



UNCLE SAM WANTED THEM TOO!

Women Aircraft Workers in Wichita During World War II

by Judith R. Johnson

World War II created unique employment opportunities for women. The demands of the war required vast numbers of skilled workers in defense industries. As in other areas of the country, women in Wichita, Kansas, entered the work force in greater numbers than ever before. This article explores the types of jobs that women in Wichita held, the challenges they faced, and the impact that experience had on their lives. While this account is specific to a given place, patterns emerge in these women's stories that correspond to the accomplishments and expectations of women across the United States during the war.

On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Wichita residents opened the pages of their local newspaper to find an article portraying their hometown as a "twenty-four hour city." The story described how the three major aircraft manufacturers in Wichita had recently added a third shift of workers. In response, grocery stores, bowling alleys, and restaurants had extended their normal hours to accommodate the unusual situation. As Wichita geared up and worked round-the-clock on defense orders, it was not uncommon for a worker to eat dinner at 8:00 A.M., or for others to compete in interfactory and city bowling league matches at 5:00 A.M. Some workers reported at midnight to one of the six schools that the aircraft factories or national government operated. At that time, more than fourteen thousand people, mostly men, worked in the aircraft industry.¹ The lightheartedness of the newspaper article, sprinkled with boosterism for the city of Wichita, contrasted sharply with the readers' moods later that day as they heard

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1. *Wichita Eagle*, December 7, 1941. The three aircraft companies are Boeing, Beech, and Cessna.



The demands of World War II required vast numbers of skilled workers in defense industries and thus created unique employment opportunities for women. As men entered the military, the nation faced a shortage of workers. Women quickly were recognized as an untapped potential work force. Responding to the nation's call, many women left their homes, schools, and offices to become riveters, welders, or workers in skilled jobs that previously had been denied them. In this 1944 photograph, Helen Volmer (right), who was interviewed for this article, works as a turret lathe operator at Beech Aircraft Corporation.



the first reports of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Whereas the emphasis of production in the aircraft plants previously had centered on supplies for the Allies, the focus now shifted to national defense as the United States joined the war against the Axis.

Government officials began a major effort to increase war production. For Wichita that meant a huge jump in aircraft construction, which required a large and skilled work force. At the same time, the nation faced a shortage of workers as more men entered the military. Almost at once, the government recognized and turned to the nation's women as an untapped potential work force. In responding to that call, many women left their homes, schools, and offices to become riveters, welders, or workers in skilled jobs that previously had been denied them.

Recent investigations demonstrate that the experience had a profound impact on women then and later in their lives. Until the 1970s historians tended to ignore this topic. Since then studies have explored the participation of women in the war effort, particularly women in California, Oregon, and Michigan. Few studies, however, have focused on Wichita, Kansas. As more local studies appear, a clearer picture of the total effort yields a greater understanding of the wartime era. Similar to the experiences of women in other areas of the country, women in Wichita momentarily escaped traditional, gender-based employment as they surmounted barriers to their entry into skilled trades.²

2. Sherna Berger Gluck, "Interlude or Change: Women and the World War II Work Experience: A Feminist Oral History," *Interna-*

The end of the war in 1945 brought a halt to these changes as women were forced to return to jobs as secretaries or clerks with reduced incomes and in many cases less challenge. Those women, however, who had worked in defense industries retained a sense of pride and an awareness that the experience had broadened their worlds and had enhanced their confidence.³ The stories of female workers in Wichita confirm that conclusion.

