Customers and Neighbors: Women in the Economy of Lawrence, Kansas, 1870-1885

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The "boosterism" of nineteenth-century urban Western planners usually emphasized a town's "founding fathers" [Haywood, 1991; Wade, 1959; Wallace, 1972]. However, if we look more closely at those city streets – through tax records, city directories, census returns, and newspaper accounts – we find there were Mrs. and Miss Duncans, Wheelers, Lanes, and other women invisible in the rhetoric of male boosterism [Nelson, 1986; Petrik, 1981-82]. This paper asks, in effect, what happens to the economic history of late nineteenth-century Western towns if we put the women back on the map?

There are many narratives embedded in that question, but I will focus here on the role of women in the economy of one town, Lawrence, Douglas County, Kansas, between 1870 and 1885. The larger project of which this research is a part grows out of my efforts to think more inclusively about women's economic activities. Much of the scholarship on women and the economy focuses on "public" sites, such as workplaces and Main Street businesses. My previous work on gendered corporate relations and women in business left me with questions about the other half of that split: the "private" life of families, houses, and residential neighborhoods [Kwolek-Folland, 1994; 1998]. This project emphasizes the ways economic activity moves among public and private settings – between Main Street and residential neighborhoods, shops and houses, firms and families [Hayden, 1996; Mackenzie, 1989; Meyerowitz, 1990; Rose, 1993]. My definition of economic activity comes from political philosopher Nancy Fraser: an economic system is any site "of labor, exchange, calculation, distribution, and exploitation" whether in a factory or a family [Fraser, 1985, p. 107]. This is a purposefully broad definition. Rather than the public/private dichotomy of neoclassical economic theory, recent scholarship has explored the ways public and private life intersect [Davis, 1992; Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1989; Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Mackenzie, 1989; Weiner, 1992; Zelizer, 1994]. This essay explores those intersections in women's economic activities in urban, residential neighborhoods as well as more formal business dealings. (The early state of this project allows only a

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brief survey here of the range of possibilities; firm conclusions will have to wait for further research.)

Located in the eastern part of the state, Lawrence developed in the 1850s as a political response to fears over the eastward spread of slavery [Dary, 1982; Nimz, 1985]. The town held a prominent position in the era's debates over such issues as women's rights to property and economic opportunities. Sited on the Santa Fe Trail and major nineteenth-century railroad routes, it was important in regional trade, giving its residents a role in the major economic transformations of the late nineteenth century (especially the expansion of national markets). Finally, the ethnic and racial mix of Lawrence's population highlights differences among urban women's economic experience. Between 1860 and 1870 the town's population grew from 1,645 to 8,320, and became increasingly diverse ethnically and racially. Ex-slaves, free blacks, Scandinavians, Germans, Prussians, French Canadians, and Irish leavened a native-born population of former Missourians, Buckeyes, Illini, and New Yorkers [Shortridge, 1995]. In 1875, African Americans and European immigrants each made up 17 percent of Lawrence's population.[1]

However, the years just after 1873 resulted in stagnation and a struggle to maintain the town's economic and demographic base [Ambler, 1994; Nimz, 1985].[2] The population shrank by over 1,000 people due to severe drought, a grasshopper infestation, and the economic depression that struck the nation in 1873 with the failure of Jay Cooke's New York City banking house. Lawrence did not fully recover until the University of Kansas began to grow in the years after 1890, although things had stabilized by the mid-1880s [Dary, 1982; Griffin, 1974, pp. 58, 171-76].

Numerous businesses closed their doors early in 1874, landladies had trouble collecting their rents, and arrests for "drunkenness" increased. The local police in the second week of the year jailed for vagrancy nine "men without homes, money or friends."[3] A Mrs. Evans had to be buried at public expense because Mr. Evans, although "a good and industrious man [had]...for a long time...been entirely out of employment, his wife sick, and the family, including three children...cared for by private charity." Probably the best thing one could say about Lawrence as it faced 1874 and its future was, as one local paper reported, that "owing to the mild winter there is almost an entire absence of mad dogs in the neighborhood."[4]

Late nineteenth century gender ideals made women observers and silent sufferers in this sort of economic nightmare. The ideal of separate spheres

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[1] State Board of Agriculture, *Fourth Annual Report, Complete Census of the State* (Topeka, 1875), p. 510; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Ninth Census of the United States: Statistics of Population* (Washington, DC, 1872); U.S. Department of the Interior, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census* (Washington, DC, 1872), Table XLVI, p. 540.

