

‘The Time for the Distaff and Spindle’: The Ontario Mennonite Women’s Sewing Circles and the Mennonite Central Committee

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Ontario Mennonite women have a long history of taking “time for the distaff and spindle.”¹ Author Barbara Coffman’s² poetic metaphor, describing the work of the Vineland Mennonite Women’s Missionary and Service Association in 1965, illustrates women’s service in the broader Mennonite church. Most women sewed, and the sewing circles were unique in providing an environment where, in historian Marlene Epp’s words, women could “visibly exercise [their] spirituality and desire to ‘minister.’”³ Unfortunately, this ministry is rarely given credit by church leaders or in history books.⁴ While feminist historians have done much to recover this dimension of Mennonite women’s past, by identifying women’s institutions like the Sewing Circles as the “underside,” or as “parallel” churches,⁵ they have reinforced the idea of a women’s culture subordinate to the more visible work of the church.

These metaphors reflect images prevalent in Mennonite circles. Take for instance photographs published in *The Canadian Mennonite* during the 1950s. Faceless and nameless women are depicted doing what they did so skilfully, sewing for relief; while male leaders are identified and shown in a variety of policy-making tasks.⁶ These photos reflect gender codes that underpinned the

power imbalance generic in a patriarchal system. Men were appointed to important tasks; women remained unrecognized under the shadow of their husband's names. Men made decisions; women quietly served. These juxtapositions perpetuate gender designations and fail to bring women's contributions into full analytical process. If gender is socially constructed as feminist historian Joy Parr claims, and if "gender identities—masculinity and femininity—acquire meaning in relation to one another,"⁷ to fully understand the history of non-resistance and relief work it is essential that we explore the relationship between the male-led organizations and the women's Sewing Circles. We must investigate ways women sought to serve; but we must also enquire what their relief work meant to them and how their mission supported and was supported by the more prominent male organizations, the Non-Resistant Relief Organization and the Mennonite Central Committee.

Most historians have been slow to recognize their inattention to gender. As recently as 1997, for instance, Ted Regehr dismissed the significance of gender in Mennonite history. Commenting on the new social history, Regehr stated that the underlying themes of exploitation and preservation of power by the elite at the expense of the powerless, *including gender imbalance*, are not applicable to Mennonite history.⁸ In my view, we do not yet know enough about gender among Mennonites to leap to this conclusion. Certainly this study of the relationship of the Ontario Mennonite Women's Missionary and Service Association (WMSA) Cutting Room with the Mennonite Central Committee (Ontario) (MCC(O)) and its parent body, the Ontario Non-Resistant Relief Organization, (NRRO) challenges Regehr's assumption. I have found power imbalances to be a sub-text in the interactions between the three organizations. Yet, adopting sociologist Rosanna Ng's framework, there appears to have been a mutual dependence.⁹

Marlene Epp's challenge of some years ago—that "[w]e need to understand the history of women's relief work and how it contributed to, and quite possibly was the foundation for, the larger and more bureaucratized relief activities of the Mennonite Church,"—is suggestive of the relief organizations' reliance on women.¹⁰ Although questions of what "women do and think" to use feminist historian Gerda Lerner's words, only recently have begun to be considered as "equally important with what the men do and think,"¹¹ Mennonite women's accounts of their own institutions are significant to the historical record.¹² Most notably, the Ontario Mennonite Women's Missionary and Service Commission has sponsored Lorraine Roth's recent volume. Aptly entitled *Willing Service*, this collection highlights numerous Ontario Mennonite women's contributions to the mission field, to the Sunday schools, to the sewing circles, and to relief. As Roth has observed, the MCC material aid shipments during World War II and after were only possible due to the work of women.¹³

As I have been researching the history of MCC (Ontario), questions about what the women were doing and thinking while the men were developing relief strategies, new programs, and generally building an institution, and questions

about how the two spheres interconnected, have intrigued me. Copious documents from the NRRO files and the MCC(O) files tell the story of the developing Ontario relief agencies. The sparse WMSA files, along with a variety of interviews have filled in the picture, leading to the conclusion that gender is an important dynamic in the history of MCC.¹⁴ Following are some observations about how gender relationships have affected the development of the MCC(O).

The relationship between the Women's Sewing Circles and the male organizations was complex. Initially, it appears, there was a mutual dependency. The MCC(O)'s parent body, the NRRO, looked to the Circles to sew for relief, and the women turned to the men for financial support to keep their ministry going. The balance of power shifted, however, when the Sewing Circles established a Cutting Room. This new enterprise employed an operator to cut garments which were in turn purchased and sewn up by women in the local Circles and donated back to Mennonite Central Committee's relief program. This business-like approach eventually allowed the Sewing Circles to become financially autonomous, thus signalling a shift in their relationship with the male-run NRRO and MCC(O). The men were uncomfortable with the change and took steps to keep the Circles subordinate, but the women protected the independence of their Cutting Room. Amidst these shifting dynamics, it is clear that the Ontario Mennonite relief agencies depended on women's superior sewing skills in their efforts to aid European refugees during World War II and other victims of wars and famine at least until 1970.

To understand the developments that led to the establishment of the Sewing Circles' Cutting Room, it is important to be aware that sewing for relief has been an institution among Mennonite women for at least one hundred years. "Sewing bees" were a way women could help one other; they allowed opportunities to socialize in pioneer culture; but they also provided a means of public work, helping the less fortunate.¹⁵ In 1907, when the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and the United-States-based binational Mission Board opened a mission on Toronto's Tate Street, which has been described as the "very worst hole in the City,"¹⁶ Waterloo County women willingly gave of their time and resources to reach out beyond their own communities.¹⁷ Some began to meet regularly in their homes, or in the basements of the churches on days when no other meetings were scheduled, to sew clothing for the poverty-stricken children that workers found in the vicinity of the mission.¹⁸

With this precedent, when Mary Ann Cressman accepted the invitation to become Ontario branch secretary for the recently organized United-States-based Mennonite Woman's Missionary Society in 1916, the sewing circle movement had been well-established in Ontario. Cressman was a good choice for Ontario leader. She presided over the sewing circle which had been established at Kitchener's First Mennonite Church eight years earlier, and she frequently travelled to binational meetings with her husband M.C. Cressman, who was Canadian Treasurer of the Mennonite Board of Mission and Charities. It may well have been at her initiative that M.C. had been keeping fabrics for

purchase by the sewing circles in his store which was an unofficial "Mennonite Centre."¹⁹

The Ontario Sewing Circles appear to have remained within their gender conventions. Unlike their sisters south of the border whose vision for mission threatened some of the male leaders, Mary Ann Cressman and the Ontario women stayed within acceptable gender boundaries. The Executive Committee of the Conference of the Mennonite Church in Ontario "heartily" affirmed the twenty circles that had emerged by 1917. As L.J. Burkholder noted in his *A Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario* published in 1935, "[I]n addition to the usual work of making garments, quilts, etc., visits are frequently made to the sick, nursing is done where necessary, help is given to bereaved families, food is taken to the hungry, and other tasks that willing hands may do are performed."²⁰

There seems to have been a solid relationship between the Sewing Circles and the new Non-Resistant Relief Organization (NRRO) L.J. Burkholder and D.W. Heise initiated in Markham in November 1917. The president of the binational Women's Missionary Association Mary Burkhard's itineration coincided with the establishment of the new relief organization.²¹ Although the Sewing Circles were primarily concerned with missions, and the NRRO with collecting monies for relief aid during the war, both groups simultaneously extended beyond their Mennonite borders. In Markham, a new circle was established even as Burkholder and Heise planned the new relief effort. The NRRO, initiated by these men and formally established at a Kitchener meeting in January 1918, brought together representatives of four Mennonite and Tunker groups. Willing to overlook their differences, these men committed themselves to work jointly at raising relief funds as a gesture of goodwill toward the Canadian government for "excepting" them from military service.²² The Sewing Circles, meanwhile, which had "deliberately" extended "beyond the borders" with their sewing for Toronto's Fresh Air children and other needy people would contribute substantially to the NRRO's relief efforts. Through their Sewing Circles Mennonite women donated clothing as well as funds designated to aid victims of the war, including their cohorts in Russia.²³

