

The Gangs of Waterloo South: Flax Farms and Wage Labour in Rural Ontario, 1854-1919

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by

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Introduction

The business of producing flax in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Ontario is an important but little-known chapter of Canadian agricultural history. Flax appeared in a very localized area of the province, centred roughly on Stratford, and became a source of wealth for some and employment for many. It is helpful to think of the flax industry as part of a commodity chain, an analytical structure recently popularized by economic and world historians. Essentially, a commodity chain is a series of value-adding stages in an object's production and consumption process. It matters because commodities connect people from various cultures and regions of the world. Topik and Clarence-Smith argued that the cup of coffee in your hand connects you to a different world. It is a manifestation of 500 years of globalization and connections between the tropical and temperate regions.¹ The flax commodity chain connected local producers, transient labourers, and both local and distant consumers. It provided everyday products in Ontario, and valuable business among American and European clients. In this paper I focus on the labourers in this commodity chain, and the unusual form they took in the Ontario economy.

Flax had to go through a long list of stages before it became tow. Fields were seeded in spring and weeded in summer. At harvest flax had to be either pulled or cut. Pulling involved expensive and difficult labour, but cut flax was shorter and less useful for making fibre. The straw was then spread in the fields, and retted for several weeks by the dew. Retting broke down the fibres for scutching. The retted flax had to be stoked, dried, and transported to a flax mill. Millers thrashed flax seed from the stalk, and ran the straw through a sharp-ribbed iron roller called a brake. As the name suggests, this machine broke down the fibre even further. Sometimes the plant was then pulled through a series of hackling combs to remove the woody exterior of the straw, and finally it was

¹ William Gervase Clarence-Smith and Steven Topik, eds., *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 1500-1989*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

scutched by revolving blades that left nothing but the interior of the straw. At last, this fibre, called tow, was ready to be sent to a linen or cordage manufacturer.

Most of these stages required expertise, difficult labour, and participation in a volatile and often distant market. Therefore, despite the tenacious story of Upper Canadian pioneers producing homespun cloth from flax and wool, pioneers grew very little flax, and flax millers – who never appeared in any quantity before the 1850s – secured their flax in other ways. The industrialists shared resources and responsibilities with farmers by renting their land and often their labour, and most of the labour involved in pulling flax by hand was organized and paid for by the mill. Pulling an acre of flax required approximately 3.5 person-days – cotton picking took 6.5 days per acre – but processing the pulled flax required timely visits and additional, if less strenuous, work.² Flax millers employed large gangs of flax pullers to harvest the mill’s crop every August – sometimes drawing on the women, children, and seasonally employed men in nearby towns, and sometimes hiring gangs from distant mills or from First Nations reserves.

What we know about farmers harvesting and marketing their crops, as individual families or even in work bees, is not appropriate to the flax story. By studying flax I hope to find avenues to the little-known labour experiences of men, families, and First Nations in this period. These three categories are not mutually exclusive, and I describe them in this order only for the sake of chronology. This paper is a synopsis of some preliminary findings with the available business, newspaper, and photographic evidence.

Male Farmers and Mill Labourers

Joy Parr argues that the nineteenth century agricultural wage labour force was made not of landless but landowning farmers – people “captivated by the agricultural dream.”³ Although many people laboured in some capacity in the flax harvests, we know very little about them. Some flax mill account books offer tantalizing glimpses of mill workers, but rarely describe their work. Censuses tell us much about a field’s produce but little about the required labour. The agricultural journals in the 1860s discussed flax production and

² James A. Byrne, “Flax-Pulling,” *Farmer’s Advocate* (Eastern Edition), July 15, 1909, p. 1140; David Vaught, *Cultivating California: Growers, Specialty Crops, and Labor, 1875-1920*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 213, n. 24.

³ Joy Parr, “Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective.” *Labour – Le Travail* 15 (1985): pp. 91-103, 96.

profitability ad nauseam, but were strangely silent on flax pullers. And farmers felt they were suppressing important information.