[2] *Lawrence City Directory for 1873-74* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1874) [hereafter LCD]; *Daily Kansas Tribune,* 29 March 1874, p. 4 [hereafter DKT].

[3] DKT, 6 January 1874, p. 4.

[4] DKT, 1874, 6 January, p. 4; 8 January, p. 4; 10 January, p. 4; 11 January, p. 4; 15 January, p. 4; 18 February, p. 4. On saloons, see LCD, p. 176, and DKT, 31 March 1874, p. 4.

suggested that as the "private sex" there was no public space where women's economic responses could become visible, and no rhetorical space in which to discuss the impact of women's behavior on the town's economy. Culturally defined as "women's work" and therefore outside of the official economy, much of the cooking, sewing, child care, laundering, and charitable activities that supported the material infrastructure of the town went on without reference to debates over urban boosterism, taxes, economic progress, or "hard times." The conflation of women's economic activity with that of their male relatives could lead one newspaper to report that "John Gardner is putting a modern...[plate glass] front into *his* millinery establishment," even as Mrs. Gardner listed herself in the city directory as a "milliner."[5] Yet women's economic activity brought them into the public spaces of the town and the town into the private spaces of residential neighborhoods, homes, and families.

The most remarkable thing about Lawrence neighborhoods in the 1870s was their extraordinary heterogeneity: There were no sharp spatial, class, ethnic, and racial divisions [Beers, 1873; Nimz, 1985; Rampelmann, 1993, p. 4].[6] Strolling down Ohio Street from the grain mill on the Kansas River, for example, would have meant passing among a polyglot and multihued population. Walking past the modest residences of English, Irish, and native born railway workers, masons, clerks, and insurance agents you might hear Irishwoman Eliza Love hustle her five children in to supper as her husband headed out for a bit of brew at Walruff's nearby beer garden. A little farther down, Daniel Stone, an African American saloonkeeper, might be leaving to walk the four blocks to his establishment. The Connecticut twang of university professor D.H. Robinson's 63-year-old mother-in-law might be heard sharply reprimanding the household maid, nineteen-year-old African American Jane Enidly. The German and Prussian families at the end of the block would add their own rich accents. And if all that was not enough, you might hear the sounds of an evening prayer meeting at the African Baptist Church at the southernmost end of the street.[7]

The divisions of urban economic activity in Lawrence were divisions of scale rather than of presence and absence. Dressmakers lived near groceries, and carpenters sawed and hammered in their side lots. The livery stable and the tobacconist shared the same block with wealthy real estate developers, professors, laundresses, and women who made meat pies in their home kitchens for sale to the local grocer. Residential and downtown neighborhoods contained a mix of "businesses." The social and economic relations of neighborhoods,

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[5] Emphasis added. DKT, 25 March 1874, p. 4. Gardner may have owned the property in which Mrs. Gardner ran her millinery shop; further research in tax records should clarify this point.

[6] Since the state census categories only allowed for "white" and "black," census figures probably obscure some Native Americans and Hispanics who were residents. The County jail, on the day the census taker visited in 1875, housed two "white" men born in the "Cherokee Nation," and one "black" man born in Mexico. Kansas State Manuscript Census, 1875, Ward 1, Wakarusa Township, Douglas County [hereafter KSMC].

[7] This walk is reconstructed from the KSMC, LCD, and Frederick W. Beers, *Atlas of Douglas County, Kansas* (New York, 1873).

streets, homes, and shops bridged ethnic, racial, and class differences and women's economic activities were central to neighborhood economic life.