Interviewed fifty years after the fact, these women vividly recalled the tension and excitement of the era. Still living in the Wichita area, many women quickly responded to a notice in the *Wichita Eagle* to participate in a study that explored their experiences. During the spring and summer of 1992, more than twenty-five women agreed to discuss their wartime work. They welcomed the opportunity to tell their stories, cooperated fully, and provided greater insights to the overall wartime effort on a personal and local level. These interviews usually lasted more than two hours, and from

tional Journal of Oral History 3 (June 1983): 93; Ruth Milkman, "Redefining Women's Work: The Sexual Division of Labor in the Auto Industry during World War II," *Feminist Studies* 8 (Summer 1982): 341; Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 106; Jane Rhodes, "Women in the Aircraft Industry During World War II," *The Territorial* 10 (May/June 1990): 28; Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, "What Really Happened to Rosie the Riveter? Demobilization and the Female Labor Force 1944-47," *MSS Modular Publications*, Module 9 (New York: 1974), 4.

3. D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 150-61; Sherna Berger Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, The War, and Social Change* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 16-17; Chester W. Gregory, *Women in Defense Work During World War II* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974), 193.

them some common themes surfaced. One was the women's surprise at the interest in their stories, coupled with a bemused curiosity as to why it had taken historians so long to investigate or study their experiences. Another theme reiterated by these women was the financial independence they gained. Overall, the tone of the interviews reflected a sense of accomplishment, pride, and patriotism in their contributions to the war effort. Several brought mementos of the war years to the scheduled interviews; especially helpful were their paycheck stubs, copies of newspaper articles, and photographs.

The entry of those women into the wartime work force was stimulated by the efforts of the War Manpower Commission. In early 1942 the federal government announced plans to offer mass training programs in Wichita to prepare workers for building airplanes. The commission specified that women who applied had to be high school graduates between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five. Single women with dependents, or married women with their husbands in the service could sign up for the program. Although the reasoning was unclear, the requirements also stated that the female applicant had to be under five foot two inches in height and weigh no more than 135 pounds.⁴ In newspapers and on radio, the call went out for women to sign up for war work. By the first week of February 1942, more than seven hundred women had placed their names on a waiting list to attend the National Defense Training School. The school occupied a

4. *Wichita Eagle*, January 7, 9, 1942.



With the United States' entrance into World War II, Wichita experienced a huge jump in aircraft construction. Thousands were employed in the city's defense industries. This scene at Beech is representative of the boom in mass production also experienced by Boeing and Cessna.

building, owned by the local board of education, on North Waco Avenue in downtown Wichita. Established in late 1941, it offered courses in sheet metal work, blueprint reading, and woodwork.⁵ At first, mostly men from Wichita and the surrounding area attended the school, but once the United States entered the war, an increasing number of the students were women.

Among those who signed up after the attack on Pearl Harbor was Virginia Cole Hagg. She had worked as a traveling saleswoman for the Palmolive Company after graduating from high school, but she quit when she heard of the Japanese attack. Motivated by a sense of patriotism and a desire "to do her part," Ginny applied for

admittance to the training school after reading about it in the newspaper. Once accepted, she attended classes eight hours a day and learned how to drill and rivet bolts on airplane wings.⁶

Another who signed up was Roseva Babcock Lawrence, who came to Wichita with her father from Hutchinson soon after the country entered the war. While he was immediately admitted to the school, Roseva's name was placed on a waiting list. Financial necessity required that she work; the only employment she could find, however, was as a cleaning girl in private homes. In the evening she studied with her father, and in doing so, Roseva learned the size of rivets, the drill bits, and other aspects of sheet metal work before

she enrolled in the school. When her father got a job at Beech Aircraft Corporation after graduation, Roseva started at the school, which at that time had two shifts. Because she had studied with her father, Roseva was able to complete the course in about four weeks rather than the usual six. She remembered that as a final project, all students had to cut out a five-point star. Since she had already figured the calculations with her father, she finished the task well ahead of the others. When she graduated from the school in April 1942, Roseva was the 10,001 student to complete the training successfully. But she was only twenty years old, and single women at that time had to be twenty-one to work in the plants. While she waited, she needed a

