

earliest commercial operations purchased the majority of their fish from Native fishers and Native women were employed in the canneries as cutters and packers. Very rapidly the Native people were incorporated into the industry and their economic lives became a mix of subsistence and seasonal wage labour.

The British Columbia Experience

During the latter part of the 1800s the efforts towards directed assimilation of the Native people of British Columbia was well underway. As Tennant (1990:74-75) points out the “traditional beliefs, practices, and institutions required active dismantling if assimilation was to succeed.” Nevertheless, as the industrial development of the fishery accelerated, beginning about 1880 and continuing until after the turn of the century, the Native people remained a significant force in the industry. In fact, the fishing industry was the “only economic sector in the province in which Indians were well paid and able to maintain a substantial presence” (Tennant 1990:73). By 1919 the British Columbia fishing industry employed nine thousand people, “the majority of whom were Indians. And more than one-third of all salmon fishermen were Indians” (Pearse 1982:151). The Native people adjusted remarkably well to the changes in the fishery and continued to participate as an integral part of the labour force. This participation articulated well with the traditional fishing economy in which the division of labour was between men and women, the men fishing and the women processing the catch. As the fishery became industrialized the Native people fished for cash as well as subsistence and the traditional division of labour persisted. During the 1920s and 1930s the development of larger and more expensive vessels caused the number of Native fishers to decline. This decline, however, was minor in comparison with the drastic decline after World War II.