

OLD AGE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: *The Case of the "Lonesome Prospector"*

MEGAN J. DAVIES

The 1947 Old-Age Pension Board report provides a glimpse of an aging and once-common British Columbian: "The mining prospector doesn't stake a claim and proceed in due course to find himself a wife and establish a family in the fastness of the mountains. He keeps on chasing the elusive pot of gold, often until he is an old man." The report noted that much the same was true of loggers and fishers. The large number of pensioners who were without family meant that: "In British Columbia we have a special problem because of old people who are obliged to live alone."²

The "lonesome prospector" who inhabited the pages of government reports also appears in memoirs and fictional accounts of the province's earlier days. Bruce Hutchison hired eighty-three-year-old "Dick," a former hard-rock miner who lived in a shack nearby, to dig the foundations of his Victoria home in 1925.³ Phyllis Knight befriended "Pat," who lived in a small cabin close to her Lillooet claim in 1935. In his sixties at that time, Pat had "worked all over the continent as a miner and construction worker and general jack of all trades."⁴ Like Delany in Jack Hodgins's *Spit Delany's Island*, the lonesome prospector evoked both pathos and nostalgia for an earlier pioneer era in which men lived independent lives in the wilderness.⁵ The transient male labourer, who had symbolized the province in

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² "Report of the Social Assistance Branch, 1944-45," in *Sessional Papers* (hereafter *SP*), BC, vol. 2, 1946, p. R-46.

³ Bruce Hutchison, *A Life in the Country* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988), xv-xvi.

⁴ Rolf Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver: New Star, 1974), 156-7.

⁵ Jack Hodgins, *Spit Delany's Island* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 201-35.

the early decades following settlement, had grown old but was still autonomous and linked to the frontier.⁶

In fact, poverty and ill health rather than freedom and independence most often marked the lives of elderly lonesome prospectors. These men were never a large group in absolute terms, but census data do identify a population of aging single men in British Columbia. Provincial health and social welfare records, too, are full of stories of elderly bachelors who had come west in their youth and worked in various resource industries. Facing old age with little or no savings, and sometimes suffering from chronic job-related illnesses, they struggled to maintain independent lives. As James Snell points out, many elderly men found shelter in rough, isolated dwellings before urbanization and the bureaucratic welfare state limited this way of life.⁷

When ill health or poverty pushed the lonesome prospector to seek financial assistance or enter a public old-age home, he came under the purview of the emerging welfare state.⁸ Health and social welfare provision for British Columbia's lonesome prospectors provides a prism through which to view the development of state policy concerning the aged.⁹ As was the case elsewhere, Poor-Law principles, paternalism, and a newer bureaucratic approach all shaped the response of the state to the indigent elderly. But in British Columbia the specific circumstances of these vulnerable old men, and the mythology that surrounded them, were other important influences on professional ideals, programs, and institutions for the elderly.

This article examines the lonesome prospector from several perspectives. I begin by describing the demography of old age in British Columbia and then contextualize this group of elderly men within the provincial economy and society. The following section explores the survival strategies employed by lonesome prospectors. I then

⁶ Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 125.

⁷ James Snell, *The Citizen's Wage: The State and the Elderly in Canada, 1900-1951* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 63-4.

⁸ For overviews of the development of health and social welfare services in British Columbia, see Isobel Harvey, "A Historic Review of the Social Services of the Government of British Columbia," in "Report of the Social Welfare Branch, 1947-48," *SP*, vol. 1, 1949, pp. P8-P18; Harry M. Cassidy, *Public Health and Welfare Reorganization: The Post-War Problem in the Canadian Provinces* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1945), chaps. 2-3; and Allan Irving, "The Development of a Provincial Welfare State: British Columbia, 1900-1939," in *The "Benevolent" State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada*, edited by Allan Moscovitch and Jim Albert (Toronto: Garamond, 1987), 155-74.

⁹ Here I employ the approach taken by Theda Skocpol in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

consider the impact of this group on social policy, institutional provision, and professional attitudes towards the elderly.

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF AGING IN A SETTLER SOCIETY

In the first decades following sustained settlement the elderly non-Native population of British Columbia reflected many demographic characteristics of newly settled regions. Non-Native men significantly outnumbered women at all stages of the adult life cycle, including old age. As is often typical in settler communities, there were relatively few elderly and a large cohort of young males.¹⁰

The continuing demographic dominance of men over women well into the twentieth century set British Columbia apart from the rest of Canada. Comparison with the Prairie provinces, which also experienced large waves of immigration, reveals the different demographic profile of the western province (Table 1). In 1901 there were 177 men to every 100 women in British Columbia, a much larger proportion than in other provinces. By the 1940s British Columbia approached national norms.

Table 2 shows that men dominated the aged population of British Columbia even during the middle decades of the twentieth century, when the province was becoming a popular retirement destination. Until the 1961 census, men over sixty-five years of age were more numerous than their female cohorts.¹¹ Within this group of older males were the never-married men who had come as young men to work in British Columbia's resource-based industries. Peter Ward refers to the lonesome prospectors when he notes that by 1941 British Columbia's demographic profile looked more like that of the rest of Canada because of the "gradual aging and death of the remaining surplus male population."¹² Bruce Hutchison's "Dick" and Phyllis Knight's "Pat" belonged to this demographic cohort.

Lonesome prospectors were concentrated in particular ethnic groups. Table 3 shows the racial origin of men and women resident in British Columbia who were over fifty-five and sixty-five years of age in 1931, the only year when the census reported on age and race. Older men

¹⁰ New Zealand was also a male-dominated settler society. In 1871 there were 705 women to every 1,000 men, with a much larger imbalance in frontier areas. As late as 1914 there were nearly as many bachelors as married men. See Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country: The Image of the Pakeha Male – A History* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987), 7–11.

¹¹ Statistics compiled from *Canada Census, 1901–61*.

¹² Peter Ward, "Population Growth in Western Canada, 1901–1971," in *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honor of Lewis H. Thomas*, edited by John E. Foster (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983), 169–70.

TABLE 1
Number of Males per 100 Females, Selected Provinces, 1901-51

	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951
British Columbia	177	179	127	125	114	105
Alberta	128	149	123	121	115	110
Manitoba	119	121	111	111	108	103
Ontario	101	106	102	104	103	101
Nova Scotia	103	104	104	105	105	102

Source: 1951 Census, Table 20.

TABLE 2
*Number of Men per 100 Women in the Population
Over 65 Years of Age, Canada and British Columbia, 1901-61*

	CANADA	BC
1901	81	174
1921	105	138
1941	104	133
1961	94	104

Source: Censuses of Canada, 1901-61.

TABLE 3
*Number of Men per 100 Women (over 55 and 65 Years of Age)
According to Ethnic and "Racial" Origin, British Columbia, 1931*

ETHNICITY / "RACE"	55+	65+
British	133	128
Continental European	195	185
Asiatic	222	214
Indian	105	102

Source: Canada Census, 1931.

were numerically dominant in all categories but particularly among continental Europeans and Asiatics. In the Chinese-Canadian community, the ratio of males to females was 5.2:1 in 1941; by 1961 this figure had dropped to 1.8:1.¹³

Institutional and municipal records suggest that lonesome prospectors often migrated to Vancouver or Victoria, yet the census reveals that they were a diminishing urban population. More common in these

¹³ Canada Census data cited in David Chuenyan Lai, "From Self-segregation to Integration: The Vicissitudes of Victoria's Chinese Hospital," *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988-9): 65.

locales were Prairie retirees. Victoria, the quintessential “Lotus Land,” blossomed as a retirement community from 1920 onwards. The 1921 census reported that 4.8 per cent of Victoria’s citizens were over sixty-five years of age, a figure that exactly matched its national equivalent. Forty years later, 20 per cent of Victorians were over sixty-five, nearly triple the national average.¹⁴ Old women figure more prominently in Victoria’s population than in the province as a whole, and by 1961 they outnumbered their male co-residents. In this sense Nellie McClung, the Prairie suffragist and writer who retired to Victoria with her husband in 1948, was then much more characteristic of British Columbia’s elderly than was “Dick,” who dynamited the foundations for Hutchison’s house five miles down the road from the McClungs.