The *Canada Farmer*, published an article on flax in almost every issue of their inaugural volume in 1864. However, even the one article on “Harvesting Flax,” offers only a few words on the technique of pulling and spreading and none on the availability and productivity of labour. Farmers reported that pulling was the most costly aspect of growing flax, usually ranging from \$3 to \$7 per acre, and sometimes as much as \$20 or \$30. New mechanized flax pullers were frequently announced in the 1860s, but were never actually perfected until after WWI.⁴

In 1865, a farmer named “E.M.” wrote to the journal refuting its constant endorsement of flax, and claiming that “In my own case the crop did not pay for pulling.” Another farmer retorted, questioning E.M.’s vigour. “The pulling which ‘E.M.’ seems to make such a bugbear of,” he taunted, “is not a job for kid gloves, but I have heard many respectable farmers state that they would much rather pull it than cut it ... as the weight of the roots pays for the extra labour.” Another writer agreed with E.M. Calling flax the “gambler’s crop,” he claimed it required twelve hands per acre to harvest in time, asking, “what small farmer’s establishment is able to cultivate a large breadth of flax, since this is the case?” However, the census, and some memoirs and mill account books from Waterloo County, Ontario, show that even when farmers grew flax in small amounts, they relied on gangs of flax pullers from the nearest mill for help.⁵

The first major flax millers in Waterloo County started up in 1854. Through their account books we see that, initially, only a few farmers bought and sowed the mill’s flaxseed, but the numbers increased every year. By 1860, one in four farmers in contiguous townships grew flax, and by the mid 1860s, the *Canada Farmer* boasted that these millers drew on over 2,000 acres of flax in Waterloo County.⁶ To put this in perspective, the average flax farmer in this region grew only 2.5 acres in 1860.⁷ Those amounts could be pulled by a couple hands in less than 5 days, yet the account books

⁴ “Harvesting Flax,” *Canada Farmer*, 1 August, 1864, p. 211; *Canada Farmer*, 15 April, 1864, p. 99; *Canada Farmer*, 15 June, 1864, p. 163; *Canada Farmer*, 15 July, 1864, p. 195; “A Flax Puller Invented,” *Canada Farmer*, 1 April, 1864, p. 82.

⁵ “Experience in Flax Growing,” *Canada Farmer*, Jan 2, 1865, p. 2; *Canada Farmer*, 15 Feb, 1865, p 57; “‘E.M.’s’ Experience in Raising Flax,” 1 Feb, 1865, p 35; 15 April, 1865, *Canada Farmer*, p 123.

⁶ *Canada Farmer*, 1 August, 1864.

⁷ Canada, *Census*, Agricultural Schedules, 1861.

reveal that these early flax farmers still relied on help from the mills to harvest their small crops.

Men and women were commonly, if not systematically, credited for “pulling flax” in the accounts. Some labourers were regular employees and others, in the case of “a dutchman,” were less familiar to the business. They harvested both flax owned by the business and that owned by individual farmers. One man was paid “for pulling our own flax,” and a farmer was charged that same year for seven hands to spread his flax and one boy to “take it up.” In one of these complicated transactions, David Hilborn was credited, in 1861, for almost 5,000 pounds of flax and 26 bushels of flax seed sold to the mill. Later, he was charged almost the total value of the flax he sold in order to pay for the 44 “bushels flax seed [he] borrowed to sow in 1860.” After earning almost \$72 for his flax and seed, and paying for the previous year’s seed he was left with less than \$7. Elsewhere in the books, we see he was given \$33 for “flax land,” in March, 1860. Later that year he was paid \$32 for pulling flax. Combined with his \$7 from the harvest of 1860, Hilborn attempted to make a profit by renting some of his land and taking responsibility for at least some of the harvest labour.⁸

Other sources indicate that the Waterloo flax millers used a gang of workers to pull even these small quantities of flax in the early 1860s. John Meyers described his childhood life on a farm in Waterloo Co., in this period, and recalled his father selling flax to the millers in an equally complex relationship. The millers would “get” his father to sow a field of flax, and they would bring “a gang of flax-pullers” to pull and stook the flax. The Meyers would draw the flax to the barn and thresh it using the mill’s equipment, and then spread in the fields to rot. A male or female mill worker was sent to turn the rotting flax over (with a ten-foot pole); the gang would return to rake and bind the flax; and Mr. Meyers would transport it to the mill with his horses. All this while, the mill owner checked on the flax to gauge its readiness. The miller then processed the flax straw and bought the finished fibre from Meyers after “deducting the price of the labor.” Meyers kept some fibre for his wife and daughters to spin into thread.⁹ In these intricate stages of the commodity chain, the millers and their gangs visited the farms on numerous

⁸ Daybook, Perine B, Woolwich Historical Foundation, A985.289, p 143.