Despite drastic action by the binational Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities in the meantime, women persisted in their relief efforts. In 1926 a conservative backlash in the Goshen, Indiana area caused the U.S.-based Mission board to deliberately by-pass the thriving WMA by appointing its own committee of three to collect sewing for missions. After two years of parallel Mennonite women's organizations competing for turf, the U.S.-based WMA acquiesced to become an auxiliary to the mission board. The Canadian Circles had little option but to follow suit.²⁴ This more hierarchical relationship was, no doubt, an irritant to some; others probably felt quite comfortable with the new arrangement. In her study of contemporary conservative Waterloo County Mennonite women, Janet Mancini Billson has found that "although gender roles are highly differentiated—with men clearly occupying the dominant position of head of household—most Mennonite women ... find security and sanity in this

arrangement.”²⁵ From the 1930s through to the end of the 1960s, the issue of how Mennonite women, through their roles as mothers, could ease human suffering seems to have been of greater import than their place in the social hierarchy.

As the NRRO made ready to support the relief program put into place by the U.S.-based Mennonite Central Committee—“the largest and most important North American inter-Mennonite relief organization”²⁶—the Ontario group discovered that the women had beaten them to the draw. The Sewing Circles may have been auxiliaries to the Mission Board, and the MCC and the NRRO may have counted on women’s contributions to their relief programs, but Mennonite women did not wait until their denomination established a relief program overseas. Immediately following the King government’s decision to support Britain’s war in the fall 1939, the Circles approached the NRRO for advice on where they might obtain fabric wholesale for relief sewing.²⁷ The NRRO’s tardy response must have caused the women to look elsewhere for doors to the public sphere. Months before October 1940 when MCC established itself in England, Mennonite women had begun to sew for the Red Cross.²⁸

The NRRO faced a dilemma. To be able to contribute fully to the MCC relief program, they needed to convince the Sewing Circles to turn their energies from the secular organization to support their own denominational efforts. This took some doing. Sewing for the Red Cross was convenient for many Mennonite women. Not only did a multitude of requests come through that organization, but the Red Cross had a system in place. Fabric could be purchased wholesale, and items could be shipped overseas through the agency. If women chose to sew for the NRRO, they would be obliged to find their own sources of material and their own means of shipping the finished product.²⁹

S.F. Coffman, a long-time and highly respected leader in Ontario Mennonite circles and a vocal proponent of the NRRO, wrote to the Sewing Circles’ chair, Martha Bechtel, asking her to promote the Mennonite relief program. With her “outgoing and friendly” nature, and her many years on the Sewing Circles’ executive, Bechtel was well-qualified to accept Coffman’s challenge.³⁰ Also a member of a relief sewing committee, Bechtel attended NRRO organizational meetings and agreed to sit on the newly-established shipping committee, despite her questionable health.³¹ Only after Bechtel and her colleagues launched their campaign did the Sewing Circles in their own constituency, and those in other NRRO-sponsoring denominations, begin to turn their energies to support the Mennonite relief agencies. Chronic illness forced Bechtel to resign in 1941, but by then the Sewing Circles had come full force behind the NRRO’s relief efforts. That year the Circles provided 13 bales and 17 cartons of material aid. These shipments contained 1,058 comforters, flannelette quilts, cotton quilts, and wool blankets worth \$793.50; also included were children’s and ladies clothing and infant layettes and soap valued at \$2356.20.³² Between 1939 and 1942, the Circles contributed a full forty per cent of the NRRO’s nearly \$60,000 in relief contributions.³³

Gladys Goering has pointed out in her history of the General Conference Mennonite Women in Mission that World War II and post-war relief needs

created a “golden era” for women’s organizations in the 1940s and 1950s.³⁴ Their public work gave them a new confidence and a sense of being needed outside of their domestic realm. Martha Bechtel’s resignation as chair of the Ontario Sewing Circles in April 1941 slowed down the momentum built by the Circles only briefly. Ready to continue with their war-time relief efforts, the NRRO Sewing Circle Committee recommended that Clara Snider, the new WMSA president, replace Bechtel.³⁵

In the meantime, the NRRO had had second thoughts about the wisdom of sending so much material aid to England. For one thing, they had “been cautioned concerning sending *peculiar* (italics mine) styles of clothing.”³⁶ Since the 1920s a rigidly enforced dress code had been embraced by the Ontario Mennonites. Dress symbolized their separation from the world although this had been rapidly disappearing as they became increasingly like their neighbours. The uniform included plain coats for men—although it was largely ministers and bishops who wore them. Cape dresses were prescribed for women, the sleeveless tunics worn over their dresses designed to hide shapely figures.³⁷ Most carefully enforced was women’s head gear. A black bonnet for outdoor wear, in addition to the traditional prayer veiling, “became a test of membership.” Lorna Bergey, historian, committee woman, and leader in the Sewing Circles, recalls: “Early in life I became aware that the women in my Mennonite church family were expected to symbolize non-conformity to the world by our dress... [i]n Ontario it... [applied] mainly to *women’s* apparel.”³⁸

With used clothing in demand overseas, the NRRO worried that “people do not understand those things and [clothing] must be made over before being used.”³⁹ Was the work required to make over Mennonite women’s cape dresses the only issue? Or were the men on the NRRO executive alarmed about the possibility that if women were encouraged to sew regular clothing, they might eschew their role as symbols of Mennonite nonconformity? Whatever the underlying reasons for considering dropping the material aid program in favour of soliciting funds, severe shortages in the United Kingdom meant a desperate and chronic need for clothing. Mennonite women thus continued to send used clothing to England until long after the war just as they had been gathering used garments for local relief at least since the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁴⁰ Further, as Lorraine Roth has pointed out, at that time “most women sewed;” although not all women “cared for the job, ... they had to do it anyway.” And for some like Leah Weber Cressman and Lena Weber, the circles provided an outlet for their creativity and skill. In a time when there were few other opportunities for women to serve their churches and communities, their “sewing machine(s) ... were their... altar(s) and pulpit(s).”⁴¹ Women’s initiative and enthusiasm would continue to carry, in large part, the momentum for the NRRO’s relief work.

