

A Union Man's Wife: The Ladies' Auxiliary Movement in the IWA, The Lake Cowichan Experience

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I didn't just marry a meal ticket, and that's what it amounts to if my husband works more than forty hours a week! We just never see our husbands when they work such long hours.

Wives also need a shorter work week and the only way that most of us can get it is if our husbands pitch in at home to give us a break, spend a little time with the children and (incidentally) learn a bit of housekeeping.¹

Women quoted at the 1947 District One Auxiliary Convention

The traditional notion of the Ladies Auxiliary lies somewhere within a vision of tea cosies and coffee at the picket line. While the ladies of British Columbia's District One Auxiliary could turn a proud hand at knitting, tatting and tea service, their interest and activity within the auxiliary movement was ultimately for deeper reasons and to more effective ends than social support. As the opening quotations suggest, the women's motives were a desire to improve their family life, lessen their own burden within the home, and support their men in fighting for union conditions.

The International Woodworkers of America (IWA) Ladies' Auxiliary movement of the late 1930s and 1940s was one of the most powerful women's movements in the history of British Columbia. The IWA, in concert with active women, developed an auxiliary based on family ties to the wood industry and rooted in local organization. Framed within the traditional

division of labour between men at work and women in the home, it encompassed separate yet supporting spheres of organization: the workplace with its economic demands on the one hand, and the family, and by extension the community with its social demands on the other. Workers fought production issues, the auxiliary consumer issues.

After the war, as workers' rights and living standards came under attack, the auxiliary movement peaked. In the post-war context of reaction against working women, the auxiliary's appeal to women in the home paralleled the consolidation of the family. In their roles as mothers and wives, the auxiliary membership provided the backbone for strike militancy and organized an extensive campaign against inflation and anti-strike legislation.

Women woodworkers in the industry received minimal support from the union leadership for demands such as equal pay, but the District One executive consistently identified the need for an auxiliary movement.²

In 1940, Nigel Morgan, president of the IWA, outlined the auxiliary's function to the women of Lake Cowichan: it could raise funds for strike and organization; increase the social life of its members; lead the political fight for labour's policies and transfer trade union understandings to the children, so that "they would not have to learn the hard way." The auxiliary would educate women in trade union consciousness so that they would not block men's activities: "I have always said that you cannot fight the boss all day and come home and fight the wife and win." Wives' participation was encouraged on the basis of both principle and self-interest. As an organized force, the auxiliary could add the moral concern of mothers for their children's future, the fight for labour's policy and peace. Women fighting against inflation and for higher wages would be improving not only their own living conditions, but also those of their men.

Through the war years, the auxiliaries defended democratic and trade union rights, developed community amenities, and assisted in the war effort. By 1945, the District's auxiliaries encompassed hundreds of women who were respected by their communities and by the union.

An examination of the Lake Cowichan Sub-Local, an organization described glowingly as both the pioneer and model auxiliary throughout the pages of the *B.C. Lumberworker*, gives not only a picture of local auxiliary life, but also a window on the development and demise of the IWA B.C. Ladies' Auxiliary Movement.

Lake Cowichan, located north and west of Duncan on Vancouver Island, was (and is) a single industry wood town where, during the Depression of the 1930s, the IWA organized the woodworkers' union. Then, too, began the Auxiliary when population growth was slow and when facilities were few. The lack of community resources created not only an intensive workload for women, but also an awareness of the importance of domestic duties to a family's survival. Despite women's expanded role, the fundamental division of labour remained unchallenged. The union praised heroic women who successfully spanned both worlds. Al Parkin, writing in the *Lumberworker* in 1948, described the Auxiliary's success in these terms:

Your IWA auxiliaries in B.C. have done better work than the union locals on many political issues affecting

the interests of the woodworkers and the people generally....As a husband with at least a shabby knowledge of household duties, I can only wonder how they did so much yet managed to get through their housework.³

At the moment when the Auxiliary surpassed the expectations of its initiators, it became a contradictory organization. On the one hand, it was dependent on the existence of the union for its *raison d'être*, and on the secondary role of women within the home, but on the other hand, it had become increasingly autonomous, initiatory and publicly visible as a force for change. Unfortunately, because of the historic dependence of the auxiliary and the union, when the IWA split in 1948, the Auxiliary Movement also split. While auxiliaries played a role in the brief life of the Canadian Woodworkers Industrial Union of Canada, the IWA restructured the Auxiliary Movement, creating centralized locals and banning its previous political organizing activities.⁴

