

White-Collar Working Class: The Ambiguous Identity of Canadian Telegraph Operators

Keywords: Telegraph, Operators, Canada, labour, working-class, technology, gender, unions, identity, telecommunications.

Were telegraph operators members of the working class or the business class? Were they skilled or unskilled? Were they labourers or executives-in-training? Was a job as a telegraph operator a temporary stepping stone or a lifelong career? Was it a job for men or for women? Telegraph operators were suspended somewhere between all these poles. The telegraph operator occupied a “liminal space” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century economy: a transitory position between management and labour, between skilled and unskilled labour, between men’s work and women’s work, between the white-collar office and the blue-collar factory floor. The ambiguous position of telegraph operators undermined their bargaining power and class solidarity, leaving them at the mercy of the corporations that employed them. This project borrows insights from the histories of labour, gender, and technology to understand both the real work and the imagined identity of Canadian telegraph operators. Through this approach we can unravel the ways in which the work and identity of telegraph operators was constructed and what affect their liminal identity had on their ability to fight for workplace reforms. This is evident through the ways in which telegraph labour was defined as temporary and transitional by popular culture, by the companies that employed telegraphers, by telegraphy schools, and finally, during the telegrapher strikes of 1883 and 1907.