A \$200 investment in a cutting machine in summer 1942 symbolized and made concrete the commitment that the women in the Circles had to supporting their denomination’s stand on non-resistance through doing their part in war relief.⁴² It also signalled a move beyond their domestic borders. Several weeks

earlier at the Ontario Sewing Circles' twenty-fifth anniversary meeting, Mrs. Chester Buschert had spoken fervently of the urgency of seeing clothing from "Bolt to Bale". Encouraging members to cut, sew, and ship clothing overseas, she exhorted them to "not ... be weary in well doing." "Our task is only begun and ever increasing," she insisted, for "our work is most important." This work would have long-term significance, for it gave women access to the public domain. As mothers and wives of conscientious objectors, their contributions demonstrated their loyalty to the British Commonwealth. That day Mrs. David Coffman specifically stressed Britain's need for help. Describing MCC's work there, she challenged listeners to move out from their domestic spaces and the separate world which Mennonites embraced: "In view of the debt of human gratitude and the debt of eternal love—how much have we done—why have we not done more? Can we see Christ standing before us?" Women were challenged to support workers like nurse Edna Hunsperger whose farewell address foreshadowed her imminent departure for England. Indeed, her work with refugee children through MCC would keep the needs up front for the women labouring on home turf until the war's end.⁴³

The cutting machine purchased immediately following that meeting transformed the work of the Sewing Circles into a cottage industry designed to provide war relief for Britain. This industrialization would cut costs and speed up the process, as circles could purchase fabric ready-cut.⁴⁴ Having a committee to choose fabric and a woman trained to operate the cutting machine to clip out patterns appropriate for overseas wear would ensure that the end product was appropriate. (This may have been particularly important in a group committed to a particular uniform.) It is not clear on what basis the cutter was chosen. Given that young Mennonite women sometimes worked in Kitchener's clothing factories, the Sewing Circles' executive was likely aware that in the garment industry cutters were chosen for their skill. They may have also known that this task was usually designated to a man.⁴⁵ There is no evidence that the cutters themselves held any previous experience or that the executive looked to the male leadership of the NRRO to operate the machine, however.⁴⁶ Barbara Eby accepted the challenge and Ida Snyder provided space for the first cutting room in her home on her family's farm just outside Kitchener. In recognition of her skill, Eby was offered two cents per garment. The local circles, in turn, were charged two-and-a-half cents for each cut garment purchased; the other one-half cent was assumed by the treasurer of the district for expenses.

Peacetime brought no letup and MCC expanded its work overseas. World War II had left some twenty-one million Europeans homeless or displaced. Approximately thirty-five thousand of these were Mennonites who had retreated with the Germans from Russia; thus Germany became a primary locus of concern and a more efficient North American relief agency became essential.⁴⁷ A Canadian office would coordinate aid coming from Ontario and the Canadian west, and represent Mennonite relief concerns to the Canadian government.⁴⁸ Officials in Akron designated Kitchener, Ontario as the location for the

Canadian headquarters and in January, 1944, Executive Secretary Orié Miller approached three groups with the proposal: the NRRO, the Sewing Circles, and the Conference of Historic Peace Churches, which had been established in 1939 to lobby the government for conscientious objection status for young Mennonite, Brethren in Christ, and Quaker men.⁴⁹

Assured that the relief work already established in Ontario would not be overridden by the MCC, Bishop C.F. Derstine, the dynamic and charismatic pastor at First Mennonite in Kitchener, volunteered to find a space. Within a month, MCC had established itself in a large old house at 223 King St. East with a clothing depot located on the second floor of the nearby Kitchener Dairies building. The MCC invited Cornelius Rempel to serve as director of the Kitchener office and clothing depot; his wife Marguerite would serve as hostess. Clara Snider, president of the Sewing Circles, accepted the invitation to serve as the first supervisor of the Clothing Depot.⁵⁰ We might expect that these new organizing initiatives would overtake them, but the NRRO and WMSA Cutting Room carried on much as they had previously.

At the time the MCC office was established in Kitchener, Ida Snyder was still operating the Cutting Room from her home. Increased relief needs and more intense promotion put pressure on the Cutting Room, however. The Women's Activities Newsletter, which came out of the MCC Head Office during these years, informed women's groups of the needs overseas. The Clothing Depot counted on Ontario women to "keep under control the huge piles of mending that were sorted out of [the] great amount of clothing sent." At the same time, specific instructions told local women what to include in "kits" designed for various age groups—infants, tiny tots, and boys and girls.⁵¹

Although the assumption that this latter work would continue to be done through the Cutting Room taxed the Sewing Circles' resources to their limit, it also reinforces the extent to which relief work represented a continuum of opportunity for women. Whether paid by the piece or working as volunteers, relief sewing gave women a public opportunity beyond their domestic chores which included the kitchen garden, looking after the poultry and eggs, household management, and child care.⁵² At the same time this double duty put almost unrealizable demands on many at a time when life was more difficult. Some held full responsibility for their farms with fathers, sons or husbands away doing Alternate Service; with the meagre stipend allowed, some women themselves entered the workforce during this time of national mobilization of labour resources; others took in boarders.⁵³ These extra pressures meant that the Sewing Circles had trouble meeting MCC's requests almost from the beginning. In March, 1943, only eight months after the Cutting Room was established, Barbara Eby requested "to be relieved" of her responsibilities there.⁵⁴ Ida Snyder took over, but despite a strong commitment to service, she too wore out. In February 1945 the Cutting Room Minutes record: "[t]he work seems to be quite a burden... as well as an expense. [Snyder] asked for more help or to be released entirely."⁵⁵ The problems—lack of space, an inconvenient location,

insufficient capital to purchase the fabric needed to keep up with the demand, and too little pay—illustrate the difficulties that women, working within a broader framework controlled by men, encounter.

Convinced of the significance of their work, the Sewing Circle executive looked to the NRRO for assistance. Clara Snyder, president of the Sewing Circles and supervisor of MCC's Clothing Depot, called a meeting with the NRRO executive and MCC Kitchener's director, C.J. Rempel. The Sewing Circles had already decided to pay Snyder \$20 for past services and to double her stipend per garment. They had also appointed an advisory committee to work with her. What they needed from the men was capital and a larger and more centrally located space.⁵⁶ By the end of that meeting, the NRRO had agreed both to loan the Cutting Room funds to purchase bolts of cloth and to locate and rent them adequate room for their enterprise.⁵⁷ Several months later, then, the Sewing Circles were invited to set up shop on Kitchener's King St. at the rear of the Mennonite-run Golden Rule Book Store Building where they would be located conveniently next to the MCC packing rooms.⁵⁸ Buying in bulk was less straightforward. War Prices and Trade Board rulings required government approval "to secure the privilege of purchasing such amount of cloth and other materials as the Sewing Circles may require for making relief goods."⁵⁹ Not until a year later did the government approve the Cutting Room's clothing projections.

Besides helping the women negotiate with the government, the NRRO upheld its commitment to the Cutting Room with a series of loans: \$200 in 1946, \$1000 in 1947, and \$1500 in 1948. This dependence came at a cost to the women's public authority; with this financial support, the NRRO executive assumed it was their prerogative to advise the women, to assist them in deciding where to purchase fabric, and to accompany them on buying trips.⁶⁰ This dependency relationship where the Sewing Circles needed to ask for money, thus putting the men in an authority role, illustrates a power imbalance. To succeed in the public domain, the women needed the financial support of men; they also were dependent on the men to provide them with institutional space. At the same time, it is important not to overlook women's initiative. Clara Snyder and the Sewing Circles' executive knew what they needed to succeed—capital, space, and government permission—and they knew where to get it.

Shortly after moving into the new space, health problems compelled Ida Snyder to resign as Cutting Room Operator. Her daughter Alice stepped in and by December was working full-time as cutter.⁶¹ Young and single, Alice Snyder would be able to give the Cutting Room the impetus it needed to become a viable operation. Under her leadership, and with the new working conditions which included eight-hour days, sales increased.⁶² Three years later, Alice's decision to answer a call to Germany would further strengthen the Cutting Room's sense of mission.

In 1948, Snyder joined over three hundred workers, many whom were young

women, already serving with MCC in war-torn Europe. It comes as no surprise that a young farm woman who had been too fearful to continue her education beyond grade eight would suffer from culture shock as she travelled to and through bombed-out Germany: "They had hardly started the rebuilding yet; the cities were piles of rubble," she recalled fifty years later. Although her work overseas which was mainly food and clothing distribution was, in part, an extension of the Cutting Room and would remain solidly in the domestic code, the opportunity strengthened her self-confidence. For Alice, like many other young women of that day, a summons overseas provided an adventure, status, and a broader world view.⁶³ Indeed, although the Cutting Room suffered in Alice's absence, her experience ultimately had positive repercussions for the organization.

