

# Just Nostalgic Family Men? Off-the-Job Family Time, Providing, and Oral Histories of Fatherhood in Postwar Canada, 1945-1975<sup>1</sup>

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*This article examines the life stories of three men who fathered children during Canada's 1949-1961 baby boom. Drawn from a sample of thirty-five interviews, these particular cases offer rich comparisons, across ethnic and class lines, of what these men valued most about their fathering years. At the conclusion of his interviews, Rutherford asked his participants to reflect on the socially and historically significant role of fatherhood and how they thought it had changed since the baby-boom period. To this end, he considers the ways that these men, especially when recalling their leisure time at home, engaged in nostalgic reminiscences. This was, as Rutherford notes, markedly different from how they recalled their roles as providers; the intensification of the male breadwinner ideology, during this period of economic growth, impacted remembering. Taken together, Rutherford offers intriguing examples of how memory navigates the boundaries between fact and fiction, and between fathers as "providers" with real regrets about the past and fathers as "nostalgic" family men who longed for what they imagined as an ideal past.*

Like motherhood, fatherhood never really ends in a man's life. It plays a role in shaping the identities and experiences of men, determining how they see the world and how others view them. It also affects how these individuals remember the past. Fathers, like other family members, frequently draw from familial memories selectively to construct a subjective sense of the past. Arguably oral history's most fruitful domain, subjectivity offers researchers a revealing record about experience, sentiment, and family role construction. Alessandro Portelli's classic statement of what makes oral history "different," emphasizes unique evidence of what specific experiences *felt* like for interview subjects, even if the memories that oral history is based on fall short of providing a consistently objective record of how they actually occurred.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 63-74.

While memory, regarding oral history and fatherhood, serves as the fundamental anchor to any family man's gendered, classed, ethno-cultural, generational, and geographically shaped self concept, the sense of the past it reveals to oral historians is characteristically opaque, depending on the particular narrative that is being shared between the researcher and the subject.<sup>3</sup> Here, through interviews that I conducted for a larger study on fatherhood in the baby boom era, I will focus on something oral historians often shy away from: nostalgia in life stories.<sup>4</sup>

### **Nostalgia and Oral Histories of Fatherhood**

Nostalgia can be difficult to define because its meaning has changed radically over time. While a longing to return to past times and places is ancient, Odysseus' romantic longing for home in Homeric legend comes to mind, nostalgia's etymological root can be traced back to 1688 when Johannes Hofer, a medical student, combined the Greek words *nostos* (return home) with *algos* (pain). Hofer tried to describe the combination of symptoms, anorexia, weeping, and irregular heartbeats, that Swiss soldiers displayed on their European march. Nostalgia, as first conceived, was an illness. Our ordinary use of the term, however, has expanded considerably. As Peter Fritzsche has pointed out, nostalgic expression in art, literature, and popular discourse is something we might understandably associate with the romanticism of the nineteenth century rather than the science of melancholia of the latter seventeenth.<sup>5</sup> Some psychologists have gone as far as to

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<sup>3</sup> On approaches to period-specific generational memories from the 1930s to the baby boom, see John Bodner, "Generational Memory in an American Town," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 26 (Spring 1996), 619-37.

<sup>4</sup> Oral historian Barbara Shircliffe comments on the problem that historians ordinarily have with nostalgic signs; some view nostalgia as "unreliable data, which potentially distort the historical record." See Barbara Shircliffe, "'We Got the Best of That World': A Case Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of Segregation," *Oral History Review* 28, 1 (Summer/Fall 2001), 61. Shircliffe joins Selma Leydesdorff when discussing nostalgia, regarding it as a potentially potent window through which oral historians can see how their subjects negotiate their relationship to the past. See Selma Leydesdorff, "The Screen of Nostalgia: Oral History and the Ordeal of Working-Class Jews in Amsterdam," *International Journal of Oral History* (June 1986), 108-115. American postwar family historian Stephanie Coontz offers a major counterpoint to the simplistic, indeed nostalgic images of the "good life" of the 1950s and early-1960s in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). See also Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000), 127-50.

<sup>5</sup> For a useful review of the origins of the term nostalgia and an insightful analysis of its meaning in history see Peter Fritzsche, "Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile, and Modernity," *American Historical Review* 106, 5 (December 2001), 1587-1618. Fritzsche argues that nostalgia and modern thought in Western cultures are related to a linear rather than cyclical sense of difference between past and present. Nostalgia, he argues, is thus a modern concept in the sense

say that emotions and the discourse of nostalgia, while springing from melancholic feelings, can foster increased self esteem, social connectedness, and relief from an existential threat.<sup>6</sup> Today, a combined sense of homesickness, reminiscence, wistfulness, longing, often tinged with melancholy, characterizes our everyday understanding of what it means to be nostalgic.

Oral historians tend to avoid discussions of nostalgia, a potentially thorny aspect of our work if it occurs as a distorting mixture of sentiment and interpretation that inflates, in memory, a more positive, ideal, or desired sense of the past. When they appear in oral history, nostalgic “pasts” derive from a complex interplay of emotion and memory. Nostalgic memories are rooted in an ideal and mythical past: of people, places, and events that connect storytellers to a better time, place, and set of relationships. Notions of home, freedom, power, and love typically inhabit memories that are clearly nostalgic to oral historians who are aware of contrasting realities in the historical past. While narratives may have been delivered in good faith, those cleansed of their more bitter, if not realistic, elements by the healing potential of memory serves to repress a more complicated past.

In recent years, however, oral historians have approached nostalgic elements evident in the oral history transcripts of both women and men as discourses informed by the “myths we live by.” Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel’s work have helped us recognize the importance of “life myths” in reconstructing the self through memory.<sup>7</sup> Life myths reflect discourse, from keywords to the favourite stories people use to reflect on who they were or became during their lives: as in, I was always a “maverick”; or, I was always a “lone wolf.” Or, as one of my interviewees said: “In the environment that I was in, the manufacturing environment, if you were a pussycat, you were gone.”<sup>8</sup> The implications of life myths are broad in studies of autobiography, both oral and written forms. But while oral historians, including myself, may point toward the value of deconstructing the subjectivity inherent in the “myths we live by,” we seldom embrace nostalgia as an analytical framework through which we may understand life myths.

Here, I use nostalgia to examine memories of fatherhood, highlighting my interviewees’ tendency to be nostalgic only when recalling their family’s leisure

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that historical consciousness of progress or decline may be seen as modern as well. An imagined view of historical *change* can lead to a nostalgic sensibility as individuals or members of a generation look back to the worlds of their past, whether their focus is on their own lives or those of past generations.

<sup>6</sup> See Constantine Sedikides, Tim Wildschut, Jamie Arndt, and Clay Routledge, “Nostalgia: Past, Present, and Future,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 17, 5 (October 2008), 304-07.

