APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY FORMATION AND THE FAMILY IN THE PROVINCIAL NORTH

*Prince George and British Columbia's Central Interior**

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"IN THE 1950S," one of my informants told me at the beginning of this study, "Prince George was a place to come, and put in your time, and then get the hell out." Then, she continued, "I found somewhere along the line, probably in the '60s, that people began to think of Prince George as the place they were going to stay and raise their family." She suggested that many left as soon as they retired, but that that too began to change in the 1980s. She herself remained in the city after living and working there from the mid-1950s to retirement several years ago.[1] The friends she had made and the fact that Prince George had "grown on her" so much in the last forty years, she claimed, left her unwilling to leave at age sixty-five.

The point that I would like to begin with strikes me as a central consideration in beginning a study of community formation in Prince George in the post-World War II era. The most significant context is rapid growth — growth in population, the economy, and complexity in social interaction. As a city whose history was significantly shaped by the arrival of the pulp industry in the early 1960s, Prince George should be understood as part of a broad pattern of suburbanization seen in comparable locales in Canada's provincial norths. As Ken Coates and William Morrison observed in their recent survey of Canada's "middle north," cities like Prince George, with good freight rail connections, access to rich timber resources and new pulp mills, boomed after the Second World War. Unlike mining, pulp production provided long-term stability despite its dependency on international economic cycles. As American and overseas markets developed and

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[1] Interview #1, 14 December 1993.

expanded, so did populations in cities throughout the provincial norths.[2] While Prince George may not have seemed attractive in the 1950s for newcomers, who soon comprised the bulk of the population, the following decades brought enormous changes that transformed the urban landscape. Housing, schools, churches, shopping centres, community health, and social services — the entire array of downtown core and suburban facilities that supported Canada's contemporary consumer culture — were constructed or expanded in Prince George. That newcomers began to think of Prince George as a place to raise their families and, later, to retire in does not seem surprising.

On this basis the city can be approached as a case-study indicative of a relatively stable and expanding forest products and supply and service centre. The nature of family life and social interaction among newcomers was an important feature of Prince George's recent history, and will become the focus for the final section of this paper. At the outset, however, I would like to introduce potential approaches to the study of Prince George in the postwar era based on interpretive frameworks found in the rich Canadian and American literature on community studies.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Objectives

Three aims are attempted in this section:

(1) To indicate the importance of placing Prince George in the context of significant demographic shifts that occurred in British Columbia and throughout much of urban Canada during this period. The basic point here is that the national and provincial populations and economies also experienced dramatic growth which had a direct impact on Prince George.

(2) To draw a distinction between local history and urban processes. This study will explore historical approaches that consider how families and communities experienced their lives in a dominant-industry locale undergoing rapid growth. Specific aspects of community formation can be probed by assessing Prince George as a case-study rather than as a subject for a city biography.

[2] Ken Coates and William Morrison, *The Forgotten North: A History of Canada's Provincial Norths* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1992), especially chap. 6.

(3) To consider the importance of economic transformation in the forest industry in the early 1960s. The sawmill era, which at its peak comprised nearly 700 individual mills in the Prince George Forest District, ended in the early 1960s with consolidation, technological change, and the depletion of first-growth stands. In 1961 the first of what would become three pulp mills began production (the first mill also produces paper products). Since then, the pulp industry has dominated the local economy, though Prince George did not become a single-industry town.

Discussion

In a recent article designed to introduce the "social context and diversity" of contemporary urban Canada, social geographers D. F. Ley and L. S. Bourne plunge into their formidably broad topic with the following observation: "This country, with its relatively sparce population, and its export-led and resource-based economy, both spread over a vast territory, has always exhibited considerable economic dependence, substantial regional diversity, and strong attachments to local places and spaces."[3] It seems a particularly well-crafted statement to begin consideration of the postwar boom period because though it applies to Canada as a whole it is especially relevant to Prince George as a dominant-industry town in British Columbia's central interior.

Growth in functional complexity in Canada's urban history in this period accompanied demographic changes which affected social relations in the workforce, families, and local communities. In particular, increased marriage rates, unusually high fertility (the 1948-63 "baby boom"), and high foreign immigration levels led to unprecedented levels of household formation. New housing starts continued to the mid-1970s. Given such pervasive national trends, structural factors affecting community formation in Prince George, whose population grew from 4,703 in 1951 to 13,877 in 1961,[4] should be measured in terms of growth patterns experienced across Canada. As a starting point, local census data should be compared to provincial and national trends.

While such structural indices provide an important context for assessing social and economic processes in Prince George during this

[3] D. F. Ley and L. S. Bourne, "Introduction: The Social Context and Diversity of Urban Canada," in Larry S. Bourne and David S. Ley (eds.), *The Changing Social Geography of Canadian Cities* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 3.

[4] *Census of Canada*, 1961. Population, Historical, 1901-1961, Bulletin 1.1-10, 6-87.

period, specific methods are required to address the social consequences of demographic change. To do this a distinction needs to be drawn between local history and what is now typically referred to as the "new urban history," though its influence blossomed back the early 1970s.

