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WHAT KIND OF WOMAN WOULD WORK IN MEATPACKING, ANYWAY?
WORLD WAR II AND THE ROAD TO FAIR EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract. World War II accelerated the movement of rural and small town Iowa women into manufacturing industry. Scholars have debated the significance of World War II for gender relations, but the recent consensus is that only focused studies of particular localities can address the complexity of the changes effected by the War. This study looks at Iowa women in meatpacking plants. Assessing the economic background, their prior efforts to enter packing plants, and the resistance they met in the plants makes their limited gains understandable. Women of rural and small town wage earning households had always been workers, usually in the informal sector; and their World War II experience was a continuation of this pattern in a formal job setting. While the women did not consistently press for gender equality as workers, they achieved more security and higher incomes than they had previously.

World War II reorganized the work of women in rural Iowa, as it did more generally for women throughout the country. With the shift from a severe economic depression to full production, women found new employment opportunities. This paper is about the Iowa women whose wartime search for work took them into meatpacking plants.

During World War II government contracts for meat and meat byproducts generated a level of production that brought forth untapped labor potential of women, releasing a flood of energy that helped to shift the course of world history. William Chafe (1972:195, 234), in his survey of the history of American women, found World War II to have been a “watershed event” that drastically modified the balance of power between men and women, as women capably moved into jobs that had formerly been men’s. Women were welding and riveting bombers in the cities; in Iowa they were cutting up hogs to provide food for allied soldiers and civilians. While
women had worked sporadically in meatpacking plants, wartime conditions expanded their range of jobs and greatly increased their numbers. Some of the existing doubts about the worthiness of women's paid work disappeared as women workers were no longer seen to be unfairly depriving men of their jobs but instead were fulfilling a patriotic duty.

But others have countered this interpretation, claiming that the changes were not as unambiguous as might be gathered from the dramatic increase in the number of women industrial workers. Inequalities remained as women met resistance from both employers and unions. Family responsibilities and double standards of sexuality limited women's freedom. The general economic recovery from the depression of the 1930s might have contributed as much to their improved employment opportunities as any change in gender expectations, and closer examination of industrial work reveals that the war shifted rather than abolished gender division of labor in factories. Studies of the structures of specific industries and the historical particularities of subpopulations reveal the complexity of the change (Anderson 1981; Campbell 1984; Gabin 1990; Goldin 1991; Hartmann 1982; Kessler-Harris 1982; Milkman 1987).

The Invisible Nature of Women's Work

What is the context for the World War II movement of rural and small town Iowa women into meatpacking and other manufacturing plants? We know that the census representation of the majority of rural women as nonworkers in the early twentieth century was misleading (Fink 1986). The expansion of women's wage employment coincided with a decline in work which would, if done by men, have been registered as self employment (Folbre 1993:136). But this tells us little about the social and economic diversity that actually existed. Rural women included farm women, women in family businesses in towns, wage earning women, teachers, and more. The women who gradually worked their way into meatpacking jobs had their roots in rural wage labor households, and these households faced a different reality than did those of farmers or merchants.

The Jeffersonian agrarian ideology that propelled the settlement of Iowa as a farming region rested on the belief that the family farm was the foundation of economic security and individual freedom, and this gave farmers a great advantage over their employees (Fink 1992; Guerin-Gonzalez 1994:12). With the founding of country towns to service the farm population this fundamental belief in the goodness of the self-employed entrepreneur
was broadened to encompass the country shopkeeper who, like the farmer, built his business and ran it with his own labor. The ideal of the independent entrepreneur had a salience in the predominantly rural context of Iowa that could not be sustained in eastern states that were dominated by large cities with commanding majorities of wage laborers. Rural scholars have reinforced the belief that rural life was basically about small property owners (Atherton 1952; Morain 1988; Stock 1992).

Yet the image of independent entrepreneurship did not apply to everyone. Not only did it fail to capture the experience of farm women (Fink 1992), it also glossed over the significant number of persons who supported the settlement of farming regions as workers on farms and in other businesses. The invisibility of this population of hired workers was not incidental; it was integral to the ideology of the self-made man who settled on the prairie plains. The story of the rugged, individualistic farm settler loses some of its sheen when one observes that a host of construction workers built the railroads and bridges that enabled settlement, that hired workers did much of the farm and domestic labor, and that wage laborers manufactured essential farming equipment. Although a little digging reveals the presence of rural wage workers, it is harder to discern what the building up of the economy has meant for them. Their ordeals and their views of the world have never defined the rural experience in the way that farmers' perspectives have. The economy and social life of the rural regions of the prairies and plains rested on their labor at every juncture, but they lived in a different social and ideological dimension from their employers.