During the years Snyder was in Germany, the Cutting Room had difficulty keeping an operator. Three women tried the position, but none lasted for more than a few months.⁶⁴ Was it worth keeping the Cutting Room going, the Sewing Circles' executive asked themselves? As John Unrau has pointed out in his history of MCC, by 1950 "large-scale material aid distribution was on the way out."⁶⁵ There were serious questions whether the MCC Kitchener office would continue, and the Sewing Circles' executive seriously considered closing the Cutting Room.⁶⁶ Snyder's presentation at the Sewing Circles' annual meeting, however, seems to have played a critical role in re-vitalizing the flagging spirits. Indeed, her detailed outline of the ongoing and urgent need for relief sparked her listeners' imagination. Snyder's enthusiasm helped to bolster the self-confidence Mennonite women had gained with their ministry to victims of war.⁶⁷ They had moved beyond the borders of domestic codes which confined their work to private space and forced on them the "banner of nonconformity." With a certainty born by their experience, the Sewing Circles' executive inquired into MCC's plans regarding the future of the Kitchener office, assuming a continuing role; they also took their Cutting Room's financial pulse. What stock had been purchased? What was outstanding in the local circles? Which circles were supporting their endeavour?

With the Sewing Circles' new vice-president Margaret Brubacher's strong leadership, on 5 April 1951 the executive came to a decision; not only would the Cutting Room persevere, it would expand its operation. The executive immediately negotiated a contract to buy wholesale materials through Mrs. Miller, the proprietor of the general store in nearby Floradale. Miller's offer of "cost price plus one cent for shipping" clinched the deal.⁶⁸ Believing that full shelves would better prepare them to appropriately respond to the needy than last minute scrambles to fill calls for emergency relief,⁶⁹ the Cutting Room committee also determined to market its services. They began to put cut garments on display at Sewing Circle workshops; they also purchased ready-made clothing and other items wholesale to stock for sale to local sewing circles: flannelette, wool and cotton batts for quilts and comforters, and ready-made articles including boys' pants and sweaters encouraged local women to participate in MCC's Christmas

Bundle project. The Cutting Room advertised its services with news bulletins in Church and Mission periodicals, and in the MCC Women's Activities Letter.⁷⁰ These initiatives brought rapid growth. Purchases came steadily from Circles in the constituency and from women in related peace churches, some arriving directly through the Cutting Room, others through the MCC office.⁷¹

With expansion, problems of overwork and cash shortages continued to arise. By early 1952, operator Twilah Snyder protested that the "extra work" was "above what she could do." Further, although sales were brisk, with the low profit margin there was never enough money to stock the fabric needed to service the multitude of requests. Hiring part-time help was straightforward enough.⁷² Alice Snyder had been working part-time in the MCC Clothing Depot since her return from Germany two years earlier, and she was quite willing to spend the remainder of her day upstairs in the Cutting Room. On the financial side, a \$400 bequest from the estate of Ida Bauman who in life had been a loyal supporter of the Cutting Room helped, but more was needed.⁷³ What was the solution? The Sewing Circles would turn for aid, as they had in the past, to the NRRO. In spring, 1953 they negotiated a \$1300 "capital advance... to be returned only when... no longer needed."⁷⁴

The "capital advance" negotiated in 1953 would be the last loan required. As the Cutting Room's relationship with MCC blossomed under Alice Snyder's capable leadership, and with a new director open to a variety of initiatives, the profit margin increased. Harvey Toews, who had become director of MCC (Kitchener) the previous year, gave the Cutting Room increased visibility. With Toews' invitation to move their enterprise from the rear of the MCC building's second floor to the first floor, the women gained a higher profile in the context of Mennonite relief work; indeed, this change would make the work of the Cutting Room and MCC indistinguishable to most observers.⁷⁵ A report that fall appearing in both *The Canadian Mennonite* and the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* illustrates this point. Highlighting the significant part that clothing donations held in Mennonite relief to new areas of strife—Korea, Jordan, and central Europe—the article credited women: "Some [clothing] is new, some of it is used but all of it is in good shape, having been checked and repaired by Mennonite women from the Kitchener district."⁷⁶

In her twin roles as supervisor of MCC's Clothing Depot and worker in the Sewing Circles' Cutting Room, Snyder coordinated the large number of volunteer hands required to sew new clothing, and to sort the old. This often meant diplomatically steering the more skilled workers towards the cutting room where a certain expertise was required to work with the cutter and up front in sales, while keeping other workers happy packing clothes.⁷⁷ Snyder's solid working relationship with Toews also smoothed relations between the MCC and the Sewing Circles. Under Snyder, in WMSA secretary Florence Shantz's words, "arrangements for working together became better." The relationship between the two organizations was important. In Shantz's words, "folks from all the peace churches" brought "relief clothing to the MCC clothing depot," then

stopped by “the Cutting Room to buy materials for more sewing.”⁷⁸ The Cutting Room supplied goods for up to 3000 Christmas Bundles during the project’s peak in the late 1950s, as well as leprosy bundles, layettes, school kits, health kits, sewing kits, and bedding.⁷⁹ With high sales, by 1957 the Cutting Room was able to purchase \$21,000 worth of materials, seven times what was bought in 1946.⁸⁰

With these developments, by the mid-1950s the Ontario Mennonite Women’s Missionary and Service Auxiliary (WMSA),⁸¹ as it was known by then, and its Cutting Room Committee and staff, developed an ever stronger sense of control. With increased sales and larger returns, despite minimal profit, capital accumulated. As early as fall 1954 the Cutting Room committee had attempted to repay the NRRO’s “capital advance.” Some saw the male body’s dismissal of their offer as patronizing.⁸² Perhaps as Lorna Bergey, who presided over the WMSA at that time has suggested, the male leadership “wasn’t used to having women running anything that big.” Whatever the case, four years later when a generous sales tax rebate had seen a substantial amount of money accumulate in the Cutting Room coffers, the NRRO changed its tune. They were still “shocked,” however, when the Cutting Room committee was able, as promised, to pay off the loan and to cover their own rent.⁸³ In Bergey’s words:

It did not made good business sense to the ladies in charge of the Cutting Room to continue carrying an outstanding loan of \$3300. on their books while showing a substantial profit. To the astonishment of the Non-Resistant Relief Committee members the entire loan was repaid.⁸⁴

By this point, some on the WMSA executive and Cutting Room committee worried that the project had become, in their words, “too large a business for this committee to oversee on marginal time.” In 1958 when Alice Snyder accepted another call for an overseas stint, this time to Jordan, the dissenters pushed for negotiating with MCC “regarding supervision of the [C]utting [R]oom.”⁸⁵ No evidence has come to light to substantiate whether the women actually approached MCC on the issue. What is striking, however, is that the Cutting Room seems to have been taken for granted by the relief organizations. Neither the NRRO’s records during this time, nor the MCC’s, refer to the Cutting Room.⁸⁶

On the women’s part, the time of doubt passed. Two new workers responded to their sense of call to continue this work and a new pay scale suggested a more confident self-image. Loretta Witmer and Leona Schmitt would alternate as supervisor and worker in the Cutting Room for the next decade and a half.⁸⁷ With Schmitt’s business training and her experience as treasurer of the WMSA, the Cutting Room continued to thrive. Now, besides relief, the enterprise supplied cut garments for a variety of local endeavours. These included MCC’s new project, Ailsa Craig Boys’ Farm,⁸⁸ and other new Mennonite institutions—Fairview Mennonite Home and Rockway Mennonite School. In addition to yard goods, the Cutting Room was now selling carpet warp, batts, soap, textile paints, sheeting for cribs, baby blankets, baby powder, safety pins, towels, and wash cloths. This added to the operator’s responsibilities, of course, for she needed to

keep track of sales tax on the expanded merchandise. Recognizing Schmitt's training and her supervisory capacity, in 1959 the WMSA offered Schmitt a flat rate of seventy-five cents an hour instead of the former pay by piecework. A growing sense of control manifested itself the following year when for the first time "sisters" rather than male auditors were engaged to examine the books.⁸⁹

