

## “Mrs. Chatelaine” vs. “Mrs. Slob”: Contestants, Correspondents and the *Chatelaine* Community in Action, 1961-1969

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### Article abstract

Scholars and critics alike have presumed that readers of popular women's magazines were merely passive consumers. That was not the case with *Chatelaine* magazine. Reader commentary was regularly featured in the magazine and often influenced editorial decisions. This analysis of the Mrs. Chatelaine contest provides a demographic profile of the reading community, an overview of the text and the producers, an examination of the national community of readers created at *Chatelaine*, it also explores the reaction of “average readers” to products of popular culture. In summary, readers' responded in a host of ways to the periodical. Some enjoyed the preferred meanings offered by the magazine, particularly of traditional fare (like the contest) which celebrated paragons of feminine virtue. Other readers were resistant to this material - they criticised, challenged, or parodied the contest - clearly demonstrating that “average” readers did not passively accept material which was at odds with their lives.

## **“Mrs. Chatelaine” vs. “Mrs. Slob”: Contestants, Correspondents and the *Chatelaine* Community in Action, 1961-1969**

VALERIE J. KORINEK

IN 1960, THE EDITORS OF *CHATELAINE* MAGAZINE CREATED A CONTEST for Canadian home makers called, appropriately enough, the Mrs. Chatelaine contest. “All homemakers living in Canada” were eligible.<sup>1</sup> Participants were required to send in photos of themselves, provide detailed personal information (height, weight, hair, eye colour and age), and reveal their husband’s occupation and income, as well as the number and ages of their children. Those were the easy questions. For the remaining eight questions, readers were requested to write essay-style answers about their house-cleaning regimes, and their monthly entertaining schedule, indicate any hobbies or projects and their recent achievements in this area, provide family and entertaining menu plans, draw the floor plan of their living room and furniture arrangement, list all their community activities and, finally, elaborate upon their philosophies of child-raising and homemaking. The prize for all this work: a pair of first-class tickets to Paris, a 10-day stay and \$1,000 to cover expenses, a complete spring wardrobe, new luggage, and a rental car for use during the vacation. In later years the trip to Paris was cancelled and winners were given a similar collection of gifts, often including a movie camera, and the \$1,000 cash prize.

The Mrs. Chatelaine contest serves as an intriguing and unique case-study of readers’ relationships to products of popular culture. *Chatelaine* readers were inveterate letter writers and, as this contest attests, were as quick to criticise the publication as they were to praise it. Through the vast number of letters received by the magazine and published each month in the periodical, a letter-

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This paper is part of a much larger study, “Roughing It in Suburbia: Reading *Chatelaine* Magazine 1950-1969” (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1996). Funding for this study was provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ontario Graduate Scholarships and the University of Toronto. My thanks to Paul Rutherford, Sylvia Van Kirk, Laurel MacDowell, Marlene Shore, Franca Iacovetta and Ruth Roach Pierson for their comments on earlier drafts of this material. As well, I wish to thank the *Journal* reviewers for their suggestions, and finally, Jane Harrison and Cheryl Smith for their feedback on a draft version of this paper.

1 “Are you Mrs. Chatelaine?” *Chatelaine* (December 1960): 15.

writing community was created. These letters were written to the editors, to the writers and often, as this case-study will illustrate, to other readers. The *Chatelaine* community was linked primarily by gender and nationality, while negotiating class, region, age, race, and ethnic difference to encompass a mass readership of women. Men also read the magazine but they were far less likely to participate in the community of letter-writers. Due to a number of factors, such as a limited number of cultural products for women, *Chatelaine's* position as the sole Canadian women's mass-market magazine, and the geographic vastness of the country (with the accompanying isolation and lack of alternatives), the magazine, its editors, writers and readers created and participated in a cultural community of Canadian women. Finally, the correspondence relating to the Mrs. Chatelaine contest permits an analysis of how readers received, incorporated, ignored or challenged the "preferred meanings" offered by the magazine. This correspondence indicates that, while some readers found enjoyment in such "preferred meanings," other readers were resistant, critical or dismissive and wrote to the magazine to challenge the sometimes narrow definitions of Canadian women.

The contest epitomises the material for which women's magazines have been repeatedly criticised by writers and scholars, ranging from Betty Friedan to Susan Faludi.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, Maclean Hunter and the Editors of *Chatelaine* created a contest that rewarded a middle-class, heterosexual and, ultimately, extremely conservative vision of Canadian women. The contest rules explicitly or implicitly excluded single women, working wives and mothers, older women, working-class-women and lesbians. However, despite the (in this case) extremely overt "preferred meaning," the producers of this pop cultural material could not determine how their consumers, *Chatelaine's* readers, would respond. While many readers revelled in completing their entries, an equally large number of critics actively ignored the "preferred meaning" of the contest.

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2 The legacy of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963) is the *a priori* assumption that all women's magazines foster women's second-class status and depict a narrow world bounded by the kitchen, the nursery, the bedroom and the grocery store. Many academic and popular writers have followed in Friedan's wake, most recently Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York, 1991). Academic works have shifted from this negative emphasis (with its attendant presumption that women are duped by women's magazines) to an acceptance of the cultural studies mode of analysis with its emphasis on issues of power, reader response and agency, and interpretation; but often these works suffer from ahistoricism, gender determinacy or an over-reliance on the text and the creators at the expense of the readers' experiences. For the most recent academic contributions to this field, see Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Fraser and Sandra Hebron, *Women's Worlds* (London, 1991); Ellen McCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms* (London, 1993); Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies Home Journal and The Saturday Evening Post, 1880-1910* (Albany, 1994); and Joke Hermes, *Reading Women's Magazines: An Analysis of Everyday Media Use* (Cambridge, 1995).

These creative readers opted for alternate interpretations. "Reading against the grain" and employing a very "tongue-in-cheek" style of humour, these oppositional readers offered, instead, their own creation: the "Mrs. Slob 1961 Contest." In letters to the editors, and in their communities, these self-identified "slobs" were able to re-make a very traditional women's magazine contest into something that rewarded their way of life, accepted class, age and marital difference and rivalled the attentions given to the "real" contestants.

The variety of responses to their contest that Maclean Hunter received is, as well, emblematic of the general dissonance in postwar society over the appropriate roles of women. Scholars have been quick to depict the fifties, in particular, as a time of "familism" or "a search for stability" as home and family became a "point of reference in an unstable world."<sup>3</sup> However, this emphasis on home, family and established gender roles masked considerable discontent and difference<sup>4</sup> – discontent on the part of some women who, by the sixties, were increasingly quick to challenge the limitations of suburbia and the sexual status quo. In addition, recent attention to class, racial and ethnic difference indicates that contemporary media accounts, as well as historical accounts, tended to ignore the newcomers and working-class women who had always worked outside the home.<sup>5</sup> Women's workforce participation expanded exponentially in the fifties and sixties, so that by the end of the decade women represented 35.5 per cent of the workforce, and the majority of women workers (over 56 per cent) were married.<sup>6</sup> Hence, both the contestants' and the anti-contestants' comments deserve to be understood as part of an ongoing debate over the changing nature of women's roles.

However, they must also be understood within the context of the magazine. By the sixties, as the summary that follows will indicate, *Chatelaine* was regularly publishing feminist editorials and articles. As well, there were frequent depictions of difference – of the working class, of immigrants and of rural dwellers – in the periodical. All the images were not of middle-class, sub-

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3 Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Their Side of the Story': Women's Voices from Ontario Suburbs 1945-1960," in *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945-1980*. Joy Parr, ed. (Toronto, 1995), 52, and Doug Owrain, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto, 1996), 12.

4 See, for example, Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-1960," *Canadian Historical Review* (December 1991): 470-504; Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia, 1994); and Wini Breines, *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston, 1992).

5 See Joan Sangster, "Doing Two Jobs: The Wage-Earning Mother, 1945-1970," in Parr, ed., *A Diversity of Women*, 98-134; and *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto, 1995); and Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Ontario* (Montreal/Kingston, 1992).