<sup>7</sup> See Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, eds., *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Cecil Yates, interview with author, Burlington, Ontario, 25 July 2001.

time; they were not nostalgic when speaking about their roles as providers. In reflecting on this pattern, I have considered why “happy times” at home prompted nostalgic storytelling whereas breadwinning, a duty that ordinarily separated family men from their domestic lives, did not. Was their nostalgia not part of a larger fatherhood mythology that privileged the image of the father at home, actively parenting and participating in conjugal family life, and in direct contrast to the working father, on the job and supporting “his” family? Was the salient absence of nostalgia, in recalling their role as providers, a gendered lens that they mobilized to overcome the patriarchal power that often accompanied that role, and especially the gendered labour economy in which they functioned? On the one hand, the men that I interviewed often remembered off-the-job time with their families through nostalgic lenses: *these* were the truly ideal moments in their eyes. Those fathers who enjoyed these moments and actively participated in their making, painted a picture of idealism. Paid work, on the other hand, was neither a duty to be shirked, nor to be recalled too fondly. I found the contrast striking. Fatherhood related in such terms by the men themselves reflected a tactic of patriarchal power, drawing nostalgic differences between privileging life at home against life at work; it should be noted, in examining gendered family regimes, that the economic power of modern fatherhood was rooted in the patriarchal advantage secured through the primary breadwinning function.

## **Methodology**

The following analysis is based on a close reading of three life stories of fatherhood that were selected from thirty-five interviews that I completed in local communities across Canada between 1995 and 2003. Interviewees were either known to the author or selected through “snowballing” techniques. They had to have been fathers during Canada’s baby boom period, 1949-1961, to participate in this study. I was the sole interviewer and interviews took place at participants’ homes, lasting approximately three hours and following the format of a life-course interview. Participants were encouraged to follow their own narrative strategies so that they could tell “their” stories on their own terms.

In this article, I also consider how my interviewees responded to seven key questions about the meaning and historical significance of fatherhood; I also encouraged them to reflect on their own fathers. What did you think was important about being a father? Why? What did you like/dislike most about it? Why? What made a “good” father and a “bad” father? How were you the same as (or different than) your father? Did you know many other fathers well? Did they influence you? Do you have any other significant memories as a father that we have not considered? (Prompt: particular incidents, events, crises that stand out in

your memory?) What did you feel worked out well for you as a father? If you had the chance, what would you do differently?

All of my interviewees also commented on what they considered, in broad terms, to be astonishing changes in family life and fatherhood since the 1930s. That they had lived as part of a generation of men who married at early ages, acquired residential independence sooner than their own fathers had, and had their children in a period of rising fertility within a growing national economy was broadly reflected as huge contrasts between their childhood and parenting years. They certainly did not see their individual lives as mere reflections of “the times” in which they fathered their own children. In fact, many tended to cast their stories, in masculine terms, as that of self-made and self-directed providers and family men. At the same time, significant trends in suburban growth and consumer spending, along with a popular discourse about “family togetherness” and stereotypical images of family life, that circulated through the situational comedies and advertisements found on television, a new form of media in Canada since the early 1950s, led to a gap that social historians are just beginning to address. Class and ethnic lines and contrasts between lived experiences and the middle-class ideal also complicate our picture considerably. While popular discourses privileged the archetypal postwar “father”—suburban, sole breadwinner, White, companionate spouse, and backbone of the citizen-consumer ethos grounded in domesticity and home-centred consumption—few of the men that I interviewed fit neatly, if at all, into that mould throughout their parenting years.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Doug Owram’s *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (University of Toronto Press, 1996) offers a useful survey of the connections between family life and the expansion of suburbanization and Canadian middle-class living modes in the postwar years to the early-1970s. Stereotypes of fathers as successful breadwinners, rising prosperity and expectations, and the good life remained a middle-class illusion, long after 1945. In *Our Lives: Canada After 1945* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1997), 9-10, Alvin Finkel estimates that “forty-one percent of Canadians were living outside the stereotypes of prosperity commonly applied to the post-war period.” Among the few studies of postwar fatherhood that address the contrasts and connections between family life ideals and life stories see my articles, “Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Good Life During Canada’s Baby Boom, 1945-1965,” *Journal of Family History* 24 (July 1999), 351-373 and “Fatherhood and Masculine Domesticity During the Baby Boom: Consumption and Leisure in Advertising and Life Stories,” in *Family Matters: Papers in Post-Confederation Canadian Family History*, eds. Lori Chambers and Ed Montigny (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1998), 309-33. See also Christopher Dummitt, “Finding a Place for Father: Selling the Barbecue in Postwar Canada,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 9 (1998), 209-223. Contrasts may be drawn to the fatherhood stereotypes, particularly that of a displaced figure in the interwar family considered by Cynthia Commachio in “‘A Postscript for Father’: Defining a New Fatherhood in Interwar Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 78, 3 (September 1997), 385-408.

## Contrasts: Off-the-Job Nostalgic Gazes Versus the Providers' Perspectives on Fatherhood Memories

Walter Davis, a working-class father of Anglo-Protestant descent, was employed for most of his working life as a semi-skilled labourer at a brick-making plant, a short drive from where he grew up. Davis was born in 1922 on a then isolated homestead, about ten kilometres southwest of Chilliwack in the agricultural heartland of British Columbia's Fraser Valley.<sup>10</sup> His family farmed on what was locally known as "Vedder Mountain," an elevated, picturesque slope overlooking the Vedder River, one of the last tributaries of the Fraser River before it enters the Pacific. He recalled, in vivid detail, growing up during the Depression with his school friends and one sibling, a sister. He served overseas during the war, and returned to raise two sons and a daughter in nearby Abbotsford, the largest city in the Fraser Valley.

Davis' father arrived in this region in 1910 to homestead as a young, married man. Walter remembered him as a former "railroad man" who moved off the Prairies and into the Fraser Valley to work as a "jack of all trades."<sup>11</sup> When Walter was an infant, his father laboured on the nearby Sumas Lake Reclamation project, a provincial government-supported undertaking in the 1920s to clear new farm land and create the Sumas Prairie, over 130 square kilometres of rich farm land. This landscape formed a backdrop to Walter Davis' memories of growing up, finding work as a teenager and later, returning to the area as a veteran.<sup>12</sup>

Davis described his father as "pretty easy going as far as I was concerned. He only gave me one lickin' in my life." His mother was just sixteen when she married him. They left his grandfather's family farm in Saskatchewan before the First World War as a result, Davis stated with some uncertainty, of a family feud. He grew up on his parent's Fraser Valley homestead, and partly depended on relief payments his father earned through government work during the 1930s. The Davis family's great hardships sometimes bound father and son together in a struggle for wages, which were needed to keep the farm and family together. Davis left high school at sixteen, and worked as a day labourer after his father lost the family farm to foreclosure.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Davis, interview by author, Abbotsford, British Columbia, 6 March 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>12</sup> On the Sumas Lake Reclamation Project, see James Murton, "Creating Order: the Liberals, the Landowners, and the Draining of Sumas Lake, British Columbia," *Environmental History* 13, 1 (January, 2008), 92-125 and Laura Cameron's multimedia approach in *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method, and Sumas Lake* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Davis interview.

