Women's Roles—World War II

by Betty Taylor

Throughout history, women as well as men have risen to meet war-time challenges. There are records of women who posed as men and engaged in combat as early as the Revolutionary War. Most often they served as nurses or in support areas that fit traditional women's roles—traditions that continue to evolve.

The nature and global extent of World War II heightened the need to involve the whole population in the war effort. Using women in the military as well as industrial jobs was inevitable.

More than 350,000 United States women joined the service during WWII. They worked as nurses, in administrative capacities, or in production. Some even flew airplanes.

Hartley resident, Irene Frick served in a division of the U. S. Navy known as the WAVES, an acronym for Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. She graduated from Hartley High School in 1942 and enlisted soon after. She achieved the rank of Yeoman 1st class while serving in bases on Grosse Isle, Michigan and in Chicago.

Betty Eeten and Beatrice Koostra, two of Hartley's most admired and revered nurses, were military nurses.

Betty Eeten, a Second Lieutenant, served at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. A friend and fellow nurse, Evelyn Reimers Checkle, recalled, "Betty once told me of a time when the Vice-President of the United States was one of her patients. He would not allow the nurses caring for him to wear perfume."

Caring for babies and assisting in the delivery room were life long passions for Betty. Perhaps her most memorable experience at Bethesda was the opportunity to aid in delivering a baby for Shirley Temple Black.

Beatrice Koostra held the rank of Lieutenant J.G. in the U.S. Army. She served as a Red Cross nurse from 1941-1945. Her tour of duty took her to England, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. Often times, she was only six miles from the front lines. A triage nurse, she cared for those with some of the most serious battlefield injuries. At war’s end, she was part of a somber group that toured a newly liberated concentration camp.

Eighteen million women were in the civilian work force during World War II, many filling jobs normally done by men. By 1945, more than 2.2 million of those women were working in war industries; building ships, aircraft, vehicles, and weaponry.

Joyce Peters and several others with Hartley connections worked in defense plants. Her future husband, Warren Jenkins, had moved to California and found a good job. With some help from him, a bit of her own savings, borrowed money, and ten dollars from her mother, Joyce moved there as well. She, Delores Adolph Snider, and Arlo Snider—who had enlisted in the navy, headed for California. A private travel bureau in Sioux City arranged an automobile ride for them in return for a share of the expenses. They survived the trip to Los Angeles in a car loaded with six people and their luggage.

Before long, Warren was drafted. While he and Arlo were in the service, Joyce and Delores shared an apartment in Los Angeles. They negotiated streetcars or rode in car pools to get to work at North American Defense Plant. Joyce wired radio boxes, and Delores, along with Bonnie Mangles Thee, painted parts. Other Hartley women who worked for North American were Doris Olhausen, and Ida Ewoldt. Area men and women worked in other California defense plants, and at times gathered to enjoy each others’ companionship.

When Joyce received her first pay check; she had only fifty cents left to her name. The $40 check looked like big money.

The iconic poster image, featuring women in defense plants, was “Rosie the Riveter.” Dorothy Hein, who worked in a defense plant in Utah, was one of the area women who riveted airplanes. Ruby Brower McCarty worked for a time in a munitions plant in Burlington, Iowa and then as a riveter in Naval shipyards in California.

At varying intervals, six women from our town moved east instead of west. They had passed civil service examinations and were headed for Washington D.C. to work for the FBI. Those women were Dorothy Fahrenkrog, Ruth Wilson Pippy, Mary Locke, Elaine Weimer, Billie Gathman Riedemann, and Jeanne Rohlf Hein.

Their workplace had once been a National Guard Armory. Jean Hein says everyone started in the mail room and worked up to better positions. She classified fingerprints. Their superiors arranged for them to meet with J. Edgar Hoover and to visit the facility in Quantico, Virginia, where FBI agents are trained.

Jean accepted the opportunity to work ten-hour days in order to earn some extra money. She doesn’t recall how much she earned, but does remember having money withdrawn from each paycheck to buy a $25 U.S. Savings Bond.

At one time she shared an apartment with three other women. As part of their routine, they took turns doing laundry in the evenings. Laundromats and clothes dryers were part of the future. They hand washed everything in the bathtub, and hung sheets and garments around the apartment to dry.

Working ten hour days didn’t leave a lot of spare time, but sometimes they went shopping or to a movie. Theaters often provided live entertainment by noted performers in addition to showing films.

Jean was in Washington from August of 1943 until April of 1945. At that time, she came home to help her father farm—another non-traditional women's role. Had she stayed on another month she would have witnessed the Victory Parade at the end of the war in Europe.

Women who remained in the area also served. Arla Rae Burley Westphalen recalls other interesting war-time experiences. After graduating from Hartley High School, she attended Nettleton Business College in Sioux Falls, and stayed on to work for downtown at Central Electric Telephone Company located next to Fantle's, a clothing store for women.

It was a time when nylon had gone to war to be used for parachutes and tents, and hosiery was in scarce supply. If word got out that Fantle's had a supply of nylons, the women would rush to the store as soon as possible. If they were lucky, they'd get there soon enough to buy one pair per customer. Nylon stockings remained scarce until the end of the war. *

Arla Rae belonged to the Girl's Service Organization, a group organized to entertain troops. At that time 335th Army Air Force Base was located in Sioux Falls, and many young men—hardly more than boys—were trained there, waiting to be sent on to further duty, most likely overseas. Members of the GSO were picked up by buses to attend chaperoned gatherings where they would visit and dance with the servicemen. Sometimes they met at the base, other times at the Arkota Ball Room. Arla Rae recalls meeting lots of lonely, homesick guys, concerned about what the future held for them.

Later she was employed by the newly established Veteran's Administration

Many women took jobs usually done by men. They raised Victory Gardens, got by on rationed goods, folded bandages for the Red Cross, recycled scarce materials, wrote letters, sent packages, raised their children, and grieved for the wounded, the missing, and those killed in action.

When peace treaties were signed, they rejoiced with the whole country, and welcomed those who returned. By then, the idea of women's roles had been forever changed.

* Nylon stockings were the favorite gift of American soldiers to impress British women. Nylon stockings were scarce in America until the end of World War II, but then returned with a vengeance. Shoppers crowded stores, and one San Francisco store was forced to halt stocking sales when it was mobbed by 10,000 anxious shoppers. Mary Bellis

Sources:

- *A Brief Historical Summary: Introduction to Women during Wartime*
- *How War Changed the Role of Women in the United States* by Joyce Bryant
- *The History of Nylon Stockings, Strong as Silk* by Mary Bellis
- Information from Jeanne Hein, Ellen Reimers Checkle, Connie Olhausen, Joyce Jenkins, ArlaRae Westphalen and Betty Crandall, niece of Beatrice Koostra.