Living conditions in the 1930s are revealed in excerpts from an interview with the Cowichan women's Auxiliary members:⁵

Lil Godfrey: There was no indoor plumbing, no electric light, no running water. We had a well which we had to go pump water out of. A fellow installed a small water system. You couldn't waste any water and you didn't have hot water; it was just cold water on the back porch, outside where we'd do the washing. At first we had gas lamps or coal oil lamps, that was 1937. No washing machines, no electric irons; there was no power, period. The first electricity we had was run on a big diesel engine--you couldn't use appliances on it, mainly light, and one at a time. The lights would go out at one o'clock in the morning, you had to have all your work done by then. If you got up on early shift, which the loggers had to do in those days, you wouldn't have any light. In the summer, the water got low; there was just a little yellow flicker up there.

Auxiliaries flourished where the men worked in camps. They came home only on the weekend, and even then just for a limited stay. Ties between women were logical and necessary.

June Olsen: A lot of the men had to go out of the woods by speeder and they worked a six-day week. They used to bring the speeder down Wednesday night and they'd come down to their families for two hours and they'd go back to camp. Then they'd come out Saturday night and have to be back in camp Sunday night. So there was really no family life.

Eva Wilson: I remember going to meet the speeder. We'd go get the money off them. That's why the women walked in a body all across. Otherwise the floozies would meet them first...

Laurie: We used to walk up to the speeder on Sunday night and then the women would get together. We'd sit there and crochet until three o'clock in the morning.

In Lake Cowichan, the women described themselves as “grass widows” because the only people in the village during the week were women, children and merchants. Yet, there had been a time when woodworkers were transient labourers who left wives and families further away and for longer periods of time. In this period, Lake Cowichan companies like Hillcrest Lumber, Mayo Lumber, VL and M, the Cottonwood Mill and Lake Logging⁶ benefited from a stable work force that could be drawn upon at the end of a shutdown. The once transient logging labour force also saw an advantage in being near work when the season reopened. While employers welcomed the presence of family life in the belief that it would be a conservative influence on men fearful of losing jobs and their “stake” through blacklisting, the opposite occurred. The existence of a permanent community fostered the development of unionism and auxiliaries in this single industry town. The possibility of a home and of a wage capable of supporting a wife and children provided an incentive to organize. John F.T. Saywell described the process:

The fact of having a home and a sense of permanence also was reflected in community affairs. There was a desire to be active, to improve not only the physical conditions of the environment but also the social aspects. Some of these communities became very progressive as a result. Lake Cowichan was a fine example.⁷

Above all, it was the women of Lake Cowichan who would better community life. Without men in the village during the week, and greatly in need of improved facilities, the power of the Cowichan Auxiliary local was greater than its urban counterpart in Vancouver and those in mill and logging towns where men returned home to a stable family each night and where there were established community resources.

The Lake Auxiliary began in 1935. In its earliest stage, it provided a network for women and support for the fledgling Lumber Workers Industrial Union. Women hid organizers who swam into camps, facing violent retaliation from company owners. Wages were \$1.25 to \$2.50 per day for skilled, dangerous work.⁸ There was no security; as one woman said: “If the boss didn’t like the colour of your eyes he could fire you.”

Women joined the auxiliary for a variety of reasons. Eva Wilson, who was initially anti-union, joined the auxiliary “to keep peace in the family.”

Eva Wilson: We arrived here after Fred got fired for organizin’ the miners. We came down here in ’34 when the loggers walked over the back of the mountain and came down to pull the mill out. Fred was working on the loading dock. He was the only one that came out in sympathy with the loggers. Fred “worked” for a week and a half tryin’ to let on that he was workin’. I put up his lunch every morning. I was never so mad in my life ‘cause he had promised me that he would never organize again. But that was a laugh. He was on the picket line. When I found out, oh God was I mad! Well, you would have been, too, making his lunch for a whole week and a half! What could I do--married with one baby, you couldn’t leave your husband in those days; no car, no money to go anywhere with, you had to stick it out. To

chiropractors and cancer clinics.

Their wartime activities were also political. They conducted a campaign to extend the vote to all soldiers. Through a joint campaign with the Asian Indian community at the Lake, they sought to give the vote to all Canadian nationals regardless of race and birthplace. They registered voters in the area and organized the incorporation of Lake Cowichan as a village.

The auxiliary sponsored regular social events for its members and the community at large. "Frolics" and bazaars raised funds to assist with auxiliary campaigns and with travel to conventions. Social events were filled with theatre; at a "Hard Times Dance" all who attended without costumes were apprehended by auxiliary members dressed as police and tried in a "mock court" and fined. Yearly bazaars featured crafts, home remedies, games and dancing. With the IWA sub-local the auxiliary initiated a Sports Day which became a community event.