5. Ibid., February 5, 1942; "Proceedings of the Wichita Board of Education," Journal I, October 6, 1941.

6. Virginia Cole Hagg, interview with author, March 19, 1992.



at Beech as an X-ray technician.⁷

Although they did not know one another, Roseva and Aletha Jeffries Johns started training at about the same time. Aletha was in a class with both men and women, but she never finished because Beech called her to work. There she ran a large, stationary riveting machine that she operated with a foot pedal. A young man about to be drafted trained her for the job.⁸

By January 1943 the War Manpower Commission reported an acute labor shortage in Wichita. The local Office of Civilian Defense organized an appeal to persuade unemployed women to join the war industries or to take jobs in order to release other workers for the military. At the same time, the state labor department in Topeka announced that women and minors could work up to fifty-four hours a week when needed. By this time the height and weight requirements for women had been dropped as unrealistic and unnecessary. Despite the elimination of the restricted hours, traditional business practices and societal attitudes about women in the workplace remained constant throughout the war. Nevertheless, the government and industry continued the call for more workers.⁹

Boeing Aircraft was one of the manufacturers directly affected by labor shortage. Consequently the company advertised on radio and

in newspapers for more women to help in the war effort. Boeing suggested, however, that not just any woman or man would do. Rather the worker had to be able-bodied, hard-working, cooperative, and able to stand the stress of high-speed aircraft production.¹⁰

Boeing officials still were not completely sold on the idea that women could effectively and competently perform jobs that men usually held. Even though a government report revealed that out of nineteen hundred war occupations, only fifty-six were unsuitable for women, Boeing seemed hesitant to embrace changes that the national emergency created.¹¹ For example, Boeing claimed that many women could not withstand the rigors of a full day in the shops, and officials complained that safety practices were new to many female employees. Company spokesmen remarked that it was hard to convince a woman that she should cover her carefully-coiffed head or remove her wedding band, and should wear slacks or industrial uniforms even if they were distasteful to her.¹² Ramona Schlatter Snyder, however, later recalled that when she went to work at Boeing in 1942, she wore slacks because her lead man and crew chief did not want women in skirts or dresses that would distract male workers. At first uneasy with her new attire, Ramona quickly adapted to slacks because they were more comfortable and allowed greater protection and mobility on the job.¹³

Still concerned about women's stamina, Boeing initiated a physical fitness program for its female

workers in early 1943. Believing that most of the new workers were former housewives unaccustomed to the strenuous work in factories, Boeing officials envisioned the program as a way to prevent fatigue that was sure to arise during the long days. This program was short-lived; the women regarded it as unnecessary because they performed adequately on the job, and the program placed more demands on their time.¹⁴

Nevertheless, women throughout the United States were absent from their jobs more often than were men, not because they lacked stamina, but because of all the other chores they performed as working mothers and wives. The daily responsibilities of running a home and managing a family took its toll as women had to find time for marketing, cooking, and general housework after their long shifts at the plants.¹⁵

Katherine Abraham, married and the mother of four children, went to work at Boeing in January 1943. Forty years old at the time, she was no stranger to work outside her home. She started on the third shift, but when the company went to two extended shifts, she began work at 5:00 P.M. and sometimes did not get off until 5:00 A.M. Her husband and oldest daughter who both worked the earlier shift took care of the younger children, but Katherine always prepared dinner for the family before she left for work. While she remembered she was tired throughout the war, she did not have to face the problem of child care that others did.¹⁶

7. Roseva Babcock Lawrence, interview with author, June 1, 1992.

8. Aletha Jeffries Johns, interview with author, June 17, 1992.

9. *Wichita Eagle*, January 10, 1943; George Trombold, Boeing Aircraft Company, interview with author, July 24, 1992; Jack Evans, interview with author, June 17, 1992.

10. *Wichita Eagle*, January 10, 1943.

11. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1943.

12. *Ibid.*, January 10, 1943.

13. Ramona Schlatter Snyder, interview with author, March 19, 1992.

14. *Wichita Eagle*, January 11, 1943.

15. Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited*, 132-33.

16. Katherine Abraham, interview with author, March 4, 1992.



Roxie Olmstead became part of the women's work force when she took a job at Beech in 1944. She is pictured here with her husband, Dick, a few days after their wedding, May 2, 1944, in Wichita.

Wichita elementary school principals were among the first to call attention to the need for child-care facilities in the city. By May 1943 the federal government operated four day-care centers near the large housing projects constructed close to the aircraft plants. An earlier survey conducted by the family security committee of the community welfare council reported that one mother out of seven with children in intermediate and high

schools was employed.¹⁷ Leona Morgan, a press brake operator at Boeing, maintained a home for her two daughters, helped in her mother's home, and car-pooled sixty-eight miles a day to her job. After work she canned most of her own food and took care of more than a hundred chickens.¹⁸

17. *Wichita Eagle*, March 27, 28, May 9, 1943.

18. *Ibid.*, September 12, 1943.

In the spring and summer of 1943, the call for more workers continued. City officials shortened workers' training time when they initiated a sheet metal class for girls enrolled at East High School. When these young women graduated in May, they could immediately begin work in the aircraft plants. The state officials' main concern, however, was a shortage of agricultural workers. An appeal to teachers to help with the harvest failed because many had taken jobs in aircraft plants. During that summer the problem became so acute that Beech, Boeing, and Cessna released 186 women and 832 men to sign up to work in the fields.¹⁹

Although none of the women interviewed worked in agriculture during the war, they all agreed that it was a citizen's patriotic duty to work. The message they heard over and over was to do their part for the war effort. All the women firmly believed that their jobs in the plants helped win the war. Many had husbands, brothers, or friends in the military; defense work such as building an airplane, or working in an office, was definitely one way to bring the soldiers and sailors home sooner.

Purchasing war bonds offered another means of contributing to the national effort. Every aircraft company had a program to allow automatic deductions from paychecks to buy bonds. Edith Mae Malcolm, a sheet metal worker at Boeing, bought two one-hundred-dollar bonds every month "to help her sons come home from the war."²⁰ Beth Wyrill Jantz had \$18.25 deducted from each paycheck, while Vada Park earned recognition as a champion bond

19. *Ibid.*, April 11, May 29, July 11, 1943.

20. *Wichita Eagle*, September 21, 1943.



lars above her usual contribution.²¹

Not all women employed in national defense worked in aircraft plants. Some took jobs in the traditional clerical area. For example, Roxie Frans Olmstead graduated from high school in 1942, at the age of sixteen, and wanted to work. Since she had taken a commercial course in school and was too young for the factory, she found a clerical job in downtown Wichita. In the fall of 1944 she went to Beech, mainly because the pay was much better. By that time she was married and her husband was in the navy. As part of her job, she went to different sections of the plant to collect rejection slips. This activity took her to many areas of Beech twice a day, and her co-workers frequently gave her nickels for the candy machines along her route. Since sugar was rationed during the war, sweet snacks were in short supply. Sometimes, Roxie recalled, she was lucky enough to reach the machines just after the vendor had filled them. Needless to say, this made Roxie a very popular employee.²²

In her office, Roxie primarily worked with women, although all the supervisors were males. That never created a problem, she said, except for one of the younger men's annoying habit of eavesdropping on the women's conversations. Whenever he approached, Roxie and her friends spoke in what she called "Alfalfa talk" in which they added the letters "il"

buyer by purchasing three hundred dol-

to the first letter of a word and placed an "I" in front of the second letter. The young man never quite figured out what they were doing. Whether or not their game stemmed from resentment or boredom remains questionable; Roxie admitted only that it gave her and the other female workers some amusement at the time.