⁹ Miriam H. Snyder and Joseph M. Snyder, *Hannes Schneider and his wife Catharine Haus Schneider; their descendants and times, 1534-1939*, (Kitchener: Miriam H. Snyder, 1937), p. 160G.

occasions. The farmers provided land, carried flax to and from the mill, and took flax seed from the millers in the spring.

Women, Children, and Family Flax Pulling

If pulling was ignored by flax enthusiasts in the 1860s, it became a cause celebre among observers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Newspapers reported on local flax-pulling gangs, farm journals described the work of pulling, Indian Agents complained of First Nations harvesters leaving the reserve, and pullers became one focus of amateur and professional photographers.

In some ways this contributed to a romanticized image of farm men and women harvesting their own flax for producing linen [**Figure 1: Pulling Flax, 1919**]. This carefully staged shot by the rural photographer, Reuben Sallows, is one example of his stylized rural imagery. The three women and one man have neat hair, clean clothes, and wear no gloves. Their form is perfect. Their backs are in unison and in line with the horizon. Their eyes are set on the immediate task before them, not on the photographer, and certainly not on the acres of flax yet to pull and possibly hundreds of acres of flax already pulled and stoked in the background. Not only is their dress and pose impracticable, but they pull in single file, stepping on good flax and obstructing the person behind them. A more idealized image of rural life is hardly imaginable. As a mnemonic device, the image leads viewers to think of the average farmer, pulling flax with the help of kith and kin, and of the important role women played in the production of flax. We are also shown the vastness of this harvest, the progress represented by the crops and buildings on the horizon, and the limitlessness of self-sufficient home production.



Figure 1: Pulling Flax, 1919.¹⁰

Other photographic evidence flatly contradicts this representation of flax pulling, and very few textual records describe anything like the Sallows photograph. In 1909, James Byrne stated that “the pulling is done by gangs,” and the production of flax occurs “in conjunction with mills and flax workers in towns, who buy the product from neighbouring farmers by the ton, or rent land and cultivate it themselves.” In most cases, according to Byrne, “a gang of 25 or 30 pullers” lead the way and were followed by an older person who did the “shocking,” or what we would consider sheaving.¹¹ Flax-pullers marketed their services to both farmers and millers, and were known for their skill in the field. Byrne claimed that farmers paid “from \$5 to \$7 an acre to a man or group of men and women, who make flax-pulling their summer trade.” “Where millmen grow the ‘stuff’ on leased land,” he reported, “they have gangs, consisting of men, women, and children, hired at ... [f]rom 25 cents to \$1.50 a day ... according to ‘pulling capacity.’”

¹⁰ Source: Sallows Collection – Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph.

¹¹ Byrne, “Flax-Pulling,” p 1140.

Byrne argued that millers drew their labour from towns within eight or nine miles from the flax fields, providing no meals but daily transportation on an austere “gang wagon.”¹²

Sallows captured this perspective as well in a more typical image of men and boys pulling flax in 1910 [**Figure 2**: Pulling Flax, 1910]. Perhaps Sallows felt less compelled to portray the countryside as an ideal place before he witnessed the horrors of the First World War. Whatever his motivation, his subjects work close together in the field, bending over, kneeling on the ground, and standing to rest their backs or move to the next stalk. They form a line which ensures they pull all the flax without treading on the standing crop, and their clothing offers protection from the sun and the thistles. Even the camera angle is more practical than Figure 1, allowing Sallows to capture as many pullers as possible without getting too far from the subjects. There is no idealized yeoman here. The focus is on the work and the faceless gang, and the photographer is not concerned with individuals or identities. The youths in the picture are not set apart in any way, and they wear the same clothes and perform the same task in the same position.



Figure 2: Pulling Flax, 1910.¹³

¹² Byrne, “Flax-Pulling,” p 1140.