In 1943, they established the United Organizations, a delegated body of community groups that supported the war effort and organized around local needs. They bolstered the PTA, raised funds for a school library and lobbied for hot lunches. They helped to build a swimming school to provide swimming instruction for children and sewing classes.

Educational meetings included rules of order, and study sessions on women's history, women's position in society, and trade unionism. Women attended local union meetings so that "the wives of the lumber workers might further understand trade unionism."¹⁵

Lake Cowichan participated conscientiously in larger auxiliary and union bodies by insuring that resolutions were prepared and that its delegates were in attendance. The sub-local was successful in winning both the IWA District Council and the larger auxiliary bodies to policies such as these: support for women in war industries, with unions asked to do all that was possible to defend their right to work; equal pay for equal work; minimum wages for domestic workers; and union label campaigns. Lake Cowichan delegates were regularly elevated to executive positions in the larger movement.¹⁶

Fundamental to the auxiliary's effectiveness was its organizational structure. Because sub-locals were community based, meetings were just around the corner. Household responsibilities could be organized to make attendance possible. For example, so that women with young children could participate, Lake Cowichan initiated cooperative playgrounds at which members rotated childcare responsibilities. Because democracy was taken seriously, all officers and committee members were elected and all activities were undertaken by a committee rather than by individuals. Responsibilities were constantly rotated. Women were pushed to take on tasks to overcome their timidity. A round was used to introduce new members to the group. The political leadership in the auxiliary, comprised of vocal women who were associated with Communist men or directly with the Party, played the role of explaining and interpreting union policy, but they did not seem to dominate the decision-making process in the auxiliary.¹⁷

In the immediate post-war period, the British Columbia auxiliary movement experienced a growing politicization, parallel to processes within the IWA itself. Union issues which had taken the back burner during the war

were pushed to the fore as the IWA geared up for strike action. The union initiated a formal political structure, the Political Action Committee (PAC), with which to lobby for labour demands. The auxiliaries attended union PACs and created their own. Women who had begun to assert their political power during the war were loath to pull back at its end; they had realized a new sense of autonomy, and power within the community. At the same time, tensions between the International and District One were intensifying: the campaign to oust the "Red" leadership was underway in British Columbia and union as well as auxiliary members felt increasingly pressed to take sides.¹⁸

Here the family-based relationship between union and auxiliary came into play. Women leaders of District One's auxiliary and women at Lake Cowichan sided with the 'red bloc'. One reason for their support was the moral, political and financial assistance that the established IWA leadership had provided for women's auxiliary organizing. Secondly, they were against the International's and, in 1947, the Federated Auxiliaries' desire to dissolve sub-locals, a move that would destroy the grassroots auxiliary movement since women could not travel weekly or even monthly to centralized but distant meetings. Finally, auxiliaries tended to swing in the political direction of their union sub-local since the ties were not only organizational but political: the woman who differed with her husband's stance faced a major family earthquake.

Lake Cowichan stepped into the fray in 1945. The women had studied the treaties of Dumbarton Oaks, Bretton Woods and Yalta, as well as the CIO's interpretation of them. When George Brown, International's head of organization, sent an organizer into BC, they believed that he was breaking CIO policy. Without consultation with the union local, the women quickly sent a letter suggesting that he follow the CIO's direction. Brown returned this scathingly facetious note:

I believe that I too am misinformed of how to better wages and working conditions, since the women from the Auxiliary insist that the organization must be built on the policies laid at Yalta, Bretton Woods, and Dumbarton Oaks. I must change therefore the method of organization completely and therefore request the women's auxiliary to send complete details of policies and commitments and agreements so that I am conscious of the program around which to organize workers in the future.¹⁹

The women again wrote to Brown, telling him where he could study CIO policy and accusing him of trying to wreck the District. The auxiliary was marked for destruction.