According to Kansas statutes, women could do business, trade, buy and sell real property, bequeath estates, and keep any earnings or property they accumulated [*General Laws*, 1862; *General Statutes*, 1868].[8] Thus, some female entrepreneurs in Lawrence operated in the officially-recognized spaces, both literally and figuratively, of the town's economy [*Private Laws*, 1860, pp. 155-56].[9] Mrs. Starrett, for example, was one of two women who owned main-street music stores. She sold pianos, organs, sheet music, and sewing machines. In addition to musical goods, Lawrence's primary business district hosted several other women's businesses: a physician, a dentist, three milliners, two female hairdressers, and one photographer.[10]

As businesswomen or entrepreneurs such women fell into categories familiar to the town's official economy. In fact, by the late nineteenth century women had a well-developed entrepreneurial history, predominantly providing services in niche markets, such as food preparation, defined as female economic territory through custom and law dating back to medieval European practices. Widows in particular often took over family businesses or used their inheritance to start a shop. The law recognized women's right to independent economic activity either as formally-declared *femes sole* traders or informally, according to local custom [Kwolek-Folland, 1998].

However, neither these more obvious forms of entrepreneurship nor the central business district exhausted women's economic avenues. Outside of the downtown, women with varied skills and resources provided diverse goods and services to the community. Some catered to a general clientele, others to a one- or two-block area. Some were entrepreneurs, others hired laborers. Lawrence's female working population, in fact, mirrored the demographics of the gainfully-employed female population enumerated in state and national census reports. In both Lawrence and nationally in the 1870s, most entrepreneurial or professional women engaged in laundering, millinery, sewing, and teaching. Most women and girls who worked for wages were in domestic service, although women could be found in a variety of positions, like fifteen-year-old Hattie Bristol, who listed herself in the Lawrence census as a "printer" [State Board of Agriculture, 1875, p. 526].

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[8] The Kansas Territory was organized at the mid-point of a national debate over women's right to property. Historians continue to debate whether or not the "Western" experience (*à la* Frederick Jackson Turner) resulted in more "liberal" attitudes towards women's economic status. The arguments in favor of reasons other than "western exceptionalism," however, are more persuasive [Basch, 1982; Chused, 1983; Hoff, 1991; Shammas, 1994, pp. 9-30].

[9] Apparently women could vote in local elections in Lawrence from the town's incorporation. The exception was in special elections to levy "extraordinary taxes" on property owners, which specified as voters "every male resident of the city of the age of 21 years or upwards" who owned property. Thus, women could own property, but they could not vote on the taxes levied on that property [*Private Laws*, 1860, pp. 155-56].

[10] DKT, 28 March 1874, p. 4; LCD.

Women dressmakers and milliners provide a good example of the mixed nature of women's economic activity. In Lawrence, both millinery and dressmaking seem to have been white women's occupations. Twenty white women appeared in the city directory or census as "dressmakers" and another five as "milliners." Milliners were most likely found on the main street in formal shops, and women customers travelled from their residences, workplaces, or surrounding rural areas to place orders they would return later to fit and take home. Dressmakers more often worked out of their front parlors, or spent time living in the homes of their clients, cutting, fitting, and stitching the latest fashions. Most dressmakers catered to the local neighborhood around their residences. These occupations were skilled artisanal trades, requiring some period of apprenticeship, and were among the best-paid female occupations [Gamber, 1997].

For both, however, doing business involved a complex series of personalized interactions with other town residents and outsiders. Purchasing supplies meant placing mail orders at the post office downtown or dealing with railroad freight at the depots, arranging with local milliners or dry goods merchants to purchase supplies at cost, or engaging with travelling salesmen and their boxes of ribbons and fabric samples. Both milliners and dressmakers had to be aware of the latest fads in sleeve length. They had both to read national magazines, and pay attention to the local market. Some of their information came from distant suppliers. Some of it they traded through informal exchanges among other entrepreneurial women at church socials, at a place like Mollie Oliver's downtown millinery and hair goods shop, or over afternoon tea at home. A dressmaker in church on Sunday could use the opportunity to worship, and to research the state of local fashion.

In contrast to the racial whiteness of the clothing trades, doing the laundry was African American women's entrepreneurial niche. Of the 21 women in Lawrence's First Ward district who listed themselves as laundresses or "washers," 18 were black.[11] These worked out of their homes. All but two of the women were single heads of households. Thirteen (62 percent) of them had dependents. Five of the black households included boarders; one of these housed two grown children, three male laborers, two unrelated women who also were laundresses, and one 8-year old girl for a household total of 9 people. Laundry was almost overwhelmingly an older woman's job: the median age of Lawrence laundresses was 36, with nine over the age of 40 and the two oldest 54.