Davis was called up some seven years later, in 1943, under the terms of the National Resources Mobilization Act. His enlistment in Vancouver, just one hundred kilometres away, took him to Canada's west coast metropolis for the first time. From there he travelled to the Netherlands as part of the replacement forces after the allied advance. He recalled that the Canadian forces had not yet fully secured the area when he arrived in the fall of 1944. When asked to reflect on his military experience in Europe, he said that he wished that he had chosen to travel a bit more. His tour of duty was, in his opinion, a missed opportunity to expand his horizons beyond the series of training postings in Canada prior to his overseas dispatch.

Following his return, Davis stayed in the militia until 1951. His return home and to the Fraser Valley in particular put Davis on the road to self sufficiency. Although he did not return to school, annual earning increases were slow but did accumulate over time. Davis started with seasonal, labour jobs close to where he grew up, "working on one of these rigs, cleaning, pulling willows outta the ditches on Sumas Prairie." After this, a job he "didn't think much of," he got steadier work for two seasons, operating tractors and seed spreaders for an Abbotsford feed-and-seed supplier. Then he landed better work with higher wages with an employer he stayed with for the rest of his paid working life, working as a yard labourer and machine operator in a clay works and brick manufacturer in nearby Clayburn.

During this period, Davis dated a schoolteacher, Nora, who taught in the Fraser Valley. They met through his niece, one of Nora's pupils: "my niece talked me into takin' her home because there was no transportation in those days. I had to take her back to where she was boarding." Their relationship began in 1951 and led to their marriage two years later. Nora taught "for a short while" after that. Motherhood, it seems, ended her paid career. "We had to move shortly after we married and before the first boy was born." Like many of the fathers that I interviewed, Davis focused on their housing circumstances when their first child, Paul, was born:

Nora was pregnant with the first boy, and we had to move then. The place we were renting was sold so we had to find our place in a hurry. And a place turned up, and we got it. Five hundred dollars down. Fifty dollars a month and we bought it. Total price of four thousand dollars. And we stayed there 'till we got this place here. We got this place here through the VLA, the Veterans Land Act.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the Veteran's Land Act and the postwar housing dilemma, see Richard Harris and Trishia Shulist, "Canada's Reluctant Housing Program: The Veteran's Land Act, 1942-1975," *Canadian Historical Review* 82 (2001), 253-82.

It was 1959. That was also the year the last of their children, June, was born. Paul had been born in 1955 and his other son, Ross, in 1957. Davis' recollections here reflect a strong tendency for fathers to precisely recall the material details of their domestic lives, especially the conditions and costs of housing their growing families. This reflected the common tendency fathers displayed to reserve nostalgic references for recalling family relationships, real or ideal, not the material realities of providing for, in this case, the family home.

Davis also remembered spending more time with his sons than his daughter, describing how June helped her mother at home with domestic chores while he participated in Cubs and Scouts with both boys. "Well I can't really imagine—Nora's life was with June, y'see. I didn't spend too much time with her [...]. June was a big help doing the housework, and things like that." With his boys, Davis recalled his days as a Scout leader: "They were both in Scouts, and Cubs. Of course, I went along too because for them to be in there I had to help out, as a leader. For one season I was a scoutmaster." Paul grew up to become a house renovator while Ross became a carpenter. "They never went far away. The only one that's any way distant is the daughter, June. She's up at Gibson's [British Columbia]. Paul and Ross are both right around here." Davis spoke of his four grandchildren, and of what he called the rise of a "black market" in divorce and re-marriage among the younger generation that followed his own day when marital breakdown, as he saw it, was something that was almost "unheard of." As he summed it up for his children: "Paul never married. Ross has been married. He's got one son. But they're separated. And June, she's got three daughters, and she's separated. It was an unheard of thing. And then something of a black market opened when that happened."

When asked what he thought was most important about being a father in his day, Davis lamented: he wished that he had "spent more time with [his children], and tried to teach them a little more, 'bout ballgames and whatnot. They had to learn that on their own, y'see." When I asked him to contrast his recollection of his own father in the 1930s with that of his own fatherhood in the 1950s and 1960s, he responded: "[The] way it was, my father didn't spend that much time with me. So, I didn't know, actually, *how* to be a father. You learned from the way you were treated when you were growing up." He even suggested, half jokingly perhaps, that some formal method could be considered in today's markets of "expert" opinion or "modern" practices: "There should be a course in parenthood. They have courses for everything else."

As a retired wage-earning labourer who lived close to where he grew up, Davis' memories of fatherhood were shaped by his class, by his long-term residency in the Fraser Valley, and by his family role as a grandfather with three grown children and four grandchildren. Through gendered role modelling as a working-class father, his after-work presence at home with his family and his

relatively steady spousal relationship structured his everyday life at home. Like most fathers, his most basic power and responsibility, as he related it, resided in his role as a provider: "I had a steady job. About the highest paying job there was in the area. Close to home, and a steady income." What worked out best? His marriage. "We both agreed on how to do things," was how he put it. Stability, security, and even repetition in home life underscored a life lived that began with his narrative about his Depression-era childhood that had not been, as retold through memory, an unhappy one: "I wouldn't say it was sad anyway," as he put it. His reference, for instance, to having had "no electric lights in those days, coal oil lamps" in describing the daily aspects of homesteading on Vedder Mountain seemed ordinary, though not idyllic.

In retrospect what he liked most about being a father was the sense of fatherly pride this role gave him: "Having somebody that looks up to you, that's one thing. Respect their judgment sometimes. Maybe think of the old man as not such a fool." He reminisced about a home life that rewarded him for the things that he felt he might have lacked both inside and outside the home—the self confidence to speak about his thoughts and feelings. However, his stories of gradually becoming used to his own fatherhood revealed a soft spoken and amiably gentle man in his everyday demeanour; he was an individual who used his language sparingly, yet effectively, to convey his life story. When I asked him what made for a good father in general, he said simply: "well, not being a disciplinarian. You gotta be easy to get along with and reasonable. Be able to talk to them. Which I couldn't do very well. I've never been a very good speaker. I can't express myself very well. I was quiet, y'see." Davis added, "if [he] could've communicated better" he might have been closer to his children. His father had been distant, he thought, and this shaped his role as well.