6 "The Labour Force," in *Canada Year Book 1969* (Ottawa, 1969), 765-66.

urban families. Yet the conventions of the women's magazine genre dictated that the magazine must include traditional material as well – particularly departmental fare or “service material.” According to *Chatelaine* promotional material, “women read service magazines for ideas on how to improve their homes, their families, themselves.”<sup>7</sup> “Service material” taught women how to consume and use the advertisers' products, and advertisers were key to the financial viability of the periodical.

Thus, the Mrs. Chatelaine contest was influenced by both the temper of the times and the unique situation at the magazine. The contest appeared in the sixties, at a time when women were returning to or entering the workforce in droves, and when women's roles were in a state of flux. Similarly, it appeared in a magazine undergoing considerable editorial revision. It was created to shore up the traditional material in the periodical and to serve as a celebration of traditional, middle-class femininity. Mrs. Chatelaine celebrated the middle-class ideal of the stay-at-home wife and mother, who devoted herself to her family, church and community. Clearly, she was intended to serve as a traditional role model for readers. However, it did not turn out that way, thus offering a compelling illustration of how readers respond to the most conventional women's magazine fare.

Before turning to the particulars of the contest and the contestants, it is necessary to sketch a brief overview of the periodical, its editors and readers. Doris Anderson assumed the editorship of *Chatelaine* in 1957; with her primarily female staff of associate editors, she was responsible for all the editorial material in the magazine. The business department, a predominantly male enclave, was responsible for advertising, circulation and market research. The separation of editorial and business operations was standard at all consumer magazines but the corresponding gender division at *Chatelaine* provided the female editors with considerable autonomy.<sup>8</sup> Anderson's personal commitment to featuring feminist issues, along with the more traditional components, in the magazine was aided by this organisational structure of female editorial autonomy. The male executives, while frequently uncomfortable with her formula, could not argue with the increased circulation nor with the resultant increase in advertisers.

Despite the changing editorial content *Chatelaine's* format remained consistent. It was an oversized periodical (11” x 14”) whose covers were dominated by images of young, white women, Canadian entertainers or British royalty. An average issue was 112 pages in length, and a yearly subscription

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7 “*Chatelaine* Ad,” *Canadian Advertising: Canadian Media Authority* 27 (September-October 1954): 114-15.

8 This was not the case at American women's magazines, where most of the editors were male and only the associate editors, and some of the staff and freelance writers were female.

cost readers \$1.50 until 1967, when it was increased to \$2.<sup>9</sup> Since the "Mrs. Chatelaine" winner was almost always profiled in the May issue (the exception was 1961 when she appeared in April), a brief overview of the May 1965 issue will serve as an introduction to the magazine's contents.

Inside the front cover, and beside the regular advertisement for Miss Clairol hair colouring, "Does She or Doesn't She," was Doris Anderson's editorial essay: "Some women just aren't cut out to be mothers." Anderson's editorial, usually devoted to feminist issues or ideas, was one of the key features that differentiated *Chatelaine* from the American women's magazines. The other entries in the "News/Views" category were the "What's New" columns which provided commentary on recent developments at the magazine, among Canadian women, in the shops, within the world of Canadian arts and entertainment, in health care and in financial issues. In addition, Christina McCall (and later Adrienne Clarkson) contributed a regular books column and the last page of the magazine (entitled "The Last Word is Yours") was devoted to readers' letters. Within the formal layout of the magazine, readers had two sections devoted to their ideas and voices – the letters page and "What's New with You."

Of the seven feature articles in May 1965, five were examinations of social issues or sexism. They included Mollie Gillen's "Canada's Seven Most Urgent Social Problems"; Kay Clefton's "I am a Common-Law Wife"; "What They Don't Tell You About Being a Beauty Queen"; and a two-part article by Florence Jones and Doreen Mowers, "How Two Women Fought Race Prejudice: Teaching Freedom in Mississippi" and "Growing Up Prejudiced in Ontario." This was not the sort of material published in the *Ladies Home Journal* or *Good Housekeeping*. Although this issue had a larger component of social activist articles than most, the articles were typical *Chatelaine* fare of the late fifties and throughout the sixties. The other two articles, "Meet Mrs. Chatelaine" and "Enter *Chatelaine's* 8th Club Award Contest" offered more conventional articles which focused attention on homemaking, child-raising and voluntary service in the community.

In addition to the features and news items, there were two fiction stories followed by the regular departmental material. The dominant section was Food and Homes, with Carol Taylor's "Shopping with Chatelaine"; Elaine Collett's "The Wonderful World of Summer Sausages," and "Meals of the Month"; Una Abrahamson's regular column, "Homemaker's Diary"; and a short feature on "Sofabeds" by Alain Campaigne. Fashion editor Vivian Wilcox profiled "Beach Sweaters," while craft editor Wanda Nelles tempted readers with "Table Linen Heirlooms to Embroider." Lois Wilson's gardening column was devoted to "Fabulous Roses," while the "Your Child" column urged parents to "Give Him

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<sup>9</sup> In contrast, American magazines were considerably larger, glossier periodicals with subscription rates of \$4-\$5 per year.

a Sense of His Own Worth.” This editorial content accounted for 50 per cent of the magazine. Numerous companies advertised in *Chatelaine*, including Nivea, Tex-made, Aylmer, Kraft, Air Canada, Christie’s, Arnel Knits, Yardley, Canadian General-Electric, Cat’s Paw, Royal Doulton and Canada Packers. Their advertisements offered compelling consumer fantasies on some of the magazine’s most colourful pages.

In any given issue of *Chatelaine*, then, readers were exposed to a wide variety of material. While the profiles of Mrs. Chatelaine or other material on Canadian homemakers, entertainers or British royalty were clearly intended to offer portraits of bourgeois hegemony, other articles were counter-hegemonic. Of course, the readers themselves brought all their critical and analytical abilities to reading the magazine and, thus, while some readers enjoyed and were challenged by the newer material, others were openly critical of articles that strayed from conventional women’s magazine topics.

Although I will turn to the specifics of the Mrs. Chatelaine winners, runners-up and readers’ letters later in the paper, an excerpt from a critical letter from Reverend Victor G. Cowell of Vulcan, Alberta, demonstrates how conservative readers could (despite the number of conventional departmental features, advertisements and articles, like the Mrs. Chatelaine profile) decode *Chatelaine* as an “undesirable publication”:

I happened to pick up the May issue of *Chatelaine*. I was never more disgusted with a magazine in all my life. In our town we have recently been turning our attention to undesirable publications that have been finding their way into our bookshelves and it seems as though we will have to give serious attention to your publication . . . . Where I take particular exception is the article, I Am A Common-Law Wife. . . . [T]o suggest that such people are victims of social injustice is a blatant contravention. . . . If your magazine continues to glorify adultery, I will declare it from my pulpit and I will do my best to see that adequate action is taken by the Church here in Alberta.<sup>10</sup>

Negative letters like Cowell’s made the readers’ letters page a lively read. In this case, and in many others, they also provoked irate readers to write in defence of the magazine, the readership and the editors. In the end, while the editors allowed readers free range on “their page,” they also were shrewd enough to realise that negative commentary was often good for business because it increased interest, forced re-reading of the periodical and tested the waters for future articles.

Because of the revamped content, the lively reading community and a variety of contests run by the magazine, *Chatelaine*’s circulation grew at an

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<sup>10</sup> Reverend Victor G. Cromwell, Vulcan, AB, “The Last Word is Yours,” *Chatelaine* (July 1965): 72.

impressive rate throughout the decade.<sup>11</sup> By 1970, the circulation for the English version was 980,000 (news stand sales were 70,000); using Maclean Hunter's estimate of two women readers per copy that gave the magazine 1,960,000 women readers for each issue.<sup>12</sup> According to a 1968 study, "[O]ver a twelve month period, the audience of *Chatelaine* combined editions increases to 51% of the total female population."<sup>13</sup> *Chatelaine's* market saturation and breadth were the envy of the American women's magazines.