Prince George can be approached as a specific case-study, or *locale*, demarcated from other social-geographic boundaries as a practical means to gather and assess data. Locally based research can generate data that is both coherent and measurable, yet adequate in terms of its potential for broad conclusions. This method now stands as one of the most important innovations in contemporary social history. In a perceptive essay, published in 1980 during the rapid accumulation of local case-studies in American social history, Kathleen Neils Conzen concluded succinctly that the task of such scholarship "becomes the analysis of the changing consequences of locality, of place itself, for those living within a place and for society at large."[5]

The "changing consequences of locality" can lead to countless historical inquiries. Studies of family history, class formation, social mobility, gender, ethnicity, social control, and community formation and/or disintegration now hold their places in the spectrum of socio-historical dimensions that have been considered through studies of particular locales.

With respect to life cycles, gender relations, and family strategies, to cite one recent and excellent example, Bettina Bradbury's use of Montreal's Sainte Anne and Saint Jacques wards led to important findings concerning the social impact of industrialization during the late nineteenth century.[6] Another successful case-study application is Joy Parr's comparison of Paris and Hanover, Ontario to examine gender construction from 1880 to 1950. "On one level this is a work of local history," Parr stated in introducing her approach to gender history.[7] Though her work contributes much to our historical knowledge of these industrial towns, it reveals, more importantly, the potential local analysis offers to interpret relationships among such things as gender, family, the workplace, and *agency*, or the power to act within these or other categories.

[5] Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Community Studies, Urban History, and American Local History," in Michael Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 289-90.

[6] Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).

[7] Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

It should be pointed out that historians did not pioneer the case-study method, social scientists did.[8] Their efforts continue to forge important new interpretations. An insightful contemporary application in Canada is sociologist Meg Luxten's critical assessment of gender relations in Flin Flon, a mining community in Manitoba's provincial north.[9]

As comparative newcomers to locally based methods, historians have and should continue to apply interdisciplinary perspectives. Bradbury, Parr, and Luxten all seek conclusions which not only speak to issues beyond their respective locales, but indicate the value of seeing beyond limits imposed by academic compartments if not departments. Paul Voisey recognized this when he wrote that "the topics pursued must have significance that transcends the boundaries of the study area itself. As with good fiction, universal themes must emerge from specific locality. And because such themes eschew events in favour of structures and processes, good local history cannot ignore other scholarly disciplines."[10] This study of Prince George is currently proceeding on this basis.

While Voisey may have gone further in applying interdisciplinary concepts in his study of Vulcan, Alberta, his development of a four-factor model for rural community formation could be tested in other contexts. Voisey considered the lure of the frontier, the heritage of settlers, the physical environment they encountered, and metropolitan influences to explain the "making" of Vulcan.[11] All four could be considered in Prince George. The interplay between the city and metropolitan as well as environmental forces seem particularly significant for the central interior or, for that matter, for other communities situated in provincial norths.

As areas high in natural wealth, comparatively low in population and affected by economic, environmental, and social changes, all was not well in northern resource-based communities in the postwar decades. Such places, Coates and Morrison concluded in depressing

[8] Paul Voisey, "Rural Local History and the Prairie West," in R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (eds.), *The Prairie West: Historical Readings* Rev. 2nd Ed., (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1992), 498. While the Chicago School of Sociology greatly influenced the generation of post-1920 urbanologists, comparable scholarship thrived elsewhere in North America during the interwar period. See Alan I. Marcus, "Back to the Present: Historians' Treatment of the City as a Social System During the Reign of the Idea of Community," in Howard Gillette, Jr., and Zane L. Miller (eds.), *American Urbanism: A Historiographical Review* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 7-26.

[9] Meg Luxten, *More Than A Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980).

[10] Voisey, "Rural Local History and the Prairie West," *The Prairie West*, 501-02.

[11] Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

terms, "have been developed with little system or view to the future. There are occasional bursts of enthusiasm about the regions. Individual governments offer their residents a short-lived vision of massive northern development, and some activity usually follows. Mines open, railway construction starts (and is sometimes completed), highways are built, forestry operations expanded and hydro-electric projects undertaken. But at the end of the day, little has changed, except that the natives have been pushed off more of their land, many of the non-natives have left, the land has been scarred, and little of lasting benefit has been left for the region."[12] Prince George's place in this picture is somewhat brighter given that relatively stable community formation has taken place supported by a relatively healthy and diversified economy during the postwar decades. Yet the city developed as part of the mid-northern zone that Coates and Morrison describe, and continues to share many of its problems.

This turns our attention to considerations of core/periphery interactions. As a case study, isolated for data collection purposes, Prince George's development in the 1950s and 1960s should be approached with due recognition of metropolitan-hinterland relationships. As well, interaction between Prince George and its immediate surroundings, be it the "central interior," B.C.'s "provincial north," or other delineations, requires careful definition.

Nodal regions, for example, situated conceptually by central place theory suggests a hierarchy of economic, political, and social forces that should be considered when exploring community formation in Prince George.

Frontier influences, on the other hand, are also important if Prince George is considered as part of a provincial north strata. In this context a sufficiently uniform region with respect to physical environment and resource dependency comes into play. "The concept of city-region as both engine and product of territorial expansion and economic growth has been especially applicable to North America," according to Carl Abbott, "offering a framework to describe the development and organization of successive frontiers and to explain the relative fortunes of cities and sections."[13]

Historians need to be aware of the contrasting influences of nodal regions created by metropolitan forces, and uniform regions shaped by factors experienced in specific geographical area such as physical

[12] Coates and Morrison, *The Forgotten North*, 5-6.