THE ELDERLY MALE IN A RESOURCE-BASED SOCIETY

These demographic data highlight the place of an elderly population in a settler society where the economy was largely based on primary resource extraction and the family was a relatively weak social institution.¹⁵ Historians have emphasized the transient nature of BC society and the small number of non-Native women during this period.¹⁶ The family farm, the basis for settlement in the rest of western Canada, was replaced in much of British Columbia by the logging or mining camp, where women and children were a relative novelty.¹⁷

Young men provided the labour needed to work in isolated and impermanent resource-based communities.¹⁸ Immigrant labourers from continental Europe and Asia formed a sizeable portion of this workforce.¹⁹ Labourers would typically move from one job to another,

¹⁴ Statistics compiled from *Canada Census, 1901-61*.

¹⁵ Again, the British Columbia situation mirrored that of New Zealand in these aspects. See Phillips, *A Man’s Country?*, esp. chap. 1, pp. 1-42.

¹⁶ See, for example, Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 89-90 and 148-9. Martin Grainger’s *Woodmen of the West*, with its descriptions of coastal logging life, is a wonderful memoir of male culture in early twentieth-century British Columbia. See M. Allerdale Grainger, *Woodmen of the West* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996).

¹⁷ See Cole Harris, “Industry and the Good Life around Idaho Peak,” in *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 194-218; and Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland’s Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1995), esp. chap. 6. For memories of the male world of logging and mining camps see Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life*, 195, 202-4.

¹⁸ For a comparison of British Columbia and the Prairie provinces in this regard, see Peter Ward, “Population Growth in Western Canada,” 155-77. Jean Barman also emphasizes the fact that British Columbia’s staples economy drew young men (see Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 130). Cole Harris found that the majority of miners at Idaho Peak were between twenty and forty years of age (see Harris, “Industry and the Good Life,” 201).

¹⁹ Barman, *The West Beyond the West*, 145.



Employees of Brooks, Scanlan, and O'Brian Sawmill at Stillwater, BC. Many such men would never marry and, in old age, would become "lonesome prospectors." Photographed by Bill Roozeboom. *BC Archives*, Photo No. D-04955.

often migrating to Vancouver or Victoria when work was scarce. These were not family men, nor were such locales likely to foster the development of families and stable, inter-generational communities. Labourers were rarely able to accumulate the capital necessary to marry and establish a family.²⁰

The society in which many elderly British Columbians lived thus stands in sharp contrast to that of the elderly in most of Canada. Historical and contemporary research has made it clear that the elderly first turn to their family for help and that the family members who care for their elders are usually women.²¹ Interviewed in 1928 for a Royal Commission, elderly Nova Scotians cited their children as their most important source of support.²² Jane Synge and James Snell both found evidence of intergenerational family support in rural Ontario during the early decades of the twentieth century.²³

²⁰ Cole Harris provides a sensitive discussion of how the economics of mining life and the geographical isolation of mining communities made marriage an impossible dream for most men (see Harris, "The Good Life," 203-5).

²¹ Peter Townsend illustrates this point in *The Family Life of Old People* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), part 1, pp. 21-136. See also Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 22.

²² Cited in Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 18-20.

²³ Synge found that most aged parents continued to live on the family farm after it was turned over to the inheriting child. See Jane Synge, "Work and Family Support Patterns of the Aged in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Aging in Canada: Social Perspectives*, edited by Victor W. Marshall (Don Mills, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1980), 138.



Cabin at a logging camp near Yale. BC Archives, Photo No. A-00875.

Historians of old age suggest that the willingness of family to care for their elders weakened as the twentieth century brought increased urbanization and greater state support for aged citizens, but they do not deny the continuing role played by kin.²⁴ Marriage was another stabilizing factor in old age: a 1948 study of social assistance cases in Vancouver found that 39 per cent of married couples were living in their own home as compared to only 4 per cent of single men and women.²⁵ The relative weakness of the family in British Columbia was of particular significance to lonesome prospectors. As they aged, these men did not have kinship networks to cushion the hardships of old age.

Dislocation from family is striking in the personal histories of these men. A woman in Montana, informed in 1925 of her brother's death at the Provincial Home for Aged Men in Kamloops, replied that she had not seen her brother since she was a young girl and knew little about his life.²⁶ John Duffy, a single Irish labourer who applied for assistance in Vancouver in 1907, had long since lost contact with relatives left behind decades before in Ireland and Toronto.²⁷

Even labouring men who did have wives and children sometimes lost contact with their kin during a life of wandering. Joseph Lynch,

²⁴ Tamara Hareven, "Life-Course Transitions and Kin Assistance in Old Age: A Cohort Comparison," in *Old Age in a Bureaucratic Society: The Elderly, the Experts, and the State in American History*, edited by David Van Tassel and Peter N. Stearns (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 110-26.

²⁵ Bernice Leydier, "Boarding Home Care for the Aged: A Study of the Social Welfare Aspects of Licensed Homes in Vancouver" (MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1948), 31.

²⁶ British Columbia Archives and Records Service (hereafter BCARS), GR 131, British Columbia, Provincial Home (Kamloops), 1895-1975, box 3, envelope Mc.

²⁷ Vancouver City Archives (hereafter VANCA), series 452, box 106FI, file 1. All names based on client data from public health and social welfare case files are fictional and were selected to reflect the ethnic background of the individual.

a stone-cutter, left his wife and eight children in the eastern United States around the turn of the century when he got “the gold fever” and headed west. He never saw his family again or contributed to family finances, although he maintained some written contact. When Lynch was old and wished to return to the eastern United States, his sons were not willing to help.²⁸

Their lack of kin made lonesome prospectors particularly vulnerable to destitution, homelessness, and institutionalization. Patient statistics compiled at the provincial infirmary in Vancouver in 1945 show that 67 per cent of its male residents over the age of sixty had either never been married or were separated from their spouses. In contrast, only 22 per cent of the women were in the same category.²⁹ The inmate registers at the Provincial Home for Aged Men show an even higher proportion of single men when the earlier decades of the twentieth century are included: the percentage of single men ranged from 70 per cent in the period between 1900 and 1916 to 55 per cent in the period between 1949 and 1951.³⁰

The lonesome prospector was not, however, an entirely solitary individual. Friendships between men who had worked together were often strong, providing comfort and support during hard times. Men cared for elderly and infirm mates, sharing a shack with them or keeping in touch through the occasional letter. With no family or stable community, old friends were a link to the time when the lonesome prospector had been a young miner, fisher, or logger. In 1915 Wilber Smith wrote to his friend, Jack Saunders, a resident in the provincial home: “The whole dammed earth seems falling away from me and I would like if you would spend the summer with me. It may be that I will find that I will have to get into the thick of things again sometime soon, but I think we can have one more quiet peaceful summer.” Smith outlined his plans, noting that the enclosed cheque for twenty-five dollars was for Saunders to spend on some new gear and a steamer ticket to rendezvous with his friend in the Slokan.³¹

Land and houses were important collateral in old age.³² But single labourers, and even skilled workmen, usually spent their working years moving between jobs and locations, a transient life that left them eco-

²⁸ BCARS, GR 131, box 3, envelope F.