Doing laundry was broadly defined as women's work, and incorporated skills nearly every woman possessed in the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, it involved more complex procedures than the work does now [Cowan, 1983]. Probably most women who did laundry for pay also made their own soap out of wood ashes, a caustic and smelly process requiring physical stamina and a knowledge of chemical interactions. On the other hand, laundering needed a minimum investment in specialized tools or ingredients. Children

[11] Based on preliminary results from the KSMC; this demographic pattern, however, conforms to the national profile of laundresses in this period.

were an economic boon for laundresses: they could tote, run errands, and make deliveries. The older age of laundresses may have reflected their need and/or desire to work at home in order to supervise dependents; and the presence of dependents may have increased their earning power.

One important feature of the neighborhood economy was that African American women washers lived scattered throughout Lawrence's neighborhoods. Even those households that could afford domestic help usually sent out their laundry. It was heavy work, lifting wet linen sheets or the full women's petticoats of the day, or hauling clean or dirty laundry. Wood and water had to be chopped and carried. Further, in this period washing used unpleasant substances such as lye and starch. Most laundresses traveled through a neighborhood, or sent their children out, to collect and deliver laundry on a weekly basis. The physical proximity of laundresses made getting the laundry done more convenient for the neighborhood's housewife consumers. Although more difficult to demonstrate, the intimacy implied by handling clothing and household items may have added a necessary level of trust, cemented by the face-to-face social interactions of neighbors. Proximity also allowed both parties to assess one another: Was a customer a good credit risk? Did a laundress use too much starch?

This configuration may help explain the town's striking phenomenon of racially-mixed neighborhoods. Nancie Hattcup, for example, a washer with a 17-year-old daughter, lived on Ohio Street with access to a neighborhood that included several merchant families, real estate agents, and various artisans. With $675 in real and personal property Nancie was not the poorest resident of the street. But she was a long way from the wealthiest – a real estate agent whose combined properties were valued at $35,000. The same pattern appears among African American men in many neighborhoods where they appear as "laborers." In other words, economic integration – and its attendant social relations and physical convenience – and the gendered and racialized divisions of labor, may have fostered racial integration. Women's economic activity as laundresses and consumers of personal services wove the public life of interchange and commerce into dwellings and neighborhoods of racially and financially diverse households.

The official main street economy intersected with the neighborhood residential economy in a variety of other ways. Women's economic activity within the family brought public exchange directly into the home and household. Boarding relatives or strangers was a common way of augmenting the family income. The Oesch family shared a house with cousins and a partner in the family furniture business. Often these relations were informal, such as Nancie Hattcup's boarders, or the sharing of houses among families with few resources. Insurance agent J.N. Vanhoesen and his wife lived with their three-year old child, a Swedish domestic servant, a black laborer, and a bookkeeper.

Families sometimes mixed their business services to take advantage of the gender division of labor. Elizabeth Martin ran the family's boarding house while her husband Henry looked after their saloon. Advertisements in the *Daily Kansas Tribune* for room and board at the Place House offered reasonable prices

"in a pleasant and business part of the city" but also demanded that since the boarding house also was the family's home, no "disorderly, drunken and bad behaved persons" would be welcome [Rampelmann, 1993, pp. 24, 54].[12] Women kept the books for family stores, worked behind the counter at the corner grocery, or provided in-kind services in family-owned restaurants or other establishments.