With an operation that continued to expand, the question of space was inevitable. Cutting Room production had outgrown its 9½ by 21½ foot premises. The building was becoming run-down and the women were tired of working in sweatshop conditions. The heating was inadequate and the floor was always cold; the insulation was so poor that "during heavy rains the water seep[ed] in and ruin[ed] stock stored on the floor." Change was mandatory, the committee agreed. An additional 500 square feet, "comfortably heated... with privilege of extra storage space during Christmas Bundle season," would serve their needs.⁹⁰ These deliberations coincided with parallel discussions among the male constituency. At its 1962 annual meeting the NRRO shipping committee requested a new building which would include the MCC offices and "an adequate facility for processing, storing and shipping of material aid for relief." Although the Cutting Room had become quite independent of the NRRO, their presence close to MCC premises and their contributions to MCC relief seem to have become an institution. Thus the NRRO proposal included a Cutting Room.⁹¹

This did not mean, however, that women were invited to join the building committee as it began to plan for expansion. Women were conspicuous by their absence in decision-making concerning the new building, and later, the development of a new organization. In a marked shift from earlier years when the NRRO and MCC invited representatives of the Sewing Circles to their meetings, the building committee relied on MCC-director Harvey Taves (who had by now anglicized his name from Toews) to act as a go-between. Taves solicited input from the women and in turn relayed their requests to the all-male planning committee. For instance, on 15 May 1963, Taves met with the Cutting Room committee in the morning, and the building committee later that same day. He negotiated rent for the new building with the women, and pointed out their responsibility to buy their own equipment. The women, in turn, requested that Taves convey their displeasure with the projected layout for the Cutting Room.⁹²

The building issue illustrates a shift in the WMSA's relationship to the NRRO and the MCC. Despite the close association between the female-led and male-led institutions, by the mid-1960s a clearer separation of spheres seems to have evolved. Was it the institutionalization of relief or a more independent Cutting Room that created this split?⁹³ Certainly the male leadership recognized the important work that women were doing in the Clothing Depot and the Cutting Room; yet the decision-makers seemed oblivious to the potential of feminine input as MCC(O) evolved. As with the building planning, women's absence is striking in the new MCC(O) organization. The NRRO, the Conference of Historic Peace Churches, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Ailsa Craig Boys' Farm, the new work that MCC had developed in Ontario under Harvey

Taves' leadership, were all part of the new equation; Material Aid was not. The Clothing Depot remained firmly under director Taves' mandate, while the Cutting Room continued to be separate under the WMSA.⁹⁴ By 1966, separate women's sessions introduced at MCC(O) annual meetings featuring female speakers further heightened the separation of spheres. Special women's meetings brought in women such as long-time MCC worker Irene Bishop, who had served with MCC in Germany and Algeria. By scheduling these gatherings during the MCC business meeting, however, it meant that no WMSA representatives would be present when decisions were being made. This is especially striking, considering that the first woman delegate had already attended sessions of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario seven years earlier, in 1959.⁹⁵

The Cutting Room may even have relished their independence from the male-run organizations, but similar to women's organizations in other institutions, in the new MCC structure women's domain was clearly subordinate. Harvey Taves invited Alice Snyder, who had skillfully managed the material aid areas for years, to become his secretary.⁹⁶ Despite no formal training in the area, however, Snyder's organizational skills appear to have been as successful in the MCC office as they were in the Clothing Depot and the Cutting Room.⁹⁷ Snyder continued to serve the institution in her secretarial capacity after Taves' sudden death in May, 1965 until early 1969 when she moved on to cook for the Craigwood Group Home in London, Ontario.⁹⁸

Despite being in a subordinate role, the WMSA was willing to work alongside the new organization. They paid rent to MCC(O) for their premises in the new building. They also funded decorating the room, found their own equipment, gave MCC a monthly stipend of \$40 for fuel, and covered one-half of the telephone bill for the new MCC(O) office.⁹⁹ It seems that the Cutting Room's rent, \$1000 annually, and a \$2000 loan "interest free" were significant factors in keeping the new building afloat.¹⁰⁰ In addition the Cutting Room, along with the Clothing Depot, continued to recruit volunteers to mend and prepare clothing; indeed, the WMSA's work continued to grow. Still running with mostly volunteer staff under a paid supervisor, in July, 1964 the Cutting Room Committee acknowledged Leona Schmitt's managerial responsibilities with a new title: no longer a mere Operator, she became "Supervisor" of the outfit. To mark her new status, the committee increased her wage to \$35/week with three weeks of paid vacation.¹⁰¹

The new title recognized Schmitt's skill as she managed multiple tasks. Not only did she oversee the production of vast quantities of cut garments but she also coordinated the many buyers of small quantities of the same and supervised assistants and volunteers. With the cutting committee she also made decisions about how much fabric was necessary to stock the vast range of items that now were expected by MCC Material Aid, and where they could get the best price. Schmitt also drove to Toronto to purchase the many bolts of fabric required. The operation depended for its success on the many volunteers, sometimes sewing in the local circles in monthly gatherings, but often labouring in the privacy of their

homes. Thus Schmitt also worked with the Cutting Room committee to market products and to monitor finished garments, diplomatically letting seamstresses know when things were not up to par!¹⁰²

Women's hard work in Material Aid was recognized by MCC officials, but public statements made no distinction between the MCC Clothing Depot and the WMSA Cutting Room. At MCC(O)'s annual meetings, for instance, women's volunteer hours were sometimes reported. In 1965, director Dan Zehr commended women for supplying Christmas and leprosy bundles and donating thousands of pounds of clothing, and in 1967 Doug Snyder noted that women had volunteered 820 days of work. "Special mention of thanks" was given "to the many women's groups from the various Ontario churches who come to the Material Aid Centre and do necessary mending on clothing which has been donated for relief," but neither director ever named the Cutting Room in their reports.¹⁰³ Nor was the Cutting Room Supervisor given voice at MCC(O) annual meetings. The WMSA executive and Cutting Room Supervisor had to clarify their identity, their mission, and their relationship with MCC through WMSA vehicles—annual meetings and the WMSA *Voice*—and a new monthly publication of the Mennonite Mission Board of Ontario and the Western Ontario Mennonite Mission Board, the *Ontario Mennonite Evangel*. This latter publication was edited by long-time church worker and WMSA member Dorothy Swartzentruber, who was sympathetic to the Cutting Room's cause.¹⁰⁴

This publicity appears to have been successful, for hundreds of women continued to stitch at home or in their circles; while others, like Salome Martin Bauman from St. Jacobs Mennonite Church and Naomi Shantz Good from Blenheim Mennonite, travelled to the MCC centre to divide their time between Material Aid and the Cutting Room. Women enjoyed these times for the social aspect. Bauman and Good, for instance, were childhood friends now in their 'golden' years. The work was far more than social, however. It challenged volunteers and provided creative outlets. Good enjoyed making decisions about the mounds of clothing—what kinds of repairs were needed and which were rags;¹⁰⁵ Bauman would often take home old dresses and "turn them into pretty little jumpers." It was women like these who also donated many hours to the Cutting Room. They compiled the layers of cut pieces (seventy odd layers of cloth could be cut at one time), examined bundles brought by local congregational women to make sure they were of standard quality, and took home cut garments to sew and return on their next volunteer stint.¹⁰⁶