Women in these wage labor households have been doubly diminished in the historical record. In the years from 1900 through World War II, the women of wage labor households of rural and small town Iowa followed the general occupational trajectory away from concentration in farming and domestic work. Although women tended to move into jobs in the service sector, a minority went into manufacturing industry, mostly for brief periods. The experience of the early women wage earners opened doors and established patterns, conditions and expectations for women workers after World War II. Meatpacking was an indigenous Iowa industry that gradually widened its employment of women. Tracing the experience of women workers moving into meatpacking plants provides a window onto what rural women experienced as they pushed on the boundaries of the male world.

The process of change in women's lives emerges largely through the stories they themselves have told. Seventeen interviews from the Iowa Labor History Oral Project (ILHOP) tell the stories of women who worked in Iowa
meatpacking plants during World War II or before. These interviews and two
done with male Mexican laborers are deposited at the Iowa State Historical
Society Archives (Alvarez 1994; Vasquez 1994), although the ILHOP inter­
views are presently open for research only by permission. I have collected
sixteen additional interviews relating to women's work in wage labor house­
holds before and during World War II using the accepted anthropological
procedure of extending anonymity to the interview subjects. Like the ILHOP
interviews, these are not open for general use. I have altered proper names in
the interview texts of those interviewed anonymously.

The Domestic Labor of Nonfarm Women

Included in the rural and small town wage earner population were
women in the households of hired farm laborers, miners, construction work­
ers and railroad workers. A large number of these women were paid domestic
laborers. At key times, notably during World War I, women workers gained
access to higher paying jobs in manufacturing and transportation industries.
At other times, especially through the 1920s and 1930s, wage income for
both men and women was intermittent at best. Women's subsistence produc­
tion and housework subsidized all of these households.

Like the Iowa population as a whole, and the rural population espe­
cially, the majority of these wage workers were White. However, the wage
worker population was more ethnically diverse than was the farm or business
population (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1943:849, 868). In Buxton, a mining
community in southern Iowa, over half the population was Black in 1905
(Schwieder et al. 1987:40), and Mexican immigrants worked in the sugar
beet fields around Mason City (Effland 1991). Enclaves of Mexican and
Black workers camped outside of railroad towns. In 1912, for example, when
the Milwaukee Railroad recruited a Black work crew for construction in its
Perry, Iowa, yards they were relegated to a "Camp Lincoln" outside of town
(Perry Advertiser 1912). The Blacks who remained in the Perry area later
lived in boxcars and eventually moved into small homes on the outskirts of
town and in the surrounding countryside. The railroad also hired a dispro­
portionate number of recent eastern European immigrants in the years be­
fore World War I (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1910). Employers benefitted
from the ethnic prejudices that kept these workers from melting into the rural
mainstream. The best these ethnic minorities could hope for were jobs at
whatever wages the employers offered; during times of labor surplus they
lost even this employment.
The canonical representation of a family economy in terms of a working man supporting a dependent wife and children with his income reflects a conventional ordering and valuing rather than historical description (Turbin 1992:214). Just as farm women contributed to their households in unacknowledged ways through their poultry, dairy, and horticultural production, the domestic labor of nonfarm women also contributed key economic resources toward subsistence (Fink 1986; Boydston 1986). The keeping of chickens, pigs, cows, and goats was not limited to farm households. Whether in the country or in town, wage labor families supplemented their cash income with a wide range of subsistence activities. At times it would be the only source of support for worker households. As one woman explained, “You’d be surprised the livestock that people had in town during the Depression—hogs and stuff right in their back yard. Nobody paid any attention to it.” These animals, together with gardens and fruit trees, provided produce for consumption and small but critical amounts of cash.