An image of 10 women and girls harvesting flax near Arthur, Ontario, tells us more about the flax harvest and about the role of children and women [Figure 3]. Most of the subjects face the camera, except for one woman who continues to spread the flax in the field for drying and retting, and a group of boys who watch the workers from the hedgerow. We do not know if the workers are spreading, turning, or taking up the flax, and the focus is on the people, as if they were family or other identifiable persons. The photographer is not known, and it has been suggested that the picture was taken in 1915. No men are present, though this could be more a result of war than a gendered division of labour. In most other documents, the pullers are described as men and women, adults and children. However, it is possible that the activity they perform in this picture was lighter work than the actual pulling, and there are no similar photographs available that show an entirely female gang of pullers.



Figure 3: Women and children standing in a field, gathering flax near Arthur, Ontario, ca. 1915.¹⁴

¹³ Source: Sallows Collection – Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph.

¹⁴ Compiled by Paul O'Donnell and Frank D. Coffey, *Portrait; a History of the Arthur Area*, 1971; photo used by permission of the Wellington County Museum and Archives, ph 9535.

Children are present in many photographs of flax harvesters, and were probably important parts of the flax commodity chain. In Thamesford, the media reported “about 30 hands in the field spreading (mostly boys and girls). ... divided up into two gangs.”¹⁵ The children in each gang were under a boss’s supervision and earned less than a dollar per day. The Tweedsmuir history of Alma, another long-time flax mill location, stated that farmers sowed the flax, but it was “pulled by hand, by boys and girls, gathered into bundles and taken to the mill. ... Sometimes as many as 40 to 50 boys and girls would work in the fields for 75 cents a day spreading the flax.”¹⁶ Mary Grant of Huron County, recalled earning 25 cents per day pulling flax in her youth,¹⁷ and these sources indicate that children were usually paid at a lower rate than adult labourers. Byrne’s estimation of \$5 per acre and the average person-days required for an acre of flax (3.5) suggests that adult flax-pullers could expect at least \$1.40 per day in 1909.

According to Cecilia Danysk, “wages for farm work were notoriously low,” and “extremely varied,”¹⁸ but flax harvesters earned more than most agricultural labourers. The largest flax manufacturer in Ontario in this period was James Livingston, and business correspondence from his son-in-law, James McColl, indicated a higher wage in areas of heavy flax production. McColl contracted with farmers in ten communities north of Yale, Michigan, to harvest about 5,500 tons of flax in 1907, the product of about 3,600 acres and the work of 420 labourers if he harvested for 30 days straight. McColl said little about the flax pullers themselves, but indicated at the start of the season that “Labor is scarce here, wages are high, and we may be obliged to cut about half of our crop.” He claimed he lost two or three men to his competition who were offering \$2.25 per day.¹⁹ Later, he wrote that a competitor was paying one man \$2.50, and 2 others at \$1.75 per day, noting with some satisfaction that their “flax is costing them something to stack.”²⁰

¹⁵ “Thamesford,” *The Woodstock Sentinel-Review*, August 30, 1888, p. 2.

¹⁶ Jean Boyle, “Flax Mill,” *Alma Tweedsmuir History*, p. 73.

¹⁷ Alan A Brookes, and Catherine A. Wilson. “‘Working Away’ from the farm: the Young Women of North Huron, 1910-1930,” *Ontario History*, LXXVII. 4. (December 1985), 281-300; however, Mary might have been paid room and board by her employers.

¹⁸ Cecilia Danysk, *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), p. 83, 85.

¹⁹ James McColl to James Livingston, 19 July, 1907, Sir Adam Beck Archives, Baden, p. 1.

²⁰ James McColl to James Livingston, 22 August, 1907, Sir Adam Beck Archives, Baden, p. 1.

McColl had teams operating in each community and although we do not know how many worked on each team, he did mention that they normally “baled” 22 tons per day (and that exceptional leadership on one team helped it bale 28 tons per day). At this rate it would take seven or eight teams to process the entire harvest in a month.²¹

Whether a miller like McColl could find adequate labour for the flax harvest determined how he harvested and what he earned. Flax that was “pulled, properly bound, cured and handled and free of all foreign matter” was the most valuable type, worth \$1 per ton more than cut flax.²² McColl sold his flax for \$17 per ton in 1907. Despite the labour shortages he was able to pull most of the crop, partly because the beet crop failed and the “beet cleaners” were able to help pull flax.²³ It is entirely possible that the wages mentioned by McColl were for skilled workers and that unskilled flax pullers were paid closer to the \$1.40 per day mentioned by Byrne, but even this was well above the \$5 per week that most farm workers earned in eastern Canada at the turn of the century.²⁴