[13] Carl Abbott, "Frontiers and Sections: Cities and Regions in American Growth," in Gillette, Jr., and Miller (eds.), *American Urbanism*, 272-3.

environment or dominant economy. The interplay of metropolitanism, something J. M. S. Careless helps explain in a Canadian context, and of frontier with its theoretical roots embedded, I shudder to note, in Turnerian debates, is no doubt complex. But sorting out the influence of each should prove useful.

A rare example of applying metropolitan analysis to the Prince George Forest District appears in an article by Gordon Hak, derived from his doctoral research. Hak considers how markets and capital from the prairie provinces served as exogenous forces that made and broke the forest industry in Prince George from the early twentieth century to the beginning of the Depression.[14] Since the fur trade era, settlement in or near Prince George has been governed heavily by external factors.

For the postwar period this leads us to consider the social impact of a significant shift in the forest industry surrounding Prince George. Sawmill industry dominance ended in the early 1960s. Pulpmills more than superseded it, they created a new economy driven by much larger scales of production. Though a comprehensive historical study of this transition has yet to be completed for the Prince George Forest District, interviews I have conducted thus far suggest an area of potential interest to labour historians, forest history, and historical geography.

Between 1939 and 1956 the number of active sawmills in the Prince George Forest District grew from 43 to 687. "The typical operation," Doreen K. Mullins wrote in her study of the industry, "consisted of crude sawing equipment, a lumber truck and a small timber sale. With the higher lumber prices and increased demand of the 1940's and 1950's scores of people flocked to the Northern Interior to make their fortunes in the lumbering industry."[15] This industry and its workforce had, as one informant put it, "a tremendous impact on what kind of place Prince George was . . . we were really regarded as a sawmill town in those days."[16] The weekend forays of forest workers into hotels like "the Europe," "the Canada," or "the Columbus" provided

[14] Gordon Hak, "Prairie Capital, Prairie Markets and Prairie Labour: The Forest Industry in the Prince George Forest District, British Columbia, 1910-1930," *Prairie Forum* 14 (Spring 1989):9-22. A thorough comparison of capital and labour formation in Port Alberni and Prince George appears in Hak's thesis, "On the Fringes: Capital and Labour in the Forest Economies of the Port Alberni and Prince George Districts, British Columbia, 1910-1939," (Ph.D. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 1986).

[15] Doreen Katherine Mullins, "Changes in Location and Structure in the Forest Industry of North Central British Columbia: 1909-1966," (M.A. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1967), 32.

[16] Interview #1, 14 December 1993.

an impromptu local theatre for the "townies," who gathered outside to watch the scenes after closing time.[17] One mill worker from Giscome, then in his early twenties, admitted to "having some good times in those days."[18] A peculiar split vision between mill workers' views of Prince George and vice versa tends to crop up in my interview data.

Many of the sawmill towns and smaller operations from Prince George to Dome Creek were about to shrink or disappear. By the early 1960s, rapid consolidation was taking place, and though the larger mills along the "East Line" of the Canadian National Railway enjoyed a few good years while timber supplies lasted, they too have since been transformed or replaced by technology and amalgamation. How workers and families experienced this transition seems well worth exploring, as suggested below. In effect, a new era began with the creation of the Prince George Pulp and Paper Company in 1961. The demographic impact of the sawmill-to-pulpmill transition can be traced through census data, though Prince George's growing service centre function also shaped the city's economic profile.

At this point it would be useful to review some salient local features of Prince George before considering a city profile based on the 1961 census as well as a brief discussion concerning the potential oral history might hold to explore family life and community formation in the postwar era.

LOCAL FEATURES

After use for thousands of years by First Nations peoples, the confluence of the Fraser and Nechako rivers also became the site for a Hudson's Bay Company post, Fort George, which served the area's fur trade economy throughout the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth, white settlers around Fort George and backers of a new townsite, South Fort George, vied to be chosen for the first railroad station site by the Grand Trunk Pacific. In 1914 the GTP created its own townsite between the two, Prince George, which was incorporated as a city the following year.[19] The new city remained a modest settlement, though it came to dominate local commerce and helped support the railway needs of the surrounding timber industry. Its population reached 2,053 in 1921, but soon levelled off.

[17] Interview #2, 16 December 1993, and Interview #6, 4 January 1993.

[18] Interview #14, 22 August 1994.

[19] Frank Leonard, "Grand Trunk Pacific and the Establishment of the City of Prince George, 1911-1915," *BC Studies* 63 (Autumn 1984): 29-54. See also Frank E. Runnals *A History of Prince George* (Prince George: n.p., 1983).

The vissitudes of the area's forest staples and railway traffic held Prince George's growth in check throughout the interwar period. While the Grand Trunk Pacific (later Canadian National) railroad was the city's largest employer, supply and service functions also comprised an important part of the area's fledgling economy. Prince George served as a market hub for nearby agricultural districts that included Salmon River Valley, Mud River Valley, Beaverly, Nichol, Isle Pierre, Reid Lake, and Pineview. More importantly, the above-mentioned series of small sawmill communities located along the CN's East Line, comprising Willow River, Giscome, Sinclair Mills, Hutton, Longworth, Penny, and Dome Creek, also fell within Prince George's immediate supply and service vicinity. Their populations fluctuated seasonally. The downtown presence of laid-off forest workers, especially during spring break-up, really put a stamp on the "kind of town" Prince George was in the 1950s.[20]

The Second World War brought an invasion of military personnel and rapid construction,[21] but it was the revival of timber markets and resource-based demands throughout northern B.C. in the early 1950s that primed the pump for dramatic economic growth and population increase during the decades that followed.

