24-5 Women Working at the Home Front (1944)

Norma Yerger Queen

Responding to a request from the U.S. Office of War Information for the observations of wartime female workers, Norma Yerger Queen—a Utahan married to a professional and employed in a military hospital—wrote about her work, community, and home life.

Source: Norma Yerger Queen to the Office of War Information, 1944.

The people of this community all respect women who work regardless of the type of work. Women from the best families & many officers' wives work at our hospital. It is not at all uncommon to meet at evening parties in town women who work in the kitchens or offices of our hospital (Army-Bushnell-large general). The city mayor's wife too works there.

The church disapproves of women working who have small children. The church has a strong influence in our county.

For the canning season in our county men's & women's clubs & the church all recruited vigorously for women for the canneries. . . .

I personally have encouraged officers' wives who have no children to get out and work. Those of us who have done so have been highly respected by the others and we have not lost social standing. In fact many of the social affairs are arranged at our convenience.

Some husbands do not approve of wives working & this has kept home some who do not have small children. Some of the women just do not wish to put forth the effort.

The financial incentive has been the strongest influence among most economic groups but especially among those families who were on relief for many years. Patriotic motivation is sometimes present but sometimes it really is a front for the financial one. A few women work to keep their minds from worrying about sons or husbands in the service.

In this county, the hospital is the chief employer of women. A few go to Ogden (20 miles away) to work in an

arsenal, the depot, or the air field. When these Ogden plants first opened quite a few women started to work there, but the long commuting plus the labor at the plants plus their housework proved too much.

Many women thoroughly enjoy working & getting away from the home. They seem to get much more satisfaction out of it than out of housework or bringing up children. Those who quit have done so because of lack of good care for their children, or of inability to do the housework & the job. . . .

I am convinced that if women could work 4 days a week instead of 5½ or 6 that more could take jobs. I found it impossible to work 5½ days & do my housework but when I arranged for 4 days I could manage both. These days one has to do everything—one cannot buy services as formerly. For instance—laundry. I'm lucky. I can send out much of our laundry to the hospital but even so there is a goodly amount that must be done at home—all the ironing of summer dresses is very tiring. I even have to press my husband's trousers—a thing I never did in all my married life. The weekly housecleaning—shoe shining—all things we formerly had done by others. Now we also do home canning. I never in the 14 yrs. of my married life canned 1 jar. Last summer I put up dozens of quarts per instructions of Uncle Sam. I'm only one among many who is now doing a lot of manual labor foreign to our usual custom. I just could not take on all that & an outside job too. It is no fun to eat out—you wait so long for service & the restaurants cannot be immaculately kept—therefore it is more pleasant & quicker to cook & eat at home even after a long day's work. I've talked with the personnel manager at the hospital & he agrees that fewer days a week would be better. The canneries finally took women for as little as 3 hrs. a day.

This is a farming area & many farm wives could not under any arrangements take a war job. They have too much to do at their farm jobs & many now have to go into the fields, run tractors & do other jobs formerly done by men. I marvel at all these women are able to do & feel very inadequate next to them. . . .

Here is the difference between a man working & a woman as seen in our home—while I prepare the evening meal, my husband reads the evening paper. We then do the dishes together after which he reads his medical journal or cogitates over some lecture he is to give or some problem at his lab. I have to make up grocery lists, mend, straighten up a drawer, clean out the ice box, press clothes, put away anything strewn about the house, wash bric a brac, or do several of hundreds of small "woman's work is never done" stuff. This consumes from 1 to 2 hrs. each evening after which I'm too weary to read any professional social work literature & think I'm lucky if I can keep up with the daily paper, Time Life or Reader's Digest. All this while my husband is relaxing & resting. When I worked full time, we tried doing the housecleaning together but it just didn't click. He is responsible for introducing penicillin into Bushnell & thus into the army & there were so many visiting brass hats & night conferences he couldn't give even one night a week to the house. Then came a mess of lectures of all kinds of medical meetings—he had to prepare those at home. I got so worn out it was either quit work or do it part time.