First Nations Flax Harvesters

One group of workers often considered “cheap labour,”²⁵ were First Nations labourers who left the reserve for seasonal work. However, there is no reason to assume that First Nations flax pullers were paid less than other farm labourers, and elsewhere, First Nations were known to earn more than non-Native harvest workers.²⁶ Their involvement in flax’s commodity chain raises many questions: Where did these workers come from? In the early 1890s, Indian Agents for Six Nations, Oneida of the Thames, and Chippewas of Thames began reporting First Nations workers leaving during the

²¹ James McColl to James Livingston, 5 September, 1907, Sir Adam Beck Archives, Baden, p. 2.

²² International Flax Twine Co. to W. D. Stoner, 8 August, 1907, Sir Adam Beck Archives, Baden, p. 2.

²³ James McColl to James Livingston, 7 August, 1907, Sir Adam Beck Archives, Baden, p. 2.

²⁴ George V. Haythorne, *Labor in Canadian Agriculture*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 26, based on the *Census of Canada*, 1901, 2: table 8.

²⁵ Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia*, (Montreal-Kingston; McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Anthropologist, Avis Mysyk, “The Role of the State in Manitoba Farm Labour Force Formation,” in *The Dynamics of Hired Farm Labour: Constraints and Community Responses*, Jill L. Findeis, Ann M. Vandeman, Janelle M. Larson, Jack L. Runyan, eds., (Wallingford: CABI Publishing, 2002): pp. 169-182, argues that the DIA’s agricultural policy and mismanagement of reserve land in Manitoba disadvantaged the Native population and “created what would become a permanent reserve army of labour for Manitoba farms” (p. 173). However, she later states that during WWII, some First Nations were such skilled harvesters that they earned even more than the average worker (p. 175).

berry-picking season and returning after the flax harvest.²⁷ A Saugeen chief claimed that off-reserve work was tempting his members to lease their land to non-Native farmers and waste their wages on alcohol.²⁸ How many participated in the harvest? This Six Nations agent reported that “Several hundreds leave the reserve,” for this activity. How much did they earn for their work? The Thames agent claimed that “Considerable money is earned by pulling flax among the whites,” and, in 1909, the *Dutton Advance*, reported that the Oneida and Chippewas continued to “earn a large amount of money by pulling flax, wood-cutting among the whites and berry picking.”²⁹ First Nations flax pullers traveled widely, and Saugeen Natives worked in flax fields from nearby Ripley to the more distant Floradale.³⁰

The most difficult question, however, is *why* did they do it? Many millers relied on flexible and transient labour to do a job that most others preferred not to do. James Byrne declared flax pulling an unforgiving job due to “the heat of a July sun, a fierce, craving, tendency of the spinal column to crack,” and the ubiquity of splinters. “The only consolation the puller has,” Byrne assures us, “is that his season is short.”³¹ The unpopularity of this work therefore, could be due more to the nature of the job than its rate of pay. Diane Newell demonstrates that British Columbia salmon cannery owners relied heavily on First Nations labourers, because the workers moved their families and belongings to the canneries for the season and because, as one cannery owner complained, “white people would not do this.” Non-Natives, in her opinion, could not operate on such distant, seasonal work, and cannery owners went to great lengths to attract First Nations who could.³² In Ontario, First Nations labourers might have found flax pulling a useful occupation for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the

²⁷ See also Sally M. Weaver, “The Iroquois: The Grand River Reserve in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, 1875-1945,” in Edward S. Rogers and Donald B. Smith, eds., *Aboriginal Ontario: Historical Perspectives on the First Nations*, (Toronto: Ontario Historical Studies Series, Government of Ontario, 1994), p. 224.

²⁸ Peter S. Schmalz, *The Ojibwa of Southern Ontario*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 224-5, referring to a statement made by Chief W. Wawanost in 1900.

²⁹ DIA, Indian Agent Reports, 1893-1913; “Indians on the Thames,” *Dutton Advance*, September 30, 1909, p. 1.

³⁰ “News Items,” *Drayton Advocate*, 25 July, 1907, p. 4; Kathryn Hansuld Lamb, “When Flax Was King,” *Waterloo Historical Society* 83 (1995): pp. 75-97, 89.