While some did laundering or provided room and board in their homes, the women and girls who served as domestics worked and lived in other people's homes. They brought labor problems and workplace struggles such as wage and hour negotiations directly into the private family and turned a householder into an employer [Lasser, 1987; Katzman, 1978]. The relation between mistress and maid was complex. Mistresses evaluated live-in domestics on how they performed their duties and on their personal characteristics. (Most of the domestics listed in the Lawrence census, like most domestics of this period, "lived-in," that is roomed with their employers.) When the supply of servants was short, domestics might be able to negotiate for better pay or hours. In Lawrence in this period, however, there were likely more girls and women looking for domestic work than there were households who could afford to hire them.[13]

The age and ethnicity of domestic servants to some extent shaped their working conditions. Not only did black women make up the majority of domestics, they also tended to be among the oldest: most were between 21 and 55, with six of them over the age of 35. The age pattern suggests that African American girls began working as domestics quite young and continued working until their early 20s when they left the workforce only to return in their mid-30s. The fact that all but one of the households of black domestics were female-headed suggests that domestic work was a major source of paid employment for black women. As older workers, African American women may have had a more finely-tuned sense of what employers could reasonably expect of them and what rights they had as workers. However, we cannot assume that women over the age of 20 were unmarried and/or childless. Living apart from one's children was a condition of work for many live-in domestics.

The mean age of German domestics was 20. Most of them worked for German families or native-born families with German surnames. Given the strong German community in Lawrence and the relatively tight age grouping (18-26), German domestics probably maintained strong family and community ties that may have helped protect them from sexual or other abuses, and strengthened their earning power [Rampelmann, 1993, p. 4]. Swedish domestics, on the other hand, tended to be the youngest, least connected to family, and most vulnerable of the group. The Swedish domestics in the sample were younger overall, ranging in age from 12 to 30, with five of the nine between 12 and 17 and a mean age of 16.5.

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[12] DKT, 10 January; DKT, 1 January 1874, p. 2; LCD. The ad appeared at least once a week in the 1870s.

[13] For example, a newspaper advertisement placed by a prospective domestic ran for several weeks in the *Daily Kansas Tribune* (for example, 6 January 1874, p. 2).

Anecdotal evidence suggests the vulnerability of young domestic servants in private homes. The *Daily Kansas Tribune*, for instance, reported in March 1874 on the birth of a baby to a "hired girl" in the "servants quarters" of a private home. Such scandals could intrude into public life in sometimes ugly ways. State senator J.C. Horton and his wife, Fannie, were deeply troubled by the seduction and impregnation of their servant, Martha Johnson (one of the Swedish domestics) by Horton's brother, Stephen, in their own home. Distorted word of the scandal in the Horton residence resurfaced a few weeks later in Chicago newspapers, which accused the Senator of fathering the child. The perhaps deliberate misunderstanding as to the father's identity nearly undermined his reelection. Martha herself was hastily married to Stephen, who promptly disappeared. Fannie then hustled her off to Leavenworth to have her child in the Kansas Home for Friendless Women [Armitage, 1994].[14] Unintended pregnancy was one of the occupational hazards of domestic servitude, and could be aggravated by youth and ethnic differences.

The unofficial female economy also included those who pieced together material sustenance through a variety of informal interchanges. These are much more difficult to uncover in the historical record, but we can make some inferences. Black female-headed households in the census all list occupations for their prime breadwinners. But even black women with incomes would have been living close to the margin, especially in depressed economic times. Among the 84 white female-headed households listed in three census wards, only 20 claimed an occupation. Even if we assume some others were widows with a comfortable maintenance from properties or interest we cannot account for more than a minority. Further, some of these white households contained children and elderly relatives. For middle-class white widows, listing an "occupation" meant a loss of status. But these women and their dependents had to live on something other than air.

Their economic activities included bartering goods or services like sewing or childcare; selling home-made beer or prepared foods door-to-door or to neighborhood grocers; raising vegetables in the side garden; or keeping chickens or a cow for eggs, milk, and cream. Keeping a cow or chickens was a typical economic resource for housewives, and cows and chickens were common town residents. Cows were tethered in residential areas and wandered loose in the downtown park, and chickens scratched in domestic yards. Thus homemakers provided fresh poultry and dairy products for neighborhood sale or trade [Dary, 1992, pp. 84, 159].[15]

Some female Lawrentians fell back on the final economic resource of all women everywhere: their sex. Most nineteenth-century brothels were family operations or owned by women who were widows, former prostitutes, or both

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[14] DKT, 8 March 1874. Fannie B. Horton Diary, Horace L. Moore Collection, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas.

[15] DKT, 29 January 1874, p. 4. The 1875 state census reported that egg and poultry production in Douglas County was valued at over $7,000. Women's labor generated most of that value.