His strongest advice was simple and direct: "Fathers should spend more time with their family, their children. Be there for them, and help them in anyway they can, which we tried to do. Financially we've helped them as much as we could." Though he helped his children more than his own father had helped him, money was not what he recalled being short of for his children. If anything he emphasized the loss of involved family time as a missed opportunity: "Spend more time with them, like I say. More trips with them and whatnot." He was not alone in this regret. In contrast, the love of his wife, the security of his retirement after over thirty years of what he claimed was well paid work with the same employer, and his ability to hold on to a job that was "close to home", stood out as accomplishments.<sup>15</sup>

Davis' nostalgically-tinged lament, for a domestic pattern that he felt should have been more oriented to family-time, was common to his generation of

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<sup>15</sup> Davis interview.

fathers. It enabled them to make a fundamental connection between history and personal experiences. In particular, this nostalgic sense of loss and lost opportunities shaped the backward gaze, in memory, of modern fatherhood altogether. This is understandable for the generation raised in the 1930s, to the extent that everyday working lives were seldom taken as a given, as a right, or even as an inevitable reward. Having survived the war years and endured the Depression, as many fathers made clear in telling their stories, instilled a strong drive for economic security in most, given the uneven wealth distribution across the social classes that persisted. For ordinary fathers, providing may have eclipsed everything else at the end of most working days, but it was only years later, that this hard reality became clear.

As much as Walter Davis' memories of fatherhood were expressed through his sense of place, self, history, and nostalgia, a close examination of Frank Thomas, a Métis father who also served in the forces during the war, offers points of contrast and comparison. As with Davis, Thomas' memories of work prompted little nostalgia compared to his recollections of his off-the-job time at home. Thomas also seemed emotional when describing his domestic life as a grandfather. His fondness for having his children and grandchildren return for visits to his home, and the connections these moments seemed to have to his childhood—a time when family and community were closely intertwined—seemed to sustain him at the time of the interview.

Thomas grew up in a large Métis family in Grouard Alberta, a mixed-race community located on the western end of Lesser Slave Lake in northern Alberta.<sup>16</sup> Thomas served in the army during the war, but did not go overseas. He married in 1948, fathered seven children and worked as a forest fire fighter in northern Saskatchewan until 1967. In 1959, his marriage to a Cree woman ended tragically when alcoholism affected her ability to parent. The raising of all of his children was largely shouldered by his second wife, who began to care for them when the first marriage broke down.

Born in 1927, Frank Thomas was the third youngest in a Métis family of eighteen children: “[A lot] of them died, very young, before my time. There was seven brothers, y’know, that I grew up with [...] one brother younger than me, one daughter,” his sister. His mother, a Métis woman of French and Cree origins, married twice. His father, a “half-breed” according to “white people,” as Thomas put it, was a blacksmith. Through his paternal line, Thomas was the descendant of an Irish newcomer to the Northwest who came to work as a telegraph lineman for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Thomas related the family story of his grandfather being taken prisoner at that time by the Métis. In captivity, he came to sympathize

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Thomas, interview with author, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 17 June 2004.

with Riel's cause in the prelude and uprising of the 1885 Northwest resistance. In the aftermath, he was employed as a farm instructor by the Indian Department in the Northwest and married a Cree woman.

Thomas remembered the hard times of the 1930s, devastating as it was on the Prairies to the south, as something his family was able to endure, and even help others through. With great pride, he described his father as a community builder, volunteer, problem solver, and as time went on, elder advisor. Through detail and example, characteristic of how he told his story, Thomas interwove his family's role in the Northwest uprising and the historical changes that followed, from the great immigration boom from 1885 to the First World War to the end of the Great Depression. His father's sense of family and community responsibility was something Thomas claimed that he had inherited from his father, who had long supported Métis self-determination. Throughout the 1930s, his father, in turn, helped foster Métis cultural renewal and land claims in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan, a time when the prominent Métis activists Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, two men who worked with his father, had assumed a combined leadership role in working to enhance the rights of Saskatchewan Métis peoples.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas spoke fondly of his father's presence at home and at work on their property. He described scenes when he modelled ordinary boyish play crafts on the skills that he saw his father perform as a working tradesman who was also engaged in the daily chores of animal husbandry:

Any kid that likes to fool around in, say, the shop or garage, or something like that, eh?—and that was my big joy, going in the blacksmith shop. At the time, I had a chance—to fool around. And I could actually help dad, a lot times. Because there was no electricity then, y'know. So any drilling to be done, y'know, you had to grab the great big wheel, turn that. Or, turn the forge, get it going. And my dad built anything. He shoed horses. And he built wagons. And he built sleighs. And everything of that nature, eh? Oh yeah! So, being a kid, naturally, I was making small wagons and small sleighs. And, y'know, that was a hell of a thing for a young kid to be doing—when other kids couldn't do that. And I could.

“Oh hell yes” was Thomas' response to the general question of whether or not his childhood had been happy, growing up close to his father and several older brothers as a youngster and youth in northern Alberta.

Thomas remembered leaving home at seventeen to work as a logger shortly before joining the military. It was February 1945, “the tail end of the war,”

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<sup>17</sup> Murray Dobbin, *The one-and-a-half men: The story of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, Metis Patriots of the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1981).

as he put it, when he signed up. “As soon as I become aware that I could join the army,” before the age of eighteen, “well hell I’m going—going to go into the army.” As he looked at a photograph with three older brothers in uniform, he added, “I think my dad wasn’t all that fussy about somebody else going to war.” Understandably, both his parents found this difficult. “He didn’t want anyone else to go.” Thomas recalled being “lucky in this sense: that they put me in the Canadian Tactical Training School. So, you had a whole series of different things that you learned while you was there. Rather than just picking up a gun and shooting, eh?”

Thomas never left Canada. He was “stationed in Calgary, B.C, Hamilton, Ontario, Woodstock, Ontario, Wetaskiwin” and clearly, as he stated, “moved around quite a bit.” On his brother’s advice, he left the army at war’s end and returned to Jousard, Alberta, where he had moved with his family before the war to complete his schooling. He worked seasonally for five years in logging camps in winter, railway crews in summer, and in commercial fishing on Lesser Slave Lake while he built a small house and home life in the community. “So I did just about every damn thing,” as he put it. He married a Cree woman, Marie, “a country girl.” While in Jousard, Thomas fathered the first two of seven children, three sons and four daughters, born to Marie. She would not, however, ultimately raise these children to maturity. Thomas’ father had been against the marriage because he had no steady income. He recalled, on the other hand, Marie’s family being delighted by the match. These were hard years for Thomas. He had a failed venture—mink farming: “There was a lot of distemper going around, with the mink ranches, and it hit my mink.”<sup>18</sup>

Thomas remembered how the birth of each of his children led him to feel anxious about his role as a provider. “That’s why I moved to Saskatchewan,” he recalled before launching into a detailed account of how he landed the provincial government job that he held as his children grew up:

I was always thinking about the future. Put it that way. I worked on the railroad. And in the winter I was in the bush. And in between times, commercial fishing. And I was always doing something. But it wasn’t anything that was, y’know, I could foresee, that I’m going to be a few years from now I’ll be sitting idle and be grateful that I had a successful life type of thing. There wasn’t anything like that in what I was doing.

