

Women and Economy: Analyzing the Roles of Women in Irish-American Communities During the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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Research Question

I endeavored to discover the similarities and differences between the roles of women within the local economies of three Irish American communities, Beaver Island, Michigan, Butte, Montana, and San Francisco, California during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Methodology

In the fall of 2011, I conducted Directed Research involved reading and analyzing relevant scholarly articles and historical documentation including census manuscripts, oral history transcriptions, and photographs that pertain to Beaver Island, Butte, and San Francisco. Reviewing scholarly articles and archival information allowed me to gain a better understanding of the domain of women within the local economies of these Irish American communities and how American social ideologies influenced each of these communities.

San Francisco, CA

- Irish arrived in San Francisco from Australia, the eastern United States, and eventually directly from the different counties in Ireland.
- Urbanization after the affluence created by the Gold Rush.
- Large, heterogeneous population
- Distinct socio-economic groups perpetuated class consciousness and social hierarchies.
- Middle class ideologies, such as the cult of domesticity, influenced female roles.
- Married women typically worked within their domestic sphere.



19th century San Francisco
<http://www.safero.org/family/pictures/oldfrisco.jpg>

Butte, Montana

- Irish came primarily from County Cork, but also Mayo, and Donegal.
- Industrial mining town
- Concerned with maintaining Irish enclave within an increasingly heterogeneous population.
- Although there were distinct economic classes and social class consciousness, it was somewhat overlooked among the Irish.
- American middle class ideologies, such as the cult of domesticity, influenced the scope of female roles.

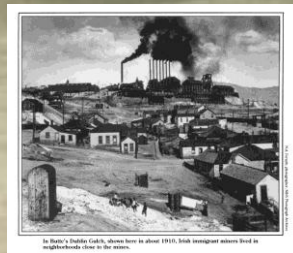


Photo taken from David Emmons's *The Butte Irish* (1989)

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Beaver Island

- Irish immigrating primarily from Árainn Mhór, but also from County Donegal and County Mayo.
- Community and environment resembling rural Ireland
- Primary Industry: commercial fishing
- Small, homogeneous population
- No significant class consciousness
- Women, regardless of marital status, created economic opportunities for themselves in order to sustain themselves and their families.



Left to right: Willie O'Donnell, Ted, Edward Floyd, Robert Gibson, Dannie Martin, Owner and captain of tug Elliot, St James, Michigan. This picture was taken before 1915. (signed) J. L. Malloy. Courtesy of the Beaver Island Historical Society.

Conclusion

San Francisco and Butte shared a lot of similarities in terms of the female's role within the local economy. In both locations, the population size grew and rapidly diversified as the economy prospered. Because San Francisco became increasingly heavily populated and ethnically diverse. Also, the fact that many Irish people had lived elsewhere in the U.S. before settling in California gave them more time to accept American social ideologies. While the Irish in Butte did overlook socioeconomic differences when it came to the preservation of the Irish enclave, there were still pressure for women to conform to the American social norms of the time. Because of Beaver Island's rural landscape, relative isolation, limited labor and resource availability, virtually homogeneous population, women took up a variety of occupations out of necessity for sustaining their family and community's livelihood. They were not pressured to adhere to the social norms that permeated throughout America.

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