

## Women in War Industries

*Encouraged by government recruiting campaigns, some six million women took jobs in defense plants during the first three years of the war. Many of them left conventional domestic jobs—as maids, cooks, waitresses—to join industrial assembly lines. Others had never worked outside the home. It is not surprising that they encountered prejudice among their male co-workers. Yet the overall experience was quite positive for many women, and it created long-lasting changes in outlook and perspective. The two following accounts are representative of the experiences of wartime working women.*

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### *Inez Sauer, Chief Clerk, Tool Room*

I was thirty-one when the war started and I had never worked in my life before. I had a six-year-old daughter and two boys, twelve and thirteen. We were living in Norwalk, Ohio, in a large home in which we could fit about 200 people playing bridge, and once in a while we filled it.

I remember my husband saying to me, "You've lived through a depression and you weren't even aware it was here." It was true. I knew that people

were without work and having a hard time, but it never seemed to affect us or our friends. They were all of the same ilk—all college people and all golfing and bridge-playing companions. I suppose you'd call it a life of ease. We always kept a live-in maid, and we never had to go without anything.

Before the war my life was bridge and golf and clubs and children. . . . When the war broke out, my husband's rubber-matting business in Ohio had to close due to the war restrictions on rubber.

We also lost our live-in maid, and I could see there was no way I could possibly live the way I was accustomed to doing. So I took my children home to my parents in Seattle.

The Seattle papers were full of ads for women workers needed to help the war effort. "Do your part, free a man for service." Being a D.A.R.,<sup>1</sup> I really wanted to help the war effort. I could have worked for the Red Cross and rolled bandages, but I wanted to do something that I thought was really vital. Building bombers was, so I answered an ad for Boeing.

My mother was horrified. She said no one in our family had ever worked in a factory. "You don't know what kind of people you're going to be associated with." My father was horrified too, no matter how I tried to impress on him that this was a war effort on my part. He said, "You'll never get along with the people you'll meet there." My husband thought it was utterly ridiculous. I had never worked. I didn't know how to handle money, as he put it. I was nineteen when I was married. My husband was ten years older, and he always made me feel like a child, so he didn't think I would last very long at the job, but he was wrong.

They started me as a clerk in this huge tool room. I had never handled a tool in my life outside of a hammer. Some man came in and asked for a bastard file. I said to him, "If you don't control your language, you won't get any service here." I went to my supervisor and said, "You'll have to correct this man. I won't tolerate that kind of language." He laughed and laughed and said, "Don't you know what a bastard file is? It's the name of a very coarse file." He went over and took one out and showed me.

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The first year, I worked seven days a week. We didn't have any time off. They did allow us Christmas off, but Thanksgiving we had to work. That was a hard thing to do. The children didn't understand. My mother and father didn't understand,

but I worked. I think that put a little iron in my spine too. I did something that was against my grain, but I did it and I'm glad. . . .

Because I was working late one night I had a chance to see President Roosevelt. They said he was coming on the swing shift, after four o'clock, so I waited to see him. They cleared out all the aisles of the main plant, and he went through in a big, open limousine. He smiled and he had his long cigarette holder, and he was very, very pleasant. "Hello there, how are you? Keep up the war effort. Oh, you women are doing a wonderful job." We were all thrilled to think the President could take time out of the war effort to visit us factory workers. It gave us a lift, and I think we worked harder.

Boeing was a real education for me. It taught me a different way of life. I had never been around uneducated people before, people that worked with their hands. I was prudish and had never been with people that used coarse language. Since I hadn't worked before, I didn't know there was such a thing as the typical male ego. My contact with my first supervisor was one of animosity, in which he stated, "The happiest duty of my life will be when I say goodbye to each of you women as I usher you out the front door." I didn't understand that kind of resentment, but it was prevalent throughout the plant. Many of the men felt that no woman could come in and run a lathe, but they did. I learned that just because you're a woman and have never worked is no reason you can't learn.

