

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM

Synopsis

INTRODUCTION

The Lull Before The Storm is a feature length production/series about Canadian women and the post-war transition, shot in collaboration with the Knowledge Network. It includes a dramatic component and a documentary. These can be screened as separate or related elements.

The Lull juggles popular, theoretical and media representations of "women's" nature, concerns and roles around a central but discontinuous narrative. This is the story of Dorothy Sanderson her son, Bobby and her husband, George. Dorothy moves between waitressing, the wartime aircraft assembly line, homemaking, childrearing and then back to waitressing. George traverses the logging industry, wartime battlefields and the construction industry, while Bobby grows older.

A Narrator binds together the dramatic portion of the Lull. He is the super-ego of the post-war era, a source of contradictory wisdom who combines the investigative approach of public broadcasting, the National Film Board's kitchen sink drama, the fantastic realism of the Twilight Zone & the advertising seduction of early television. Dramatic styles flip through soap opera, the "woman's" film genre, docudrama, Hollywood dance musicals and advertising fantasies. Documentary interview clips from working and community women from British Columbia's 1940's and 1950's interweave with the narrative.

The documentary centres on interviews from women who lived in logging communities on Vancouver Island in the 1940's and 1950's. It explores their roles within the family, community life and social change. Interviews with women active in Sikh community organizations and the members of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) auxiliaries, offer points of similarity and comparison.

The series is 96 minutes in total length.

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Our intention is to produce entertaining and educational programmes that provide insights into a little known aspect of British Columbia's history. Through interviews, dramatic sequences and a wealth of archival footage and audio collections, we will bring to life the daily lives of women - the poignant, humorous and difficult details of homelife and workplace in a time when the ideal of femininity reigned supreme.

The Lull Before The Storm will be an informative video series about British Columbia's women in the post-war period. Based on extensive research conducted by Sara Diamond and the Women's Labour History Project, and shot on location and in studio in the province of British Columbia, the Lull investigates the impact of the post-war economy and social values on women's lives at home and at work.

The 1950's are important, for in many ways they came closer to the North American dream of stability, economic well-being, family and home, than any other time. Yet despite these features these years resulted in underlying social conflicts, as women entered the workforce in a steady stream and conflicts between independence and tradition escalated.

Drama

The dramatic programme considers significant transition in attitudes from woman's wartime workplace heroism to their unwanted and then invisible status in the job market. How did such a dramatic step backwards occur? How did working women and their families adapt to the new image and expectations of femininity? Were the only options for personal fulfillment "to marry a millionaire" or be an embittered, single, career woman? How did women cope whose families needed their income to break even or afford the smaller luxuries the post-war period promised? If they worked, what did women do to make work rewarding, both financially and personally?

The family motif will appear throughout this video as a constant restatement of the values of post-war society, a symbol of stability and prosperity. This video will begin with a dramatic recreation of a panel about women's right to employment. From this point, three strands of narrative will combine: anecdotal documentary interview footage which explores the changing experience of women at work and at home; original footage from television, film and advertisements; and a sequential dramatic narrative about a woman of this era.

The interviews provide an avenue through personal memory to this era. The archival footage will allow insight into how women were presented within popular culture. Through dramatic narrative, will emerge a sense of women's subtle personal resistance to a rigid set of standards.

Historical Context

During the war, Canadian women had filled important leadership roles while men were overseas; they were working in government and in industry. Women's self-esteem and competency skyrocketed. Yet, many women yearned for the war to end. They were anxious about their men overseas, they were lonely - if anything the desire was for autonomy and family, for work and for romance. Canadian society, while eulogizing the role of Canada's homefront heroines, also feared the implications of women remaining in the post-war labour force.

As men began to return from overseas, the forces of government and media attention swung to their problems and needs. World War I veterans had been the unhappy victims of unemployment and disillusionment. This was not to happen again - society would take care of its soldiers. Demobilized from the labour force, women were remobilized into the home - both as consumers of the benefits of post-war society and as companions to the working man and ex-soldier. Veterans had never worked side-by-side with women in factories and mills, they had not experienced the new-found wartime equality with them. They longed for the stability of home hearth and a motherly wife.

Historical Context

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Yet the post-war period was not only a time for the readjustment of gender roles. North American society was experiencing an economic boom of unequaled proportions. Adults who had grown up during the depression and had experienced the pressures of wartime, had delayed their aspirations for economic well-being for too long. The growth period after the war promised social status through participation in the growing consumer market. Leisure and well-being were commensurate with notions of family and a standard of beauty was established by advertising. Culture became increasingly universal as cinema, radio and television all reflected international events and North American values.

With the erosion of a locally-based culture came the dominance of an urban consumer lifestyle. Advertising reinforced the romantic ideal of husband, home, motherhood, while emphasizing the scientific and full-time nature of these enterprises if they were to be successfully realized. Women were now the "managers" of their homes and their children, sanitizing surfaces with a variety of solvents and minds with a dose of pop psychology. Advertising copy, read by the disembodied voice of a male narrator advised women on the most traditional of tasks, from baby care to "ring around the collar". And post-war society was fascinated with the cult of femininity - it raised the beautiful woman to the highest pedestal.

In the workplace women were again invisible, yet they were there in greater numbers and variety than in previous generations. Women left "non-traditional" work to participate in the "pink and white collar" job ghettos. Others left the workforce completely while their children were young, returning later in life when ^{work} outside the home became an economic necessity. Equal pay issues gained momentum amongst women, but the idea that they worked for pin money inhibited real gains.

