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# PIONEERS OF PRODUCTION

## *Women Industrial Workers in World War II*

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Our aim in choosing this topic was to understand the role of working women in World War II. Elizabeth had visited the Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. the summer before this project began and brought home a "We Can Do It" poster of Rosie the Riveter. This poster became our inspiration. We wanted to know who Rosie was and how she came to be an American symbol. The slogan is one that we, as young American women, felt we could relate to in our own lives. We wanted to know its origin and were excited to investigate this important frontier in women's history.

We began our research in our school library, where we found several good secondary sources that gave us a broad understanding of how women contributed to the war effort by working in "male" industries. There is an abundance of information about "Rosie the Riveter" and her work in the California shipyards. We thought it would be more interesting, however, to extend our research to the role of women industrial workers here in our own state of Massachusetts. We therefore decided to choose two particular industries in Massachusetts that employed women during the war and hoped to find suitable primary source material.

While we looked for these two industries, we continued to investigate our topic by searching the online public library catalog. We found a wealth of material, and visited at least seven libraries to collect it all. This took a lot of time. Newspaper and magazine articles published between 1941 and 1948 proved to be useful because they provided both statistical information and insights into the cultural and social impact of these women workers. The periodicals also gave us a more direct view of World War II, in general, because they reported the events as they occurred. It was very tedious to search through the microfilm reels, but a lot of fun to look at the old magazines that the libraries had retained in hard copy. We were often distracted and amused by articles and advertisements that were not related to our topic simply because they were so different from those we see today. In addition to newspaper and magazine articles, it was exciting to collect and display some editorial cartoons. We also searched the World Wide Web, but did not find it to be as useful as we had expected. Other than the recruitment posters, our internet searches did not lead to very much information.

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Our teacher, Todd Goodwin suggested that the Springfield Armory Museum might have information on our topic specific to Massachusetts. After visiting, we decided the Armory was a perfect example of a local Massachusetts industry that depended on women workers during the war. The museum staff was extremely helpful and pointed us to a small exhibit about the Women Ordnance Workers who had worked there. We spoke to the archivist and were able to acquire the transcriptions of two oral history tapes of local women who had worked at the Armory during the war. Reading these transcriptions made it clear to us that these women workers were pioneers in industrial work. They spoke with pride about the fact that women had never before been allowed to be machine adjusters, run big router machines, or do other heavy labor. The war gave them the opportunity to prove themselves in these male-dominated jobs. In recalling her experience at the Armory, one woman said, "The foreman approached me one day and asked me if I wanted to become a machine adjuster—I said whoa—talk about women's liberation."<sup>1</sup> We found our other focus industry by reading, *Punch In, Susie!*, written by journalist Nell Giles who worked at General Electric Company (GE) in West Lynn in 1943. We also interviewed two women, Dr. Mary Doherty and Alice Jones, who had worked in the GE plant during the war. It was especially fun to talk to these women because they were happy to relate their stories about their years of work in the GE plant. Unfortunately, we did not have any luck contacting the GE plant directly. We wanted to see if they had records of women's employment in the plant during World War II, but were unsuccessful. A visit to the public library in Lynn, Massachusetts, however, allowed us to search such local newspapers as the *Lynn Telegram*, the *Lynn Daily Evening News*, and the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* in Northampton, Massachusetts, for articles of the time and supplement our research.

The layout for our exhibit emerged very naturally. We wanted to provide context for and an overview of women war workers nationwide, but also focus on the two examples from Massachusetts. We decided to "tell the story" by dividing our exhibit panels into three categories: the mobilization effort, the pioneering war work that women successfully performed, and the lasting effects on American society of their efforts. Since newspaper and magazine articles played such an important role in our research, we chose to include two collections of headlines in our display. We collected statistics, graphs, and charts to provide support for our hypothesis that women's war work had a lasting effect on American society. We found that our two Massachusetts industries exceeded the trend of women industrial workers nationwide. Both the Armory and General Electric had increased the number of women workers to more than 40 percent by 1944. Nationally, the figure was approximately 25 to 30 percent. It was

surprising to find that nearly all of these women abruptly lost their jobs at the end of the war. At the Armory, *every* woman was dismissed one week after V-J day. Despite this fact, surveys of the time showed that a majority of women wanted to continue working.

We included many direct quotations from the people of the time period our exhibit because their words are very powerful. Those women who recorded their experience spoke clearly and effectively about the impact of their efforts on the war, on the role of women workers in America society, and on their personal lives. It was hard to choose since there were so many important statements.

Quotations helped us prove that our topic directly related to the National History Day theme "Frontiers in History." As Josephine von Miklos said in *I Took a War Job* in 1943:

For the first time in history there are women welding and women burning and women winding armatures, and women shipfitting and women in the pipe shop and tin shop and in the tool room. . . . We, this first hundred, are the pioneers.<sup>2</sup>

Women industrial workers proved they could work as hard and contribute as much as men. One headline from *Business Week*, May 1942, exclaimed, "Surveys show they [women] not only can do the job but that they often do it better. Obstacles to employment are giving way." And although most women were laid off from their jobs at the war's end, their efforts had a lasting effect on women's role in the American work force. Frankie Cooper stated it best in *The Homefront: America During World War II* (1984): ". . . the women were different in World War II: they didn't want to go back home and many of them didn't. And if they did go back home, they never forgot, and they told their daughters, 'You don't have to be just a homemaker. You can be anything you want to be.' And so we've got this new generation of women."<sup>3</sup>

Working on this project was very personally satisfying. It was especially rewarding when we were able to track down primary source material. We were surprised to find Constance Green's book, *The Role of Women Production Workers in War Plants in the Connecticut Valley* (1946), and excited when we managed to gain access to it. We were a little frustrated by the time constraints because there was a lot of material that we simply were unable to pursue. For example, we would have spent time at the Armory archive looking through their large collection of photographs, but we ran out of time.

It was fun to research this topic because women's history is only briefly mentioned in our school history curriculum. Although we have grown up with the "women's movement" as a part of our culture, it was really inter-

esting to study a time when women were just beginning to prove to themselves and the nation that they can perform as well, and sometimes better, than men in the industrial labor market. We are grateful to all the historians who researched and recorded this history so that girls like us can now know it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Oral history interview, Mary Urekew Grant Mulcahy, 16 August 1983, Springfield Armory Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts.

<sup>2</sup>Josephine Miklos, *I took a war job*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1943).

<sup>3</sup>Mark Harris, *The Homefront: American During World War II*. (New York: Putnam, 1984).



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