²⁹ Patient statistics compiled from British Columbia Legislative Library, Isobel Harvey, “Study of Chronic Diseases in British Columbia,” 1945.

³⁰ BCARS, GR 131, box 1, vol. 1. The following inmate numbers were selected for analysis, spanning the admission years 1895-1965: 1-99, 300-99, 600-99, 900-99, 1200-99, 1500-99, 1800-99.

³¹ *Ibid.*, box 3, envelope C.

³² Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 17.

nomically vulnerable as they grew old.³³ Andrew McKenzie, for example, left his home in Bruce County, Ontario, in 1868, when he was thirty. He spent twenty-seven years in the United States, arriving in British Columbia in 1895 and working first in the Kootenays and then in logging camps near Vancouver. In 1909, when McKenzie requested assistance from the City of Vancouver, he owned no property.³⁴

In contrast, home ownership and a long-term connection with a local community could serve a single man well in his old age.³⁵ Robert Marland, a bachelor farmer on Salt Spring Island, had been an island resident for thirty years. Marland grew enough vegetables for his own use on his two-acre plot and had a small income from odd jobs. When Marland's health deteriorated in 1919 his neighbours collected money for their elderly friend, cared for him while he was sick, and secured funds for him from the provincial government.³⁶

Some lonesome prospectors bore the scars of lives of dangerous work.³⁷ Injuries sustained when men were young could create serious health problems in old age. The government agent in Prince Rupert sought aid for William Hunter in 1927, reporting that the old man had lost an eye in a mining accident when he was young. Now, at seventy-one years of age, Hunter's other eye was failing and he was unable to obtain work.³⁸

Chinese men were particularly likely to be without kin in old age, a problem well recognized within the Chinese-Canadian community.³⁹ Typically, single men emigrated to Canada and found work on railway construction and in mines and canneries. Many of these men saved enough for a return trip to visit China and perhaps to marry there, but only a few wealthy merchants could afford to bring their wives and children to Canada.⁴⁰ While the dream was always to return to China, many Chinese emigrants, like the old and nearly blind prospector to whom Phyllis and Ali Knight gave their Lillooet cabin in 1935, ended their lives alone in Canada.⁴¹

³³ See Harris, "Industry and the Good Life," 205.

³⁴ VANCA, series 452, box 106, file 1.

³⁵ BCARS, GR 289, Records Concerning Indigents, 1910-25, box 7, file 5.

³⁶ Snell notes the importance of community support for the elderly (see Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 62-3).

³⁷ Harris, "Industry and the Good Life," 204.

³⁸ BCARS, GR 289, Provincial Secretary, Indigent Fund, Originals, 1914-33, box 1, file 5, letter of 1 August 1927 from N. Watt, Government Agent, to the Deputy Provincial Secretary.

³⁹ Lai, "From Self-segregation to Integration," 52-68. Lai's article details early charitable efforts within the Chinese community to care for poor single men.

⁴⁰ Edgar Wickberg, ed., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 5.

⁴¹ Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life*, 160-1.

METROPOLIS AND HINTERLAND:
SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN OLD AGE

Historians of old age have stressed the importance of independence to elderly men and women.⁴² British Columbia's lonesome prospectors were no exception. They used many strategies in order to live autonomously, piecing together pension income, fragments of employment, relief work, and seasonal or permanent migrations from hinterland to metropolis. Good health was always crucial.

Many single elderly men lived alone in remote shacks in the woodlands or mountains of rural British Columbia, near the places where they had spent their working lives.⁴³ Neighbours, friends, or local businesses might allow an old man to make a home in an unused building on their property. For example, in 1927 the provincial police constable in Fernie reported that Alfred McTaggart, a seventy-two-year-old lumberjack from Ontario, was living rent-free in a small cabin west of the town owned by the Elk River Lumber Company.⁴⁴

Other lonesome prospectors remained on their own land. Matthew Barker was a seventy-six-year-old bachelor who lived near Vernon during the 1940s in what was described as "typical hermit's quarters." This residence, where the "old dog, favourite chickens and rabbits wander in and out at will," did not meet the standards of the local social worker, but Barker, a former butcher, lumberjack, and firefighter, had lived alone for thirty-five years and was apparently content.⁴⁵

Continuing good health was vital, of course. The Provincial Indigents files of the 1920s contain reports of lonesome prospectors living in desperate situations. In July 1931, for example, the police constable in Cumberland reported that he had visited a seventy-year-old man living in a one-room shack and removed him to the hospital. The man had been alone and ill for a month. The officer stated that everything in the cabin, including the old man, was filthy.⁴⁶

In an employment market dominated by younger men, aging labourers could not hope to hold on to the physically strenuous work

⁴² See Peter Laslett, "The Traditional English Family and the Aged in Our Society," in *Aging, Death and the Completion of Being*, edited by D. Van Tassel, 115-64 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), and Tamara K. Hareven, "The Last Stage: Historical Adulthood and Old Age," *Daedalus* 105 (1976): 13-27.

⁴³ Cole Harris notes that some old miners from Sandon spent their last years in a shack on the base of Idaho Peak, where they had worked as miners in their younger days (see Harris, "Industry and the Good Life," 205).

⁴⁴ BCARS, GR 289, box 2, file 5, Provincial Police Report, 18 October 1927.

⁴⁵ BCARS, GR 131, box 4, envelope P.

⁴⁶ BCARS, GR 289, box 1, file 6, Provincial Police Report, 5 August 1931.

that they had previously undertaken. Lonesome prospectors took up light, often seasonal, labour, like gardening, janitorial work, and berry-picking.⁴⁷ Jobs that were less physically demanding and less well-paid were evidently set aside for elderly labourers.⁴⁸ In Victoria, elderly men were given work as street cleaners.⁴⁹ Older men cleared brush from the roadsides during the summer months.⁵⁰

Although "retirement" was becoming increasingly accepted in Canada by the 1940s, these men generally did not "retire."⁵¹ Few men applying to enter Victoria's Home for the Aged and Infirm described themselves as "retired." Applicants commonly made such statements as "I am too old to work" or "I am sick." Uncertain personal finances and a life structured around work meant that retirement was not a choice for them, as it was for middle-class family men; instead, lonesome prospectors worked as long as they physically could.

Seasonal or permanent migration to an urban centre was a strategy employed by many lonesome prospectors. These men appear to have congregated in Vancouver's Hastings Street area, undoubtedly recalling the neighbourhood's "bar rooms, cafes, poolhalls, second-hand stores and boarding-houses" when they had come to the city as young labourers.⁵² In Victoria, aging men found accommodation at the Salvation Army Hostel, in a row of cabins on Pembroke Street, or at rooming houses and hotels such as the Clifton Rooms or the Ritz Hotel.⁵³ Lonesome prospectors sought out the temperate weather

⁴⁷ Victoria City Archives [hereafter vca], Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, box 29, file 6; BCARS, GR 131, box 3, envelope R. Snell notes that the elderly were given unskilled, low-paid tasks such as janitorial work (see Snell, *A Citizen's Wage*, 29).

⁴⁸ Chris Phillipson states that the concept of "old men's jobs" persisted in Britain until the mid-twenties. See Phillipson, *Capitalism and the Construction of Old Age* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 23.

⁴⁹ This practice ceased in 1926, when the city purchased a mechanical sweeper. vca, Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-1956, box 19, file 2, 29 January 1926, report by F.M. Preston, City Engineer to the Public Works Committee.