Thomas recalled his excitement and hope when a letter arrived stating that he was to report for duty to work for a specific job he did not even know existed

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<sup>18</sup> On the decline of mink ranching by the 1940s in Western Canada, see George Colpitts, “Conservation, Science, and Canada’s Fur Farming Industry, 1913-1945,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 30, 59 (1997), 77-107.

at that time. "I thought 'O Jesus, here's security!' This is what I was dreaming for." In 1951, with help from his father's contacts within the Saskatchewan government led by Premier Tommy Douglas, Thomas began a seventeen-year stint at a physically and emotionally demanding career, one that kept him away from Marie and his children for long stretches: he became a smoke-jumper, a forest fire-fighter during the long late-spring to early-autumn season of fire danger in the boreal forests in the province next door to his own.

Frank and Marie moved with their first born to Prince Albert, British Columbia, in 1951. The fire watch and jumper base was on Lac La Ronge, approximately 200 hundred kilometres north, by air. Marie and the children were initially housed at a married quarters dormitory at the former Air Force base at Prince Albert. His fire seasons were spent at the La Ronge base, though he came home whenever a break in the fire danger permitted. His family lived in Prince Albert from 1952 until 1967 and he commuted to work. "I never had much of a home life when I was a smoke-jumper," he remembered when describing his long years as a father there. "As far as family is concerned, I regret it terribly because I grew up without my kids." Thomas worked either in the bush or on standby on base from early April to the end of September, unless a long period of rain set in. "My biggest regrets because I never could spend very much time with my family, except in the winter."

On the job, Thomas supervised university students whose fathers, he claimed, as government civil servants were able to place their sons in the adventurous, well-paid summer work of the smoke-jumper. Although he grew to like many of the young men, he was not impressed with their knowledge of the bush. "They didn't know a tree from a piece of grass, for Christ sakes. We called them 'greenies.'" Thomas, however, recalled years of providing capable leadership in a risky, physically demanding but often rewarding job. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's English television services produced a half hour feature on his life as a smoke-jumper, though it revealed nothing about the constant behind-the-scenes struggle Thomas remembered when it came to personnel issues and race. Racist sentiment, he felt, had blocked his chance for advancement in the forest services. He had originally signed on with the provincial government in the hopes of becoming a conservation officer. He recalled, with bitterness, how managers and some co-workers took a dim view of a Métis supervising white men. Despite this issue, he loved many parts of the work, especially the sense of expertise and pride it gave him as a woodsman who could combine traditional knowledge with that of modern fire fighting technology and forest management. He also hoped for a steady and secure livelihood.

That never happened. What did were long absences that wreaked havoc on his marriage. Marie began drinking and it did not take long for their home life, complete with unpaid bills, fights, and several trial separations, to break down

completely. An alcoholic, she left Thomas and her children to return to her family on Great Slave Lake in 1959. It was a particularly difficult time for Thomas: "I was looking after security, and I never got it." His most immediate crisis was to find someone to care for his children. His parents helped out, but were growing too old for the demands. Eventually he arranged for a woman from Prince Albert, Irene, to babysit his children; over time she assumed full-time responsibilities for their care. "I think she was a real remarkable woman," Thomas stated. "Because for her to look after seven kids. Y'know. And raise them. Not her own. And still be with you. I have the greatest love and respect for her."

By the end of that year, Irene and Thomas were married. She raised the children with Frank still away most of the time until finally, in 1967, the smoke-jumper era of forest fire fighting in northern Saskatchewan ended; the provincial government suspended the entire program initially on a two-year trial basis then permanently. Thomas found another job, as a machine operator, at a large paper mill in Prince Albert. Holding several jobs after that, he attended university for a year in the early 1980s and became active in Métis politics. His children went on to raise their own families, supported by skilled vocations, trades, and university-educated professions.

While his fatherhood role was far from behind him, with all seven children still healthy and in the prime of their lives, Thomas' memories of his parenthood years led to a series of retrospective observations. On what he thought was important about being a father, and why, he stated:

As far as I was concerned my life was more too damn destructive, you might say. I was all over the place. And not being able to spend too much time with my family. And, I sure as hell didn't want them to be in that kind of a situation. That's why both my wife and I stressed that these kids go to university, y'know, and get an education. And settle down someplace, in order to, y'know, not roam all over the place like I did.

His pronounced lack of nostalgia for his career was counterbalanced, however, by fond memories of fatherhood at home, within his family circle.

This appeared most clearly when I asked him what he liked most about being a father: "I think the most joyous time that we've always had, still have, is Christmas. Family's all there. Everybody is happy! And, I get very emotional. I don't usually speak [...] and break down," he recalled, choking back tears. What did he dislike most about it? Again, his lament for breadwinning time away from home was quite apparent:

Being away. And, if you move around lots, there's a great expense in moving all the time. Constant moving. And renting and moving. And

course, I always thought that I wasn't, look, I was not able to buy the things for them I thought they would like, eh? That's one of the things, I think, that I would have liked to have been able to do. And couldn't manage as much as I would have liked to have, anyway.

When asked what he thought a good father should be, Thomas stated, in reference to his own past: "My father was a good father and I try like hell to be like him, but I never can." And what made for a bad father? "Total neglect of family, I guess, y'know, total neglect. It just happens. But what are you going to do about it? Y'know, people come home drunk and beating their wife up, or something, y'know. That's not good for any family. That's something that I wouldn't like, y'know." He also feared that his own children would experience racism. "Having went through discrimination myself, I knew that the kids was going to run into the same situation. And I tried to tell them, well, this is how you deal with it." Thomas recalled telling them that they would have to excel at many things to be accepted on an equal basis in today's competitive society. Equality was perhaps an ideal for the future, but not a reality today, Thomas warned them.

What had worked out well for him? Was he still close to his children? "O hell yes!" "My Sundays are still "dad's day," with family because, y'know, when the weather's good, you have a barbecue, eh? And they all come over. And if it's not good, then they'll make a great big pot of Chinese food. Sunday's always to a large extent pretty well every Sunday is a family day." What would he do differently? "Probably not get married. Stay in the army, for sure. Oh, I would have got married, but probably not the same one, because if I'd stayed in the army I would went overseas, and I might have brought a Dutch girl home, I dunno."

The moments that stand out most for Thomas as markers of his parenting accomplishments were graduation ceremonies. All of his children completed high school and only one did not attend university. His first born, Tina, obtained two degrees and works today as a social worker and teacher. As Thomas put it: "[Graduations]! Well, y'know, it's something that as a father that you dream about, I guess. And when you see it come to conclusion, well you figure "well God damn it! That's one down, two to go." It's a pretty good feeling. Because you feel then that to some degree you have been successful in raising a family."

Thomas' fatherhood, like his life as a whole, was anchored in the decisions that he made to find security as a man with little formal education. He recalled his Métis heritage as empowering, especially as a youngster watching his father and other leaders organize their community. But he later felt it marginalized him as a government employee. His hopes for the future dimmed, but endured. His second marriage saved him and his children. He joked that he once overheard his sons refer to him as the "old man," but noted with some pride

that they would never wish to hurt a man they always addressed as “dad.” It was a good feeling. Years, and seven graduations later, Thomas believed he could best revive it on Sundays, or at Christmas, or at any time in which the family circle could be reconstituted. He was hardly alone in this as a father, parent, and spouse. He negotiated his memories with a past that was at many times indifferent to his struggle to find security and to compensate for his “biggest regret” of not being able to, as he emphasized in telling his story, “spend very much time with my family, except in the winter.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, his family life when off-the-job was recalled in nostalgic terms, hardly the case when recalling his years as a breadwinner.