The job really broadened me. I had led a very sheltered life. I had had no contact with Negroes except as maids or gardeners. My mother was a Virginian, and we were brought up to think that colored people were not of the same economic or social level. I learned differently at Boeing. I learned that because a girl is a Negro she's not necessarily a maid, and because a man is a Negro doesn't mean that all he can do is dig. In fact, I found that some of the black people I got to know there were very superior—and certainly equal to me—equal to anyone I ever knew.

Before I worked at Boeing I also had had no exposure to unions. After I was there for awhile, I

<sup>1</sup> Daughter of the American Revolution.



joined the machinists union. We had a contract dispute, and we had a one-day walkout to show Boeing our strength. We went on this march through the financial district in downtown Seattle.

My mother happened to be down there seeing the president of the Seattle First National Bank at the time. Seeing this long stream of Boeing people, he interrupted her and said, "Mrs. Ely, they seem to be having a labor walkout. Let's go out and see what's going on." So my mother and a number of people from the bank walked outside to see what was happening. And we came down the middle of the street—I think there were probably five thousand of us. I saw my mother, I could recognize her—she was tall and stately—and I waved and said, "Hello, mother." That night when I got home, I thought she was never going to honor my name again. She said, "To think my daughter was marching in that labor demonstration. How could you do that to the family?" But I could see that it was a new, new world.

My mother warned me when I took the job that I would never be the same. She said, "You will never want to go back to being a housewife." At that time I didn't think it would change a thing. But she was right, it definitely did.

I had always been in a shell; I'd always been protected. But at Boeing I found a freedom and an independence that I had never known. After the war I could never go back to playing bridge again, being a club woman and listening to a lot of inanities when I knew there were things you could use your mind for. The war changed my life completely. I guess you could say, at thirty-one, I finally grew up.

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*Sybil Lewis, Riveter*

When I first arrived in Los Angeles, I began to look for a job. I decided I didn't want to do maid work anymore, so I got a job as a waitress in a small black restaurant. I was making pretty good money, more than I had in Sapulpa, Oklahoma, but I didn't like the job that much; I didn't have the knack for getting good tips. Then I saw an ad in the

newspaper offering to train women for defense work. I went to Lockheed Aircraft and applied. They said they'd call me, but I never got a response, so I went back and applied again. You had to be pretty persistent. Finally they accepted me. They gave me a short training program and taught me how to rivet. Then they put me to work in the plant riveting small airplane parts, mainly gasoline tanks.

The women worked in pairs. I was the riveter and this big, strong white girl from a cotton farm in Arkansas worked as the buckner. The riveter used a gun to shoot rivets through the metal and fasten it together. The buckner used a buckner bar on the other side of the metal to smooth out the rivets. Buckner was harder than shooting rivets; it required more muscle. Riveting required more skill.

I worked for a while as a riveter with this white girl when the boss came around one day and said, "We've decided to make some changes." At this point he assigned her to do the riveting and me to do the buckner. I wanted to know why. He said, "Well, we just interchange once in a while." But I was never given the riveting job back. This was the first encounter I had with segregation in California, and it didn't sit too well with me. It brought back some of my experiences in Sapulpa—you're a Negro, so you do the hard work. I wasn't failing as a riveter—in fact, the other girl learned to rivet from me—but I felt they gave me the job of buckner because I was black. . . .

The war years had a tremendous impact on women. I know for myself it was the first time I had a chance to get out of the kitchen and work in industry and make a few bucks. This was something I had never dreamed would happen. In Sapulpa all that women had to look forward to was keeping house and raising families. The war years offered new possibilities. You came out to California, put on your pants, and took your lunch pail to a man's job. This was the beginning of women's feeling that they could do something more. We were trained to do this kind of work because of the war, but there was no question that this was just an interim period. We were all told that when the war was over, we would not be needed anymore.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Assess whether factory work for women offered more sacrifices or opportunities.
2. What racial or gender stereotypes emerged in these accounts? What did such attitudes suggest about the prospects for social progress in the postwar era?
3. How do you think these women would educate their own children about their vocational futures?