Schmitt's directorship in the 1970s probably marked the Cutting Room's peak. Social changes in the last half of the 1960s and the early 1970s would reshape the WMSA's mandate and its self-image. As the need for material aid overseas declined, the WMSA embraced new MCC initiatives. In 1962 Edna Byler, wife of an American MCC official, started the Self-Help program. The Ontario WMSA joined American women and other Canadians in marketing crafts for third-world women.¹⁰⁷ Five years later, in 1967, Margaret Brubacher, who had put the Cutting Room on a solid footing, turned her energies to a new

enterprise designed to raise funds for overseas aid. WMSA women followed her lead, promoting and advancing the Ontario Relief Sale.¹⁰⁸ Finally, MCC thrift shops, opened in Ontario in the early 1970s, depended heavily on female volunteers to sell the used clothing donated by constituents to raise relief funds.¹⁰⁹ Cutting Room supporters stood behind the new ventures, but these shifts would mean the organization's decline. Despite servicing women sewing crafts and quilts for the relief sale and marketing Self-Help goods,¹¹⁰ MCC's transition from sending Material Aid to financial assistance saw the Cutting Room shift down from a five-day-a-week operation to two. When a new Mennonite institution, the Mennonite Credit Union, negotiated to locate at the 50 Kent Ave. facility, MCC(O) offered it space which encroached on the Cutting Room.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, Leona Schmitt had resigned from her supervisory capacity in 1970. Loyal supporters carried on the work of a diminished Cutting Room under Loretta Witmer's supervision until 1976 when Alice Koch took charge. Koch continues in that capacity to this day.¹¹²

Even while the need for women's sewing skills was declining with the changing context of the 1970s, the secular women's movement gave Mennonite women a voice in male institutions like the MCC(O). Women recognized that the MCC(O) depended on them to achieve its material aid goals and some insisted that it was time they also be included in decision-making.¹¹³ Although the voices of their foremothers had been muted, the women who founded and ran the Cutting Room from the 1940s onward had paved the way for their more vocal daughters of the 1970s.

One could say that while women grew from their reliance on the male-led NRRO to become more self-confident and more independent, women's voices were silenced in the organization as a whole. Yet this failed to discourage those who promoted the Sewing Circles' Cutting Room. They knew what their mission was. They were skilled seamstresses and business women, and they were committed through "the distaff and spindle" to ministering in the only avenue open to them. As decisions were made and hurdles were passed, they seemed confident in their role. To use Janet Mancini Billson's term, they thrived as *Keepers of the Culture*,¹¹⁴ providing the bulk of the volunteer labour for MCC material aid. During the decades between World War II and 1970, there is no evidence that women were concerned with being excluded from decision-making bodies. They made the judgments required to keep their own mission going. Women played a crucial role in MCC's material aid program during these years, and despite an unbalanced power relationship imposed by male structures, while keeping the culture, women have also maximized their own opportunities; indeed, their work was foundational to MCC's overseas relief work. As further research is done on women's roles in Self-Help, the Relief Sale, and the Thrift Shops, further evidence may be found to support the notion that women have underpinned MCC's relief work.

NOTES

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¹ Barbara Coffman, "W.M.S.A. in Work and Action," *Ontario Mennonite Evangel* (October, 1965), 6.

² In her book *His Name Was John* (Herald Press, 1964) she described the life of her father John Coffman.

³ Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside,'" *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 5 (1987), 100; see also Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996) and Lorraine Roth, *Willing Service: Stories of Ontario Mennonite Women* (Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, 1992).

⁴ Women are conspicuous by their virtual absence in the three-volume *Mennonites in Canada* series. See Frank H. Epp, *The History of a Separate People, 1786–1920*, (Toronto, 1974) and *A People's Struggle for Survival, 1920–1940* (Toronto, 1982). Even Ted Regehr's 1996 volume, *A People Transformed* (Toronto), which was published well within the time frame of the current rich historical scholarship on Canadian women, includes women only in an 'add and stir' approach. This despite his research assistant Marlene Epp's careful investigation into women's side of the story; see for instance Epp's "Women in Canadian Mennonite History" and "Writing Women into Mennonite History," *Mennogesprach* (September, 1990): 13–6.

⁵ See M. Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History" and Neufeld Redekop, *Work of Their Hands*. This categorization follows the precedent set by non-Mennonite church historians. See for instance, Joan Gundersen, "The Local Parish as a Female Institution: The Experience of All Saints Episcopal Church in Frontier Minnesota," *Church History* 55, 3 (September, 1986), 307–322;

⁶ I am grateful to Linda Huebert Hecht for pointing me to these photos housed in the Photo Collection at the Mennonite Historical Archives of Ontario. In an unpublished paper presented at the "One People, Many Stories: Charting the Next Generation of Mennonite Historical Study in the US and Canada" Conference held at Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, British Columbia, 8–11 May 1998, Huebert Hecht elaborated on the important role that photos play as documentary evidence. Esther Epp Thiessen also commented on this juxtaposition in her opening comments as chair of the "Organizing Gender in Institutions" session at "Engendering the Past: Women and Men in Mennonite History," held at The University of Winnipeg, 17 October 1998.

⁷ Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld, *Gender and History in Canada* (Mississauga, 1996), 1.

⁸ Ted Regehr, "Many Voices, One Story?": Accounting for Diversity in Canadian Mennonite History." *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 15 (1997): 101.

⁹ Roxana Ng, "Work Restructuring and Recolonizing Third World Women: An Example from the Garment Industry in Toronto," *Canadian Woman Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring, 1998), 24.

¹⁰ Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History," 104.

¹¹ Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York, 1997), 143.

¹² Beverley Boutilier and Alison Prentice have noted a tradition of women community builders writing their own histories. See *Creating historical memory: English-Canadian women and the work of history* (Vancouver, 1997), 16.

¹³ Lorraine Roth, *Willing Service: Stories of Ontario Mennonite Women* (Waterloo, Ont., 1992), xi.

¹⁴ Archival materials are housed in the Mennonite Historical Archives of Ontario (MHAO) at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. Linda Huebert Hecht and I have conducted about thirty interviews for the larger project. The tapes have been deposited at the MHAO.

¹⁵ *W.M.S.A. 1895-1967*, compiled by Mrs. L. Koch, Mrs. E. Brubacher and Mrs. D. Bergey, from Alice Koch private papers donated to Mennonite Historical Archives of Ontario (hereafter MHAO).

¹⁶ Roth, *Willing Service*, 25-26.

¹⁷ Epp, *A People's Struggle for Survival*, 351.

¹⁸ Lorna Bergey, "Changes in Cultural Symbols for Ontario Mennonite Women of the Swiss Tradition during the 1950s and 60s: Stories We Need to Hear," *Mennogesprach* (Spring, 1990), 10.

¹⁹ Roth, *Willing Service*, 1-5, 29-30 and "Conscientious Objection: The Experiences of Some Mennonite Women During World War II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 66 (1992), 539.

²⁰ I would like to thank Lorna Bergey for pointing me to L.J. Burkholder's succinct summary of the history of the Sewing Circles. See *A Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario* (Markham, Ontario, 1935; reprinted in 1986 by the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario), pp. 170-72. For a history of the WMSA and an outline of the controversy that developed soon after its inception in 1911, see Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: a story of God's faithfulness, 1683-1983* (Scottsdale, Penn., 1983), 195-98.

²¹ Roth, *Willing Service*, 40-42.

²² F. H. Epp, *History of a Separate People*, 376-77; Mennonite Central Committee (Ontario) (hereafter, MCC(O)) Annual Report, January, 1965, Mennonite Historical Archives of Ontario. All archival sources cited hereafter are from the MHAO.

²³ Koch et al, 2.

²⁴ Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women*, 202-03; Koch et al, 3; Katie Funk Wiebe, "The Place of Women in the Work... Is the Sewing Circle of 50 Years Ago Meeting the Needs of the Modern Age?" *The Canadian Mennonite* 11, 9 (1 March 1963), 5.