Cecil Yates grew up in the north central industrial city of Leicester before he left for Canada with his parents in 1948. He was sixteen. Although he grew up as working-class boy and adolescent, his job training and subsequent career led him to a plant management position. Cecil Yates immigrated to Canada from war-torn England with his parents as an adolescent; they settled in London, Ontario.<sup>20</sup> Yates served a three-year stint in the Naval reserve after completing high school in Canada. He then went on to promotions to senior plant management positions, while he raised three sons in a marriage that has lasted to the present. His experiences and self-identification as a middle-class man of British ancestry provide some fundamental contrasts to the experiences of Walter Davis and Frank Thomas. His marriage, in 1955, produced his three boys from the crest of the baby boom in 1957 to its collapse in 1962. They all grew up in the mid-town suburbs of Burlington, Ontario in the heart of southern Ontario’s golden horseshoe, before the family moved into a four bedroom split-level house built by a corporate developer in the early 1970s. He worked throughout these years, eventually becoming a plant superintendent for a large-scale railway car manufacturer located in Oakville, travelling back and forth from work by car, a commute that took more time each year as traffic flows, especially at rush hour, increased on the Queen Elizabeth Way thoroughfare.

While too young to serve in the British forces, Yates was eight in 1939, he recalled how profoundly the war affected his family life. His father took his carpentry skills to several Royal Air Force bases in the midlands, after signing-on early in the war to repair, refurbish, and rebuild aircraft. His mother also worked during this period, at a munitions factory, and thus his childhood memories centred around a narrative that focused on his parent’s absence from his life. What he did describe however, often in vivid detail, were horrific episodes of growing up during the blitz. Deeply embedded in his memory were scenes of the civilian losses endured during night-time bombing raids of the German Luftwaffe that

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas interview.

<sup>20</sup> Cecil Yates, interview with author, Burlington, Ontario, 25 July 2001.

devastated the nearby cities of Birmingham and Coventry, as well as his own home city of Leicester. A childhood, affected by war, obviously came through in many of his stories. But the blitz was only part of a much larger picture.

Wartime memories were often interwoven with nostalgic ones about special times, like holidays, and abandoned traditions:

Christmases were always wonderful. We certainly would not overindulge. But we were better off than a lot of young people. Christmases, of course, were for the children. The children got the presents. The adults, as was the custom, they didn't exchange presents. They had a Christmas dinner. It was just the joy of giving to the children. Which to me is the correct way.

I don't agree with what we do anymore, because with every Tom, Dick, and Harry [...]. You would never ask what you were going to have! Ah, but I can remember, again during the war, it was a big difference because of the war, waking up and there would be a pillowslip at the foot of the bed, and your presents from Santa Claus. You never got a present from Auntie Dorothy, or your best [...] it was always from Santa Claus! Okay. It didn't confuse the issue, as it did with our children. And the presents would be in that pillowslip, the pillowslip denoting what Santa Claus carried on his back. That was his bag of toys that he delivered.

His memories of such moments were more than tinged with nostalgia. They were shaped by it, by a longing to see, in such passages, a return to, as he saw it, more authentic connections between Christmas rituals and the values he claimed to cherish as a child and, later, as a father.

As the war dragged on, and holidays were infrequent occasions, Yates recalled how his household responsibilities increased. He frequently had to look after himself and his sister, both alone at home for considerable stretches during the day by the end of the war. "I was taking care of my sister and odd jobs like that," he recalled. "You mature very, very fast." From his perspective, the variety of community-based service centres organized by churches and volunteer agencies that operated meal and shelter programs for home front children was enviable: In "some of them, you could sleep. You were fed. Clothed, in some cases. I can remember they would have facilities in the basements of churches, recreation halls, where you would go and get a meal. Especially, there was always a big meal on Saturdays, and the kids would go there." When both of his parents were away, Yates, too, took meals in communal shelters with his sister. For Yates, the blurring of public and private life boundaries that wartime conditions, especially the use of public shelters and school-based measures to address immediate childhood security, necessitated was significant. "As a matter of fact,"

he added for emphasis, “during those years I can remember my headmaster and my classroom teachers more than I could my parents.” What did these years, as a formative period, ultimately, mean for Yates? “I think one of the things I look back at is the respect that was shown towards your elders, towards your teachers, and the respect that you received back.” As Yates related in nostalgic terms: “It was a mutual respect type of society, which you don’t have today, obviously.”

Part of his father’s war service as a ground crew member included training tours of duty at a variety of bases, both in England and, later in the war, in Canada, a period which Yates did not recall in much detail. This gave his father the opportunity to apply his carpentry trade in Canada, and pursue a more promising future for his family. When the family finally joined him in London, Ontario, adjustment was harder for his mother than his father. According to Yates, they faced intense discrimination as newcomers, despite their English heritage and their postwar re-settlement in southern Ontario.

At first, during the general housing shortage of the late 1940s, they lived in a rustic farmstead that still lacked running water on the outskirts of the city. While this was an exciting period for Yates, his mother was far less happy with the move: “[The] only thing is, my mother, I can remember when she moved into this old, beaten up farmhouse she said to my dad ‘Why in the name of heck did I leave a home as I had in Britain to come to Canada and be treated the way we’d been treated?’ She wanted to go home. But my dad, he stuck to it.”

Yates decided to take up an apprenticeship rather than attend university following his secondary school graduation in 1950. For him, the decision was a natural progression from a series of summer jobs he held in housing construction in London’s growing suburbs. Along with an active youth soccer background, something he brought from England, he also joined, a year later, the Naval Reserve “for the challenge,” as he explained it. Yates trained on summer stints with the Navy on the Great Lakes until 1953. During that time, he also met his wife, Laura, a Women’s Royal Canadian Navy Service volunteer stationed in Hamilton, at a Seaman’s Mess dance. He was not yet twenty-five when they married; she was two years younger. After their church wedding, he began a successful career in railway car engineering and plant management at a large-scale manufacturer located in Oakville and he and Laura settled into to suburban life in nearby Burlington. His first born, Mike, arrived in 1957; Dave in 1959; and, finally Doug in 1962. Each of his sons completed secondary school and attained post-secondary education leading to careers in engineering, forestry, and business management. Each married and had families with children of their own at the time of the interview; one son was divorced. His own marriage, to the present day as he related, had remained solid during and beyond the ordinary challenges of raising a family.