In the post-war period, the auxiliary in British Columbia took up three high-profile central campaigns: union support, the fight against inflation, and political activity. The *B.C. Lumberworker* encouraged women to support the 1946 strike: "Because women usually have the job of stretching the pay envelope to meet all the needs of the family they know the meaning of the word STRIKE." While there might be hungry mouths for a while, an effective strike would eliminate hunger in the future. Other articles promised "a better

keep peace in the family, I joined the auxiliary. Fred and Archie and Hjalmar were travelling by boat. Sometimes they had to swim, too, go to Camp Six in a rowboat, and they'd come home at three or four o'clock in the morning; they were trying to organize one of the camps. I would have a great big pot of stew or something ready for them. They'd be frozen.⁹

In 1936, women provided support for the strike which began at VL and M and then encompassed the entire valley. In 1937, the IWA was organized and women began a series of socials at the floating picket camp. Those meetings filled a dual role: they raised much-needed money and provided a backroom cover for union meetings. Eva Wilson described her own entry into Cowichan social life: "My first dance at Lake Cowichan, you should have seen the looks when I got there. There was loggers' boots, there was everything there, but me, in a long slinky black evening gown, no backing, spike heels, walking along this track and up through the bushes to get to the picket camp. You had to sit on blocks of wood. Nobody attended anything in those clothes—they had skirts and sweaters. They kept looking at me as if I was something from another world, with a backless evening gown at the picket camp. This was in '36."¹⁰

But the auxiliary had less dramatic and more sorrowful functions, too. The auxiliary's hospital committee visited workers in the Duncan hospital. Injury, such as spinal fractures and dismemberment and death, were commonplace. Logging occurred close to the settlement, so women would wait in terror after the whistles blew which indicated an accident. After hearing the injured men's complaints as they were jolted over the corduroy road to Duncan, the women organized their first campaign: they lobbied for and won a new road to the hospital.

In 1940, the Lake Auxiliary was the only one in British Columbia. Edna Brown, one of its founding members, travelled the province teaching women to organize auxiliaries. The local consisted of the wives, mothers and daughters of the more active unionists, although women did join despite uninterested husbands. Union membership declined in 1938-39, as a result of the disastrous Blubber Bay strike, but as the demand for wood grew with the onset of war, unionism again picked up. By the mid-1940s, the Lake auxiliary had grown to an active minimum membership of fifty with new members initiated at each meeting. Up to four hundred people out of a population of 660 came to its regular events. However, it did not exist in organizational isolation. The auxiliary was attached to the militant, Communist led Local 1-80 which also encompassed Camp 6, Youbou, Ladysmith, Chemainus, and Duncan. The auxiliary affiliated with other auxiliaries to form a province-wide network which held quarterly meetings in conjunction with District One conventions and executive meetings. In turn, both the District and sub-locals affiliated with the Federated Auxiliaries of the IWA/CIO which held yearly conventions in the USA. These conventions established priorities for all wood auxiliaries in both Canada and the USA.¹¹

The Lake Auxiliary followed precisely both District and federated priorities, although when a conflict occurred, it opted for District policy. When wartime resolutions called on the auxiliaries to fight for the unity of labour, the defense of labour's rights in the context of a war against fascism,

the support of the CIO's position of international labour cooperation, and to work to build the war effort, the auxiliaries took their role seriously. The 1943 federated convention stated:

There has never been a time in the history of the labour movement when the auxiliaries of our union have had a more important role to play than today. With millions of American men serving their country in the Armed Forces the political importance of women has greatly increased.¹²

Lake Cowichan women understood the implications of this policy in the following terms:

We believed in the cause. I don't know whether you call that patriotism. There was no union activity during the war; everything was for the war effort. The one goal was to get the war over.¹³

In following the general wartime policy, the auxiliary initiated locally-based campaigns. As one woman put it, "we worked on everything that was important." The sub-local divided its meetings into three categories to deal with its important projects: business, social and political/educational. The women sent magazines, cigarettes, Christmas presents, cards and letters to local women and men in the services. It canvassed for war bonds and stamps and the Red Cross. At the same time, the members fought to improve the operation of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. While the issues of rationing and wartime inflation could have pitted the auxiliary against local merchants, this did not occur because the auxiliary understood that the federal government and local rationing boards were responsible for the scarcity of important commodities, not local storekeepers. The women emphasized mutual demands for supplies of children's clothing and shoes, fruit and vegetables, milk, butter and sugar. Increased amounts of these commodities would profit local merchants who chafed at the lack of goods for sale. In 1943, the women organized an Island-wide campaign for an increased canning sugar ration which was necessary if food was to be preserved for use in the winter ahead. The women checked local stores for inflationary prices and union label goods. They lobbied Ottawa to extend rationing to all essential foodstuffs. They fought for a road to Port Renfrew by organizing joint community meetings.¹⁴