This formed the structural backdrop for probing the social history of the area, which I began by interviewing a small (just over thirty individuals at present), but often knowledgable group of residents. Some were born in Prince George, but most had vivid impressions of how their lives intersected with historical changes — often dramatic changes that occurred from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s when the new pulp industry, sustained economic growth throughout northern B.C., and rapid suburbanization transformed their city.

Since mobility was high in this period, this obviously represents a skewed sample. Those that stayed were not necessarily typical, but by virtue of their long-term residence they are now part of a more established community. How "community" in Prince George developed and what kinds of groups should be assessed opens up a wide debate that incorporates the roles of ethnicity, gender, class, life cycles, family relations, and other variables that affect social interaction on a local level. One approach, discussed below, that I am using to assess community formation is aimed at balancing local specificity with useful generalizations. Family relations and family-community rela-

[20] Interview #1, 14 December 1993.

[21] Tom Makowsky, "Prince George at War," in Thomas Thorner (ed.), *Sa Ts'e: Historical Perspectives on Northern British Columbia* (Prince George: College of New Caledonia Press, 1989), 441-60.

tions (examining interactions between private and public spheres), I believe, afford important research dimensions through which community life can be approached.

When I began, my first aim was to uncover, in a very general way, aspects of life in Prince George in the 1950s and early 1960s that might warrant further study. Anyone else beginning as I did might well stumble upon other topics or key questions. Nonetheless, my basic concern as a social historian was to explore how families and individuals that still reside in Prince George experienced their lives in a city undergoing rapid growth. Life cycles, gender, ethnicity, class, and family relations underlay my selection and interviewing processes.

Though a small city, Prince George was mostly populated by newcomers by the end of the 1950s, and the diversity of life experiences presents a challenge to any researcher. Certainly the city was not unique in this regard. But, in most applications, firm conclusions drawn from oral history cannot be made without contextual evidence that sheds light on a larger picture concerning, for example, changes or continuities in demographic or economic structures. Without grounding qualitative findings in census data or other quantifiable indices, the oral historian is poorly equipped to measure some of the basic dimensions listed above that influence community formation history. How "community" itself is defined is also crucial.

Sociologists have long been concerned with analysing social behaviours based on various definitions of community. As far back as 1955, George Hillery unearthed some ninety-five different definitions of community in the literature. Three elements were fundamental: commonality among people, social interaction, and common land.[22]

With a rapidly expanding population moving into Prince George and its suburbs, commonality among people was certainly not based on a shared local history. Furthermore, apart from the small core of established residents, social interaction in the early 1950s seems only to have begun to create networks affecting significant portions of the growing population.

One important exception was work. Throughout my interviews, informants who arrived at this time often recalled how important coworkers were in establishing social contact. Many reported that making friends at work, quickly, was something that people felt comfortable doing. In short, my fieldwork suggests, not surprisingly, that recently arrived residents were preoccupied with settling in to work-

[22] Linda Stoneall, *Country Life, City Life: Five Theories of Community* (New York: Praeger, 1983).

centred lives, though several admitted that they had no intention of staying on in Prince George. The workplace often became the easiest place to secure some continuity in social interaction in a highly mobile community. This seems to have applied at all levels, from professionals to unskilled labourers.

In this case, Hillery's "commonality among people" in forming community may have boiled down to the fact that most workers were relatively young. Moreover, by 1961 almost a third of Prince George's population had lived in the city for less than five years. Processes leading to local roots and local loyalties began among newcomers, but could not congeal until their residence in Prince George became firmly established.

As well, it seems that Prince George was not what Harold Kaufman and one of his students, Kenneth P. Wilkinson, refer to as an "interactional community," that is a community constructed on the strength of reasonably empowered majority.[23] As Gilbert Stelter and Alan Artibise have noted, a "common feature of resource towns is a simplified occupational structure. The middle class is relatively weak and usually confined to small group of merchants and professionals."[24] This appears more true of Prince George at the beginning of my period of study than at the end. It took a "reasonably empowered majority" some time to acquaint themselves with each other in order to build community ties that, as I have discovered, are quite apparent today.

At the other end of the socio-economic scale, Prince George was divided between rich and poor, partly due to the arrival immediately after the war of lower-income residents in an area on the outskirts of the city known as the Island Cache.

The Island Cache is an interesting local feature because its physical presence was erased from the local scene with wholesale evacuation and the creation of a municipal park, Cottonwood Island Park, in the late 1970s. Social memories of the Cache are now held only by those who lived there, worked there, or perceived the area as outsiders.[25] No public symbol of it remains, and its primary evidence is scattered.[26]

[23] Kenneth P. Wilkinson, *The Community in Rural America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

[24] Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan F. J. Artibise, "Canadian Resource Towns in Historical Perspective," in *Shaping the Urban Landscape: Aspects of the Canadian City-Building Process* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1982), 415.

[25] On class and group memories in western societies see James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), especially chap. 3.

[26] One potentially useful source is "Cottonwood Island — A Report of Desirable Land Use, November, 1970," a copy of which was supplied to me by the town planner of that time.

Its residents were located on the southern bank of the Nechako river, just before it joins the Fraser. From the city's perspective, the Cache was located literally on the "other side of the tracks" in an industrialized zone across from the CN yard, north of River Road.

