“Go into the yard as a worker, not as a woman”

Oregon Women During World War II, a Digital Exhibit on the Oregon History Project

by Amy E. Platt

By 1944, over a hundred thousand women in Oregon held jobs created because of World War II. Over 30,000 worked in the shipyards and chemical depots; at least 78,000 joined the Women’s Land Army; and 25 signed up with the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPS). Several hundred Oregon women were ordered from their homes and incarcerated in detention camps on the state’s borders, a result of Executive Order 9066, which identified Japanese Americans as potential enemy aliens and incarcerated over 117,000 people on the West Coast. At least one Oregon woman spent the war as a U.S. spy in the Philippines, and others were in charge of destroying secret military documents shipped to the Port of Portland. Several more worked the night shift at a twenty-four-hour child-care center on Swan Island in the Willamette River. One Portland woman took a break from her job at the Kaiser Shipyards to compete in a national welding contest in Mississippi; she came in second. Oregon women joined millions of women across the country who found meaningful employment in war-related industries. In addition, about 350,000 women nationally joined the U.S. armed services, serving in support positions around the world. Over three million took part in agricultural work organized by the Department of Agriculture, and over eighteen million worked in defense and related industries. Hundreds of thousands more engaged in other forms of unpaid labor, such as organizing bond drives, collecting scrap metal, and contributing to local civil service organizations. Thousands joined the Red Cross and the USO (United Service Organizations), and thousands planted Victory Gardens. Because of the war, women who had been restricted to particular jobs — or to no jobs at all because of their gender and race — found employment with men in factories and farms. The increased democratization of the

Showcasing excerpts from a digital exhibit as well as a new accompanying essay, this feature is published in association with the Oregon Historical Society’s museum exhibition, WWII: A World at War, A State Transformed, on display from June 26 to December 7, 2015.
were opened to Oregon women were government-contracted positions that the workforce, the tens of thousands of many men into the military and out of "This occasion of war is a time to break down, insofar as it can be done, the artificial and dangerous barrier which exists between women who work for a living and those who do not." In many ways, World War II blurred the distinction between women who had to work and women who wanted to work.

Because of the draft, which took many men into the military and out of the workforce, the tens of thousands of government-contracted positions that were opened to Oregon women were almost always the highest paying and often the most interesting jobs they had ever held. Many women moved to Oregon for these new opportunities, but most who were engaged in war-related employment were already living in the state. By 1943, women made up 65 percent of new hires in Oregon shipyards. Beginning in February of that year, about a thousand workers a week were trading their non-war-related jobs for war-production employment.

The war-related jobs were new, but many of the women who filled them were experienced in the workforce. Historian Amy Kesselman estimates that over half the women working in the shipyards had held jobs before the war, and many who had been unem-
ployed wanted to work but had been unable to find jobs in the Depression economy. During the 1930s, many women took service jobs and worked in farms, orchards, and industries such as canning and textiles.

Thousands of women exchanged their low-paying, unskilled jobs for ones that required particular skills and earned them higher wages. Some women making $3 a week as domestics were suddenly making up to $230 a month as welders in the shipyards. They had money to spend and could buy houses and farms, pay for college, afford childcare, and influence consumer trends. The cultural shift that resulted from the massive labor recruitment campaigns for women workers caused anxiety in the male workforce unused to competing with women in the labor market. After the war was over, the War Department responded to that anxiety by distributing propaganda characterizing the return to prewar employment conditions as a patriotic duty.

America’s cultural and economic transformation, however, could not be easily reversed. The government’s home-front mobilization during World War II was the largest social and economic endeavor in the country since the Civil War, often forcing demographic and legal change in rapid, transformative bursts. In Oregon, the government relaxed labor restrictions on women and minorities; unions lost their closed-shop status in the shipyards and opened their memberships; farmers overcame their reluctance to hire women, Japanese Americans, and Mexicans; and the state urbanized as tens of thousands of men and women moved to be near shipyards, aluminum plants, and weapon factories.

Women responded to the nation’s expectations of its citizens with deliberate economic and patriotic intentions. They enthusiastically engaged in the demographic reorganization of the economy in ways that made it impossible for men to ignore women’s physical and intellectual capabilities. Their investment in the health and wellbeing of their communities and workplaces was evident across race, ethnicity, and circumstance, and it endured beyond the end of the war. As women lost their jobs to men returning from the war, they could see the realities of a post-war economy that would likely deny them employment as skilled workers.

During the war, many had anticipated the impending female labor purge, joined unions, earned certifications, and formed labor associations. “What will [women] ask in return?” Banning wrote in 1942. “First, I hope they will insist that if they have done well and shown staying power and ability, they suffer no more in the period of readjustment than do men. They should not be penalized or discriminated against as women.”