Yates spoke of the strictly gendered and traditional tasks that he and Laura had followed: he as a *breadwinning* husband and father and she as a *homemaking* wife and mother. As he put it: “[You] gotta remember, she was a housewife. And I was a breadwinner. And housewives, in those days, you do the necessary chores to take care of the kids. Laundry, cooking, the whole bit.” When referring to his responsibilities, Yates spoke about the upkeep and maintenance of his home as a *masculine* domain, with the basic lawn care and household maintenance tasks resting, rather comfortably on his shoulders: “Oh, I did all that sort of stuff, the gardening, the maintenance, any form of maintenance. I always did it, because, cripes, I’m pretty adept, in the mechanical aspect and anything like that. She was more or less the domestic and I don’t want to downgrade that. It was very, very important.” Yates seemed relaxed when speaking about this part of his life. Much of the time he spent at home while his boys grew up was composed of as a set of daily, seasonal, and annual routines. It was during this period that he built the extension room porch, a significant home improvement project to which he proudly referred and where our interview took place.

But the serenity of the Yates’ household had a darker backdrop. Laden with nostalgia, Yates felt, as the 1960s wore on, that the foundation of the society upon which he had grown up, from his childhood in England during the war to his youth in postwar Canada, had gradually given way to a tragic, fundamental erosion of cultural “values”. The simple, ordinary virtues of mutual respect, discipline, hard work, perseverance, and thankfulness for humbler rewards that he claimed were essential to his own background, had all but disappeared. Yates’ remarks were cast as a lament for the evaporation of a sort of moral glue that had held people together in former times. This ran counter to his stalwart sense of self and to his role in society as a man and as a *family* man; these remained secure. His comments reflect, in larger terms, a generational sense of displacement that can take many forms, from alienation experienced in the face of unfamiliar forms of popular culture to fear of shifting definitions of family roles and relationships, something often felt by succeeding generations of parents as their children mature. Yates echoed an aging generation’s response to feelings of decaying codes and traditions, to a sense of change both real and imagined in modernizing contexts. History and change is something that Peter Fritzsche connects to nostalgic sentiment, patterns that are common in oral narrative yet seldom explored by scholars.<sup>21</sup>

As a father who witnessed striking transitions from his childhood to the present, it seems clear that Yates’ sense of historical transformation and his personal sense of self pitted rapid change and cherished tradition at odds with each other. The rise of Nazism ultimately plunged the Britain of his birth into

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<sup>21</sup>Fritzsche, “Specters of History,” 1587-1618.

chaos, and yet he found a sense of stability as an older brother in a loving home, despite the fact that his father and mother were often absent. Postwar Canada was the land of opportunity, but newcomers from war-torn Europe were hardly welcomed. The sixties, he recalled as well, was a period that destroyed much of what he revered, yet his own three boys, he claimed, were hardly affected by its counterculture excesses of drug experimentation or rock music. In summarizing his adaptation to Canada as a youth in the late-1940s, Yates said:

I loved Canada, I still do love Canada. But I loved Canada as it was when I got here. Canada was clean, industrious, respectful, low crime rate, good traditions. I feel it is an absolutely magnificent country, I do, again. But, like any country in the world, it's gone to pot. We've travelled a lot. It's the same all over the world. It's not just Canada. The values of life have dropped considerably, depending on what your values are.

On consumerism, seen through the prism of his nostalgic gaze, he returned to almost cynical comments on Christmas, when comparing then and now:

I feel that Christmas is over commercialized. I feel it's just a big con. With the amount of, like my own young grand kids. Their basement is full of toys, believe me. The boxes have not been opened in two or three years! It is disgusting. The manner in which they pile on, pile on these gifts. Two of my grandchildren are twins. And, of course, this is double, double every dog darn thing. Whereas, when I was a kid, as I suggested, there was just small presents, from Santa Claus. It's now presents from all over, you don't get one, you might get three! And it's just totally overindulgent.

For Yates, the pull of the past was palpable: "And I keep telling, I wish I could go to back to the old days. When they respected what Christmas was all about. The kids, y'know, Christmas is for one reason, today. And that's where you get all these goodies. There's no religious aspect. There's no tradition as far as Santa Claus, or anything else like that. There's nothing there anymore." What was most important for Yates about being a father?

I think the most important thing was the fact that you are passing along your seed. You have gone ahead and created the next generation and you had a certain responsibility, not only to that person, but also to society. To continue to bring these people up in a family environment. I love the family environment situation. I don't think I could've gone through life as a single individual. It was a loving type of an arrangement. A respectful one, a responsible one."

Yates' statements, which form part of a strikingly consistent testimony to what his childhood, youth, and adult experiences taught him, cannot be understood without reference to his formative years, growing up on the periphery of bomb-scarred Leicester in the years from Hitler's attack on Europe to his departure as a newcomer to Canada in the reconstruction period that followed.

While at no point did he refer to the commonplace provider's lament for time spent away from his children, like Walter Davis and Frank Thomas, he shared the paternal if not patriarchal sense of pride of becoming someone his youngsters looked up to as a father. While Yates acknowledged his wife's childcare role as every bit as central to her family duties as breadwinning was for him, he also pointed to the need for fathers to be consistent and nurturing role models. And that does not always come easily: "[Oh] well, when it comes down to it, it is a total caring for your offspring. Being a role model, if you will. It's difficult some days to be a role model. Just generally being a generally good, honest, respectful individual that these young people can look up to with respect. And I think my three boys, I have that with them, without question."

What characteristics did Yates associate with a bad father? He did not state that he knew any truly bad fathers, but as a former scout leader he recalled some men whose role modelling had failed to meet his standards. Here, echoes of his personal sense of parenting, community, and childhood during the blitz resurfaced:

With certain members of a scouting community you've got some fathers or parents who are a little overbearing, a little overprotective, trying to coddle their sons. They weren't helping them at all. I used to say 'let them live their lives, get into the environment, and recognize what is good for them and what is part of life. Don't try to protect them all the time.' Hell, I went through the war years and I was left to my own means.

What would Yates have said in reference to daughters remains an open question. His comments have an obvious gendered undertone, referring explicitly to father-and-son relationships in the scouting world.

To the extent that models of fatherhood often begin with one's own father, I always asked my subjects to describe any contrasts or similarities between themselves and their fathers: "I think I was a little more forceful than my own dad," Yates explained. "First of all, I followed my mother's footsteps as far as aggressiveness is concerned." Of course his mother looked after him for most of his formative years in England, especially after his father enlisted. He immediately followed this statement with a reference to his management work in the railway car manufacturing business, a job he characterized as machismo in nature. "In the environment that I was in, the manufacturing environment, if you

were a pussycat, you were gone. You have to have a certain amount of spunk, but you have to attend to that spunk with a certain recognition that, hey, you have to got to be fair.” Again the tough-but-fair stance is something that guided Yates’ life; he used it to guide others as well.