Of all the women employed in the aircraft industry during the war, few served in administrative positions. Fifty years after the experience, the women recalled a clear yet subtle gender-bias in the plants. In most cases the crew chiefs and lead men were older and experienced males, beyond the draft age. No one thought much about it because, as Helen Olmstead said, that was the way things were then. At Boeing, Doris Massey Buchner's experience challenged the prevailing attitude. While in high school before the war, Doris petitioned the principal of her school for permission to enroll in the male-dominated drafting and woodworking classes. When she went to Boeing for a job in June 1942, they placed her in an assembly section where her drafting skills were immediately put to use. In an office on the second-floor balcony overlooking the huge plant, Doris was one of two women. The other workers were men who, Doris claimed, did not know what to do with her, so they tended to ignore her. Eventually Doris was promoted to inspector for the wing tips and tunnels of the B-29s. She remembered the other woman, also an inspector, asked Doris to wear her hair on top of her head to give the appearance of greater height. An inspector represented power and authority, and being a woman, Doris needed to project a forceful image. Although she appreciated the in-

creased salary of an inspector, Doris knew that a woman's position of power was temporary because of the war; when the conflict was over, men would resume control.²³

Racial discrimination also prevailed. Few black men or women worked in the shops, except as janitors. "What a prejudiced bunch of people society was in those days," Helen Olmstead reflected.²⁴ One black woman who worked as a riveter was Julia Scott Nelson. Born and raised in rural Oklahoma, Julia learned of job opportunities in Wichita in 1943. After her arrival in the city, she immediately began training at the defense school on Waco Avenue. Upon graduation, she joined her sister who already had a job at Boeing. Although she recalled that some tension existed between her and a young white woman, Julia retained her natural dignity and met the opposition with intelligence and poise. By the end of her first summer on the job, the two women had developed a compatible and comfortable relationship.²⁵

Meeting women from other areas of Kansas and the nation was a common experience during the war. It was the first time she became aware of regional differences, reported Donnalea Keown Haynes. While employed at Beech she met and worked with many women who had come to Wichita because of available jobs. She noticed different habits and customs,

21. Beth Wyrill Jantz, interview with author, June 12, 1992; Vada Park, interview with author, June 8, 1992.

22. Roxie Frans Olmstead, interview with author, March 16, 1992.

23. Helen Olmstead, interview with author, July 23, 1992; Doris Massey Buchner, interview with author, June 18, 1992.

24. Helen Olmstead interview; Karen Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II," *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982): 84.

25. Julia Scott Nelson, interview with author, August 28, 1992.

Twin sisters Vada Park (left) and Vera Sims, defense workers at Beech, were residents of Planeview, a housing project that developed during the war to accommodate Wichita's enormous work force.



but emphasized that they were not offensive, just unfamiliar to her.²⁶ During breaks in the workday and at the end of a shift, many women socialized together. For those who worked the night shift, getting together for a meal at a local restaurant offered relaxation after work. Each aircraft company had an extensive recreational program for its workers. Activities included baseball, basketball and softball teams, parties sponsored by different sections, and holiday dances. Many of the women joined the USO after undergoing a screening process to verify their integrity, wholesomeness, and character. Others went on dates to the Blue Moon, a popular nightclub, to dance. Some even continued their friendships after the war was over.²⁷

26. Donna Lee Keown Haynes, interview with author, June 15, 1992.

27. *Plane Talk*, Wichita, February 6, 20, 1943; Jantz interview; Snyder interview.