⁵⁰ BCARS, GR 150, Correspondence Pertaining to the Care of Destitute Persons, 1910-25, box 7, file 2, letter from Provincial Constable J. Roger to McMynn, Superintendent, Provincial Police, 23 January 1919. BCARS, GR 289, British Columbia Provincial Secretary, Indigent Funds, 1914-33, box 1, file 2, report by S.B. Hamilton, Sub-Government Agent, Greenwood, 15 July 1927.

⁵¹ For an analysis of the growth of retirement and its role in the industrial economy, see William Graebner, *A History of Retirement: The Meaning and Function of An American Institution, 1885-1978* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980). Snell sets the historical argument concerning retirement in the Canadian context (see Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 26-35).

⁵² Robin John Anderson, "Sharks and Red Herrings: Vancouver's Male Employment Agencies, 1898-1915," *BC Studies* 98 (Summer 1993): 43-84 contains an excellent depiction of the urban milieu of the migrant worker in British Columbia. Dennis Guest linked Hastings Street and the life histories of male residents at Taylor Manor (see Guest, "Taylor Manor: A Survey of the Facilities of Vancouver's Home for the Aged" [msw thesis, University of British Columbia, 1952], 39-40). See also Grainger, *Woodsmen of the West*, 11-17, who stresses the predominantly male presence in this section of Vancouver.

of the southern coastal towns, although others chose the drier air of the Kamloops area, particularly to alleviate miners' consumption.⁵⁴

British Columbia's two large cities also drew lonesome prospectors because they offered social services that an elderly worker from the hinterland might require. Phyllis Knight met her friend "Pat" in Vancouver during the Second World War and found that he was now resident in the city and living in a "run-down row cabin" that she called "the Black Hole of Calcutta."⁵⁵ The fact that Pat was able to obtain relief was evidently one factor in his deciding to move into the city. Support offered by urban agencies such as the Salvation Army and friendly aid societies also attracted aging single men.

Alexander Fox, who entered Victoria's Home for the Aged and Infirm in 1940, illustrates this pattern. Fox worked in logging and railroad camps in the province since 1907 but based himself in Vancouver and Victoria, staying in private rooming houses and at the Salvation Army Hostel. At seventy he settled permanently in Victoria, with a monthly pension of twenty dollars.⁵⁶

Some elderly men held on to vestiges of a transitory, independent life by going to the city in winter. One pensioner described his seasonal migrations in the 1940s: "Every year I leave Vancouver on March 1st for Hope – then I have a tent and camp on the Coquihalla River for 2 months, then I go to Princeton and camp on 9 Mile Creek – 9 miles west of Princeton for 2 months – then I walk over the Dewdney trail to Hope and camp there till the end of October – I then leave for Vancouver for the winter."⁵⁷ Such a survival strategy clearly depended on good health.⁵⁸

Other lonesome prospectors used the Provincial Home for Aged Men in Kamloops as a base, departing during the summer months or at harvest time.⁵⁹ Signing out from the institution with a couple

⁵³ These locations are taken from past and current places of residence listed in applications to Victoria's civic old mens' home. vca, Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-56.

⁵⁴ Pat Roy relates the coastal climate to unemployed men in "Vancouver: 'The Mecca of the Unemployed,' 1907-1929," in *Town and Country: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development*, edited by Alan Artibise (Regina: University of Regina, 1981), 393-413.

⁵⁵ Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life*, 225.

⁵⁶ vca, Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-1956, box 62, file 2.

⁵⁷ BCARS, GR 496, British Columbia, Provincial Secretary, Originals, 1929-47, box 17, file 2, *New Notes*, vol. 11, bulletin 8, January 1945.

⁵⁸ Snell notes a similar case involving a single, elderly man who spent winters living with a Vancouver friend and summers camping in the interior of the province until he became ill from gastritis and malnutrition (see Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 67).

⁵⁹ This point is based on patient movements detailed in three annual reports of the provincial home: BCARS, GR 496, box 29, file 2, Annual Report, Provincial Home, Kamloops, Fiscal Year ending 31 March 1936; BCARS, GR 131, box 2, file 2, Annual Report, Provincial Home,

of fellow inmates, men were able to live a vagabond existence, finding piece-work in seasonal industries or simply travelling around. In 1924 Sam Penner told the provincial police constable in Vernon that he planned to spend July and August picking berries in Naramata.⁶⁰ Jack Bell, pulled out of the waters off West Vancouver in August 1923 after he had fallen off the ferry, was taking his yearly leave of absence. Bell's little holiday trip, commented the police officer dealing with the case, had cost the province \$81.15.⁶¹

Introduced in British Columbia in 1927, old-age pensions became a cornerstone of the economic well-being of many old people, allowing lonesome prospectors to avoid, or postpone, entering an institution. As the numbers of British Columbians receiving pensions increased, the clientele in public institutions for the aged became older and more enfeebled.⁶² Over time there was a subtle but significant reordering in the life cycle of the vulnerable aged: old age and poverty no longer made institutionalization inevitable.

Even a reliable pension income was insufficient insurance against a continued spell of ill health. Chronic illness left men without kin in a spiralling cycle of costly hospitalization and destitution, and it led them, finally, to the doors of a public institution. Wyndham Page's story is typical. A single man, Page had farmed in Penticton from 1905 to 1936. He retired to Victoria at age seventy-four with a monthly pension of twenty dollars, where he lived first at the Ideal Rooms and then at the Boat House in Lime Bay. In March 1939, Page went into the Jubilee Hospital. After a six-month stay he left and found shelter at the Salvation Army Hostel. When Page applied to enter the old men's home in October 1940, he told the city's welfare administrators that he owned nothing except a silver watch.⁶³

Many of the single aging men who entered public institutions were in desperate circumstances. In 1925 Tom Hamilton wrote to the superintendent of the Provincial Home for Aged Men to say that he was coming to live in the institution again but that: "I don't know how I will get there as I have no money but am trying to raise some by selling my books and blankets etc. I have been trying hard to stay

Kamloops, Fiscal Year ending 31 March 1941; file 12, Annual Report, Provincial Home, Kamloops, Fiscal Year 1 April 1950 to 31 March 1951.

⁶⁰ GR 131, box 3, envelope R.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, file 2, BC Provincial Police Report, 9 November 1923.

⁶² Megan Jean Davies, "Institutionalizing Old Age: Residential Accommodation for the Elderly in BC, 1920-1960," (PhD diss., McGill University, 1994), chap. 4.

⁶³ vca, City Clerk's Office, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-1956, box 26, file 2.

out of that place but it is no use I can't work any more."⁶⁴ Of the 68 applicants who entered the old men's home in Victoria between 1935 and 1944, 55 declared that they owned nothing of value.⁶⁵ Some men may have bequeathed possessions and money to friends rather than pass them over to the state, but the fact that a 1952 study found that many men entering Vancouver's civic home were suffering from malnutrition testifies to their situation.⁶⁶

EARLY STATE PROVISION AND THE LONESOME PROSPECTOR

British Columbia's lonesome prospectors provided impetus for the development of the province's welfare state. The existence of a significant group of single aging men in poor circumstances pushed the province, and in some cases municipalities as well, into providing institutional care for them. Aid was also given through regular monthly outdoor relief payments, single aging men comprising a sizeable portion of the elderly people who received such help.

These early responses to the impoverished elderly were largely rooted in the philosophy and practices of the English Poor Law.⁶⁷ The men who received financial aid or found shelter at public facilities faced moral scrutiny (reminiscent of that meted out by English Poor-Law guardians or the administrators of Ontario's punitive county refuge homes) from government agents, police constables, neighbours, and the staff of public old-age homes. Like other people who lived outside the social and moral sphere of the white, middle-class family, the lonesome prospector was seen as socially problematic in the urban milieux of Vancouver and Victoria.⁶⁸ State assistance, therefore, worked as both carrot and stick to police the behaviour of single aging men who lived on the margins of BC society.