Originally known as Foley's Cache, a storage site for the firm of Foley, Welch and Stewart, this riverfront area went from a choice residential location in the interwar period to a low-income, partly industrialized neigbourhood. A housing strip in the Cache called Planer Mill Row had been hastily built to serve the postwar sawmill industry.

The Row included houses for skilled mill workers, typically welders, millrights, or sawyers. They build their own dwellings with company-supplied lumber on company-supplied land. But by the late 1950s, several informants have reported, the neighbourhood was abandoned and re-occupied by several metis families.

One metis woman who spent part of her youth there recalled that "normally being a resident of the Cache, I probably would have shunned away" from community events. In reference to a city hall function she did attend, accompanied by a worker with the Company of Young Canadians, she admitted that otherwise "I wouldn't think of going" to such events.[27]

For historians, or other researchers, assessments of the Island Cache could be made from a number of perspectives. Oral history might provide a key to unlocking experiences concerning, for example, self-perceptions and identity constructions in a small, socio-economically disadvantaged community on the margins of Prince George. How did residents in the Cache experience their lives while living adjacent to a city undergoing rapid economic development, housing construction, and population increase? How, in turn, were they perceived by Prince George residents?

As elsewhere, approaches to community formation in Prince George should recognize potential cleavages based on class as well as ethnicity. Class differences may have been accentuated by several factors. First, there was a small nucleus of middle-class residents whose family histories in Prince George date back to the interwar period, if not further. Transiency was high and differences between established residents and labouring sojourners were probably a noticeable local characteristic.

Interview informants to date include a former resident and a former elementary school principal who had several years' experience in the small school that served Island Cache.

[27] Interview #14, 22 August 1994.

Secondly, the settled community seemed to welcome the significant influx of middle-class newcomers who began to arrive in the mid-1950s. Many were young professionals. As noted above, newcomers often formed interactional groups based on occupation, though many did not stay long. Those that did appear to have formed friendship networks with the established middle class.

Of the men, many I interviewed joined with other male residents, new and old, to strengthen community service clubs. This appears to have provided an important means of integrating mainly middle-class men into community life. The Kinsmen, Rotary, and Lions clubs, along with other service and community associations, were quite active in Prince George at this time. As one informant, then a young dentist, put it: "there was always something going on . . . two meetings a month, parties all the time. There was the Firemen's Ball, there was the RCMP Ball, there was the Rotary Ball, the Rotary Installation Ball, there was the Lions Club. There were all sorts of clubs. They had all sorts of things on the go."[28]

Many of the attitudes, values, and beliefs expressed in the memories of my middle-class informants need to be placed in historical perspectives that transcend local boundaries. Values, for example, placed on home ownership or constructing a community reflecting the aspirations of young parents and children seem rooted in a postwar suburban experience. Local particularisms were influential to be sure, but much of what I am collecting in these and comparable samples suggests a much broader social history.

Yet many aspects, particularly in the 1950s, have a purely local flavour. As mentioned, one peculiarity was the view outsiders held of the sawmill camp workers who came to whoop it up in the hotels. "I guess the thing I remember the most," the same dentist related

> was the number of single men in their '50s. . . . A lot of them never married and they worked in the sawmills, lived in the Europe Hotel, the National Hotel, and some of the old rooming houses downtown. There were just hundreds of single men . . . chronic bachelors, ex-army types, and whatever. Fellas who just drifted around and finally got too old to get married. I guess marriage wasn't in their future. I had hundreds of them as patients. They didn't really have . . . a goal or an aim — the goal was to stay alive, I guess, and take a job. . . . They were good people . . . their wants were simple . . . they'd get boozed up every Friday or Saturday night. People [who] stayed in the

[28] Interview #6, 4 January 1994.

> Macdonald would say you'd get a corner room on the alley and just stick their head out in the summertime, or whenever, and watch the show on the street down below when the beer parlour came out. It was just one fight. Just one big fight — and watch! Well the pub let out in the alley, I think you'd get about a hundred people all fighting and, you know, they'd be all pushing each other around and scrapping. And the police would show up, and they'd start fighting with the police.[29]

Another, then a high school student, recalled that

> one of the things we used to think was really a lot of fun to do was borrow [a parent's] car and sit outside the Columbus and there was another hotel right across the street there, the Europe . . . and they [the loggers and sawmill workers] would stagger back and forth and have fights in the middle of the street. It was very exciting for us. But that's the way it was. . . . They'd have this hard, hard work and they'd come back in and just live it up and then go back out and slug it out there.

Though many similar scenes seem etched in the memories of local residents who saw these men from a distance in the 1950s, their descriptions, in my view, tend to produce stereotypical portraits. As the former high school student put it, "they were hard working, hard drinking, hard fighting men." Prince George was, for her, "very much a macho place back then."[30] While a gendered experience is suggested, and well worth pursuing, such images of the sawmill worker are only a starting point when considering social life, and for some, family life in the milltowns found along the CN's East Line.

One of my informants spent part of his teenage youth living and working in Penny, where his father was employed as a sawfiler. Next to Giscome, Penny was the largest milltown on the East Line. It had a two-room elementary school, which took pupils up to grade 8. But for High School, Senior Matriculation, there was nothing. There was also no way for these children to get into Prince George to complete their schooling. Roads were often impassable; the distances too great.

