyond older debates about organized labor to illuminate the conflicting ideologies of work and gender that women confronted as they entered the public worlds of work, organizing, and labor politics in the postwar period.

The conflicted terrain of class and gender was further complicated by the ideological contexts of the Cold War. In both Canada and the United States, anti-communism became part of the rhetoric of renewed attacks on organized labor after World War II, in which Mine Mill was a frequent target. Mercier shows how women in the Mine Mill women's auxiliaries engaged in both sides of that ideological debate, on both sides of the border. Loch-Drake shows how the complex terrain of class, gender, and Cold War reaction led to different images of men and women activists, and different rewards and sanctions for their work as union members. In concert, these articles show how focusing on one cross-border institution, in this case a union, can provide interesting comparisons of how class and gender operated in different local and national contexts. They take us far beyond the questions of older labor histories to changing postwar gender roles, and to the local, personal, and private impacts of public work and public politics. They help us link the staple industries of older western histories to contemporary labor and gender relations.

#### NOTES

1. See Beverly Stoeltje, "A Helpmate for Man Indeed: The Image of the Frontier Woman," *Journal of American Folklore* 88, no. 347 (January–March 1975): 27–31; Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the Canadian West," in *The Women's West*, ed. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 145–64.
2. Walter Sage, "Some Aspects of the Frontier in Canadian History," Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1928; "Geographical and Cultural Aspects of the Five Canadas," Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1937; Herbert Heaton, "Other Wests Than Ours," *Journal of Economic History* 6, Issue Supplement: The Tasks of Economic History (1946): 50–62; Paul F. Sharp, "When Our West Moved North," *American Historical Review* 55 (1950): 286–300.

3. For some of the early work on mining town women, see Elizabeth Jameson, "Imperfect Unions: Class and Gender in Cripple Creek, 1894–1904," *Frontiers* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 85–117; also in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 166–202; Marion Goldman, *Gold Diggers and Silver Miners: Prostitution and Society on the Comstock Lode* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981); Mary Murphy, "The Private Lives of Public Women: Prostitution in Butte, Montana, 1878–1917," in *The Women's West*, ed. Armitage and Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 193–206; Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana, 1865–1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987).