²⁵ Janet Mancini Billson, *Keepers of the Culture: The Power of Tradition in Women's Lives* (New York, 1995), 213.

²⁶ Regehr, *A People Transformed*, 24.

²⁷ Martha Bechtel to S.F. Coffman, 3 October 1939, Non-Resistant Relief Organization files (hereafter NRRO), S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 2.

²⁸ Regehr, *A People Transformed*, 66-67; C.N. Good to S.F. Coffman, 11 June 1940, S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 2.

²⁹ Mary Cressman to Martha Bechtel, 28 October 1940; Martha Bechtel to S.F. Coffman, 28 October 1940; L. J. Burkholder to S.F. Coffman, 15 December 1939, S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 2.

³⁰ For further information about S. F. Coffman the man and his leadership in Ontario see Urie Bender, *Four Earthen Vessels: Biographical Profiles of Oscar Burkholder, Samuel F. Coffman, Clayton F. Derstine and Jesse B. Martin* (Pennsylvania, 1983), pp. 113-84; Lorraine Roth has included a brief biography of Martha Bechtel in her *Willing Service*, pp. 16-17.

³¹ Minutes of Executive Committee, 14 November 1939; Minutes, 13 December 1940, NRRO; Martha Bechtel to S.F. Coffman, 29 October 1940; S.F. Coffman to Martha Bechtel, 20 November 1940; S.F. Coffman to C.N. Good, 20 November 1940, S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 2.

³² Martha Bechtel to Noah Bearinger, 4 January 1941, S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 5; Lists of Bedding and Garments provided by the Sewing Circles of the Non-resistant Churches of Ontario, 1941, NRRO Correspondence.

³³ Minutes of Executive Committee, Treasurer's Office, 2 May 1942, NRRO.

³⁴ Gladys Goering, *Women in Search of Mission* (Newton, Ks, 1980), 38; see also M. Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History," 99.

³⁵ Martha Bechtel to S.F. Coffman, 16 April 1941; Mrs. C.N. Good to S.F. Kauffman (sic), 26 May 1941, S.F. Correspondence, file 5; Roth, *Willing Service*, 263.

³⁶ Minutes of Executive Committee, 4 November 1941, NRRO.

³⁷ For a fascinating analysis of this phenomenon among the Holdeman Mennonites see Linda Boynton Arthur, "Deviance, Agency, and the Social Control of Women's Bodies in a Mennonite Community," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* (1998) vol. 10, no. 2, 75-99.

³⁸ Lorna Bergey, "Changes in Cultural Symbols for Ontario Mennonite Women of the Swiss Tradition, 1;" see also F.H. Epp, *A People's Struggle for Survival*, p. 70 and Marlene Epp, "Carrying the Banner of Nonconformity: Ontario Mennonite Women and the Dress Question," *Conrad Grebel Review* (Fall 1990), 237-58.

³⁹ Minutes of Executive Committee, 4 November 1941, NRRO.

⁴⁰ F. Epp, *A People's Struggle for Survival*, 351.

⁴¹ Roth, *Willing Service*, 36.

⁴² M. Epp has emphasized that women's sewing was their way of witnessing to their churches' non-resistance stance. See "Writing Women into Mennonite History."

⁴³ Minutes of Annual and Semi-Annual Meetings, 23 May 1942, Women's Missionary and Service Association files (hereafter WMSA). Roth, "Conscientious Objectors," 540-41. See also biographies of Hunsperger Bowman and Cressman in Roth's *Willing Service*, 87 and 188-90.

⁴⁴ Roth, *Willing Service*, 20; M. Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History," 99-100; Koch et al, 10; Cutting Room Minutes, 8 July 1942, WMSA.

⁴⁵ Ng, "Work Restructuring and Recolonizing Third World Women," 22.

⁴⁶ A telephone interview with Alice Snyder 26 January 1999 by the author confirmed that neither she nor her mother Ida Snyder who would follow Barbara Eby as cutters had ever worked in the clothing industry. It remains to be discovered from where these women learned their skill.

⁴⁷ John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and its Service, 1920-1951* (Scottsdale, Penna., 1952), 175.

⁴⁸ Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, 330.

⁴⁹ S.F. Coffman to Clara Snider, 31 December 1943; O.O. Miller to S.F. Coffman, 1 January 1944, S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 1.

⁵⁰ S.F. Coffman to Thomas Reesor, 8 January 1944; S.F. Coffman to S. Goudie, 8 January 1944; O.O. Miller to S.F. Coffman, 1 January 1944, S.F. Coffman Correspondence, file 6; Women's Activities Newsletter, (January, 1945), MCC(O) Correspondence, Box 1, file 37; Roth, "Conscientious Objectors," 544; Dorothy Sauder, "Mennonite Central Committee: Early Days at the Kitchener, Ontario office," *Mennogesprach* 7, 1 (March, 1989), 1.

⁵¹ Women's Activities Newsletter (January, 1945); M. Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History," 99; Dorothy Swartzentruber Sauder, interview by Linda Huebert Hecht, Kitchener, Ontario, 17 December 1996.

⁵² Regehr, *A People Transformed*, 61.

⁵³ M. Epp, "Writing Women into Mennonite History," 14.

⁵⁴ Cutting Room Minutes, 5 March 1943, WMSA.

⁵⁵ Cutting Room Minutes, 2 February 1945.

⁵⁶ Cutting Room Minutes, 2 February 1945; Financial Statement, 1 January–31 December 1945, NRRO.

⁵⁷ Financial statement, 1 January–31 December 1945, NRRO; Cutting Room Minutes, 2 February 1945.

⁵⁸ Minutes of Executive Committee, 22 May 1945, NRRO; Koch et al, 10.

⁵⁹ Alice Snyder, interview by Linda Huebert Hecht in Kitchener, Ontario, 17 October 1996; Executive Minutes, 2 February 1945, NRRO; Cutting Room Minutes, 2 February 1945; my unpublished paper, "Canadian Homemakers during World War II: Rations, Shortages, and Conservation" deals further with how War Price and Trade Board restrictions affected women's lives.

⁶⁰ Annual Meeting, 29 March 1945 and 4 April 1946; Financial Statement, 1 January–31 December 1946; 1 January–31 December 1947, NRRO; Cutting Room Minutes, 29 April and 1 May 1947; Koch et al, 10.

⁶¹ Cutting Room Minutes, 2 February 1945.

⁶² Koch et al, 10; Cutting Room Minutes, 8 November 1946.

⁶³ Alice Snyder, interview; Orie O. Miller and Ernest W. Lehman, "Feeding and Clothing the Hungry," in E.J. Swalm, compiler, *Nonresistance Under Test* (Nappanee, Ind., 1949), 183; See also Norman Knowles, "The Rector and the Deaconess: Women, the Church and Sexual Harassment in Early-Twentieth Century English Canada, A Case Study," *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Summer, 1996), 98-99.

⁶⁴ Koch et al, 10; Cutting Room Minutes, 17 August 1950.

⁶⁵ Unrau, *In the Name of Christ*, 160.

⁶⁶ Iva Taves, interview by Linda Huebert Hecht, Kitchener, Ontario, 29 August 1996; Koch et al, 10; Cutting Room Minutes, 5 January 1951.

⁶⁷ Regehr alludes to this confidence gained by Mennonite women, like their Canadian sisters, in *A People Transformed*, 62.

⁶⁸ Cutting Room Minutes, 6 March 1951, 5 April 1951; Koch et al, 5, 10; Roth, *Willing Service*, 19–20; Margaret Brubacher, interview by Linda Huebert Hecht in Cambridge, Ontario, 24 July 1997; Lorna Bergey, telephone interview by Linda Huebert Hecht in Kitchener, Ontario, 1 September 1998.