Shortly after the war Ray Williston, then principal of the Prince George High School, joined forces with the district school inspector and school board chairman. Without Victoria's approval or knowl-

[29] Ibid.
[30] Interview #2, 16 December 1993.

edge they tried something that proved cheap and effective — they had a dormitory built. The physical structure was purchased from the army, which had put up numerous semi-permanent structures in or near the city. The price was nominal. An H-shaped building was dismantled from the base, next to the exhibition grounds, and re-assembled at Alward and 5th Avenue, close to the High School. Vocational classes helped put in the plumbing and wiring.

My informant estimated that about ninety students lived there during school terms — the boys wing on one side, the girls on the other, with a common dining room:

> it was run by two women, that's all. But boy they were special people. And they were given a hell of a lot of power. . . . If you fooled around — and the rules were very, very strict — you had to be in at nine o'clock every night. You couldn't be out on the streets. . . . You couldn't even go to the first show, 'cause you couldn't make it back in time at the dorm. And if you weren't back, you were in really deep trouble. And the power was [the matron] could just say — you're out! You'd have to go home and tell your parents, who were just sawmill workers and struggling to put you in there . . . you know, you just couldn't bear the shame of it in those days.

The Dorm was described as something that worked extremely well at that time. There were designated study periods, and my informant suggested that the Dorm students got better marks than what they called the "town kids." This may or may not be true, but he also claimed that many of his fellow students went on to highly successful careers, and identified several.

When the Department of Education discovered that the Dorm was operating (after it was up and running for almost a year, according to this account) a decision was made to duplicate the Prince George model elsewhere. I was also told that high school dormitories were then set up in other towns in northern B.C., including Terrace, McBride, and Williams Lake.

While the facts behind this story require further documentation, it seems likely that a fuller understanding of the Dorm's historical presence as an institution situated between Prince George and the East Line milltowns might broaden or revise our perceptions of interaction between the sawmill hamlets and the city. There undoubtedly were teenagers, town kids, parked in their parents' cars who laughed at the drunks stumbling and punching their way out of the

Columbus or the Europe. But they probably had to work hard to keep up with classmates who came from the same East Line communities as the notorious rough-housers (who perhaps are now remembered as slightly larger than life).

Besides sawmill workers, Island Cache, middle-class formation, and the Dorm, another local feature that stands out in my initial fieldwork was the 1953 loggers' strike. Those who recalled it tend to see this particular dispute as the most significant labour struggle in the pre-pulpmill era. It was clearly a bitter and divisive battle, though most of Prince George appeared to back the loggers.

In his book *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*, journalist Ken Bernsohn recounts the standoff between some 1,500 loggers belonging to the International Woodworkers of America and the industry's employers represented by the Northern Interior Lumbermen's Association. It began in September and lasted nearly one hundred days. The IWA's demand for an 18¢ hourly wage increase, closed shop, and more paid holidays was flatly rejected by the NILA. Nothing more than an extension of the previous contract was offered. Recollections of the strike that ensued characterized the struggle as a kind of watershed event. Many in the city backed the IWA and held on to the bitter end.

But its significance in Prince George's history at this time, or even as part of the district's forest history, may have been overemphasized in my interview data. The strike's impact on union strength could have been coincidental. While 700 members, or almost half, were lost before a 5.5¢ increase was gained, the strike broke out at a time when the industry was becoming more capital-intensive and more concentrated in the hands of larger, but fewer sawmill operators.

Nonetheless, a thorough re-assessment of this event through oral interviews and other available primary documentation might well lead to other inquiries that shed light on social responses to the restructuring of the district's forest industry in the 1950s.

Towards the end of the decade, dramatic changes in Prince George's social geography accompanied the broad shift from its rustic, sawmill town phase to a more diversified and mature city. Downtown areas were renovated or replaced with new buildings while suburbanization increased on the city's expanding periphery.

In January 1958, Prince George's first and only woman mayor, Carrie Jane Gray, began a brief term in office that introduced innovations in town planning, including several urban renewal projects. She also regularized the procedures by which city business was conducted.

Appropriately, when she first joined city council as an alderman in 1951, she had campaigned as "Carrie Jane Gray, Householder." In part, this simple slogan symbolized an attempt to distance herself from the status quo, particularly from the men in town who were purported to uphold it. But throughout her years on city council, the interests of householders, of the newcomers moving into the city's new suburbs, were never far from her agenda.[31] The same year she became mayor, Desmond Parker was appointed to a full-time position as town planner.

Across Canada, city-building in resource-based communities had entered a new phase in the postwar era, according to Stelter and Artibise's broad survey of this topic. Plans "for town building after 1945," they state, "can be regarded as part of an afterwar feeling of needing to start anew to build a better world."[32] Since Prince George was neither a new settlement, nor built by the pulp companies, it does not fit neatly into this pattern. But town planning, and suburban growth in particular, were affected by postwar idealism. As Parker put it, "I was trained during the war to help rebuild the world we had destroyed."[33] The final section of this paper offers a statistical summary of the demographic setting and trends Desmond Parker faced.

Rapid suburban development was a fundamental aspect of Prince George's history in the early 1960s. Approaches to community formation processes in this period should incorporate methods to explore life in the city's new suburbs. How interaction between families and the wider community was experienced is certainly not the only mirror of local society we could consider. But it can be a powerful one.

FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IN SUBURBIA

Any approach to the dramatic transition in Prince George from "sawmill town" in the 1950s to "modern suburbia" within a decade must remain sensitive to historical continuities as well as change. Development occurred sporadically and unevenly. And neither newcomers nor those with a long history in the area were affected by this transition uniformly. Local experiences of First Nations people, for example, also formed part of the city's postwar history and should become part of community formation studies in this locale.

[31] For a brief portrait of Carrie Jane Grey see Marguerite Hall, "Carrie Jane Gray: 'A Fly in the Ointment'," in Thorner (ed.), *Sa Ts'e*, 547-56.

[32] Stelter and Artibise, "Canadian Resource Towns in Historical Perspective," in Stelter and Artibise (eds.), in *Shaping the Urban Landscape*, 428.

[33] Interview #5, 6 January 1994.

Though the suburbs of Prince George were far from homogeneous, my present focus on families and private-public sphere interactions in its neighbourhoods is intended to strike a balance between local specificity and more general contours concerning family and community history during this period.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES AND TRENDS FROM THE 1961 CENSUS

Before discussing some key questions pursued in my current interview series, a few statistical profiles of the city's population history, ethnic composition, occupations, housing development, age, and gender are presented in the tables below:

TABLE 1
Population: historical trends

	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961
Prince George	2,053	2,479	2,027	4,703	13,877*
British Columbia	524,582	694,263	817,861	1,165,210	1,629,082
Canada	8,787,949	10,376,786	11,506,655	14,009,429	18,238,247

* Includes amalgamation of South Fort George.
Source: 1961 Census, *Bulletin* 1.1-10, 6-1, 6-84, 6-87

TABLE 2
Immigration: historical trends

	Prince George	British Columbia	Canada
Before 1921	593	157,808	772,030
1921-30	448	71,982	444,969
1931-40	58	11,300	87,703
1941-45	20	4,498	32,445
1946-50	255	37,296	303,984
1951-55	673	65,947	567,190
1956-57	366	42,796	329,586
1958-59	195	20,239	188,340
1960-61	143	11,266	118,016
Total	2,751	423,132	2,844,263

Source: 1961 Census, *Bulletin* 1.2-8, 58-1, 58-6, 60-6

TABLE 3

Population: by ethnic groups, Prince George, 1961

British Isles	7,196
Other European	
French	829
Austrian	119
Czech and Slovak	64
Finnish	36
German	1,668
Hungarian	126
Italian	390
Dutch	412
Polish	323
Russian	105
Scandinavian	1,393
Ukrainian	478
Other	387
Asiatic	
Chinese	196
Japanese	4
Other	25
Indigenous Peoples	54
Other and not stated	72
Total	13,877

Source: 1961 Census, *Bulletin* 1.2-7, 38-11, 38-12

TABLE 4
Housing: historical trends, period of construction

	Period of Construction of Occupied Dwellings				
	Before 1920	1920-45	1946-59	1960-61	Total
Prince George	141	667	2,289	262	3,359
British Columbia	74,740	47,927	219,080	17,785	359,532
Canada	1,391,719	1,148,389	1,846,210	168,175	4,554,493

Source: 1961 Census, *Bulletin* 2.2-1, 16-1, 16-4, 17-4

TABLE 5
Labour force, Prince George, 1961

	Men	Women
Agriculture	14	2
Forestry	182	23
Fishing and trapping	2	—
Mines, quarries, oil wells	11	3
Manufacturing industries*	896*	77*
Construction industry	408	18
Transportation, communication, utilities	648	78
Trade	819	310
Finance, insurance and real estate	104	78
Community, business and personal service	488	692
Public administration and defence	279	60
Unspecified	145	40
All industries	3,996	1,381

* Includes 705 men and 32 women in wood industries: sawmills, veneer and plywood mills, and sash, door, and planing mills.

Source: 1961 Census, *Bulletin* 3.2-4, 6-41, 6-43, 6-45, 6-47

TABLE 6

Age and gender distribution, ten-year age groups, 1961

	Pringe George				Canada			
Age	Male	Female	Total	(% of total)	Male	Female	Total	(% of total)
0-9	1,952	1,874	3,826	27.6	2,217,931	2,117,992	4,335,923	23.8
10-19	1,150	1,154	2,304	16.6	1,677,195	1,611,363	3,288,558	18.0
20-29	1,096	1,058	2,154	15.5	1,191,907	1,201,036	2,392,943	13.1
30-39	1,241	1,088	2,329	16.8	1,275,479	1,267,355	2,542,734	13.9
40-49	850	763	1,613	11.6	1,075,512	1,058,765	2,134,277	11.7
50-59	551	360	911	6.6	763,969	805,504	1,569,023	8.6
60-69	255	173	428	3.1	538,483	532,254	1,070,737	5.9
70-79	161	95	256	1.8	330,262	346,150	676,412	3.7
80-89	34	19	53	0.4	96,224	111,377	210,601	1.2
90+	1	2	3	—	7,946	12,093	20,039	0.1
Total	7,291	6,586	13,877	100.0	9,218,893	9,019,354	18,238,247	100.0

Source: 1961 Census, *Bulletin* 1.2-2, 21-1, 21-2, 23-9, 23-10

PRINCE GEORGE — A CITY OF NEWCOMERS: SOME PRELIMINARY COMMENTS AND RESEARCH STRATEGY

Between 1941 and 1951 Prince George's population grew by almost 57 per cent compared to 29.8 per cent in British Columbia and 23.2 per cent for Canada as a whole. Prince George's high growth rate continued the following decade. Though the city's 1961 population of 13,877 had included an amalgamation of South Fort George, the 66.1 per cent increase in the preceding decade far exceeded the provincial rate of 28.5 per cent and the national rate of 23.2 per cent.