The heterogeneity of *Chatelaine's* reading audience was obscured by the mass audience statistics. It is possible to reconstruct a detailed demographic profile of *Chatelaine's* readers in the sixties from the numerous surveys and studies commissioned by the Canadian Magazine Advertising Bureau, from Maclean Hunter research reports and from the audited circulation figures released monthly in the industry rate-book, *Canadian Advertising Rates and Data (CARD)*. *Canada's Magazine Audience (CMA)*, a study published in 1969, reported that *Chatelaine* readers hailed from all regions of the country, were of sexes and represented all socio-economic groups.<sup>14</sup> Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia and Atlantic Canada accounted for the vast majority of readers (of both sexes), while the share of Quebec readers was much smaller.<sup>15</sup> The primary reason for the smaller French-Canadian readership was the introduction in 1960 of the French-language version, called *Châteline*. In 1968, the total female readership of the magazine (per issue) was estimated at 1,851,000, while men accounted for 641,000 readers.<sup>16</sup> Using the average figures provided for the number of female readers, and the number of English Canadian women in general who were housewives, the survey illustrated that one out of every

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11 At the start of the decade, the average total paid circulation was 767,250 copies per month, with news-stand sales accounting for approximately 52,000 copies and subscriptions the bulk of all sales. "Chatelaine Circulation," *Canadian Advertiser: The Media Rate and Data Authority* 34 (May/June 1961): 103.

12 "Chatelaine Advertisement," *Canadian Advertising Rates and Data* 42 (April 1970): 69.

13 "Chatelaine Magazine Group," Submission to the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, presented by Lloyd M. Hodgkinson, Publisher, 18 February 1970, 1-2.

14 *Canada's Magazine Audience: A Study from the Magazine Advertising Bureau of Canada, Vol. 1: Profile of Readers*. Originated by the Canadian Media Directors Council; validated by the Canadian Advertising Research Foundation. Conducted by ORC International Limited, 1969. It should be noted that all statistics reported, unless otherwise stated, refer to the English version of the magazine and do not include readership figures for *Châteline*.

15 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 63. The statistical totals by region were: Ontario (48.5 per cent), Prairies (23.8 per cent), B.C. (13.3), Atlantic Canada (10 per cent) and Quebec (4.4 per cent). For comparison sake, the regional population percentages for all Canadian adults were: Ontario (36.1 per cent), Quebec (28.7 per cent), the Prairies (16 per cent), B.C. (10 per cent), and Atlantic Canada (9.2 per cent).

16 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 12 and 10. Most of the male readers of *Chatelaine* read the periodical because their wives or mothers were subscribers.



three Canadian housewives read the magazine.<sup>17</sup> In total, *Chatelaine* was read by 23.2 per cent of all English-Canadian adults, compared with the 24.6 per cent who read *Maclean's* or the 37.2 per cent who read *Reader's Digest*.

For both sexes, readers were most likely to be from the 35 to 44 years old, followed by those in the 55 years and over age category, while those in the most desired age group from the advertisers' perspective, the 25 to 34 year-olds, were in third place.<sup>18</sup> The vast majority of readers were married (67.9 per cent) although there was a sizeable number of single readers (23.1 per cent) and divorced, separated or widowed readers (8.3 per cent).<sup>19</sup> With respect to education, *Chatelaine* readers were drawn from all educational levels, although generally speaking women had more education than men.

The male readers surveyed were mostly employed as skilled/unskilled workers (23 per cent); retired or unemployed (17.7 per cent); or in the service industry (15.5 per cent).<sup>20</sup> For women the most common occupation listed was housewife (57.3 per cent) followed by student (11.7 per cent) and clerical/sales (10.7 per cent).<sup>21</sup> So, *Chatelaine* magazine contradicted the myth that women's magazines were produced for and consumed by a primarily affluent, middle-class audience. Figure 1 combines male and female occupations, classified by head of household, for a more representative profile of *Chatelaine* purchasers' employment.<sup>22</sup>

17 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 30. The figure for English-Canadian housewives who were readers of the magazine was listed as 1,061,000 of the total female audience. The comparable English-Canadian average was 3,257,000 women who listed their occupation as housewife.

18 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 10 and 12. Of the total male readership of the magazine, the age breakdown was as follows: 55 years and over (21.9 per cent); 35-44 years (20.8 per cent); 25-34 years (16.7 per cent); 45-54 years (15.1 per cent); 15-17 years (10.8 per cent); 20-24 years (7.7 per cent); and 18-19 years (6.9 per cent). For women, the age breakdown was slightly different: 35-44 years (22.7 per cent); 55 years and over (17.6 per cent); 25-34 years (16.8 per cent); 45-54 years (16.5 per cent); 15-17 years (10.8 per cent); 20-24 years (10.5 per cent) and 18-19 years (5.1 per cent).

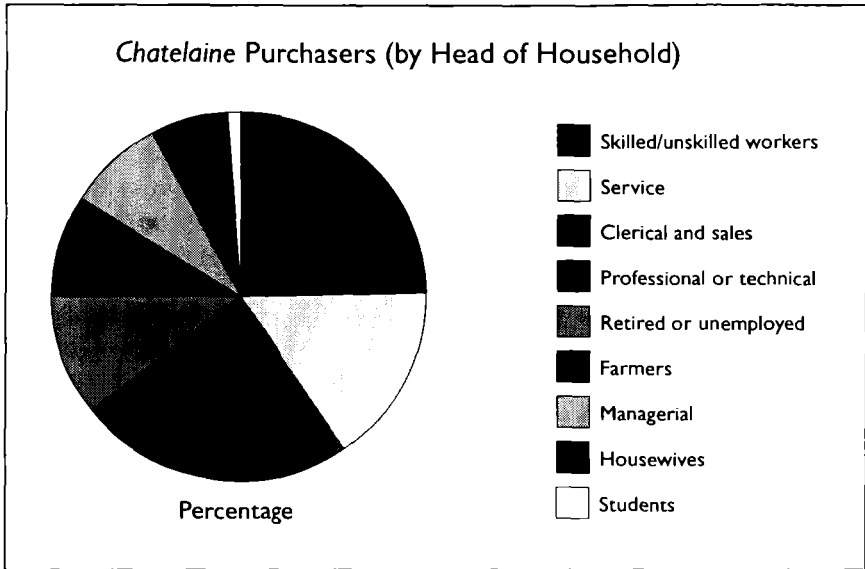
19 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 20.

20 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 28. After the top three categories (these categories were determined by the surveys) the remaining male occupations were: clerical and sales (11.1 per cent); students (10.2 per cent); professional or technical (9.6 per cent); farmers (6.1 per cent); managerial (5.4 per cent) or housekeepers (2.4 per cent). These figures refer to the total male reading audience, not the primary male reading audience.

21 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 30. Once again, using figures from the total female audience, the remaining female occupations after the three top occupational categories were: service (8.2 per cent); retired or unemployed (5.2 per cent); professional or technical (5 per cent); skilled or unskilled workers (1.5 per cent) or managerial (0.4 per cent). No female readers listed their occupational category as farmer.

22 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 54. The figures were: skilled/unskilled workers (24.9 per cent), service (15.7 per cent); clerical and sales (13.2 per cent), professional and technical (10.9 per cent); retired or unemployed (10.5 per cent); farmers 8.9 per cent; managerial (8.2 per cent); housewives (6.7 per cent); and students (1.0 per cent).