[Hobson, 1990; Kwolek-Folland, 1998]. Paula Petrik's study of Helena, Montana between 1865 and 1900 suggests that prostitution may have been one of the earliest sources of investment capital in the development of western towns, and that prosperous madams served as local bankers before the appearance of a more permanent financial infrastructure [Petrik, 1981-82].[16] Although arrests for prostitution are difficult to untangle in this period from "disturbing the peace" and "vagrancy," the presence of "houses of ill fame" in Lawrence suggests someone was selling sexual services. In 1873, for example, there were eight arrests each for "keeping" and "frequenting" a "house of ill-fame." In February, several white and black women, from the "class of semi-vagrants of the female persuasion," were arrested for "vagrancy."[17]

Some women may have moved in and out of formal prostitution, or traded sex informally for favors, work, food, or clothing. This was one way to stretch limited budgets or bridge periods of unemployment or under-employment. These women "of doubtful repute" did not fall into the same category as the "common prostitutes, bawds, and disorderly persons" cited in the town's laws. However, they still converted sexual resources into material ones [Hobson, 1990; *Private Laws*, 1860, p. 137].[18] There is little to indicate that these women were segregated in a particular part of town; the unofficial nature of their sexual trades protected them from official censure.

Finally, women's role in charitable work often is not seen as financial labor although numerous scholars have pointed to its economic dimensions [Muncy, 1991; Ginzberg, 1990, Kwolek-Folland, 1998]. Charities played a critical redistributive role in Lawrence during this period, given the lack of well-organized community services. In churches, homes, and on the streets women solicited donations or visited the homes of the town's poor. The Methodist oyster supper held on New Years' Day 1874 charged a fee. The fee, as well as women's time in preparing and serving the meal, went to relief of the membership's poorer neighbors and parishoners. While the town's charter authorized some expenditures for the destitute, it was never enough. To take up some of the slack and provide a more flexible response in hard times, groups like the Rebekahs held entertainments as fundraisers for the "sick and suffering." In addition to contributions of food or clothing purchased with funds earned in suppers, bake sales, or entertainments, women's organizations such as the Ladies' Benevolent Union collected and redistributed goods, like clothing, to the "deserving poor."[19] In making these economic exchanges, women traded their social contacts, and managerial, cooking, and decorating skills for material support for the town's destitute.

Charitable work, in fact, is probably the most extreme example of the way gender underpins our notions of public and private activity. A great deal of

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[16] DKT, 6 January 1874, p. 4; 10 February 1874, p. 4.

[17] DKT, 6 January 1874, p. 4 and 10 February 1874, p. 4. The 1875 state census shows one female prisoner in the Douglas County jail.

[18] DKT, 31 January 1874, p. 4.

[19] DKT, 9 January and 22 February 1874, p. 4.

women's economic activity is trivialized (as is charitable work), dismissed as domestic rather than economic labor (like laundering), or overlooked (as with women's entrepreneurship). One result is that much of what we know of the female economy slips through the fog of history almost by accident. We know that Mrs. Sarah Vandenberg was a Lawrence businesswoman who sold sewing machines in 1874 because a newspaper editor saw fit to include that information in her obituary. But if we only read the newspaper, we would not know it was *Mrs.* Gardner's millinery business that would advertise its offerings behind a new plate glass window. The divisions of public and private, downtown and residential areas, meant that men's activity was defined as public and subsumed within itself, like Mr. Gardner, the value of women's economic actions.

The underlying gender divisions of capitalism make the distinction between a public and private economy seem a natural division between men and women. Yet the case of Lawrence suggests that women's economic activities took place in both the official public arena of main street shops and the intimate habitats of families, residential neighborhoods, and informal exchanges. When a domestic servant and a mistress negotiated a labor contract in the front parlor, the private home became a site tied to the labor market for domestic servants, national financial conditions, and shared understandings about the nature of domestic work. Laundresses incorporated their children into the labor pool and turned their residential yards into processing plants. The private sphere of home and family, in other words, was not the economically-neutral realm of affective relations nor merely a service and support network for the "real" world of men's work. Rather it was an economic site that mingled public and private spaces throughout the town.

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