⁶⁴ BCARS, GR 131, box 3, envelope N.

⁶⁵ These statistics are compiled from applications to the old men's home in Victoria. VCA, Clerk's Department, Committee Reports, Series man-4, 1885-1956.

⁶⁶ Guest, "Taylor Manor," 37.

⁶⁷ I refer here to the ideas that culminated in England's New Poor Law of 1834 and that have an enduring history, echoing down to Margaret Thatcher and the Fraser Institute. For a discussion of Poor-Law philosophy and practice see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Faber and Faber), 1984, esp. chap. 4; and Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State and Social Welfare in Britain, 1830-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), esp. chap. 1.

⁶⁸ For example, a 1909 Vancouver news article decried the fact that old men from their makeshift civic quarters spent their days on the streets begging drinks in saloons, getting drunk, and selling alcohol to Natives. "Home for old and destitutes become crying need in Vancouver - Problem of Housing Our Dependents," *Daily Province*, 4 September 1909, p. 3.



Old Men's Home, Victoria. BC Archives, Photo No. G-03350.

Yet when it is compared to the meagre payments and cruel refuge homes that were the lot of the indigent elderly in other parts of Canada, the assistance given to British Columbia's lonesome prospectors appears to have been relatively generous.⁶⁹ The pioneering role of British Columbia's single working men during the early development of extractive resource economies established the lonesome prospector as a worthy recipient of government aid rather than as a person to punish for his improvidence. Moreover, the case of the lonesome prospector shows how the aged inevitably undermined the Poor-Law principle that assistance should be of such a low standard that recipients will be compelled to maintain themselves. These men were destitute, not because they were unwilling to work, but because they were old and in bad health. Thus, paternalistic concern and a measure of respect were interwoven with the regimented, moralistic fabric of early state care.

The provincial Indigent Fund, established in 1880 to help British Columbians in need of financial assistance, illustrates how the province responded to the aged poor with a mixture of moral scrutiny, benevolence, and administrative control. When local government agents or provincial police requested funds from the provincial secretary, they often noted that the old man in question was one of the region's

⁶⁹ For illustrations of harsh conditions in public old-age homes and houses of refuge in Ontario, see James Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), chap. 2. The contrast between British Columbia and New Zealand, with a similar population of single aging pioneers, is also striking. See M. Tennant, "Elderly Indigents and Old Men's Homes, 1880-1920," *New Zealand Journal of History* 17 (1983): 3-20.

early prospectors or settlers. Applications were judged and rates set on an individual basis. However, the state generally found it cheaper to give a minimal monthly cash payment that enabled an aged person to live independently than to pay for institutional accommodation.⁷⁰

The Indigent Fund assisted many lonesome prospectors who could no longer support themselves, and it was administered promptly and with some sensitivity to specific needs. In August 1922, for example, the government agent in Smithers informed the deputy provincial secretary that a local man, sixty-years-old, had been “stricken with paralysis” and was living in a rooming house on his last few dollars. The province agreed to cover the man’s rent and pay a local restaurant to provide his meals.⁷¹ Six months later the local agent found the ailing man a cabin and reported: “He is not improving at all, so far as health is concerned, but being in a cabin by himself is just able to cook his own meals and keep his own fire going which gives him the desired feeling of independence.”⁷²

But government agents and police constables, the province’s social welfare agents in more remote areas, were not always so sympathetic. Their communications to the deputy provincial secretary frequently revert to the discourse of the Poor Law, noting that the man in question was in ill health and unable to work but also commenting on his moral character. It would be mentioned that an applicant had “exemplary habits” or that he was “very seldom seen around the Beer Parlour.”⁷³ Aid was sometimes controlled by a local merchant; as one government agent commented in 1927 in reference to an old man in his district, “I would not trust him with a nickel, for as soon as he gets his hands on money he develops an unquenchable thirst for anything with a kick.”⁷⁴

In contrast to the individual solutions crafted by administrators responsible for the Indigent Fund, the path-breaking Old Age Pensions Act, 1927, gave pensioners a set monthly sum of twenty dollars. Recipients had to be British subjects over the age of seventy who had lived in Canada for twenty years and in British Columbia for five.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ BCARS, GR 289, box 5, file 2, 16 October 1924, letter from Deputy Provincial Secretary to the Superintendent, BC Provincial Police.

⁷¹ BCARS, GR 150, box 11, file 4, letter from Government Agent (Smithers) to Deputy Provincial Secretary, 23 August 1922.

⁷² Ibid., letter from Government Agent (Smithers) to Deputy Provincial Secretary, 20 February 1923.

⁷³ BCARS, GR 289, box 6, file 5, letter of 8 December 1925 from MLA to the Provincial Secretary; box 3, file 7, Provincial Police Report, 29 December 1926.

⁷⁴ Ibid., box 3, file 4, letter of 23 August 1927 from the Government Agent (Cranbrook) to the Deputy Provincial Secretary.

⁷⁵ British Columbia was the first province to join the federal scheme. For a detailed description of the introduction of old-age pensions, see Kenneth Bryden, *Old Age Pensions and Policy-Making in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1974), 63–74.

Many lonesome prospectors, who had come to Canada as immigrants from Europe and Asia, would not have met the criteria unless they had become naturalized British subjects. Others were not old enough to qualify. Thus, older systems of outdoor relief continued to support the aged.

The introduction of provincial old-age pensions formalized aid to elderly indigents, incorporating the Poor-Law elements of the Indigent Fund while setting aside the paternalism of earlier state provision. The informal application process employed under the earlier scheme became a standardized means test. Bureaucratic regimentation left no room for the flexibility that had enabled Indigent Fund administrators to craft aid to meet individual needs. Under the new program eligible lonesome prospectors could count on a monthly pension, but it would be a standard payment rather than an acknowledgment of their merit as pioneering citizens of British Columbia.

While Indigent Fund records furnish many examples of state assistance for vulnerable elderly men, the development of public old-age homes provides even stronger evidence that lonesome prospectors were important in the early history of British Columbia's welfare state. The Provincial Home for Aged Men was established in 1894 in Kamloops. Built in the same era as the provincial mental health institution, the Kamloops home was obviously intended for lonesome prospectors. Its purpose was "to care for the old and the infirm without suitable homes, particularly the pioneer miners, trappers, lumbermen, and others who had opened up the new country and were worn out in the struggle with nature."⁷⁶ The expectation that those who used the home would be pioneering men without "suitable homes" is borne out by an analysis of its inmates. Labouring and semi-skilled men comprised the bulk of the institution's residents at any time between 1900 and 1950.⁷⁷

The Provincial Home for Incurables, located in the Marpole District of Vancouver, was acquired by the province from the Vancouver General Hospital in 1923.⁷⁸ Males comprised 76 per cent of the patients between 1923 and 1938.⁷⁹ The institution was renamed the Provincial Infirmary and expanded during the early 1940s to include Mount Saint Mary,

⁷⁶ Cassidy, *Public Health and Welfare Reorganization*, 45.

⁷⁷ Based on figures from the inmate register of the institution. See Note 30.

⁷⁸ BCARS, GR 277, British Columbia, Department of Health Services and Hospital Insurance, Hospital Insurance Division, box 5, file 2, "Report on the Provincial Infirmary, 1954," p. 1; and William Donald McFarland, "The Care of the Chronically Ill: A Survey of the Existing Facilities and Needs of Vancouver" (MSW thesis, University of British Columbia, 1948), 23.