This has been a lot of personal experience but I'm sure we are no exception. I thought I was thro[ugh] working in 1938. My husband urged me to help out for the war effort—he's all out for getting the war work done & he agreed to do his share of the housework. He is not lazy but he found we could not do it. I hope this personal experience will help to give you an idea of some of the problems.

Questions

1. According to Queen, why did women take jobs during the war? Which reasons were especially important?
2. What practical factors limited women's participation in the labor force? How did practical factors affect women who came from different circumstances—farms, towns, the military base?
3. How did their outside jobs affect women's work at home? What problems and options did Queen mention?

24-6 Mother, When Will You Stay Home Again? (1944)

Wartime advertising encouraged married women with children to work in war industries, but increasingly such messages included references to the postwar lives of such women. This advertisement appeared a year before Germany's surrender, fifteen months before Japan's. (Far more American military casualties were suffered during this period than during the first twenty-nine months of America's involvement.)

War Industry Employment Advertisement (1944)

Source: Advertisement, Adel Manufacturing Company, *Saturday Evening Post*, May 6, 1944. Courtesy Gaslight Advertising Archives, Inc.

Questions

1. What role does the child play in the advertisement?
2. What purposes are served by placing the husband-father in military service?
3. How would the wartime experience of the wife-mother contribute to her postwar life, according to the ad?

25–2 Virginia Snow Wilkinson, From Housewife to Shipfitter, 1943

War brought extraordinary demands for labor in defense plants and other sectors of the economy as millions entered the armed forces. Women and African Americans, who had been largely excluded from high wage and skilled factory work in the past, now found new opportunities to obtain quality jobs. The Office of War Information and the mass media now encouraged women to do their patriotic duty and work in defense plants. The following magazine piece described one woman's experience with defense work

...Over and over for months I had heard from the radio the call for women to enter war work. I had been delaying for one reason or another but I finally recognized these arguments in favor of my going to the shipyards: my children, now in their teens, were able to take some responsibility for our home; I wanted to help out the war effort more than I had been doing through a few voluntary services; and with living costs always going up and the children's education looming ahead, we could use the money. So I had taken the aptitude test at the U.S. Employment Office, had attended a defense class for shipfitters, and was now on my way to an actual job at Richmond.

...When I reached the shipyards...I was borne along by the crowd and permitted to enter through the guarded gate when I had shown my temporary pass. I stood in a long line to receive papers; I stood in another line to receive tool checks (for every tool borrowed, a chip from your stack). At last some sixty of us women were herded to a personnel building, where a young man addressed us on safety precautions, the woman counselor for the day shift advised us about our clothing, and then, after a tour of the yard, we were divided into the trades for which we had been employed. The names of the welders were called and responded to. An escort was assigned to take them to their locations. The burners were selected, the flangers, the chippers, the checkers. Only a sparse group remained to be grouped as shipfitters' helpers—six women besides myself, Negro and white. Again we started out en masse; this time to a little cottage which was labeled "Master Shipfitter." The man upon whom the cottage door opened was small and harassed. We were presented to him a little apologetically, I thought, by our guide.

"What have you got there?" the shipfitter asked.

"Just a few shipfitter helpers, Mr. Jepson."

"Oh, my God! Women shipfitters. Why do they treat me like this? Women shipfitters...."

...I was sent to work on a nearly completed hull in one of the concrete basins—a hull which had been constructed up to its weather deck. I found myself on the rusty black steel more amazed than ever before.

I was assigned to a leaderman working high on the side of the ship.

"You come along with me, duchess. I'll teach you how to make scuppers. Come on."

To "come on" meant to clamber over the side of the ship until I felt the scaffolding beneath me. The simplest way seemed to be to jump from the deck to the scaffold, for I was not going to be caught lagging behind the men here where I was the only woman on the side of the hull. Sometimes a worker would extend a hand of assistance. I refused to see it. I jumped from deck to scaffold, catching myself by a clutch at a handy pipe; I squeezed to the outer edge of the support to allow another worker to pass; I ran along the scaffold planks. All this in abysmal ignorance of where I was. It was hours later, I think, when my leaderman, standing beside me, tossed a little piece of wood or rag overboard and I heard no sound from it as it fell or lighted. I

looked over and down, and down, and then crept by inches back to the security of the hull's side. No soft billowy water lay beneath us, but a great depth of brutal concrete.

