



WOMEN WORKERS IN WAR TIME

THE entrance of women into wage-earning occupations was tremendously speeded up by the Civil War and the World War. With the departure of men for the front, women moved into their places in factories and offices. The Nation's work and the new industries created by the war had to be carried on, and women were given the chance to enter trades and occupations never before open to them.

Of the role that women played during the World War we have a dramatic picture. The war itself wrenched the whole industrial machine. In the quick shift from peace to war status women as well as men were rapidly absorbed by the iron and steel mills, metal factories and foundries; they were practically drafted to make munitions and other war supplies. Aerial warfare created a new industry in which women were indispensable, and it expanded the industries that made the materials necessary for aircraft manufacture.

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Meanwhile the army of 4,000,000 men had to be fed and clothed, and in addition the Nation's industries had to continue to supply the needs of the people at home.

In the war-time crisis women's industrial employment took two new and definite paths: First, into the war-munitions industries, where high wages were being paid and where a greater degree of skill was required, went large numbers of women already trained in industry; throughout the war employers testified to the greater value of the women already experienced. Second, as the drafts took more men to the front, another class of women went into the old woman-employing manufactures; of these, many had previously been at work in agriculture, in domestic or personal service, or had never before worked for pay.

As a special emergency measure, under the war-labor administration in Washington, there was set up in 1918 a Woman in Industry Service, whose duty it was to set standards for the employment of women in war work. Such an agency had long been the desire of progressive people interested in women workers, but not until the war focused the attention of the public on the importance of women's work was it achieved.

The labor shortage created by the war gave more women than ever before in the history of the country the opportunity to enter factory work. By throwing open to them the iron and steel mills, sheet-metal plants, chemical and lumber mills, automobile and electrical-supply factories, it broadened their industrial horizon.

Many of these war jobs for women, it is true, were of a monotonous, unskilled type, such as tending automatic machines, or turning out, assembling, or inspecting duplicated parts, hundreds of thousands a day, at great speed. But the shortage of labor also cleared their way to many of the skilled

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occupations and key positions in industry. In the iron and steel mills and other metal industries, for example, it opened to them the machine shop and the tool room. In other industries, too, women were given work requiring judgment, skill, and precision.

Moreover, the experience of women even in the war-supply industries was to be of peace-time value to them. For in factories making shells, guns, and other munitions women were handling the same kinds of machines and tools as were used by the women who made automobiles, motorcycles, electrical apparatus, and agricultural implements. In the furniture and veneer factories the same kind of work went into peace products as went into airplane parts, munition and tool boxes, or wheels for artillery trucks.

The war-time increase among women workers was not limited to the factories. Thousands more women than ever before became nurses, both at home and overseas. From 1910 to 1920 women school teachers increased in numbers by one third. The number of women telegraph operators doubled. The entrance of women into office work as stenographers and typists, clerks, and bookkeepers and cashiers was spectacular, their numbers increasing by over 800,000. With the surge of women into the newer occupations during the war period came a large decrease in two of their old lines of work—agriculture and domestic and personal service.

Would women remain as workers when the war ended? Many people thought this question would be answered by the return of women to their homes or their old occupations. And large numbers must have returned to their old occupations. But today we know that there are 2½ million more women at work than in 1920, immediately after the war.

While some of the most dramatic features of women's war work have disappeared, the field of their employment has

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been permanently and widely expanded. The woman street-car conductor has practically vanished. Women in overalls turning out shells and guns are, happily, a thing of the past, but from 1920 to 1930 the number of women operatives in plants making electrical machinery, apparatus, and supplies increased by 18,000, the number in plants making chemicals and allied products by 9,700, and the number in automobile factories by more than 6,000.

The war proved that women could do work that no one had ever believed they could do. But it did more. Their substitution for men in carrying through a national emergency broke down many prejudices against their working and changed ideas as to the types of work they should do. What women could do properly and do well in war time became easier for them to do in a time of peace.

Among the permanent war-time gains made by women workers is the Women's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor, which grew out of the Woman in Industry Service of the war labor administration. The function of the Women's Bureau is to "formulate standards and policies which shall promote the welfare of wage-earning women, improve their working conditions, increase their efficiency, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment."

The Bureau investigates and reports to the Department all matters relating to the employment of women in industry. It is a fact-finding agency whose duty it is to study the problems and conditions of women workers, to decide by scientific research and investigation the best standards for their employment, and to make public its findings and conclusions. During the 15 years since the war the Bureau has published 110 bulletins. These are used by students, economists, legislators, labor unions, and employers as a guide in obtaining better standards of employment for women.