The racial discrimination that African American women faced in Oregon (and elsewhere in the country) made their post-war readjustment particularly brutal. Meaningful employment was a civil rights issue, and the sudden loss of thousands of well-paying jobs in 1945 significantly slowed social and economic mobility for Oregon’s
African American citizens. Employers tried their best to turn the clock back to pre-war discrimination, in direct contradiction of the active recruitment and integration of black workers into professions traditionally dominated by white men. As labor activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn described in 1942: “The Negro people and women must have permanent access to all jobs and professions. This is democracy. To deny it is to disrupt national unity and cripple production in a critical war period.”

Oregon women who were incarcerated in detention camps during World War II faced different challenges in the post-war adjustment period. As Japanese Americans, they had been stripped of their legal status as citizens and lost much of their economic investment when their property and businesses were either confiscated or left idle. Many Japanese Americans left Oregon for good, and those who stayed faced discrimination that effectively limited their access to the economic system they had helped build before the war.¹

**STORIES OF WOMEN** in Oregon during and after World War II are told in the extensive historical records they created and saved, including letters, photographs, scrapbook collections, magazines, and artifacts. The Oregon Historical Society (OHS) holds thousands of those records and hundreds of oral histories, some of which are available on the digital history website, the Oregon History Project (OHP). Using over 200 historical records related to Oregon and World War II, the OHS Research Library has curated a digital exhibit on women during the war — Oregon, WWII, Women, and Work. The exhibit includes dozens of digitized records that help document women’s labor in Oregon. Each record is linked to World War II entries on The Oregon Encyclopedia (The OE), written by scholars and illustrated with photographs from the OHS collections. A selection from the exhibit is shared in the following pages.

The digitized records and encyclopedia entries have also been plotted on an interactive map, the Oregon History Wayfinder, a new website built by the OHS Research Library with support from the Oregon Heritage Commission. The map provides an indispensable guide to the places women lived and worked in Oregon during World War II, with access to their biographies, associations, and institutions as well as to the digitized records collected by the OHS Research Library and Museum. Oregon’s war-related installations and events are mapped, with links to related digital records on, for example, Camp Adair and Fort Stevens, the Japanese balloon bombing, the Lincoln County guerrillas, and Japanese American detention camps.

These stories of working women — a shipyard welder, bomb-builders, a farmer, a pilot, a spy, and a woman who destroyed secret documents for the government — are a small sample of the records that have been digitized by the OHS Research Library. Look for the complete exhibit on the Oregon History Project, www.oregonhistoryproject.org, and learn more about World War II in Oregon on The Oregon Encyclopedia, www.oregonencyclopedia.org.

The Umatilla Ordnance Depot (often referred to as the Umatilla Chemical Depot) near Hermiston did not manufacture munitions but it stored every kind of munition in the American arsenal, from .30-caliber small arms ammunition to two-ton blockbuster bombs. The 1943 article that accompanied the photograph above noted that “just how much in weight of explosives is stored at the Umatilla depot cannot be told, but it’s a fair guess to say there’s enough, if it all could be properly planted, to just about tear Mr. Tojo’s war machine apart.”¹¹

During World War II, women workers made up a substantial part of the depot’s work force, the great majority of which was civilian. In 1943, 27 percent of the workers at the depot were women, and an Oregonian article noted that the “ordnance department hopes to increase the percentage, because they are doing a good job and because they are draft-proof.” Women also formed about a quarter of the work force in other important war industries in the region. The Umatilla Ordnance Depot continued to store conventional munitions after the conclusion of World War II. It began to store chemical weapons in 1962, eventually accumulating approximately 12 percent of the nation’s stockpile of nerve and blister agents. Reports of leaking nerve agents in the late 1970s led many Oregonians to call for the destruction of the depot’s chemical weapons stocks. In 1986, Congress ordered the Department of Defense to dispose of the nation’s remaining chemical weapons. The incineration of chemical weapons at the depot began in 2004 and was completed in 2011.
MABEL MACK, WOMEN’S LAND ARMY

The agricultural economy in the United States transformed radically during World War II to provide food for American soldiers mobilized around the world. The Emergency Farm Labor Program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture set high crop quotas, and farmers were called to action. Farmers planted every inch of their land, and they needed help to harvest it. But workers were hard to find, because the military draft and high-paying industrial jobs in the cities drew people away from the fields. In 1943, the federal government created a farm labor program through the states’ extension services, which operated through land grant colleges. Part of that program was the reinstitution of the Women’s Land Army (WLA), which had first been used in World War I to replace men who had joined the military.1

In Oregon, the WLA was administered by Oregon State College (OSC), now Oregon State University. Mabel Mack, a nutrition specialist at OSC, was appointed its head. She recruited women, assigned them to farms, and made sure they had adequate housing and safe working conditions. State agencies took advantage of existing land grant college extension programs to rally Oregonians to the war effort on the home front. In presentations throughout the state, women demonstrated how to maintain proper nutrition on a rationed diet, how to plant Victory Gardens, and how to reuse and repair clothing. An estimated 78,000 women in Oregon responded to the call and spent the war working on farms.2

Mack remained on the staff of OSC after the war as a state specialist in home management, spending part of her time helping Oregon counties establish their own home demonstration agent programs. She retired in 1968 and moved to Lincoln County, where she set up support programs for senior citizens. Mabel Mack died in 1979.