The war's conclusion in August 1945 brought an abrupt end to the jobs women held. In one month Boeing laid off fifteen thousand workers, many of them women.²⁸ The sudden unemployment, however, came as no surprise; government and industry emphasized from the beginning that women were hired "for the duration." No one anticipated an easy transitional period or that women would readily accept a return to traditional jobs. As early as January 1943, the *Wichita Eagle* ran a cartoon entitled "Somebody else let a Genie out of a bottle once too." The cartoon depicted a woman going to work with her "own man-sized pay envelope" in her overalls' pocket. A man in the background, standing in the doorway wearing an apron and holding a broom, said, "But remember,

28. *Wichita Eagle*, August 19, 1945; Trombold interview.

you gotta come right back as soon as the war is over!" Her reply was, "Oh Yeah?"²⁹ As if to reinforce that idea, in June 1943 Gov. Andrew Schoeppel of Kansas suggested that because of all the newcomers in the work force, a drastic change in the social order was a definite possibility. At the same time, the American Legion Auxiliary challenged the idea of women employed in industry and declared that women with children belonged at home and had no business in the workplace.³⁰

In August of that same year, Arthur Brown, a nationally-celebrated illustrator, claimed that after the war women would blossom as more feminine than ever. Brown suggested that it was natural for women to want jewelry, clothes, and pretty things for the home. Yet he cautioned that their wartime

29. *Wichita Eagle*, January 24, 1943.
30. *Ibid.*, June 15, 1943.



experiences probably had given women a new self-confidence and independent strength that had been unrecognized before they entered the factories.³¹

A survey by the Wichita Chamber of Commerce in the spring of 1944 confirmed Brown's expectations. From the pool of skilled and semiskilled male and female workers, 91 percent planned to stay on the job for the duration and 17 percent planned to leave Wichita after the war. Of the women surveyed, 35 percent desired to become housewives, 6 percent preferred sales work, and 2 percent considered teaching as an option when the war was over. But a full 26 percent wanted to continue in factory or shop work.³²

In 1945 the *Wichita Eagle* editorialized that employed women's attitudes would be a factor in the readjustment of labor in peacetime. After recognizing women's contributions, the writer noted that it was presumed they would be anxious to return to their homes at the first opportunity. He also said that the idea they might object to quitting had apparently occurred to no one. Surveys in several other industrial areas of the country had disclosed that a great majority of women intended to stay on their jobs rather than return to their kitchens. Yet returning veterans also were entitled to jobs. A situation might emerge where men would be receiving the government dole while women held down the jobs men wanted. Even so, the writer claimed, the simple argument that a woman's place was in the home and that she should be willing to return to her

babies and her dishes failed to resolve the issue. If a woman insisted on working for wages, no law could prevent her from doing so. He concluded that the war might have emancipated women from household drudgery to a greater extent than anyone realized. Finally, he noted that private industry and the government had already begun to plan for postwar employment in mid-1944.³³ After VJ Day, however, the question of women's place in industry became a more pressing issue.

By August 1945 cutbacks in defense contracts were already evident in Wichita. The state manpower director estimated that within six months, more than 140,000 workers in Kansas could expect to lose their jobs. He predicted that 50 percent of the female workers would return to their housekeeping duties and be glad to do so. "This," he stated, "would be especially true when they found the honeymoon of high wages over."³⁴

I ndeed many women changed jobs or left the work force at the conclusion of the war. The situation in Wichita reflected national trends. Of the twenty-five women interviewed, nineteen were married before, during, or immediately after the war. The majority recalled the relief they felt when they left the work force and began what they then considered normal lives as housewives. For example, Vada Park and her twin sister Vera Sims were both very happy when their jobs were terminated. Their unemployed status meant they could join their husbands who had recently been released from the military. Aletha Jeffries Johns was one of the first laid off at Beech,

but that made her happy since her husband had enough points for early discharge.³⁵

Two married women who left their jobs at the end of the war specifically stated that their husbands did not want them to work. Roseva Lawrence reported that her husband, Joe, said no wife of his would ever work. Donnalea Keown Haynes' husband felt the same way; she agreed because she wanted a family. While other women never explicitly cited their husbands' opinions, one commented that "society looked down on women who worked outside the home."³⁶