³¹ Byrne, “Flax-Pulling,” p 1140.

³² Diane Newell, *Tangled Webs of History: Indians and the Law in Canada’s Pacific Coast Fisheries*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 76.

Department of Indian Affairs' "tendency to discourage them from cultivation," on their own land.³³ The short season and scheduling of flax pulling allowed them to be involved in other activities for the remainder of the year. The type of work meant that entire families could contribute to the harvest in various capacities, and the proximity of Ontario's flax regions to First Nations reserves made it more attractive. In some cases, we read that workers were brought in from their reserves by flax millers, but although one photograph shows a miller meeting the workers at train stations,³⁴ there is no evidence that suggests their interregional transport was paid by interested millers.

We do know that First Nations flax pullers camped near their worksites as they traveled to different locations [**Figure 4: First Nations' camp**].³⁵ Figure 4 was taken by an unknown photographer near Arthur, Ontario, and shows how the harvesters lived when they were on location. The tents are large – at least twice as tall as the workhorses standing in front of them – and the three in the picture could accommodate at least the 25 to 30 in the typical work gangs of this period. They appear to be either commercially available dwellings or constructed from ordinary canvas. Moving around for seasonal work was nothing new for most Ojibway bands. Thomas Vennum argues that well into the twentieth century the Lake Superior Ojibway "used tents during berry picking, [but] they preferred the wigwam in both sugarbush and rice camp."³⁶ The sight of these tents captured the attention of at least one photographer, but there was little about Ontario's First Nations flax pullers that seemed spectacular to non-Native residents. Figure 4 and the Indian Agent reports suggest one reason for this, that is, these labourers came to flax fields every year for four decades, and lived closely with non-Native rural people. The farmhouse in the background and the outbuildings to the right of the tents mean that they camped in between farms and probably interacted frequently with their neighbours. The

³³ Leo G. Waisberg, and Tim E. Holzkamm, "'A Tendency to Discourage Them from Cultivation': Ojibwa Agriculture and Indian Affairs Administration in Northwestern Ontario," *Ethnohistory* 40(2) (1993): pp. 175-211; Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

³⁴ Kathryn Hansuld Lamb, "When Flax Was King," *Waterloo Historical Society* 83 (1995): pp. 75-97, 90.

³⁵ Terry Crowley, "Rural Labour," in *Labouring Lives: Work and Workers in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, ed. Paul Craven, (Toronto: Ontario Historical Studies Series, Government of Ontario, 1995), p 40.

³⁶ Thomas Vennum, Jr., *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), p. 166.

“growers were in no way inconvenienced by having them on their farms,” reported the *Farmer’s Advocate*, because the workers prepared their own food.³⁷



Figure 4: First Nations’ camp on field near Arthur, Ontario, ca. 1915.³⁸

Paige Raibmon has shown how, in Puget Sound, First Nations hop-pickers became “Authentic Indians” and a source of spectacle to non-Native tourists, but in Ontario, flax pickers were observed with more caution.³⁹ “These Indians are usually law-abiding and fairly industrious,” the *Dutton Advance*, assured its readers, although “they do not make much progress.” In Woodstock, the *Sentinel-Review* announced, in 1887, that “the flax pulling commenced last week and we have the usual influx of Indians. They are very quiet and inoffensive citizens if the pale faces will not give them any ‘fire water.’”⁴⁰ This attitude was apparently the result of several years of close contact with First Nations flax pullers. They had been pulling flax off reserve as early as 1880, when

³⁷ “The Cultivation of Flax for Fibre,” *Farmer’s Advocate* (Eastern Edition), 2 May, 1918, p 769.

³⁸ Compiled by Paul O’Donnell and Frank D. Coffey, *Portrait; a History of the Arthur Area*, 1971; photo used by permission of the Wellington County Museum and Archives, ph 9536.

³⁹ Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ *The Woodstock Sentinel-Review*, 4 August, 1887, p. 4.

it appears they were eyed with great suspicion. The non-Natives' fear of arousing the violence of the "other" in their midst was reflected in London by the *Advertiser*.