"Do people often fall off the scaffold?" I asked, shaking.

"Not often," my leaderman assured me. "Only once."

I did not allow the firm surface of the hull to get out of my clasp for the remainder of the afternoon, not, that is, until later, when a piece of red-hot steel just skinned between me and the hull I was clinging to. It landed at my feet still glowing. I looked up at the men above me, who were preoccupied with the burning of a hole.

"Never mind, darling," the leaderman soothed. "I think they saw you."

But later I heard him berating these same burners. "You let a red-hot clip fall within an inch of her—what the hell you trying to do?"

The next day Mr. Jepson sent me out to an assembly way where I was entered upon the foreman's books as a shipfitter's helper. Here are made the double bottoms which hold water and oil for the ship's needs and for necessary ballast and, I suppose, give a second bottom when the first is missing. These units look much like the honeycomb of a wasp's nest—with the wasps still crawling about chipping, marking, and welding. They are built up off the ground about five feet on skids of heavy timber and iron....

I walked along the skids and bumped into a man in tan, apparently an engineer. We talked.

"Tell me," I asked, "Do you think I have misjudged my job? Do you think if I keep trying I can find something to do?"

"Let me tell you," he said. "I have degrees from four different universities. I helped build Singapore and Pearl Harbor. And *I* can't find a job for myself."

I took my problem to Mr. Jepson.

"Can't you find a job with something for me to do?" I asked him.

"You've got a job, haven't you?"

"You mean I've been employed. But I can't go on taking money for doing nothing. I've got to respect myself or leave."

"My God, all day long they come in here wanting me to find them a job with more to do. What do you think I am? I can't revolutionize the industry. What people don't understand is that this is shipfitting. You can't build ships the way you do other things." He spread out his arms. "There are times while the work is getting laid out when few people are needed but then, after it shapes up, everyone around, and more, can be thrown on it. There just has to be a period of lull. If this were a peacetime activity the boss would be around with more work than anyone could do, shouting, 'Get the hell on to the job.' But by God, woman, this is war. What can you expect?

Later, my foreman, answering the same inquiry, said, "The management does employ more men and women than it can put to work at once but they are here on hand, taking on new experience, learning new terminology—port, starboard, bulkhead, and vertical keel. Some will drop out but eventually the others will be drawn in on the job. Some of those will be no good. The others will build ships. You've got to have a lot of people to draw from in order to get even some good workmen. They shake the basket after a while and the capable come to the top."

"And the women?" I asked.

"And the women too have got to be used. The men don't like the idea; they voted against it in their unions; but they'll get used to women in time and think nothing of it. They used to feel the same way about women in the plate shop, but it's full of women now—they run the show—and there's no real hostility there toward them any more. Women haven't been seen much on ships yet but they'll be seen as the war goes on."

I was glad he mentioned the war. I had been wondering whether it was because there were no radio news reports here that no one spoke of the war, that great events shaping outside were diminished and pushed back from the consciousness of men. Was it because there were no clocks—for never a one could you find in the yard—that there seemed to be so little realization of the time that was so late? It was hard indeed to remember the urgency of the voices on the air, my own struggle against a sense of guilt and conscience, and the compulsion that had finally brought me to this job I was not doing. Should I leave? I remembered my husband's and children's absurd pride in my being here and decided to give myself two months to find something real to do.

...It must have been a fortnight or so later that I was given my first real shipfitting job...I was taught to put chocks on the double bottom. Chocks act as supports when the unit is turned over and put into the waiting hull. For weeks the craftsmen of our skids had worked on a huge section of double bottom, labeled XAK, which was at last passed as finished. It was prepared by the riggers to be lifted by the cranes—and then the whistle blew and we all went home. In the morning we learned that while the cranes were lifting the sixty tons—on the graveyard shift, mind you—the great weight suddenly broke loose and dropped, breaking a crane, smashing the roadway and concrete walk, and quite ruining the unit itself.