Beth Wyrill Jantz was among those who were self-dependent for a livelihood. She left defense work and found a job as a cashier at J.C. Penney in Dodge City. Helen Volmer who operated a lathe that made rivets, bolts, and casings at Beech, worked until VJ Day and then left because the men were coming back. "All the talk," she said, "both inside the plant and in the newspapers encouraged women to give up their jobs for the returning veterans." Thus, while she thoroughly enjoyed her work, she felt a subtle obligation to turn her job over to a man. Because she was unmarried and needed an income, Helen eventually found a job, with a severe reduction in salary, as a secretary in an insurance firm.³⁷

Ardis Rutherford Sowards was one of the few women interviewed for this study who stayed in the aircraft industry after the war ended. Ardis, who had been a freshman at the University of Wichita when the war began, had worked

31. *Ibid.*, August 1, 1943.

32. *Ibid.*, April 16, 1944.

33. *Ibid.*, June 23, 1945.

34. *Ibid.*, August 18, 1945.

35. Vera Sims, interview with author, June 8, 1992; Park interview; Johns interview.

36. Lawrence interview; Haynes interview; Snyder interview.

37. Jantz interview; Helen Volmer, interview with author, March 20, 1992.



Although management expressed its doubts as to women's abilities in positions of authority, female workers proved fully capable. Women constituted a large part of this aircraft inspection class at Beech.



The war's conclusion in August 1945 brought an abrupt end to the jobs women held because they originally had been hired only "for the duration." In one month Boeing, shown here, laid off fifteen thousand workers from its expansive Wichita production facilities.

at Cessna for a summer job in 1942. When it was time to return to school that fall, Ardis postponed her education and continued working. A sense of patriotism to do her part for the war effort, and the thrill she felt at earning her own money convinced her to stay. During the war Ardis worked in the accounting office. She retained that position until 1947 while her husband finished college. Eventually Ardis returned to college and earned a degree.³⁸

Most of the women favorably recalled their wartime experiences, particularly when they considered the financial aspects. High pay allowed them more economic freedom and independence, and for the first time these women were able to contribute to their families' budgets. Beth Wyrill Jantz who came from a rural area in Phillips County to work at Boeing remembered how her first paycheck so impressed her. She recalled it was twice as much as she had ever earned before.³⁹ Leona Giddings, who worked in the tool crib at Beech, used some of her wages to help her father buy a gas station in Derby. Before and during the war he had farmed; his injured knees, however, dictated that he find a less physically demanding business. Ruth McLaughlin, a welder, bought a set of false teeth for her mother and a monument for her father's grave. And Roseva Lawrence bought her parents a new set of living room furniture. Julia Scott Nelson, her sister, and brother combined their savings to buy a farm for their parents.⁴⁰

38. Ardis Rutherford Sowards, interview with author, June 1, 1992.

39. Jantz interview.

40. Leona Giddings, interview with author, June 15, 1992; Ruth Durand McLaughlin,

Some of the women also spent their wages on themselves. For example, Ruth McLaughlin and Marceline Barton Hendrixson from Hutchinson said that for the first time in their lives they could afford weekly visits to the beauty shop. Donnalea Haynes remembered taking a bonus check from Beech and splurging twenty dollars on a new dress. That, she recalled, was an extravagance unknown to her before the war.⁴¹

Many of the married women contributed to purchasing new homes or to buying automobiles when they again became available. Katherine Abraham used her savings to help buy a restaurant that she and her husband managed together. In all cases, these Kansas women recognized that high salaries during the war empowered them with greater influence in their families' financial decisions.⁴²

Money, however, did not solely motivate these women. All were willing to do what was necessary to win the war and bring the men home. Most agreed that their employment was only "for the duration," and they did not intend to continue working after the war. A universally-shared memory was how tired they became with hectic schedules, long hours, and physical exertion. The war itself took an exacting toll on them with forced separations and the constant fear for loved ones. The end of the conflict allowed those who wanted to return to their homes to do so, and for others to pursue new directions in their lives. Doris Buckner re-

called that she looked forward to leaving her job at Boeing, resting awhile, and then returning to college. Others channeled their energies toward reestablishing homes with their husbands and raising families.⁴³