Messrs. Gunn Bros. Have imported a host of Indians from Munceytown to pull flax for their Ailsa Craig Mills. It was found necessary to warn all the liquor stores and hotels on no account to give or sell the natives any intoxicating drinks. Mr. Alex Gunn positively asserts he will make an example of any dealer that violates the law in this respect. The first night or so after the arrival of the aborigines things were getting interesting at the 'hub.' One man came near being stabbed, and Billy Coulter felt uneasy about his scalp.⁴¹

By the turn of the century there was less uneasiness between First Nations labourers and their non-Native neighbours, although they remained segregated work groups and continued to raise the curiosity of rural onlookers like Reuben Sallows.

This curiosity preserved a brief glimpse of First Nations flax pullers, although the documents are few and it is difficult to shed the lens of their non-Native creators.

[**Figure 5:** Pulling Flax, 1910] Figure 5, a photograph by Sallows, shows a group of First Nations men women and children pulling flax in 1910. There do not appear to be any non-Natives working with the harvesters, which suggests that they formed a segregated gang. They are potentially posing for the photographer although the romantic devices of Figure 1 are not in effect here. They are closer together than the pullers in Figure 2. Perhaps this is because the photographer needed to get the entire group in the frame, or because the upright workers are actually working *behind* the pullers binding the flax in sheaves. If this is the case, it is interesting to note that the women and children are performing the same work as the men. A gendered division of flax labour would mean that the women here should be handling the pulled flax like the subjects of Figure 3.

The make-up of the typical First Nations flax gang changed very little since July 1888, when the *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* noted that "About twenty-five Indians, braves, squaws, and papooses, arrived in town this morning from Brantford. They are going flax-pulling."⁴² Furthermore, the *Farmer's Advocate* used another Sallows photograph of the same First Nations gang when it published a picture of "A Group of Flax Pullers Ready for Work," in 1918.⁴³

⁴¹ *Advertiser*, [London], August 5, 1880, p. 3

⁴² "Town Local," *Woodstock Sentinel-Review*, 23 July, 1888, p. 1.

⁴³ "Some Ontario Flax Fields," *Farmer's Advocate* (Eastern Edition), 22 August, 1918, p. 1361.



Figure 5: Pulling Flax, 1910.⁴⁴

Most reserves close to the flax-producing region of southwestern Ontario are indicated in the sources, which suggests that the flax harvest was a very common activity for First Nations families. In 1895, E. D. Cameron, the Indian Agent for Six Nations, was “glad to add that this custom of seeking employment is not increasing, but the desire to remain on the reserve and cultivate land is gaining yearly.”⁴⁵ Yet, First Nations participation in the flax harvest did not decline until the stagnation of Ontario flax production after WWI.

Conclusion

The major problem with flax farming in the late nineteenth century was the arduous task of harvesting the fibre by hand. Still, its value caused farmers and millers to create new labour relationships. They capitalized on “gang” labour for the flax harvest, and

⁴⁴ Source: Sallows Collection – Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph.

⁴⁵ *Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada*, 1895, p. 14-1.

employed diverse teams that included landowning flax farmers, permanent mill workers, transient labour, and entire groups of First Nations families.

The person-days required to harvest flax meant that somewhere between 500 and 2,000 people were involved in pulling the crop every August. One problem with gauging flax pulling in terms of “man-days/acre” is that according to Beatrice Craig, this is “an age and gender neutral measurement.” Economic considerations were not the only reasons women and children did or did not participate in the labour force, and cultural factors must come into play in our analysis.⁴⁶ The increasing labour productivity of women and children in the flax harvest may have been key in making the industry profitable in the late nineteenth century, but more research is needed to determine how this happened and how it modifies our knowledge of gender and farm work.

As well, the increased production of flax was contingent on government policies that discouraged First Nations farming and helped create a labour pool ideal for flax pulling and other work off-reserve. The Ontario flax story suggests that gangs of First Nations labourers were a critical element of the harvest, they considered flax pulling an important source of income, and their encounters with non-Native Ontarians raised curiosity and alarm among band leaders, Indian agents, and the non-Native population. The only participants who welcomed this form of gang labour were the flax millers, photographers, and the First Nations harvesters themselves.

⁴⁶ Beatrice Craig, “Women, Children, and the Calculation of Labour Productivity in Europe and North America,” *Histoire & Mesure*, XV (3/4): (2000), pp. 280, 282.