With respect to his thoughts on raising children in the twenty-first century he said: “I would suggest that parenting today is more of a very cautious nature and an environment where there is a heck of a lot more detail involved in being a parent, where before it comes naturally.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, his remark echoes the conclusion of a major synthesis of childhood history in North America: “Today connections that linked the young to the world of adults have grown attenuated,” he underscores. Children spend longer than ever before in the school under adult control or consuming mass products and leisure, also produced by adults. They have, he goes as far in asserting, “few [...] ties to actual adults apart from their parents and teachers.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed the normative family system offers too little freedom for children and too much of a controlled, manipulating, commercialized parenting environment, conditions that fathers have played a major role in creating.

Yates does not think that he would have done things differently in any significant way if given the chance. While many fathers, Walter Davis and Frank Thomas clearly among them, would have liked to have spent more time with their children, this lament did not appear in Yates’ response. His belief, that life’s challenges have to be dealt with as they present themselves, reflects an equally strong theme in these heavily gendered texts. Like many, Yates contributes to a genre of life stories that were told through a masculine resistance narrative: “[Well], I have had a pretty happy life. It hasn’t been the easiest life but I don’t think I would go back and say I would change that. Because life is life. When there is a situation as far as hard knocks is concerned, hard knocks now and again is a very, very good teacher, there is no doubt about it.” He did voice regret however about one of his son’s marital breakdown. And yet Yates suggests that in the end there was nothing he could have done to help absorb that particular blow, nor that of a career setback in forestry in Western Canada, for the same son, Dave. “I often think that with Dave. Dave has gone through a tremendous amount of stress and strain in his life, but I don’t know how I could cushion that anymore than I did. But, he went to be a forester, bingo, that went wrong; his marriage went wrong. A straight, decent guy. I wish I could’ve done something to make his

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<sup>22</sup> Yates, interview.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 383. See also Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Nancy Janovicek and Joy Parr, eds., *Histories of Canadian Children and Youth* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003).

life a little easier. But, ah, there is not much I could do.”<sup>24</sup> It seems that his nostalgic gaze served as a healing filter at times.

## Conclusion

The men that I interviewed, many of whom are now fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers, used nostalgia when offering personal reflections on fatherhood’s history, especially when they compared their younger days to those of today’s generation.<sup>25</sup> A sense of longing and a desire to revive the comforting elements of custom and convention often made their way into the therapeutic editing and comforting selectivity of memory and auto-representation. Elderly family men who wished that either childhood, or parents, or neighbours, or local communities could conform to their sense of a more exemplary past revealed intersections of both biographical and historical yearnings for things past, however mythical. This was likely the case for their wives too, as mothers looking back on their own pasts as children, parents, and grandparents. What stood out in these men’s oral histories, however, is how they used nostalgia to demarcate differences between their roles as parents at home and their responsibilities as fathers at work.

Davis spoke of his children’s sense of respect for him as empowering; Thomas’ recollections of happy Christmases triggered an intense sense of nostalgia, even tears; Yates referred to the satisfaction he felt as a role model, echoing Davis’ sentiments. For Davis, fatherhood was about being able to communicate and get along with his children; this, he said, came with some difficulty for him. Thomas held up his own father as an ideal parent, suggesting that he fell somewhat short of his father’s model but understood its importance. Yates reiterated the significance of positive role modelling for all fathers. For Davis, simply not being home, or for Thomas “total neglect,” typified the flip side of good fathering. On the other hand, too much “coddling” could also characterise bad male parenting.

The world that was lost to these men was, as they viewed it, corroded by excessive consumerism, abundance, and divorce. Their largely conservative ethos of family solidarity amidst change, expressed in masculine terms that disparaged either the “coddling” or the “total neglect” of children while the “old man” or “dad” emerged as a venerable paternal presence, was clearly a desire to return to the values of a former time and place. That a pastoral myth was operative is a key

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<sup>24</sup> Yates, interview.

<sup>25</sup> On community based projects that draw on the power of generational memory as a social movement, see Joanna Bornat, “Oral History as a Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 189-205.

to understanding not only the retrospective gaze of these three family men, but also those held by many of their generation. Nostalgia for each of these fathers was expressed at the intersection of both personal and historical perspectives each man *as a father* developed in stages over their lives. While it may be said that elders across societies in the modern period characteristically yearn for a past in which the pastoral myths of unspoiled settings, the cultural rootedness of traditional societies, or the invigorating demands to mature quickly are evident, the cases here point in two directions: the past as an ideal space and the past as one of hardship and severe constraint. Orientations beyond this were profoundly shaped by individual experience, presented in the obvious ethnic and class contrasts each man faced.

Fatherhood in English Canada during this period of intense modernization and consumerism was constituted at the intersections of individual life stories and broad patterns of economic growth, which affected family life. Fathers' orientations toward their family lives were rooted in class and ethnically-specific histories of masculine domesticity that moved through the changes in consumer-driven family living modes that intensified after 1945, especially by the early 1950s. Much of what fathers thought would become a permanent feature of their family lives proved transitory as their children grew up and their spouses contemplated empty nests.

This left many family men in the middle, as one historian puts it, of a social order that increasingly perceived its foundations under attack, in need of protection, or in need of philosophical justification, especially by the end of the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> Yates sensed, for instance, when I asked him about his role in domestic routines that I was interested in how he recalled his home life in the era before Betty Freidan. In response, he stated that the past was different from the present, that mothers and fathers assumed traditional roles, emulating those of their parents.

Many of the men that I interviewed were reasonably happy with their past lives, yet confused or noticeably quiet about certain aspects of them today. The erosion of the image of the separate sphere ideal of female homemakers and male breadwinners wedded together as exemplary helpmeets, whose provider's roles at home as mommies and daddies differed but were complimentary, could be a sore point for many of these men. The men with whom I spoke expressed a nostalgic sense for the past and in doing so, were not simply cranky old men trying to recover a lost age. Often they were honestly trying to sort out what went right and

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<sup>26</sup> For his useful study of a select number of prominent American men's experiences, negotiated within the broad cultural and societal changes in the postwar years to the end of the 1950s, see James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Also see Christopher Dummitt, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

what went wrong. Nostalgic references to off-the-job family time were seldom accompanied by nostalgic references of work. Memories of the provider's role were either, as in the cases of Walter Davis and Frank Thomas, a lament for their absence from the home, or, as in the case of Cecil Yates, expressed as ordinary duty to family, to provide, to be responsible, and to be, in the process, a good citizen.

Davis, Thomas, and Yates displayed a strong tendency to recall the time they actually spent with their children as ideal moments, and nostalgia served a logical purpose of elevating their domestic presence, real or imagined. They could at least aspire to be *ideal* family men. This clearly contrasted how they recalled their paid work, whether they regretted it or simply related it as a necessary fact of life. Oral histories of fatherhood speak to an underlying patriarchal power, evident through the contrast between memories of life at home and those of life at work. This study, of oral history and gendered family regimes, reveals how the economic power of postwar fatherhood was not only rooted in the patriarchal advantage of the male provider's function, but also came to shape how it was recalled by the fathers themselves.