These trends were reflected in immigration, though the contrasts are far less dramatic. Over 59 per cent of Prince George's immigrant population of 2,751 arrived between 1946 and 1961. Corresponding figures for British Columbia and Canada are 42.0 per cent and 53.0 per cent respectively.

On ethnicity, summarized in table 3 above, high numbers of ethnic Germans (1,668) and Scandinavians (1,393) stand out, given Prince George's total population in 1961 of 13,877. The largest category, however, was British at 7,196.

Marked contrasts are found when Prince George's postwar housing construction is compared to provincial and national averages. Many informants commented on the extreme housing shortage they encountered as newcomers to Prince George in the early 1950s. The problem was certainly not unique to Prince George,[34] but suburban development accelerated in the city at a particularly high rate. By 1961 almost 80 per cent of Prince George's family dwellings had been built after World War II. This compares to 51.5 per cent for British Columbia and 44.2 per cent for the entire country.

Table 5 presents breakdowns of the city's labour force in 1961. As noted, sawmill and other wood industry occupations comprised the single largest sector, though transportation was not far behind.

Prince George was, in part, a young parents' town in 1961. Though there were more men than women, gender imbalances were not significantly high. Children under ten years stood at 27.6 per cent of the city's population, compared to a national average of 23.8 per cent. The proportion of children and adolescents from ten to nineteen years was slightly less than the national average, though corresponding figures for adults in their twenties and thirties were higher in Prince

[34] An analysis of this problem is found in John Miron, *Housing in Postwar Canada: Demographic Change, Household Formation and Housing Demand* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

George than in Canada as a whole. The average number of persons fifty years and over was lower in Prince George.

These figures tend to support the comments that began this essay. If Prince George was becoming a place that people would choose to stay in and begin to raise families, then it seems appropriate to turn our attention to the city's new neighbourhoods.

Assessments of relations between the community and domestic family life (based on families of procreation, orientation, and reconstitution) will likely point to two directions: topics connected to Prince George's local circumstances in northern British Columbia, and those related more broadly to family and community experiences that were part of Canada's postwar social history.

By Prince George's local circumstances I mean returning to the considerations raised at the beginning of this discussion. A recasting, for example, of Paul Voisey's model of community formation might help us understand how newcomers responded to their settling-in periods that eventually led to local loyalties demonstrated in long-term residence. Frontier, heritage, environmental, and metropolitan influences have been apparent in my interview data thus far. Each of these concepts, however, need to be carefully defined and applied. What did it mean, for example, when one of my informants claimed that he and his wife came up here to pursue their careers on a "a kind of job-hunting frontier"?[35]

The following five categories of inquiry have been designated for my future interviewing strategies and may be used in developing questionnaires:

(1) Domestic homes and families: how were values concerning home ownership constructed and how were the roles of family members influenced by the structure of their households, properties, and neighbourhoods? How were living spaces perceived and experienced? Work, mobility, life cycles, family relations, gender, ethnicity and class will be considered.

(2) Wives and mothers and fathers and husbands: how did living in Prince George affect experiences in these roles? The dimensions listed above will be considered, with particular attention paid to gender and work.

(3) Children and parents: how did family and community life in Prince George influence constructions of childhood and adolescence? Peer relations and schooling will be considered, as will the above dimensions.

[35] Interview #15, 23 August 1994.

(4) Families and communities: what reciprocal effects arose from social interaction between families and the surrounding community? Relationships between families and schools, churches, voluntary organizations, local politics, and community activism will be addressed.

The research ahead will undoubtedly pass through many conceptual and methodological refinements. The basic question I have, which connects to all those listed above, concerns efforts people made to derive meaning from their respective lives. This involves the kinds of emotional experiences that oral history is well suited to exploring. If jobs or businesses kept families in Prince George, how did they create or recreate their lives in the community based on higher-level needs?

On a personal note, I have found that exploring the life histories of the people in Prince George has, in a modest way, helped achieve for me what the British social historian Paul Thompson hoped oral history might accomplish in the historical profession as a whole. "Oral evidence can achieve something more pervasive, and more fundamental to history," Thompson wrote. "While historians study the actors of history from a distance, their characterizations of their lives, views, and actions will always risk being misdescriptions, projections of the historian's own experience and imagination: a scholarly form of fiction. Oral evidence, by transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects,' makes for history which is not just richer, more vivid and heart-rendering, but *truer*."[36] While this may be disputed (especially since the use of oral evidence is itself subjective), I should add that my research is bound to uncover much more than oral data, and already has. Evidence that begins with memories of family and community often leads to letters, photographs, or other material dispersed widely in the community.

Sometimes the search can start the other way around. A poignant case in point is found in the recently published family history entitled *The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided*, by Denise Chong, who grew up in Prince George. Chong's search for her family's Chinese roots began as a child: "I had known all my life there might be relatives in China. As a child, I was curious about a photograph of two young children. It lay loose among a pile of other black-and-white photographs in the bottom drawer of the cedar chest upstairs in our home in Prince George, a logging town in northern British Columbia."[37]

[36] Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 2nd Ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 99.
[37] Denise Chong, *The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1994), 3.