⁷⁹ BCARS, GR 496, Box 47, File 9, "Report Prepared for Advisory Board, Provincial Infirmary, March 16, 1939."

run by the Sisters of Saint Ann in Victoria, and Allco, a former relief camp near Haney. Allco was for men only, but men outnumbered women at the other institutions as well. In 1945, when a study of the provincial infirmary system was undertaken, males still dominated the patient population at Marpole and were twice as numerous as women at Mount Saint Mary's.⁸⁰ As at the Provincial Home for Incurables, the majority of men in the provincial infirmary system were skilled or semi-skilled craftspeople or labourers who had never married.

Municipal and charitable institutions for the elderly were rare in British Columbia, but the City of Victoria established the Home for the Aged and Infirm for old men in 1891.⁸¹ A new brick structure was built in 1905 on the site of the present Oak Bay Manor.⁸² Of the 351 male applicants to the Victoria institution between 1900 and 1950, almost all listed blue-collar occupations: labourers, janitors, carpenters, fishers, farmers, and sailors.⁸³

The Vancouver Old People's Home, renamed Taylor Manor in the 1940s, was not built until 1915.⁸⁴ Its population was almost exclusively male in the early years. Indeed, the new building had space for forty-four men and eight women, further indication of the dominance of men in British Columbia's public old-age homes.⁸⁵

Victoria's Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA) also became involved in providing accommodation for aged men.⁸⁶ In 1884 the CCBA rented a small wooden hut and established a *Tiapinfang* (small hospital). Five years later the association purchased

⁸⁰ Harvey, *Study of Chronic Diseases*.

⁸¹ The Home for Aged and Infirm Ladies, opened in 1897 and still operating as Rose Manor, was established by women of Victoria's Friendly Help Association when civic authorities refused to open a home for elderly women. See Ida Gould, *History of the Aged and Infirm Women's Home* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1928).

⁸² VCA, Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, box 9, file 1, Reports of the Home Committee, 1 and 17 April 1906.

⁸³ These data are based on patients' applications. VCA, Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-1956. Unskilled workers also dominated the male populations of Ontario's institutions for the aged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Sharon Cook, "A Quiet Place ... to Die": Ottawa's First Protestant Old Age Homes for Women and Men," *Ontario History* 81, 1 (March 1989): 28-9; and Stormi Stewart, "The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 3 (1992): 224.

⁸⁴ Aged indigents were housed in the old city hospital, the old civic jail, and at the crematory caretaker's house. See "May Turn Ranch into Home for Aged," *Province*, 21 August 1906, p. 1.

⁸⁵ "Report of the Old People's Home, 1917," *Medical Health Officer's Report*, City of Vancouver, 1917, p. 22.

⁸⁶ The Provincial Home Act, 1893, excluded Chinese from admission to the Kamloops facility. See Peter S. Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37-9. No specific regulations prohibited Chinese men from entering Victoria's old men's home, but their absence is striking considering their often destitute circumstances. My conclusion is that Chinese men were probably barred from the civic facility.

a lot on Herald Street and build the *Zhonghua Yiyuan* (Chinese hospital), a two-story brick edifice.⁸⁷ In 1929, when the CCBA was unable to pay taxes on the property, the City of Victoria took possession of the hospital and leased it back to the association for a monthly rent of thirty dollars.⁸⁸ Henceforth the City of Victoria actively supported the Chinese hospital, an indication both of the racial segregation of social welfare in British Columbia and of the plight of aging Chinese men.

The public homes where lonesome prospectors lived in their last years reflected a Poor-Law ethic. Poor-Law practices and Poor-Law regulations were still features of public old-age homes when Leonard Marsh and others crafted the welfare state after the Second World War.⁸⁹ Men entering the Provincial Home for Aging Men, Victoria's Home for the Aged and Infirm, or the civic old people's home in Vancouver were meant to be destitute. Any assets had to be turned over to the state.⁹⁰

Moral behaviour and respect for authority were important principles in these establishments. A document signed by men entering the provincial home states: "The inmates of the Home are required to be clean in their persons and habits and to do their utmost to keep up the respectability and tone of the establishment."⁹¹ At both the provincial home and Victoria's old men's home inmates could not leave without permission, and neither swearing nor alcohol was permitted.⁹² Insubordinate inmates faced expulsion.

Inmates in Victoria's Home for the Aged and Infirm did gardening, housework, and general labour. As at the provincial home, their work was an important element of the institutional economy before inmate infirmity increased and old-age pensions became widespread.⁹³ Like workhouses and refuges for the aged elsewhere, these were not at-

⁸⁷ Lai, "From Self-Segregation to Integration," 54. There was also a Chinese old men's home in New Westminster.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56-61.

⁸⁹ Snell observes that even when poorhouses evolved into old-age homes, they continued to be associated with their earlier function (see Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, 70-1).

⁹⁰ Residents who left Taylor Manor received back funds relinquished upon entering, minus a charge for their keep. See Guest, "Taylor Manor," 27. By the late 1930s, the estates of patients in the provincial infirmary system were charged a daily maintenance fee. See BCARS, GR 277, box 5, file 1, 17 October 1950, memo from I.R. Buckley, Bursar, Provincial Infirmary, to A.W.E. Pitkethley; and *Ibid.*, 2 November 1950, memo from A.D. Turnbull, Minister, to Lloyd Detwiller.

⁹¹ BCARS, GR 496, box 12, file 1, "Rules and Regulations for the Government of the Provincial Home," 25 July 1895.

⁹² Rules for the inmates were set out in the 1892 Home Committee Report. See VCA, Clerk's Department, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-1956, box 2, file 2, 28 October 1892, "Home for Aged and Infirm Committee's Report."

tractive, home-like places. Visitors were struck by the bleak surroundings and the empty lives of inmates. The Vancouver Old People's Home had dormitories where "a single bare light bulb glared from the centre of the ceiling and white beds with white coverlets stood mutely side by side."⁹⁴ An observer at the provincial home in the 1940s found that food became a focus of residents' lives: inmates began lining up more than a quarter of an hour before meals.⁹⁵ Magazines brought into the institution quickly vanished, taken by inmates desperate for imaginative stimulation and news from the wider world.⁹⁶

Yet when measured against the punitive regimes and harsh conditions in similar state institutions elsewhere at this time, the inmates of British Columbia's public homes for the aged seem to have been relatively fortunate.⁹⁷ Rules and discipline were certainly features of these institutions, but they were not always rigid. In Victoria during the 1930s and 1940s, for example, the superintendent not only tolerated the inmates' monthly visits to the nearby "wet" municipality of Saanich but was at the tramstop to meet the men when they returned and to help them to bed.⁹⁸ Indeed, the men and women who ran the provincial home, the Provincial Infirmary, and Victoria's old men's home during this period were noteworthy for their kindness and flexibility. Old people in private and charitable facilities appear much more likely to have received cruel or abusive treatment.⁹⁹

Thus, while both outdoor relief and state homes for the aged embodied elements of Poor-Law philosophy, its harsher aspects appear to have been muted. The presence of the lonesome prospector, mythologized by his pioneering contribution to the province, was partly responsible. But the historical moment at which British Columbia's public old-age homes came into being was also important. In British Columbia state facilities were built relatively late and were established specifically for the aged. They did not evolve from houses of industry,

⁹³ VCA, City Clerk's Office, series Man-4, Committee Reports, 1885-1956, box 18, file 18, 21 July 1924, "Report of the Home Committee"; Report of Home for Aged and Infirm for Year ending 31 December 1894, *City Report, 1894*, pp. 46-52; J. McIntosh, "Report of the Home Manager," 17 March 1920, *City Report, 1920*, p. 120.