Mabel Mack holds a poster in 1943, calling for workers to help harvest crops in the Willamette Valley.

HERMINA STRMISKA, WELDER
by Mary Bryan Curd

Hermina “Billie” Strmiska was thirty-five when she won the Oregon Shipbuilding Welderette contest in March 1943, beating out one hundred other women welders in the standard American Bureau of Shipping Test. Her victory qualified her to compete in a national contest at Ingalls Shipbuilding Company in Mississippi, where she came in second. The contest was part of a national recruiting and morale-boosting effort by the shipbuilding companies to bring women into the workforce.3

Born in Texas, Strmiska arrived in Oregon City as a teenager and eventually worked in Portland as a nanny. She married and moved to West Linn so her husband Ed could work in the sawmills. They returned to Texas, but the Depression drew them back to the Northwest as migrant pickers. When work at the shipyards picked up, she and Ed found jobs as welders. Before applying for the job, Strmiska enrolled in a private welding school on Foster Avenue in Portland so she could pass the welding test for the Oregon Shipyards. She got the job, joined the Boilermakers Union, and went to work full time. By the time she entered the welding contest, she had mastered the three kinds of welding required to win: flat, vertical, and overhead welding. The competition in Mississippi — judged by the inspectors from the Maritime Commission, the Bureau of Ships, and the U.S. Navy — was elaborately covered by the news and entertainment media, including Movietone News, the Associated Press, and Life Magazine. After the war, women were the first to be laid off from their shipyard jobs. Some found skilled employment in the private sector, but most were forced to return to clerical, retail, and domestic work at wages far below that of their wartime jobs. Strmiska made enough money in the shipyards to buy a farm, and she spent her post-war years there. Her oral history about her years as a shipyard worker was taken in 1981, and it is available in the Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

Hermina Strmiska, pictured here in about 1943, worked as a welder at the Oregon Shipyards.

OHS Research Library, call no. 012523

OHS Research Library, negative no. 62059
CLAIRE PHILLIPS, SPY

The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the United States’ spy agency during World War II, employed about 17,000 workers, 4,500 of them women. More than 1,000 of those women were sent overseas as code clerks and field operatives. In its intelligence-gathering operations, the United States and its allies also took advantage of associations with informants throughout the world, including thousands of women who joined resistance organizations. One Oregon woman, Claire Phillips, spent the war as a spy in the Philippines — without any training or official mandate from the OSS.

Phillips, born Clara Snyder in 1907 or 1908, grew up in Portland after her father moved the family so he could work in the shipyards. She became a singer and dancer in Northwest clubs before joining a musical stock company that toured the world.

Most of what we know about Phillips is from her memoir. According to her account, she was persuaded by resistance forces in the Philippines to gather information in Manila from the Japanese occupiers, which she would then pass along to Filipino guerrillas and American forces. From October 1942 until her capture in May 1943, she ran a spy ring out of Club Tsubaki, a cabaret in Manila that was popular with Japanese officers. She smuggled out information in her brassiere, earning her the code name “High-Pockets.” She also funneled food, medicine, and other supplies to Americans being held in prisons around Manila.

When the Japanese intercepted one of her messages, Claire was captured, imprisoned, and tortured before being liberated by American troops in 1945. Phillips returned to Portland in 1948 and married again. That same year, at the recommendation of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, she received the Medal of Freedom for her work as a spy in the Philippines. Phillips spent the rest of her life battling the federal government over compensation for her war work in Manila. She lived in Portland until her death in 1960.

MARGARET MCLEOD, RED CROSS

By the end of World War II, three million women had volunteered for the American Red Cross, serving in various medical and support capacities throughout the world. The Red Cross had been active in Oregon since World War I, and many women joined the organization to help with civil defense and to staff medical facilities that faced labor shortages.

Margaret McLeod from The Dalles, Oregon, joined the Red Cross clubmobile service in 1943 and worked her way up to club manager. McLeod was raised in The Dalles, and graduated from Oregon Agricultural College. She documented her experience in the Red Cross in letters, photographs, and scrapbooks, all of which are part of the Oregon Historical Society’s Research Library archives. After serving briefly on a clubmobile — a job she found strenuous — McLeod spent the rest of the war helping establish and run clubs in Germany and England. McLeod eventually returned to Oregon and settled in Milwaukie, where she died in 1989.
NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN IN OREGON SHipyARDS

When the labor market opened up during World War II, more than 65,000 Native Americans worked for war industries or joined the armed forces. An estimated one fifth of Native American women who were able to work took for the Kaiser Shipyards in Portland and Vancouver.