Figure 1



To help their advertising and media clients put all the statistical data in perspective, the writers of the report included the appropriate statistical averages for English- and French-Canadians at the bottom of each table of information. For both male and female *Chatelaine* readers, their occupational categories mirrored the Canadian averages.<sup>23</sup>

The vast majority of *Chatelaine* readers lived in single family dwellings (79.2 per cent). They were more likely to do so than the average English-Canadian family (74.1 per cent) but not by a wide margin.<sup>24</sup> The housing figures were often quoted in *Chatelaine* advertisements in *CARD* as an indication of a "better-sort" or "affluent" audience. In reality, it probably was due to the larger number of rural and small town dwellers among the *Chatelaine* readership, because single family homes (whether owned or rented) were the most

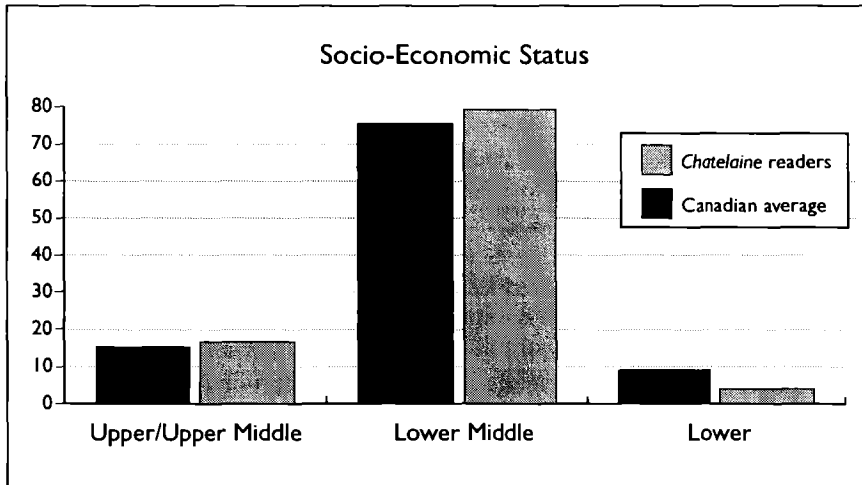
<sup>23</sup> *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 28. However, it should be noted that the proportion of male readers who were in the professional or technical occupations or were retired or unemployed was slightly higher (roughly 2 per cent) than the Canadian average. Correspondingly, the weighting of male readers who were skilled/unskilled male workers was 4 per cent less than their percentage of the male population of English Canada.

<sup>24</sup> *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 55. For the total audience figures, 12.2 per cent of *Chatelaine* readers lived in multiple family housing (defined to include semi-detached and duplexes) and 7.8 per cent in apartments, flats or rooms. In comparison, English-Canadian averages were 14.4 per cent for multiple family housing and 9.8 per cent for apartments, etc.

common form of accommodation in rural areas and small towns. One-third of all *Chatelaine* readers lived in a rural area, which was proportionately higher than the Canadian average.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to the *CARD* advertisements, which often used adjectives like “better-sort,” “quality” and “affluent” indiscriminately to describe *Chatelaine*’s readers, the *CMA* study demonstrated that *Chatelaine* readers were average Canadians. The study classified readers residing in single family homes into four groups: Class A (Upper Group); Class B (Upper Middle Group); Class C (Lower Middle Group); and Class D (Lower Group). The classifications were based on income, type and style of home, neighbourhood, standard of living, etc. According to the report, 79.3 per cent magazine (or 1,976,000) of the readers of *Chatelaine* lived in a household classified as lower-middle socio-economic (see Figure 2).<sup>26</sup> This Lower Middle Group was described as living in the “older less prosperous sections or in newer low-priced housing developments.”<sup>27</sup> They could “buy the necessities with little to spare” and had a “fair standard of living, with few luxuries.”<sup>28</sup>

Figure 2



25 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 106. Percentage of readers by community size: under 1,000 (30.1 per cent); 1,000-29,999 (17.8 per cent); 30,000-99,999 (6.1 per cent); 100,000-349,000 (11.5 per cent); 350,000 and over (34.5 per cent). Only 25 per cent of all Canadians lived in a rural or farming community.

26 *Canada's Magazine Audience*, 60.

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

In comparison with the other magazines in the survey, *Chatelaine* had the lowest percentage of Upper and Upper Middle readers.

*Chatelaine's* chief strength was that it attracted a mass audience of average Canadian women, and some men, from all regions of the country. The readers lived primarily in single family homes, but they were more likely to live in a rural area than most Canadians. In terms of occupation, education, income level and household income, they were average Canadians. Certainly, the socio-economic portrait illustrated convincingly that, in comparison with other periodicals and with the Canadian averages, the English-speaking *Chatelaine* community was most likely to come from the lower-middle class. In other words, in terms of advertising priorities, the readers represented women and families who had a small amount of discretionary spending and only a fair standard of living.

The demographic profile is very important because it illustrates one of the fundamental tensions at any mass-market magazine. *Chatelaine* readers were drawn primarily from the lower-middle class and, despite their vast numbers, in terms of purchasing power (always the way class issues were defined at *Chatelaine*) these were not the "better-sort" of readers desired by the business department and advertisers. Because of this, their needs (and limited budgets) were seldom addressed in the beauty, fashion and home-decorating features. Those departmental features continually strove to attract more affluent readers to the magazine and to the pages of advertisements they supported. Only the food articles were primarily devoted to "budget" menus and affordable entertaining. Yet the readers themselves were determined that the magazine reflect the reality of their lives. This was a consistent demand in the letters written to the editors, and in the particular responses to the Mrs. Chatelaine contest. Unlike today's readers, who have a plethora of choices when it comes to consumer magazines, in the sixties *Chatelaine* was the only Canadian women's periodical. Readers believed that the magazine's mandate was to provide a magazine of interest to *all* Canadian women.

Although it was not uncommon for readers to meet *Chatelaine* editors at women's groups or, in rarer cases, to tour the *Chatelaine* offices, the readers' messages were communicated loudest through their letters to the editor. To print a wide variety of responses in the magazine, the editors chose excerpts from an average of 15 letters per issue.<sup>29</sup> While unpublished letters were not usually preserved the Maclean Hunter Collection at the Public Archives of Ontario contains a valuable resource – reader's letters to Doris Anderson from

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29 Valerie J. Korinek, "*Chatelaine* General Survey Database," in "Roughing It in Suburbia." The total number of letters published between January 1960 and December 1969 was 1,778. The average for the 120 issues was 14.8 letters per issue. This obscures a range of 8-23 letters per issue over the period.

1962. While it is impossible to state with certainty that this was the complete number of letters received during that year, the collection provides an excellent sample from which to assess how letters were chosen for inclusion in the magazine. Anderson claimed – in the magazine, in interviews and in this excerpt from her letter to a reader – that the letters page did represent the letters received:

I found your comments about our Letters Page very interesting indeed. Actually, the Letters Page of *Chatelaine* is one of the best read pages in the magazine. We receive many more letters than we publish, but we do try to give a fairly accurate representation of the many various opinions that are held by the people who write to us. Some of the letters we receive are constructive and very intelligent, and some are critical and often vicious. But since everyone who writes to our Letters Page wants to have his or her letter published, I feel we have a duty to print a representative selection of all types of letters. . . .<sup>30</sup>

The 1962 collection permits an assessment of this claim. The national, gendered and geographical range of letter-writers permits conclusions about the “representativeness” of those letters chosen for publication. They highlight the readers’ concerns about content and illustrate the editorial responses.

The letters published in the magazine were most likely to come from female readers (82 per cent) although men did contribute their share (13 per cent).<sup>31</sup> While the writers were from all regions of the country they were most likely to come from Ontario (43 per cent), the Prairies (24 per cent) or British Columbia (14 per cent).<sup>32</sup> The tone and purpose of the letters varied considerably. There was an almost equal weighting of positive (46 per cent) and negative letters (40 per cent); the remaining letters were neutral. The purpose of the letters was indicative of the degree to which readers were engaged with the magazine’s content and found it worthy of commentary. The vast majority of letters were written in response to articles (71 per cent). All of the components of the magazine received written commentary at some time during the decade, but in comparison with responses to articles the responses to these were considerably smaller.

The unpublished letters in the 1962 collection exhibit similar characteristics to the published letters. Once again, the vast majority address themselves to the articles, although this sample contains a great many angry letters in

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30 Ontario. Archives (AO), Maclean Hunter Records Series (MHRS) F-4-3-a, Box 434, Doris Anderson to Mrs. M.K. Paul, Caledon, Ontario, 7 March 1962.

31 The statistics are generated from the “*Chatelaine* Letters 1960 Database” (“*Roughing It in Suburbia*”), which includes 446 letters. In 5 per cent of the letters analyzed the writer’s gender was unclear.

32 A smaller proportion of letter-writers were from Quebec (7.5 per cent) and Atlantic Canada (7.2 per cent). Very few letters were received from outside the country. Those that were, with rare exceptions, were from Britain (1.8 per cent) or the United States (1.3 per cent).

response to a "blasphemous" fiction story published in the magazine. Using the January 1962 files for a comparison, of the 164 letters 93 (57 per cent) were positive.<sup>33</sup> There were 71 negative letters (43 per cent) and no neutral letters. Similarly, using the letters in the September-December 1962 files it was possible to determine the regional and national origin of the letter-writers. All regions of the country were represented, but writers were more likely to come from Ontario (41 per cent), the Prairies (22 per cent) and British Columbia (14 per cent).<sup>34</sup> Thus, published letters were representative of the letters received at the *Chatelaine* offices. There was no attempt to skew the selection in favour of positive mail (indeed, negative mail and the controversy it generated made for a more lively page) or to downplay representation from Ontario in favour of a greater national flavour. All regions of the country participated, as did a few readers from Britain and the United States.