If the work in the basin on Hull 6 was not to be held up we had to rush a new XAK to replace the other. All hands were thrown upon it—even my hands. I was told to locate the chocks on the blueprint, to measure for them, to find the chocks, to get a welder to put them on, and to check to see that they were square....

A few mornings later, as soon as we stepped upon the skids, we perceived that something new was astir. The shipfitting women—there were three of us—were called together.

"We're going to give you your own unit to work on together," the leaderman said. "XAK is your baby now. Study your print, square your frame lines down the vertical keel, and get the crane to bring you your steel."

Alice, our naive nineteen-year-old, glowed. "Golly," she said. "Really?" The colored girl was more sophisticated but we were all pleased.

"Let's be so accurate and careful that they won't be able to find a thing wrong. Let's check and recheck everything...."

"We'll work it out together. If one of us makes a mistake we'll tell her and correct it and no bad feelings..." "We'll all stand and fall together on it." That was the way we talked.

I never saw such a change in three workmen as in these three girls. We became integrated persons working together on a project which focused all our interests. I noticed how quickly we ran our own errands, how conscientious we were in checking, how we abhorred sloppy measurements. For once we had been given responsibility, for once we had been put on our own, for once we had enough to do.

"When we finish we'll hold open house and invite you in to tea," we told our leaderman.

Our enjoyment was such that we did not notice that something was amiss until late in the afternoon. Then we became gradually aware of the hostility of the men. Our woman burner reported that they were "seething with resentment" that women should be given a unit to construct. The women checkers said, "You should just hear what we hear outside our checking shed, my dears." This was the first time I had come up against the hostility of one sex toward another and I could not believe it. The men had always been so decent, so respectful, so kindly. But this was the first time that we had been seen in the light of competitors. We had been amusing little creatures only too happy to take what crumbs of jobs were dropped to us.

Our leaderman said, "I know, but pay no attention. They'll have to get used to women shipfitters. Half these men may be in the Army this January. They might as well accept the fact that women will have to take their places."

Our woman checker said, "In September I was one of the first women ever to be admitted out here in the yards. You could have cut the resentment with a knife and spread it thick. But it's gradually being worn away."

The next day, with no explanation, our XAK, "our baby," was taken from us and given to the men. We had to stand aside and see the men working on what we felt was our project. Cora, whose boy friend was one of the group, said the men were afraid the assemblies would become like the plate shop—overrun by women. She took herself over to the unit where her friend was working, to lean against the steel. Alice took out her lipstick: "Oh, what the heck do I care so long as I get my dollar five an hour. But it *was* fun."

I tried to reflect that there must be another side to this thing. Maybe the men who were heads of families, straining to take care of several dependents, and who had known the bitter struggle for a living—maybe these men resented the fact that any eighteen-year-old could come out without a day's training, without a grain of tool sense or mechanical sense, and draw the same pay as they and rise at the same rate—even these girls who would go at once into debt for fur coats and "perfectly adorable" evening gowns. The pay was too high for the beginner, I knew—for the boy who had quit high school as well as for the girl. The experienced workman might easily feel resentment. But this I knew too; that the responsibility placed upon these girls had made them almost in one day into serious workmen....

I had promised myself two months in which to find myself here in the shipyards but my probation was not to last so long. It seemed that we, the women, were being assimilated gradually, if slowly. For a while we had floated on top, undissolved, but the broth was big enough with a little stirring and stewing to absorb us all—or almost all. The great need was for experienced workmen, men or women; and time on the job, doing this and a little of that, adds up finally to experience. I was given more and more to do. (When I told my leader-man that I liked having more to do he answered, "Well, neither you nor I nor the shipyards are as new and green as we were; we're all getting under way.") Six weeks from the date of my arrival at the yard I was given a unit to handle by myself. I guess it was not so much but it was my own.

1. What are the most difficult obstacles facing Wilkinson on her new job? How does she deal with them?