The BIA supported the integration of Native women into the American workforce and armed forces, in large part because it reinforced a policy of cultural assimilation. Because both federal and local governments were still supporting various forms of segregation, the inclusion of Indians in the army and war industries presented an interesting question: Should Native Americans be classified as “colored” or “white”? Indians resisted segregation, and the federal government allowed Native American men and women to serve and work without being subject to racial exclusion practices, as African Americans were. After the war, many Native American women returned to reservations and used their skills to seek new work and leadership opportunities.

MRS. J.L. WASSON, PORT OF EMBARKATION

Portland was one of three subports of embarkation in the United States during World War II that maintained and operated ships, transported and housed military personnel, and controlled war supplies. Unlike the shipyard companies built around the ports, nearby military installations were slower to integrate. The Port of Portland hired at least two women to destroy government documents — Mrs. J.L. Wasson and her friend Alma Tugger.

Wasson, who referred to herself as “Nettie” in her oral history, arrived in Portland in 1937. She worked as a nanny and at the Meier & Frank Department Store, before taking advantage of the better pay offered by the Port of Portland after the war started. By her account, she became the first African American hired by the Port of Embarkation. Wasson was able to participate in a job market that needed to hire women and minorities to fill positions traditionally held by white men in order to keep up with wartime demands. The African American population in Portland increased dramatically during the 1940s, from around 2,000 to 22,000 people, because of the Kaiser shipyards.

In 1942, these nine women from the Chemawa Indian School trained at the National Youth Administration program to work in Portland’s shipyards.

This 1944 photograph shows an integrated team of Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation workers.

OHS Research Library, call no. 01610

OHS digital no. ba00790

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Hazel Ying Lee, who was born and educated in Oregon, was the first Chinese American woman to fly for the U.S. military, one of two Chinese Americans in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) and one of thirty-eight WASPs who died in service. Lee was born in Portland on August 24, 1912. Her parents, Yuet Lee and Siu Lan Lee, were Chinese immigrants who met and married in the United States, and then raised eight children in Portland at a time when anti-Chinese sentiment was prevalent. Hazel Ying Lee graduated from Commerce High School (now Cleveland High School).

In 1932, Japanese military forces invaded and occupied Manchuria, China. The League of Nations demanded their withdrawal, but Japan refused, and by 1933 occupied the northern province of Jehol. Lee, like many Chinese Americans, traveled to China in hopes of joining the Chinese Air Force to oppose the Japanese invasion, but they did not accept women pilots. In the Fall of 1942, she heard about and applied for the Women’s Flying Training Detachment (WFTD). She was accepted into the program, and during a six-month training regimen in Texas learned to fly a variety of military planes.

Shortly thereafter, the Women’s Air Ferrying Service (WAFS) merged with the WFTD and was renamed WASPs. Lee was stationed at the Air Transport Command’s 3rd Ferrying Squadron at Romulus Army Air Base in Michigan, where she flew ferrying and administrative flights.

Hazel Ying Lee was born in Oregon and became the first Chinese American woman to fly for the U.S. military, and one of two Chinese Americans in the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs).

Hazel Ying Lee died on November 25, 1944, as a result of injuries sustained in a collision on a runway in Great Falls, Montana. Lee’s service was typical of the over one thousand women who joined the WASPs. They did not receive military benefits; and for those thirty-eight who died in service, the U.S. Air Force did not pay for funeral expenses. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter gave WASPs veteran status. President Barack Obama awarded the WASPs the Congressional Gold Medal in 2010.

The title quote is from a report by Augusta Clawson, a welder for Oregon Shipbuilding Corp. on Swan Island, to the Department of Education and the Oregon Division of the U.S. Employment Service advising on training practices for female employees. Quoted by Amy Kesselman, Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver during World War II and Reconversion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 47.


5. Ibid.


7. Ibid., 22.

8. Ibid., 29.

9. An example of how the industry addressed the post-war employment issue for women can be found in the Kaiser shipyards publication, the Bo’s’n’s Whistle. The August 19, 1945, issue, for example, has an article titled “What will happen when they quit building ships?” and the women featured all declare their intention to return home. The issue is available on the Oregon History Project, http://oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/the-bo'sn's-whistle (accessed May 11, 2015).


U.S. Army men and women gather around an American Red Cross clubmobile “somewhere in Great Britain.” Margaret McLeod worked for a brief period on clubmobiles, such as this one, that served as mobile comfort stations for military units.