Health was also a major project, especially in an era of no medical or hospital insurance and before the widespread use of penicillin. Because tuberculosis was widespread in BC, the auxiliary convinced local dairies to pasteurize milk and they established a distribution network which included deliveries to out-lying areas. They raised funds for the Queen Alexandra Solarium and "adopted" a child patient there, and each year they produced endless quantities of jam for the institution. Throughout the war, through petitions and public meetings, they fought for the Cowichan Health Centre to be expanded to a Health Unit, with a public health nurse and doctors. They sat on the board of the Centre to influence policy. They sponsored a well-baby clinic. They lobbied for subsidized housing, a Blue Cross Plan, government health insurance, Workers' Compensation Board (WCB), recognition of

place to live in, a place so interesting that the youngsters will want to stay in it and not on the streets" if better wages and shorter hours were won.²⁰ While Vancouver organizers fretted that women working in industry would have to be removed from picket lines in order to provide coffee service because of the apparent disinterest of industry wives, women on the Island organized food, social activities and services for the 1946 trek to the Legislature. Women from the Lake Cowichan Auxiliary led the march. The auxiliaries were vocal in their opposition to Bill 39, which restricted the right to strike.

The strength of the Auxiliary at this time is shown by the many feature articles pertaining to women in the union press. Columns such as "Penny Pincher" "Cook Book Corner" and "Beauty Foods" all provided an appeal to women to protest against rising prices. All the articles also reinforced women's role as homemaker.

British Columbia auxiliaries launched a major fight against price gouging and for a continuation of wartime price controls. The "rolling pin brigade," as the press called it, united with consumer groups to lobby Ottawa for price controls, milk subsidies, rent controls, low-cost housing, farm subsidies, and a peacetime price regulation agency. Lake Cowichan again led the way in their campaign to reach local farmers: "We know that the farmers should have more money for their milk. We know that the consumer should pay less for milk. Somewhere between the farmer and the consumer a lot of money gets lost."²¹ Tactics included mass meetings, buyers' strikes and lobbying of merchants and farmers.

On the political front, auxiliary members campaigned for "labour's post-war program" of public works, unemployment insurance and social services.

The 1948 split ended a historical period for the IWA and its auxiliary. The divisions created by it would never really heal for former women's auxiliary activists. The new auxiliary had no autonomy from the union since it was forced to ask for permission before "even catering to socials." This form of organization was repugnant to the women who had seen themselves as "fighting for the rights of all working-class women of BC."²²

For the auxiliary members activism had meant more than supporting their men, and more than fighting for their own interests by supporting union demands. By the end of their existence, the auxiliaries had transformed working-class community life in the province. Women participants, despite the emphasis on their domestic role, had begun to demand within their own homes an equal division of labour. The auxiliary was a means to escape from isolation and loneliness; it broadened the horizons of women by providing a legitimate structure through which they could be politically active, educated and vocal. The women's auxiliary provided women with entry into union meetings and activities, so the power gap between male and female family members began to diminish. The auxiliary validated the invisible work in the home and the skills associated with that work. In communities such as Lake Cowichan, the auxiliary was the most active organization throughout the 1940s. While never fully autonomous in the union structure, it waged an effective fight within its own sphere. The attention given to its dismantling and destruction by the White Bloc leadership of the IWA bears testimony to its effectiveness. As Eva Wilson said, "I bet we did scare the daylights out of them!"²³

Footnotes

1. *B.C. Lumberworker*, May 5 1947.
2. Interview with Harold Pritchett, July 1981. Survey of *B.C. Lumberworker* reveals emphasis on auxiliaries.
3. *B.C. Lumberworker*, January 28, 1948.
4. Interview with Jeanne Ouellette, June 1979.
5. Interview with Lake Cowichan Women's Auxiliary members, 1979.
6. Blanche Norcross, *The Warm Land: A History of Cowichan* (Duncan: Island Books, 1975).
7. John F.T. Saywell, *Kaatza, The Chronicles of Cowichan Lake* (Sidney, BC: Peninsula Printing, 1967): 92.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Interview, Lake Cowichan.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Minutes of Federated IWA Auxiliaries, 1943-46.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Interview, Lake Cowichan, Lil Godfrey.
14. Minutes of Lake Cowichan IWA Ladies Auxiliaries, 1943-1947.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.* and Federated Auxiliary minutes.
17. Interview with Lake Cowichan women.
18. District One Executive meetings. Harold Pritchett, IWA Archives, University of British Columbia, Special Collections.
19. *Ibid.* and Lake Cowichan Auxiliary minutes.
20. *B.C. Lumberworker*, May 21, 1946.
21. *B.C. Lumberworker*, May 22, 1947.
22. *The Vancouver Sun*, May 22, 1947.
23. Interview with Lake Cowichan women.