⁹⁴ Guest, "Taylor Manor," 20.

⁹⁵ Harvey, *Study of Chronic Diseases*, 21.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁷ See Note 69.

⁹⁸ Oak Bay Municipality, Clerk's Office, David Havard, "Memoir," 7.

⁹⁹ The report of the 1933 inquiry into the Maple Rest Nursing Home in Victoria shows the kinds of abuse that the elderly might have suffered in private institutions run for profit. See VCA, City Clerk's Office, series Man-4, Committee Reports, box 22, file 4, Minutes of a Meeting of the Health (Special) Committee, 31 July 1933.

as in central and eastern Canada, the United States, and Britain.¹⁰⁰ It was clear from the outset that the BC institutions were for needy aged people rather than, as the argument went elsewhere, for degenerate workhouse inmates punishable for their insolvency. The manner in which British Columbia's Indigent Fund was administered offered the possibility of a more humane and sensitive approach, yet the paternalism of this earlier system could not easily be transposed onto the provincial pension bureaucracy of the 1930s.¹⁰¹

THE PROFESSIONAL WELFARE STATE AND THE LONESOME PROSPECTOR

The blend of Poor-Law philosophy and paternalistic practice that characterized early provision for aged British Columbians was re-ordered in the Depression era. T.D. Pattullo's Liberal government came to power in 1933 and took a sharp turn towards corporatism, adopting the idea that state and society was best run by "experts" who would mediate the rights and demands of varied interest groups.¹⁰²

The professional men and women that George Weir, Provincial Secretary, and Harry Cassidy, Provincial Director of Social Welfare, brought with them into the provincial bureaucracy did not initially see the aged as a specific or significant client group.¹⁰³ However, this shift towards a professional welfare state coincided with a growing interest in the elderly in Canadian public health and social work

¹⁰⁰A Montreal house of industry was incorporated in 1818, and similar institutions were established at Toronto in 1837 and in Kingston during the next decade. See William Forbes, Jennifer Jackson, and Arthur Kraus, *Institutionalization of the Elderly in Canada* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1987), 5-6. Rural poorhouses were set up in Ontario during the 1860s and 1870s (see Stewart, "The Elderly Poor in Rural Ontario"). For an analysis of the evolution of poorhouse to old-age home in the United States and Britain, see Michael B. Katz, "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 62, 1 (1984): 110-40; and M.A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System, 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Batsford, 1981), 89-90.

¹⁰¹David Roberts states that "in smallness lay the key to paternalism," arguing that the latter did not adapt well to urbanization, industrialization, or the welfare state. I think that paternalism was simply reordered in the welfare state, becoming a cornerstone of social worker-client relationship. See Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 180-1.

¹⁰²This interpretation of corporatism and the role of the "expert" in the corporate state is based on the ideas of Harold Perkin. See Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London: Routledge, 1989), chap. 8.

¹⁰³George Weir, minister responsible for health and social welfare, was Pattullo's key reform ally in the provincial cabinet. See Robin Fisher, *Duff Pattullo of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 233, 250-1; and Margaret Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Vancouver: Evergreen, 1958), 456-7.

circles. Moreover, health and welfare policy of the late 1930s brought the dilemma of the aged indigent into sharp relief.

These new welfare professionals envisioned compassionate care for the aged as a component of modern society.¹⁰⁴ Taking up the paternalistic mantle set aside when old-age pensions replaced the Indigent Fund, these men and women created the category of "elderly" as a client group beset by personal, social, and medical problems.¹⁰⁵ The use of professional personnel and of detailed medical and social case reports enhanced the power of "expert" over "personal" testimony.¹⁰⁶ As the lonesome prospector illustrates, the simultaneous emergence of the welfare state and "expert" opinion about the aged undermined the independent position of elderly people who relied on state assistance.¹⁰⁷

One might have expected the lonesome prospector to have disappeared during this period, erased by a professional need to categorize clients and a shifting provincial demography. But the image of the lonesome prospector, with his attractive combination of feisty independence and needy vulnerability, was seemingly irresistible to provincial bureaucrats. By the early 1940s the lonesome prospector had become the archetypal elderly client for government social workers and administrators. Amusing anecdotes about feisty old men, still living a vagabond existence, dot the pages of contemporary government reports and periodicals.¹⁰⁸

The reasons the new welfare professionals focused on the lonesome prospector are complex. Like their Poor-Law predecessors, the new

¹⁰⁴Illustrations of this philosophy can be found in annual reports of the social assistance branch. See, for example, "Report of the Social Assistance Branch, 1944-45," in *SP*, vol. 2, 1946, pp. R43-8.

¹⁰⁵My approach here is based on the thesis that state bureaucrats are active agents with their own policy agendas. Programs that they develop naturally reflect their own professional allegiances. For a fuller development of this approach, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 1-62. For an analysis of how doctors, social workers, and bureaucrats constructed the elderly as a social and medical problem, see Carole Haber, *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 127, 129. Canadian medical and social work journals of the 1940s and 1950s are replete with negative images of the elderly and the social problems that they created.

¹⁰⁶After 1938, for example, all new patients at the provincial infirmary had thorough medical examinations, patient medical records were kept, and applications for admission were accompanied by a social history. See BCARS, GR 496, box 23, file 12, "Annual Report of the Provincial Infirmary for the Year 1938-39."

¹⁰⁷Historians of old age see strong links between the marginalization of the elderly in modern society (the modernization thesis) and the growth of "expert" opinion about the aged. See David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Thomas R. Cole, "The Spectre of Old Age: History, Politics, and Culture in an Aging America," in *Growing Old in America*, 4th edition, edited by Beth B. Hess and Elizabeth W. Markson, 23-37 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1991).

¹⁰⁸BCARS, GR 496, box 17, file 2, *New Notes*, vol. 11, bulletin 8, January 1945.

bureaucrats believed that British Columbia's pioneers deserved to be cared for when they grew old.¹⁰⁹ Because these men were alone and vulnerable, it was expected that the state would assume the role of supportive family. As surrogate mothers, sisters, and daughters, female social workers dealt directly with elderly men, finding solutions to housing and home problems and mediating between the lonesome prospectors and the community. By claiming this group of clients as their own, welfare professionals carved out an important niche in the expanding welfare state.

Two policy initiatives of the Pattullo government reflect a new awareness of the indigent elderly and a perception of them as both vulnerable and problematic. The 1937 Hospital Clearances Program was a scheme to remove chronically ill patients from local hospitals. Provincial administrators found that elderly indigents, many of whom would have been lonesome prospectors, were the primary clientele for their new program.¹¹⁰ Female welfare field workers, the vanguard of Harry Cassidy's new professional welfare state, placed these elderly men and women in local homes or institutions. This was not an easy task. In Revelstoke in late 1939, we find a beleaguered field worker placating an elderly male client who, she believed, had "numerous persecutory ideas," while also trying to impress upon local medical personnel the need to gather specific information and follow regularized procedures.¹¹¹

The Welfare Institutions Licensing Act, 1937, created a board that monitored institutions for indigent men, women, and children, yet the office staff also found that they spent most of their time dealing with the elderly.¹¹² Indeed, the new legislation was largely based on the findings of the 1937 Bird Commission, established to investigate the treatment of aged occupants at homes for the friendless in Burnaby and Summerland.

The findings of the commission, and of a further commission the next year, underscored the fact that the dependent elderly could be manipulated and abused in unregulated accommodation.¹¹³ Because the aged were seen as defenceless, the state was obliged to protect and care for them. The solution was an expanded, professional welfare state.