⁶⁹ Lorna Bergey, telephone interview.

⁷⁰ Koch et al, 10.

⁷¹ Margaret Brubacher, interview.

⁷² Cutting Room Minutes, 19 February 1952.

⁷³ Cutting Room Minutes, Louida Bauman to Carol Bauman, 22 April 1953, WMSA; Koch et al, 11.

⁷⁴ Wilfrid Ulrich to Margaret Brubacher, 25 February 1959, NRRO Correspondence.

⁷⁵ Koch et al, 11; for a further example of Toews' initiative during these years, see my "Christian Love Meets Government Regulation: From Ailsa Craig Boys' Farm to Craigwood, 1954–1970," in *Historical Papers*, Canadian Society of Church History, 1997.

⁷⁶ "Canadian Churches Donate \$155,000 for Overseas Relief," *Canadian Mennonite* 2, 41 (22 October 1954), 3.

⁷⁷ Telephone interview with Alice Snyder.

⁷⁸ Cutting Room Minutes, 24 September 1958; Koch et al, 11; Roth, *Willing Service*, 263–64.

⁷⁹ Koch et al, 17.

⁸⁰ Wiebe, "The Place of Women in the Work," 5; see also Koch et al, 11.

⁸¹ Roth, *Willing Service*, 263; Mrs. Elmer Brubacher to M.R. Good, 1 October 1958, Cutting Room Correspondence; Koch et al, 5, 7.

⁸² Minutes of meeting between NRRO executive, MCC representative, and WMSA executive, 28 October 1954; Mrs. Elmer (Margaret) Brubacher to M.R. Good, 1 October 1958, Cutting Room Correspondence; Statement of Receipts and Disbursements, 1 April 1956 to 31 March 1957, NRRO; Koch et al, 11.

⁸³ Cutting Room Minutes, 24 September 1958 and 23 April 1959; Koch et al, 11; Lorna Bergey, conversation with Lucille Marr, Waterloo, Ont., 13 June 1997; Bergey, telephone interview; Roth, *Willing Service*, 263.

⁸⁴ Bergey, "Changes in Cultural Symbols for Mennonite Women of the Swiss Tradition," 10.

⁸⁵ "Alice Snyder goes to Middle East," *Canadian Mennonite* 6, 40 (10 October 1958), 3; Alice Snyder, interview; Cutting Room Minutes, 24 September 1958.

⁸⁶ See for instance Wilfred Ulrich's report on the NRRO to the CHPC annual meeting, 14 November 1959 and H.W. Taves' letter to ministers and leadership, 13 November 1959, NRRO Correspondence; Aaron Klassen has suggested that "the Cutting Room has never received the attention it deserved;" interview by Linda Huebert Hecht, Kitchener, Ontario, 18 December 1996.

⁸⁷ Cutting Room Minutes, 24 September 1958 including an unsigned letter, "Why a Cutting Room?" Koch et al, 11, 17; Ruby Schmitt, interview by Lucille Marr, Kitchener, Ontario, 18 June 1997.

⁸⁸ See my "From Christian Love to Government Regulations," for the early development of that institution.

⁸⁹ Koch et al, 7; Cutting Room Minutes, 23 April 1959, November 1960.

⁹⁰ Cutting Room Minutes, 23 February 1960.

⁹¹ Minutes of Annual Meeting, 10 April 1962, NRRO Correspondence.

⁹² Cutting Room Minutes, 15 May 1963.

⁹³ Social theorist Max Weber has suggested that the equality afforded women in the initial stages of a movement quickly shifts to a hierarchical arrangement. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, E. Fischhoff, Trans. (Boston, 1968), pp. 104–05, referenced in Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Susan Setta, "Women in Evangelical, Holiness, and Pentecostal Traditions," *Women & Religion in America*, vol. III (New York, 1986), edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, p. 227.

⁹⁴ Memorandum from H.H. Epp to Conference of Historic Peace Churches, 1964; Meeting of Ontario Conference and CHPC representatives, 1964, MCC(O) Minutes.

⁹⁵ MCC(O) Annual Report, November 1966, November 1967; MCC(O) Bulletin, 18 February 1969; see also Bergey, "Changes in Cultural Symbols for Ontario Mennonite Women of the Swiss Tradition," 2.

⁹⁶ Alice Snyder, interview; Sauder, "Mennonite Central Committee;" "MCC(O) Report to the Annual Meeting of the Conference, May 1965.

⁹⁷ MCC(O) Annual Report, November 1965.

⁹⁸ MCC(O) Bulletin, 18 February 1969.

⁹⁹ Cutting Room Minutes, 18 January 1964; 8 April 1964; 13 April 1964.

¹⁰⁰ Bergey, "Changes in Cultural Symbols for Ontario Mennonite Women of the Swiss

Tradition," p. 10; Koch et al, 11; Cutting Room Minutes, 21 April 1966 and 16 March 1970; MCC(O) Annual Report, November 1968; Lorna Bergey, telephone interview.

¹⁰¹ Cutting Room Minutes, 7 July 1964, April 1965 and 12 July 1965.

¹⁰² Cutting Room Financial Records, 1943-65; Cutting Room Minutes, 1 April 1965, 19 January 1966, 12 June 1967 and 10 June 1968; Leona Schmitt report, July 1965.

¹⁰³ MCC(O) Annual Report, November 1965, November 1967.

¹⁰⁴ MCC office report (1964), Executive Minutes; Mrs. E.C. Cressman, "WMSA Report," *Ontario Mennonite Evangel* (May 1964), 14.

¹⁰⁵ Roth, *Willing Service*, 207.

¹⁰⁶ Roth, *Willing Service*, 203-04; Luella Yoder, "From Cutting Room to Clothing Centre," *WMSA Voice* (February, 1970), 8-9.

¹⁰⁷ See for instance Marlene DeFehr, "Self-Help for the Helpers," *Canadian Mennonite* 11, 44 (8 November 1966), 1, 10; Marion Keeney Preheim, "Edna Ruth Byler," in *Something Meaningful for God* edited by C.J. Dyck, *The Mennonite Committee Story*, vol. 4 (Scottsdale, Penn., 1981), 131-50; Roth, *Willing Service*, 199-202; Alice Snyder, "Needlework and Woodwork an aid to Self-Help in Jordan and in Haiti," *Canadian Mennonite* 12, 13 (31 March 1964), 1; Cutting Room Minutes, 19 January 1966.

¹⁰⁸ MCC(O) Annual Report, 1966; Margaret Brubacher, interview.

¹⁰⁹ MCC(O) Annual Report, 1972; Ruby Schmitt, interview.

¹¹⁰ Mrs. Leighton Schmitt, "Report from the Cutting Room," *Ontario Mennonite Evangel* (March, 1969), 11; Cutting Room Minutes, 6 December 1966; Roth, *Willing Service*, 53-54.

¹¹¹ Cutting Room Minutes, 24 April 1972; 28 February 1973; Koch et al, 17.

¹¹² WMSA Executive Committee Minutes, 16 March 1970; Cutting Room Minutes, 28 August 1970; Koch et al, 17; Roth, *Willing Service*, 263-64.

¹¹³ See for instance Frank Epp, "Women at MCC! An Omen?" *Canadian Mennonite* 17, 8 (25 February 1969), 3; Dorothy Swartzentruber, "An Equal Place to Stand," *Ontario Mennonite Evangel* (April, 1970), 6; Kathy Hildebrand, interview by Lucille Marr in St. Catherines, Ont., 21 July 1998. These issues will be dealt with more fully in the larger MCC(O) History Project.

¹¹⁴ Billson, *Keepers of the Culture*, 3.