The issue that generated the largest number of letters in the 1962 archival collection concerned the reaction to the first Mrs. Chatelaine winner in 1961. The April 1961 issue of *Chatelaine* introduced readers to the first Mrs. Chatelaine – "Mrs. Joyce Saxton, of Plenty, Saskatchewan, a mother of three – and a typical and, at the same time, a most exceptional homemaker!"<sup>35</sup> Whenever the magazine attempted to portray a "typical" Canadian woman, it ventured into difficult terrain because readers expected "typical" women to reflect themselves. When they did not – and that was a common occurrence in a magazine with such a diverse mass audience and a penchant for depicting the comfortable middle-class lifestyle to their lower-middle-class and working-class readers – controversy and a fury of letter-writing ensued. In future years, as the "Mrs. Slob" letters will illustrate, many interested women did not participate because the construction of the "typical Canadian homemaker" did not mirror their images of themselves. Editor Doris Anderson remembers the Mrs. Chatelaine contest as a yearly dose of realism, which gave the editors "very good insight into where women were at with their lives."<sup>36</sup> Yet the adjudicating committee, in contrast to the slob's lament about the perfectionism of the winners or Anderson's vision of the contest's purpose, "hated" the contest "because it was a lot of hard work and they usually thought that Mrs.

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33 AO, MHRS F-4-3-a, Box 434, Files: "Letters to the Editor: January 1962" and "Letters to the Editor: January 1962, File 2." The letters were counted, and the tone of each letter was categorised as negative, positive or neutral.

34 Ibid., Box 435, Files: "Letters to the Editor: Sept-Dec., 1962, File 1" and "Letters to the Editor: Sept-Dec., 1962, File 2." The letters were counted (total number is 169), and the region or country of origin was noted. The remaining results were: Atlantic Canada (6.5 per cent); Quebec (5.9 per cent); Canadian but with no address (3.5 per cent); Britain (2.9 per cent); United States (1.7 per cent); Other (1.1 per cent); Europe (0.5 per cent).

35 "Meet Mrs. Chatelaine," *Chatelaine* (April 1961): 109.

36 Author's interview with Doris Anderson, 30 June 1994.

Chatelaine didn't cook very well."<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, the articles and letters concerning the Mrs. Chatelaine contest will illustrate that the competition served multiple purposes – to celebrate Canadian homemaking, to act as a reader survey and to foster interest and participation in the magazine – and multiple interpretations.

Internal memos from Maclean Hunter confirm that the contest exceeded expectations for participation and that those women who participated spent a vast amount of time compiling their entries. E.H. Gittings, Assistant Advertising Sales Manager for *Chatelaine*, was astonished by the contest's popularity:

We received approximately 5,700 entries from our English edition and 400 entries from our French edition. Some of the entries were very elaborate indeed. They included such things as samples of pies, cookies, tape recordings of their voices, and in practically all cases, it was obvious that these readers had spent literally days preparing their entries. Mrs. Saxton who won the contest last year, confessed after she had been selected that she had spent over 150 hours preparing her entry.<sup>38</sup>

On all accounts, both in number of entries received and in the amount of time contestants put into their entries, the contest was a success. J.L. Adams, *Chatelaine* Manager for Eastern Canada, wrote that the first winner, Mrs. Joyce Saxton, of Plenty, Saskatchewan, was a "charming and delightful person," even though in the course of the day she had remarked that "although she read *Chatelaine* every month from cover to cover, her favourite magazine was *Reader's Digest* because it didn't flop around when she was reading it in bed."<sup>39</sup>

Saxton's views on marriage, child-raising and the role of a homemaker were meticulously profiled in the article entitled "Mrs. Chatelaine – her home, her family, her everyday world."<sup>40</sup> A farm wife and mother of three children, Saxton was an energetic housewife who that past year had "preserved 140 quarts of fruit preserves . . . 60 jars of jellies, 260 packs of frozen fruit and vegetables; sews most of her children's clothes and some of her own."<sup>41</sup> In addition to her household tasks, this former school teacher ran a community swim programme in the summer, and was "a member of or on the executive of nine clubs and community groups."<sup>42</sup> Numerous black and white photos depicted Saxton cavorting with her children, organising her pantry, watering house-plants, teaching swimming, and sharing a snack with her fellow church

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37 Ibid.

38 AO, MHRS F-4-1-b, Box 431, E.H. Gittings, Assistant Advertising Sales Manager for *Chatelaine*, to Mr. F.D. Adams, 22 June 1961.

39 Ibid., J.L. Adams, Manager for Eastern Canada (*Chatelaine*), to L.M. Hodgkinson, 14 February 1961.

40 "Mrs. Chatelaine – her home, her family, her everyday world," *Chatelaine* (April 1961): 110.

41 Ibid., 111.

42 Ibid.

circle members. The article ended with her summation of her homemaking goals:

I must find common ground with my husband so that family life may be mutually enjoyed; spend time with the children regardless of household tasks; plan my home for the family's comfort and convenience; serve nutritious and attractive meals; through some planning, try to get necessary household jobs out of the way by noon, so there is free time for extras; help to do my share in the community; keep up-to-date on current events.<sup>43</sup>

For the editors of *Chatelaine* Joyce Saxton embodied the middle-class virtues that *Chatelaine* advocated in their departmental features. Her emphasis on planning, nutrition and effective time management was consistent with the prevalent themes of the food and home-planning features. The fashion and beauty department took centre stage in the remaining four-and-a-half-page photo essay. "Mrs Chatelaine enjoys a whirl in Toronto before flying to Paris" allowed readers to follow Saxton's gruelling itinerary, her "nights at the theatre; luncheons; shopping trips; rounds of meetings with celebrities; appointments with a stylist to find a new coiffure," and to study the "series of beauty treatments and make-up lessons."<sup>44</sup> As queen for a week she was fêted by *Chatelaine's* staff and she hobnobbed with the likes of Pierre Berton, Gordon Sinclair and the dancers of the Royal Ballet.

Although in future years the featured articles on the Mrs. Chatelaine winners were not as lengthy, detailed or lovingly sketched, it was clear that, with the exception of 1969, they all celebrated similar stories of middle-class feminine virtues. *Chatelaine* was never subtle about the contest's purposes but as the years progressed the editorialising about the aims, ambitions and effects of the contest was stated explicitly:

Every year, when we read the many entries for the Mrs. Chatelaine contest, we are impressed all over again with the happiness and sound family solidarity that exists across our country. In a way, the winner represents all of you, a symbol of all the love and care and effort that Canadian wives and mothers are pouring into their homes, the lives of their children, and their community. We congratulate the winner, but we also congratulate the runners-up, and all those who sent in an entry, for each entry was the sum of its sender's pride and joy in what she was able to give. This is a very good omen for Canada. Perhaps, in setting down your blessing, you found an extra dividend of surprise in discovering how good your life really is.<sup>45</sup>

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43 Ibid.

44 Eveleen Dollery, "Mrs. Chatelaine enjoys a whirl in Toronto before flying to Paris," *Chatelaine* (April 1961): 112.

45 "Here's the winner of our contest Mrs. Chatelaine 1964," *Chatelaine* (May 1964): 36.