¹⁰⁹ Snell notes the sentimentality of public rhetoric about pioneers who "had given their labour and their health to open up the Canadian frontier and to develop the modern Canadian economy" (see Snell, *The Citizen's Wage*, xv).

¹¹⁰ BCARS, GR 496, box 49, file 8, 2 June 1942, memo from Percy Ward to P. Walker.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, Welfare Field Service Report, 26 January 1939.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, box 49, file 5, "Annual Report of the Welfare Institutions Board for the Calendar Year 1942," p. 3.

The 1943 transformation of the provincial pension department, which saw it move from emphasizing accountancy to emphasizing social service administration, illustrates how older elements of paternalism now found a new, professional expression within the corporate welfare state. Responsibility for pensions was taken away from the Workmen's Compensation Board, and a new board was created with a social service division to deal with pension applications as well as housing and health problems. With a detailed application form giving information about a variety of aspects of the pensioner's life, those implementing the new policy argued that "the applicant could be seen as a human being, rather than a number."¹¹⁴

Health and social welfare administrators were well aware of the plight of single aging men. In fact, Amy Edwards, first supervisor of the new Social Service Department of the Provincial Pensions Department, frequently highlighted the lonesome prospector in the pages of her annual reports.¹¹⁵ In 1948 she asked, "What means have we of helping the old prospector preserve, in some degree, his sense of freedom and self-sufficiency?"¹¹⁶ But this fond portrait also contained harsh judgments about the ability of these men to live independently. The lonesome prospector is characterized as irresponsible, for his vagabond existence had never included thoughtful preparation for old age. Nor were his standards of living necessarily shared by social workers, as the 1949 report on Matthew Barker's "hermit's quarters" near Vernon makes clear: the investigating worker described Barker's dwelling as "almost tumbling down and extremely dirty."¹¹⁷

Edwards and her colleagues argued that social workers should have wide-ranging involvement in the lives of their aged clients. Old-age pensions were therefore only one facet of state services for elderly men and women. In an increasingly competitive world the old-age pensioner needed protection and guidance.¹¹⁸ Even the complex regu-

¹¹³ BCARS, GR 907, Report and Evidence concerning the Home of the Friendless (1937); and GR 911, British Columbia Commission of Welfare Institutions and Nursing Homes (1938).

¹¹⁴ This policy shift is detailed in Eleanor Mathewson, "Old Age Pensions in British Columbia: A Review of Trends in Eligibility" (msw thesis, University of British Columbia, 1949), 44-5.

¹¹⁵ Amy Edwards is an example of British Columbia's new breed of welfare professionals and was one of the first geriatric "experts" in the province. A graduate of the University of Toronto, she studied at the New York School of Social Work and held the post of Supervisor of Welfare Field Services from 1937 to 1943, when she moved to the Pensions Department. See H.M. Cassidy, "Personnel Changes in British Columbia," *Canadian Welfare Summary* 14, 4 (November 1938): 43-5; and Mathewson, "Old Age Pensions in British Columbia," 44-5.

¹¹⁶ "Report of the Social Welfare Branch, 1947-48," *SP*, vol. 1, 1949, p. P-62.

¹¹⁷ BCARS, GR 131, box 4, envelope P.

¹¹⁸ This is a recurring theme in professional writing about the aged. For example, see "Annual Report of the Old-Age Pension Board," *SP*, vol. 2, 1945, p. T-12.

lations governing assistance or pension application forms might overwhelm a person who had spent his life in an oral culture.¹¹⁹ The lonesome prospector belonged to an earlier and simpler “pioneer” era and was therefore too “unworldly” to cope with modern society. The bureaucrat and the social worker, connected with the urban milieu of the corporate state and the university, were ideal intermediaries between the solitary pioneer and the mid-twentieth-century community.

Many professionals had a great deal of compassion and affection for the lonesome prospectors who were their clients. The social worker who visited Matthew Barker was charmed by his “devilish brown eyes,” the “mess of white hair coming down over his forehead,” and his propensity for dancing a jig to demonstrate how fit he was.¹²⁰ But, while the earlier, *laissez-faire* arrangements of Indigent Fund administrators fostered independence where possible, the new bureaucrats did not believe that the lonesome prospector had a legitimate place in modern society. Cast as a “character” and separated from his female social worker by a mammoth void of education, class, and gender, the lonesome prospector would have found it difficult to hold on to his cherished independence.

Moreover, while the main purpose of the Indigent Fund was to care for those in need, the hospital clearances scheme, like other state initiatives of the period, was reform with an economic rationale. The initial survey and planning for the new program focused on the fact that removing elderly chronic patients from hospitals would save the province much-needed funds. The concerns of the elderly people who became clients of the new bureaucracy were therefore often secondary to the administrative requirements of the state and the professional aspirations of those who crafted and implemented policy.

CONCLUSION

It is doubtful that many British Columbians today hold the image of the lonesome prospector in their minds when they think of the province’s aged. In demographic terms single aging men are now even more marginal than they were before, although they are still over-represented among institutional populations; instead, British Columbia has now become the ultimate Canadian retirement location for those who can afford escalating housing prices in its mild coastal areas.

¹¹⁹“Report of the Social Assistance Branch, 1944-45,” *SP*, vol. 2, 1946, p. R-45.

¹²⁰BCARS, GR 131, box 4, envelope P.

Yet we should not forget the lonesome prospector. As historian Michael Katz acknowledges, there has remained in the public mind a profound connection between old-age homes, poverty, and death.¹²¹ This is a powerful legacy of our lonesome prospectors, the group most closely associated with older Poor-Law institutions in the province. Even today, some older Victoria residents still speak of the Home for the Aged and Infirm, closed nearly thirty years ago, in tones of dread and horror.¹²² Statistically, the percentage of elderly men and women who enter old-age homes is small, but the negative cultural image of public institutional care for the aged renders the decision to enter residential accommodation potentially traumatic for elders and family alike.

Historically, the lonesome prospector is linked to an older, needs-based welfare state that those of us raised with universal pensions and medicare find unsettling. Yet much of the recent thought concerning the welfare state points to a return to earlier values and diminished state provision.¹²³ Current research suggests that the "lonesome prospector" of the future will be a female whose economic well-being has been undermined by divorce and wage-earning years spent raising children and caring for elderly relatives.¹²⁴ In this fashion the life stories of lonesome prospectors serve to warn us of the extreme vulnerability of the aged poor when state support is limited or given only to those deemed "worthy" of assistance.

For scholars, the case of the lonesome prospector demonstrates how regional particularities of demography, economy, politics, and professional development shaped the growth of the health and social welfare state. The lonesome prospector also shows how popular mythology and stereotyped images of those in need become infused into administrative culture. The picture that emerges from the western province includes shades of paternalism, the Poor Law, and welfare professionalism. It is this complexity of region, ideology, and practice that we need to incorporate into our analysis of the broader evolution of the Canadian welfare state.

¹²¹Katz, "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home."

¹²²Interviews conducted by Brenda Davies with Beth and Vic Simmons and Dr. J. MacPherson in Victoria, British Columbia, during October 1990. MacPherson, a dentist, said that facilities like the Old Men's Home were "sad places" and that "conditions were dreadful, yes, terrible."

¹²³For a discussion of this trend in the American context, see, Blanche D. Coll, *Safety Net: Welfare and Social Security, 1929-1979* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 277-88.

¹²⁴See, for example, Michael F. Hopkinson, "One Foot in the Grave: The Consequences of Canada's Ageing Population," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 11, 2 (1996): 177-84.