Post-war society successfully constructed a social safety net. Family allowance (the baby bonus) supplemented incomes and acted as a childrearing incentive. The boom and bust cycles of the economy, inevitable in a primary industry-based province like British Columbia, took their toll on tolerance of women in the workforce. Still, the increasing availability of unemployment insurance and welfare softened the blow. The very net that the unions had fought for, combined with the achievement of dues check-off and the Rand formula, made union procedures automatic, minimizing contact between stewards and members on the job while requiring a heightened bureaucracy to implement.

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Yet, even in the 1940's and the 1950's, something bubbled softly under the surface. Women loved their children, husbands and many of the elements of domestic life. Yet, dissatisfaction with the modern office, hospital, switchboard, restaurant and classroom, with the tedium of endless housework accumulated - women began to murmur, some joined unions and worked quietly away for equal pay, equal pensions and wage increases. A deeper dissatisfaction would soon echo down office corridors. Women would again be assertive.

The Documentary

The second programme concentrates on the daily and community lives of two groups of women on Vancouver Island, both centred around single-industry logging towns. Women from East Indian and white backgrounds attest to the parallels and differences in home life, housework and community involvement in the period during and after World War II. This portion centres on the women who did not work outside the home but were responsible for establishing a wide range of community services and events. In doing so, they often stepped out of the expectations of feminine traditions. To their own surprise they became organizers.

The programme will combine personal testimony, location visuals, excerpts from cinema and television of the time and archival footage from Vancouver Island. A reunion between a group of Sikh women and another with several women of the IWA auxiliary movement provide lively discussion, allowing the women to interview each other. Original group dynamics re-emerge in the group setting. The women describe the mundane tasks of daily life with great humour and vitality.

Women within these communities performed parallel work - they married, raised children, made a home, often with limited resources, acted as the conduits for information about their cultures, tended the sick and the elderly, watched the family budget, and then went out to work when the children were old enough or the economics of the family demanded it. Their activism was channeled through community service, whether based in temple sisterhood or in a union auxiliary.

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Lil Godfrey and Eva Wilson have lived on Vancouver Island, in the once booming logging centre of Lake Cowichan (the Lake) since they were married women in their late teens. Lil remembers her first house, a step up from the tent that she first inhabited. Made of logs, the wind howled through its open cracks. She and a friend insulated it early one morning in the dead of winter while husband Fred worked far away in the logging camps. A fellow walking by fell off the path (there was no road) and into a ditch, breaking his leg. He was gawking at the unusual sight of women in a men's town, and worse, doing their own carpentry.

As the town grew, there were three kinds of women - the wives of loggers, the manager's wives and prostitutes. More families settled and the loggers' wives became concerned with two issues: safety in the woods and the lack of basic community facilities. The men were away in the camps most of the time, and women relied on each other for company and support. They would walk down to the rail line together to meet the speeder when the men came in, insuring that each husband was faithfully home, instead of ensconced in the small red light district.

There was no medical clinic, school or road system to the hospital in Duncan. Working closely with the union, they established the IWA Women's Auxiliary. It was an energetic organization that provided these women with endless amusement and Lake Cowichan with a long roster of achievements. These ranged from tuberculosis testing, to a new road, to clinics, schools, as well as bazaars, parades, loggers' sports days, a PTA, swim club, voters' registration, adult education and a co-op store.

When Mrs. Dley, Mrs. Johel, Mrs. Atwal, and Mrs. Mann came to Vancouver Island, they were young & newly married to men chosen by their parents. The fact that an arranged marriage was indissoluble meant that these coupled young strangers had to find a means of accomodating each other. The transition was not always easy. Life in the early forties was minimal on the Island. They relied on well-water and outhouses; it was their own muscle power that chopped wood for the stove and furnace and scrubbed down the clothes and diapers that needed endless washing. The garden that they grew and the milk and butter from their cows stretched the family income. Gradually they learned to negotiate the language of their new homes, of family life and schools and medical authorities.

Their husbands worked in the nearby forest and mills, in jobs that evoked constant anxiety, for industrial accidents were common, and disabling or fatal.

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When Mrs. Dley's husband died, she was denied a widow's pension. She began farming, supporting her three small children by selling her dairy products to nearby residents.

Despite a continued allegiance to custom and religion, during the post-war boom their aspirations became very similar to other North Americans. Why launder by hand when it is possible to own a washing machine? Why walk when you can drive a car? Still, leisure remained unknown for many of these women, who now in their sixties continue to cook, garden, care for their grandchildren and preside over family life.

Research

Video research included 3/4" interviews with a quality 3-tube camera. One interview was conducted in Duncan with four women; another took place in Lake Cowichan with Mrs. Dley. These interviews are in Punjabi and are translated. In November 1988, there are two interviews which were conducted in Vancouver with Japanese women who experienced the readjustment after internment. In 1989, video interviews were shot with leading union members and Vancouver Island Women's Auxiliary members as well as interviews with several women active in community and labour affairs in the 1950's.

For the audio, an extensive series of sound interviews with community and workplace activists have been collected. These provide a base for period flavour and for individuals for the videotape. Research is also being conducted on appropriate music of the period.

In terms of archival footage, we have made an extensive search of the National Film, Television and Sound Archives, and the National Film Board Stock Shot Library. There are many valuable news items from the CBC and descriptive visuals from local and provincial sources. These range from advertisements of the period, to cooking classes, to reportage about women and work, to labour programmes.