Ultimately, most readers who entered the contest tended to be consummate wives and mothers and very service-minded. However, that was not the case for all readers. For them, the Mrs. Chatelaine contest highlighted actual or imagined inadequacies in their various roles as wives, mothers and often workers. One woman, Mrs. Beatrice Maitland of Chatham, New Brunswick, took matters into her own hands and decided to write to the magazine and nominate herself for the "Mrs. Slob 1961" contest. The following excerpt from her first letter to Anderson includes her humorous yet trenchant critique of the contest's rules:

Yesterday was the closing date for your Mrs. Chatelaine contest, but I didn't enter. . . . I wish someone, sometime, would have a competition for "Mrs. Nothing!!" A person who isn't a perfect housekeeper, a faultless mother, a charming hostess, a loving wife, or a servant of the community. Besides being glamorous as a model, talented as a Broadway star and virtuous as a Saint. I have studied your questionnaire carefully but my replies are hopelessly inadequate. . . . To start with my appearance is absolutely fatal. . . . I am overweight, pear-shaped and bow legged. Consequently, not having much to work on I don't bother and cover it up with comfortable, warm old slacks. . . . Now, housework. Failure there too as I am a lousy housekeeper. . . . Entertaining? Practically never. . . . A game of cards or just talk with a few beers. No fancy food, drinks or entertainment. . . . Meals?. . . . We prefer plain meat and potato-vegetable meals with no frills. For birthdays our children choose the dinner. What's the menu? Usually hamburgers and chips. You can't win. Make a fancy meal from a magazine and they look like they are being poisoned. . . . The decor is middle English European junk shop, especially when the children start doing their homework. Community activities? I have always belonged to and worked with other organizations . . . but I have become so sick of and bored with meetings I quit. . . . My philosophy as a home-maker - I guess that is, be happy, don't worry. You do what you can with what you've got when you feel like it. Consequently I'm never sick and I've got no nerves or fears. That is poor me. . . . So if you want to run a contest for "Mrs. Slob 1961" I would be happy to apply and would probably win hands down. Thank you for your enjoyable magazine and my apologies for taking up your time.<sup>46</sup>

Maitland's self-deprecatory style of humour and her obvious send-up of the conventions of the contest made for a witty letter. However, there was a considerable edge to this piece since she challenged the presumption that all Canadian women aspired to or could afford the easy affluence of suburbia. As an R.C.A.F. wife with three kids, Maitland was clearly not part of the "better-sort" of reader the magazine's advertisers and publisher sought.

Anderson's response praised Maitland's "wit" and "good humour" and acknowledged that the "Mrs Chatelaine contest sets up pretty formidable rules

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46 AO, MHRS F-4-3-a, Box 434, Mrs. Beatrice Maitland, Chatham, N.B., to Doris Anderson, 1 November 1961.

but, in our defense, the woman who won it last year was a fairly average homemaker in Western Canada who lived on a farm."<sup>47</sup> Neither Anderson nor Maitland anticipated the response that would follow the publication of her letter in the February 1962 issue. Unlike most letters, which were usually edited down to a few key lines of commentary, Maitland's letter was published virtually in its entirety, with an accompanying headline and cartoon to draw further attention to her critique. According to Maitland's own description, having her letter published in *Chatelaine* was akin to having a "best-seller":

When I wrote that letter to you, back in the fall, I never dreamed that such a furor would ensue. . . . My stars! It's as good as having a best-seller! Strangers have shook my hand and said, "Welcome to the Club." And it's buzzing all over our P.M.Q. I have also had a lot of letters all very much in agreement. Who would have thought there were so many slobs in the country?<sup>48</sup>

Who would have guessed so many slobs read *Chatelaine*? Despite the magazine's attempts to encourage household perfection and reward the ideal Canadian homemaker, the Mrs. Slobs refused to re-create themselves in that mould. With Maitland's treatise as their rallying cry, they wrote to her and to the magazine professing support and encouragement to all the other Canadian slobs. Anderson's reply acknowledged that Maitland's letter and the ensuing letters in her support provided a wake-up call for the magazine: "You certainly did stir up a furor. I for one found it extremely interesting to realize what a great load of guilt most of the housewives of this country carry around on their shoulders. It makes me a little guilty that women's magazines probably contribute as much as any medium to this feeling. Thank you for reminding us."<sup>49</sup>

The letters professing solidarity with Maitland came from all regions of the country. This brief sampling captures the spirit of the letters. Most continued Maitland's critique of the contest's middle-class bias and the rather limiting role prescribed for Canadian wives and mothers. Mrs. F. Miller of New Westminster, British Columbia, wrote: "I received my issue of *Chatelaine* about one half hour ago and turned immediately to 'The last word is yours.' I say Three Cheers for Mrs. Beatrice Maitland."<sup>50</sup> Mrs. C. Cserick of Ottawa deduced that the magazine was to blame for its unattainable style of homemaking and its focus upon the suburban family: "To be brutally frank I love *Chatelaine*. . . . But dear old *Chatelaine*, you write very little about us – don't you – we don't have a home of our own – 2 bedrooms is all, but we do like to read, listen to good music, watch good TV shows, take in a really excellent movie, drink gallons of coffee at odd hours, love our husband and kids, care for them

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47 Ibid., Doris Anderson to Mrs. Beatrice Maitland, 10 November 1961.

48 Ibid., Mrs. Beatrice Maitland to Doris Anderson, 2 February 1962.

49 Ibid., Doris Anderson to Mrs. Beatrice Maitland, 12 February 1962.

50 Ibid., Mrs. F. Miller, New Westminster, B.C. to Doris Anderson, 12 January 1962.

and do 100 menial jobs a day.”<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, none of the readers who sympathised and identified with Maitland decided that the magazine was not for them. They considered the magazine a general Canadian women’s magazine, not one oriented to homemakers or urban middle-class women. Many of these respondents remarked that, until Maitland’s letter, they had thought they alone had difficulties coping with the demands of homemaking in the sixties.

Perhaps the pithiest letter received was from Grade 6 student Victoria M. Haliburton of Ville Lemoyre, Quebec, proving that a reader could be of any age and consider herself part of the *Chatelaine* community:

I agree completely with Mrs. Maitland . . . . The most common meal around our house is my father’s specialty. Corn-and-tomato-york, he calls it, and it looks exactly what it is: namely, a mess of corn, tomatoes and bread crumbs. The same with most of our meals. No fancy French names for us. Macaroni and cheese sauces is macaroni and cheese . . . . Entertaining? The closest thing *we* have to that, except on rare occasions, is friends dropping in and out while my mother does the ironing or washing . . . . Housework? If my mother happens to be in the mood . . . . If you ran a Mrs. Slob contest, and my mother entered, there’d be some tough competition.<sup>52</sup>

It is apparent that Haliburton was familiar with the departmental fare and yet pronounced it beyond her family both gastronomically and financially. If from today’s perspective the departmental food material often appears rather plain or uninspiring, these letters reveal that many readers were sceptical about the creations of the *Chatelaine* Institute kitchens. It would appear that the time requirement, the pseudo-sophisticated names, ingredients and tastes were completely foreign and unenticing to many Canadian families. This letter from reader Greta Usenik of Paradise Hill, Saskatchewan, elaborates on the themes developed in Haliburton’s letter, when she encourages the *Chatelaine* editors to get out and visit “average” Canadian housewives: “Wish the entire *Chatelaine* staff could descend on me some afternoon and I’d show them how it’s done. Our homes are modern, from plumbing to electric dryer, but no pile carpet or *Glamour*. Also no patio, just the whole big outdoors.”<sup>53</sup>

The “Mrs. Slob” correspondence illustrates that the readers were adept at providing alternate interpretations of the magazine. They did not feel compelled to emulate the household perfectionism of the departmental material, nor did the contest encourage them to become super-volunteers, homemakers and wives. Rather, the magazine was construed as out of step with the average Canadian homemaker. One reader, Mrs. W. Ockenden of Victoria, echoed

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51 Ibid., Clara Cserick, “Slob par excellence,” Ottawa, to Doris Anderson, 27 January 1962.