In retrospect, these women recalled the positive aspects of their experiences. Marceline Hendrixson appreciated that wartime work allowed her more contacts with women than had been possible before. For her it made all the difference in the world because she learned to interact with other people and accept their differences. She believed that the experience enhanced her confidence and provided her with valuable social skills.⁴⁴ Ruth McLaughlin agreed with those sentiments and suggested that because of the war experience, women of her generation had much fuller lives than those of their children. Helen Volmer believed that she and others helped pave the way for women, and that together they broke some of the barriers to the types of jobs women were considered capable of performing. She was very pleased with her work and felt a great sense of accomplishment, although she noted that their factory work was not always recognized or appreciated by later employers who seemed to forget or ignore the skills and talents of women.⁴⁵

Similarly, Ardis Sowards felt that she had proved herself, and that contacts with people from outside Wichita had widened her world view. Ardis had led a protected life with little exposure to

interview with author, June 4, 1992; Lawrence interview; Nelson interview.

41. McLaughlin interview; Marceline Barton Hendrixson, interview with author, June 4, 1992; Haynes interview.

42. Johns interview; Jantz interview; McLaughlin interview; Sims interview; Park interview; Abraham interview.

43. Buchner interview.

44. Hendrixson interview.

45. McLaughlin interview; Volmer interview.



Beth Wyrill Jantz, pictured here in 1942, was among those who were self-dependent for a livelihood. Following the war she left defense work at Boeing and found a job as a cashier at J.C. Penney in Dodge City.

different types of people. Thus she welcomed the opportunity to meet new people from other regions of the country.⁴⁶

Ramona Snyder thought that after the war it was perhaps more

acceptable for women to work with tools. Roseva Lawrence, who was hired as the first female X-ray technician at Beech, said people did not believe a woman could do it, but she had proved them wrong. Vera Sims who had worked before the war knew from experience that women had limited employment opportunities, and that women always earned less than men. The war changed that, although a return to the status quo afterwards put women back into low-paying jobs. Even so, Vera firmly believed that women's war experiences altered both male and female perceptions about the jobs women could do if given a chance.⁴⁷ Quite clearly their performances in the defense plants challenged the prevailing definitions of womanhood, despite the fact that most left aircraft work at the end of the war. As was the case with women throughout the United States, the Wichita women did not accept clear distinctions between woman's work and man's work; what they desired at the time and what the war interrupted took precedent over any desire to confront existing standards and constraints.⁴⁸

During the interviews, rather than emphasizing their roles in change, these women felt more comfortable in recollecting the positive personal benefits. Their social worlds expanded as they participated in plant activities. The experience promoted freer and easier interactions between males

and females, and they met and socialized with women and men from other regions of the country. As a result, they were a part of a process the war hastened whereby the United States became a more complex and less homogeneous society.

On an individual basis, the women remembered the work experience as a time when they tested themselves, a time when necessity forced them to stretch to prove themselves. Pride in their accomplishments surfaced when they discussed the wartime era. Told before the war that women were not strong enough and that it took years of training to learn to rivet or drill, these women demonstrated they were capable and could endure long hours each day for weeks on end. Quite clearly these women believed they held their own with men. Nevertheless, the experience later prompted them to question restrictions based on gender alone. With the perspective of fifty years, they believed they had made subtle inroads into altering perceptions. Several remarked that more opportunities for women became available in the 1950s and 1960s, and they looked upon their daughters and granddaughters as women who continued to wage the fight against inequalities in the workplace. While no immediate revision of values emerged because of what they did, Ramona Snyder concluded, "We more or less came out from under man's thumb."⁴⁹

(KH)

47. Snyder interview; Lawrence interview; Park interview.

48. Campbell, *Women at War*, 237-38.

49. Snyder interview.

46. Sowards interview.