52 Ibid., Victoria M. Haliburton, Ville Lemoyre, Quebec, to Doris Anderson, 24 January 1962.

53 Ibid., Mrs. Greta Usenik, Paradise Hill, Saskatchewan, to Doris Anderson, 19 January 1962.

Anderson's concerns about the amount of guilt the Mrs. Chatelaine contest induced in the readership: "I am sure there are many more home-makers just like this except that many *do* worry because they can't be more like that perfect being so often portrayed in women's magazines."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, a letter from Mrs. Neil Ferguson of Dutch Brook, Cape Breton, did not make specific reference to the Mrs. Slob letters, but her critique of the contest and her comments about the classist nature of the magazine provided an important commentary on readers' class identifications:

In the last two Mrs. Chatelaine contests it was quite well to do women that won. Do people from the middle class income bracket ever enter these contests? . . . There are a lot of women that would certainly enter if they could fill out the entry forms but how can they say how well they entertain when they are racking their brains as to what to cook up for their family for a hearty good meal when maybe there is very little pay coming in to provide the proper ingredients for a proper meal . . . These women are the same ones that patch and do over the children's clothes from year to year to have their kiddies warm and presentable for school while the mothers themselves are likely wearing the same coat for the last five or six years.<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, many readers who identified themselves as average or middle-income families were not. Regardless of their income level, they believed that the magazine's contests and budget planning specials should be accessible to all readers. Anderson's response was to state that the winners had both been in the \$5,000 income bracket, "average" for Canadian families at that time and thus not beyond the realm of the majority of readers. Mrs. Ferguson probably thought that answer was a cop-out.

At issue was the notion of "representation." Of course, one housewife and her family could hardly be expected to represent the goals, ideals, styles and dreams of all the readers, but many readers compared Mrs. Chatelaine to themselves and often found her wanting or her perfection repellent. Great care was taken in the selection of the winner and the runners-up to avoid slighting one particular region or province. Thus the winners came from almost all parts of the country – only British Columbia and the Territories did not have a grand prize winner during the decade, although they did have runners-up each year. Mrs. Saxton was followed by: Josephine Ouellet of Sillery, Quebec; Florence E. Holt of Regina, Saskatchewan; Ethelyn Mosher of Middleton, Nova Scotia; Leone Ross of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Elsie Lee Fraser of Calgary, Alberta; Eva Hammond of St. Hilaire, Quebec; Diane McLeod of Toronto, Ontario; and in 1969, Bettie Hall of Montreal, Quebec.

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54 *Ibid.*, Mrs. W. Ockenden, Victoria, to Doris Anderson, 16 January 1962.

55 *Ibid.*, Mrs. Neil Ferguson, Dutch Brook, Cape Breton, to Doris Anderson, 25 September 1962.

All of them had a least three children and, with the exception of Bettie Hall, were very active in community, church and cultural events in their respective communities. According to the supplementary information the editors provided each year, the contest continued to be extremely popular and many women entered repeatedly. For example, Mrs. Henriette Van Der Bregen of Weyburn, Saskatchewan, was selected as provincial runner-up three years in a row.<sup>56</sup> Another persistent runner-up, Ethelyn Mosher, crowned Mrs. Chatelaine in 1964, was a study in community involvement, maternal pride (she was the mother of four young children) and excellence in homemaking. If the list of her hobbies and household chores was exhausting (gardening, singing in the church choir, sewing her own and her children's clothing, sports and freelance writing), her list of community service was staggering:

Ethelyn has time for church and youth groups, especially among the coloured people in the neighbourhood, where she has been speaker, singer and Sunday-school teacher. For several years she has worked with Civil Defense projects (she was chief observer with the Ground Observer Corps). She chauffeurs Brownies and Guides, helps with community canvassing. She works in the hospital canteen and visits patients with the gift-and-magazine cart. She's been a delegate to the County Council for Home and School Associations for three years, and director of the Middleton Vacation Church School for thirteen.<sup>57</sup>

This "wife of a hardware merchant" planned to "share her happiness with the whole community."<sup>58</sup> A few months later, she shared her enjoyment with the *Chatelaine* community when, in a letter to the editor, she gave some indication of the prestige, interest and even international acclaim accorded the winners:

Being Mrs. Chatelaine is one of the nicest things that has ever happened to me. When the excitement has died down, I know the memory of this happy time will give pleasure to my family and to me for many years to come. There have been letters, cards, and telegrams from every province in Canada, with the exception of Newfoundland, and many from the United States and Brazil.<sup>59</sup>

For the winners, the "Mrs. Chatelaine" experience proved very enjoyable. One of the runners-up, Mrs. Marjorie E. Hallman of Pictou, Nova Scotia. (Nova Scotia's runner-up for 1963), stated: "*Chatelaine* has been resource, teacher, companion and friend. Also has reinforced my self-esteem when I made it as runner

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56 "Meet Mrs. Chatelaine 1966," *Chatelaine* (May 1966): 91.

57 "Meet Mrs. Chatelaine 1964," *Chatelaine* (May 1964): 67.

58 *Ibid.*, 36.

59 Ethelyn Mosher, Middleton, N.S., to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (August 1964): 62.

up in the 'Mrs. Chatelaine Contest.'"<sup>60</sup> For each Ethelyn Mosher and Marjorie Hallman, of course, there were plenty of sore losers and proud slobs who continued to share their views each year in the letters page of the magazine.

Two years after the original Mrs. Slob letter was published, readers' reaction to the perfection of Ethelyn Mosher in 1964, also undoubtedly influenced by Mrs. Maitland's genre-defining letter, renewed the anti-contestants' correspondence. One reader, Marianne Fenton-Marr, nominated herself as "Mrs Chatelaine" in her letter to the editors:

I hereby appoint myself Chatelaine woman of the year . . . . I live in an ordinary bungalow. I have one child and two foster children. I bake all my own bread, cakes, pies and cookies. I make good nourishing soups. I make all the clothes. I make my husband's shirts. I knit sweaters, make hats for myself. I do all my own washing and ironing. I take my boy to hockey, baseball and lacrosse. In summer holidays we go camping. I do lots of gardening, make fruit into jams and jellies. Oh, I almost forgot. I teach my children and several neighbours children the violin. Will you ever publish this letter? Of course not, but I got it off my chest.<sup>61</sup>

Obviously a human dynamo around the home, either Fenton-Marr was a disconsolate loser in the contest or had never entered, believing that her chances of winning were not good because she did not appear to be actively involved in volunteer or community projects. Meanwhile, Mrs. Houston of Bowmanville, Ontario, complained: "How sweet, goody, goody and religious do you have to become to be able to measure up to your average Mrs. Chatelaine winner? How original, they all are, with their Home and School, Scouts and Guides, Sunday schools, etc. . . . Well then, a big handshake to lousy housekeepers like me, who reads a book while she should be waxing floors."<sup>62</sup> Fenton-Marr got a response, although not the one she was looking for, from Mrs. John Barrett of Hearts Delight, Newfoundland: "Re. the last word is yours [August] and here's happy reading to Mrs. G. Houston of Bowmanville, Ontario, from one lousy housekeeper to another. Long may she wave her book, and I don't care if Marianne Fenton-Marr drowns in her good nourishing soups and balls herself up in her hand knitted sweaters. Here's to our side."<sup>63</sup> The perfectionists might have won the contest, but it certainly appeared that those who sided with the

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60 Mrs. Marjorie E. Hallman of Pictou, N.S., was one of the few people who completed the author's questionnaire regarding reading the magazine in the fifties and sixties. Questionnaire dated 18 January 1994.

61 Marianne Fenton-Marr to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (August 1964): 62.

62 Mrs. G. Houston, Bowmanville, Ontario, to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (August 1964): 62

63 Mrs. John Barrett, Hearts Delight, Newfoundland, to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (December 1964): 80.

slobs took just as much pleasure, perhaps more, in ridiculing it and sanctimonious writers like Fenton-Marr.

The success of the contest had less to do with the number of entrants or the calibre of the winners than with the creation of a substantial amount of interest in the magazine – from both teams —and the fostering of a sense of community among entrants and letter-writers alike. We will never know whether Mrs. Houston wrote to Mrs. Barrett personally after her letter appeared in the magazine, but it is clear that theirs was a friendship or alliance formed in response to and aided by the magazine; where they went from there was up to them. As Mrs. Mosher's commentary made clear, many readers, having initially been introduced to other readers through the pages of the magazine, did feel free to write personal letters to them, and it is not fantastic to suggest that some pen-pal relationships resulted from the magazine exposure.

More critical commentary followed in 1965. Mrs. D.E. Embury of Peace River, Alberta wrote to complain about the class and income level of the participants: "I enjoy everything about your magazine; but every year when you announce the Mrs Chatelaine Contest [Oct., Nov] my temperature rises. Frankly, I believe there are a lot who hesitate to enter because you ask for the annual income of the family."<sup>64</sup> A more poetic complaint was lodged by Cooksville, Ontario correspondent Mrs. Marion Robertson, who wrote, "Why, oh why, must you ruin a perfectly good magazine with that nauseatingly smug contest?"

Nice Mrs. Chatelaine  
 Wrote to the Editor  
 Praising herself to the sky.  
 What talents galore!  
 Does she know she's a bore  
 When she says, "What a good girl am I!"<sup>65</sup>

By the end of the decade, it was possible to chart subtle changes in entrants to the Mrs. Chatelaine contest. In particular, women who worked outside the home started to infiltrate the list of regional runners-up. This was particularly true for the Atlantic Canadian runners-up who were listed as teachers, nurses and small business owners. However, the grand-prize winner continued to conform to the full-time mother/part-time community volunteer model until 1969 when the unthinkable occurred. That year, the title of the profile said it all. "I was a working mother when that term was a dirty word," claimed Bettie

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64 Mrs. D.E. Embury, Peace River, Alberta, to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (January 1965): 72.

65 Mrs. Marion Robertson, Cooksville, Ontario, to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (January 1965), 72.

Hall, the 1969 winner.<sup>66</sup> This mother of five sons was a "genuine, all-her-life, full-time working mother" who had "no regrets" and refused to make apologies for her choices.<sup>67</sup> Recently relocated from Tillsonburg, Ontario, to Chateauguay, Quebec, this former assistant director of nursing and subsequent high-school teacher did not belong to any women's service clubs. In fact, she described women's clubs as "so much wasted time and effort. So much tribal chatter."<sup>68</sup> Hall's experience juggling work and home commitments was eased by a live-in nanny for 10 years, yet at this stage her boys were pulling their own weight in the household. The three teenagers were able to "cook, wash and iron," while the younger two were responsible for their rooms and some family chores.

Reader reaction to Hall's comments and the article in general was, like virtually everything *Chatelaine* published, open to the varying interpretations of readers. Mrs. M.H. Epp, Saskatoon, was critical of Hall's privileged position (although she did not frame her letter in class terms), her lifestyle and her parenting skills, but in particular was angered by her off-hand dismissal of all women's organisations:

I wish to protest your article on Mrs. Chatelaine [May], not because she is a working mother, but because she is depicted as being so perfect. "I insist on instant obedience." How can she do that if she isn't home? How can she justify separating from her family for a year just for material gain? "She reads voraciously." When? "She entertains formally." Just how perfect can you get? No mother who chooses to stay at home and raise children properly should take this article seriously. Even more do I protest her attitude to women's groups. Who would staff Red Cross clinics, roll bandages, work in community kitchens . . . if it were not for unselfish women? "Tribal chatter" indeed! It's lucky not all women are as selfish as Mrs. Hall and work only for personal gain.<sup>69</sup>

In contrast, Mrs. L. Mann of Heriot Bay, British Columbia, found Hall a "most refreshing person" and enjoyed reading about "a winner that seems so down to earth."<sup>70</sup>

The Mrs. Chatelaine case-study, particularly the resource of the unpublished archival letters, permits a behind-the-scenes portrait of how the community of letter writers responded to the published material. Despite the concerns of numerous critics who bemoaned the lack of mental stimulation

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66 "I was a working mother when that term was a dirty word," *Chatelaine* (May 1969): 34.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Mrs. M.H. Epp, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (August 1969): 68.

70 Mrs. L. Mann, Heriot Bay, B.C., to Editors, "The Last Word is Yours," *Chatelaine* (August 1969): 68.



provided in women's magazines or the hegemonic portraits of middle-class life, in the hands of readers this material underwent a startling transformation. The importance of readers' agency – to purchase the material, but more importantly to interpret and interact with the text – must not be underestimated. Some readers, like the entrants in the contests and particularly the winners, revelled in their existence as stay-at-home mothers who found pleasure and purpose in their husbands, kids and community volunteer participation. They were, despite the magazine's overwhelmingly lower-middle-class and working-class readership, drawn from the middle and upper-middle classes. The wives of successful farmers, professionals or merchants, these were women who could afford to entertain and decorate their homes in style; they were creative and resourceful homemakers who were equally adept at canning vegetables, sewing drapes and leading the family sing-song around the piano. They burned off the rest of their phenomenal energies directing and participating in community volunteer groups – particularly those in church, school and women's organisations. If it all appeared a little too perfect, that was what it took to win the contest; and the prizes, even in the later years, made it worth while.

However, while these perfect homemakers and the perfectionist "wannabes" concentrated on honing their entries, another group of equally devoted readers, the slobs, were crafting their letters of protest. They were not cowed by the prowess of the winners or the expectations of the magazine, but instead believed that the periodical, as Canada's only women's magazine, should reflect all Canadian women. The originality of Mrs. Maitland's entry was never duplicated, but many members of the reading community wrote in the ensuing years to represent "our side," as they referred to the non-participating "slobs." While the winners, their friends and communities celebrated their victories, the "ordinary" readers, non-participants and (it seemed) the remainder of the *Chatelaine* community of readers, enjoyed the "slobs" letters. Despite the effort and money Maclean Hunter and the sponsors poured into this showcase of Canadian homemaking, the slobs had more fun. They wrote to the magazine and to each other, loyally supported their side and forced the magazine to consider the issue of representation every year. The slobs represented the voices of the majority of *Chatelaine's* readership who, as the demographic profile of readership makes clear, were average Canadians. Anderson's characterisation of the contest as a "dose of reality" for the editors was equally apt as a description of the process of discovery undertaken by the readers. In the face of attempts to reconcile with those paragons of Canadian homemaking, many readers resisted and instead found solace in, and solidarity with, the slobs.

The concerns of the *Chatelaine* community illustrate part of the discontent and debate about the ideology of domesticity in postwar Canada. The magazine launched this contest honouring the ideal homemaker precisely at the time when vast numbers of Canadian women returned to or entered the

workforce. The media representation of the stay-at-home mother as the ideal contrasted with the reality that many women were in the workforce. Ostensibly, *Chatelaine's* editors supported this idea because it would counterbalance their more unconventional fare and attract what they hoped would be favourable attention to the periodical. As well, the valorisation of middle-class feminine values tied in to the departmental features and the advertisements for household products. There was nothing exceptional in this; in fact, American magazines were full of similar material. But because *Chatelaine* had a heterogeneous, national audience of "average" Canadians and not primarily an affluent urban or suburban audience, this material was received differently.

This contest illustrates the diversity and the participatory nature of the *Chatelaine* audience. It cautions against presuming that editors and producers of products of popular culture have all the power because they can determine the fare, whereas consumers' only choice is whether or not to purchase the product. Many *Chatelaine* readers were critical of the material and vocal in their criticisms. As well, by creating an alternative contest and, in later years, openly mocking the real winners, "slobs" carved out their own oppositional niche within the magazine. The "slob" letters demonstrate how published letters in the periodical instructed members of the community in the art of "reading" *Chatelaine*. Clearly, those letters encouraged readers to reread the periodical, to read more critically and to read creatively; it encouraged them to remake the material in ways that would be meaningful to them. As conceived, the contest should have glorified and celebrated the ideal of the perfect homemaker, mother and super-volunteer. Instead, readers demonstrated how out of step this "ideal" was and forced *Chatelaine* to modify the contest. It is very doubtful that a working wife and mother would have won in 1969 had it not been for the "slob" correspondence and the critical letters.

The Mrs. Chatelaine contest serves as an example of the *Chatelaine* community in action. It illustrates that some readers were actively critical of the magazine's content and that they did not passively accept conventional (or, in this case, exceptional) portraits of middle-class women. While some readers derived enjoyment from participating in the contest and receiving accolades (and recognition) when they won, others derived pleasure from parodying, subverting or criticising the contest. This showcase of homemaking was ultimately a showcase of a lively community of readers and letter-writers who demanded that their ideas, concerns and lifestyles be reflected in "their" magazine. *Chatelaine's* readers were not merely passive consumers or pawns of a cultural empire, but rather were active participants in a cultural community of Canadian women.