The interweaving of the waged and nonwaged economy can be seen in the history of a community of Mexican railroad workers employed by the Santa Fe Railroad. The community was established outside of Fort Madison, Iowa, during the 1910s as the railroad (illegally) recruited Mexican workers uprooted in the chaos of their country’s revolution. Excluded from the railroad unions and paid less than the White workers with whom they labored, Mexicans’ wages were minimal and their living standards were marginal. The railroad made their low incomes sufferable by providing housing of sorts, dispensing medical care, allocating railroad passes, and by offering the Mexicans unused railroad land so they could raise their own crops. Unable initially to secure housing in town, the Mexicans lived in boxcars provided by the company, the women and children of different households being thrown together in close proximity to where the men worked in the railroad yards. In the 1920s the company built bunkhouses for workers and their families, and extended family groups were gradually able to purchase adjacent land and put up their own clusters of small homes. Extending their workdays, the households supplemented their railroad wages by raising chickens, goats, pigs, and cows and by cultivating plots of corn, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, and squash. This subsistence and the small cash income it produced were crucial to the maintenance of the Mexican community, particularly during the 1930s when most of the Mexican railroad workers had only spotty wage income (Fort Madison Daily Democrat 1987; Alvarez 1994; Vasquez 1994).
While few of the Mexican women in the Fort Madison community drew paychecks from the railroad, their labor was a key resource for their families and indirectly for the railroad, which was able to maintain a surplus labor force at less than the cost of living. Women kept house and raised large numbers of children in makeshift living quarters, absorbing the heavy labor demands of keeping the living space warm and inhabitable. They fed their families by grinding home-grown corn on stone metates and making tortillas, the staple food. The women served these tortillas with beans that they bought dry in twenty-five-pound bags, but the occasional fish and meat that filled out the diet came largely from subsistence production rather than from cash purchases. Women also participated in household enterprises such as a butchering and sausage making business described by a former resident. Another woman earned money by making and selling doughnuts from her home. All of the subsistence and cash generated in household production depended on the resources of the railroad, which bound them to it even as it discriminated against them (Fort Madison Daily Democrat 1987; Alvarez 1994; Vasquez 1994).

Although it was rare for a Mexican woman to work outside the household, they supervised the labor of children who did. A small boy would earn a bit of money for his mother by carrying hot lunches to railroad workers. Mexican women would hire out children to White households to do chores such as mowing grass, washing windows or scrubbing a porch; and the mothers would collect the money for this labor. In this way, the women turned their extensive child rearing work into cash income, which they dispersed to keep their households functioning (Alvarez 1994; Vasquez 1994).

As in the Mexican families, it was more common for White children than mothers to go out to work to supplement the household income before World War II (Lamphere 1987; ILHOP: St. John 1978:11). When married women were pressed to work outside their own homes they were most likely to do domestic labor, in this way adding the work of their employers’ households onto that of their own. Many young women earned their first income as teenagers when they would work as “girls,” that is, in domestic service. While much of this paid domestic labor fell outside the census record, more Iowa women were recorded as working in “domestic and personal service” in the 1915 state census than in any other worker category, a pattern that continued through the 1940 federal census (Iowa Census 1916:552; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1943:869). This relegation of woman’s
work to the domestic sphere was a small salute to the fiction that a household was supported by a male wage earner.

Keeping young women in school cost households money and also limited the income they could bring into the home. Women interviewed anonymously expressed regret and sometimes resentment over being pressed to quit school to work. The balance between individual and family needs was an uneasy and shifting compromise. One woman whose mother was mentally and physically disabled remembered having to support herself from the time she was twelve, finally quitting school when she was a sophomore in high school in 1935:

Young people worked if they could work at something. They usually could do jobs like babysitting or raking yards or mowing lawns. . . . All of the young people didn’t work, but I did because I somehow thought I had to have money. . . .

(Question: Did you give your money to your parents?)

I did if I lived at home. If I lived at home my dad took all of it. So I tried not to live at home, because he took every dime. It probably wasn’t the thing to do, but parents did that. They took the money from the kids. If the kids made it they just took it. They had to have it. They had to pay rent and what not all. It wasn’t unusual, but I resented it so I tried to live with the people I worked for.

Regardless of the conflict within a family or a household about how resources would be allocated, a teenaged woman was usually anchored to her parents, whether or not she lived in their household.

Daughters of farm labor families might be in the fields from an early age. As with the northern Colorado family of sugar beet workers described in the fiction of Hope Sykes ([1935], 1982), Mary Ashlock recalled twelve to fourteen-hour workdays thinning, weeding and harvesting sugar beets. Born in 1915 in southern Minnesota as one of six children in a family of migrant sugar beet and onion laborers, she began field work when she was seven, attending school only from around the first of November to the last part of April (ILHOP: Ashlock 1981).

Different women also supported their household economies through a variety of illegal occupations, including prostitution, bootlegging and gam-
bling. As one woman recalled the economically and socially marginal district of her childhood in the 1920s and 1930s:

> There was a west side area where most of the gamblers and hookers lived, . . . “Mrs. George” had this place, way out, and lots of the lawyers would go out there on weekends and booze it up. You know what I mean. She ran a bootleg joint. . . . The businessmen put blinders on and didn’t question it, because a lot of them participated in the gambling and the drinking and the whoring that was going on.

Activity of this type provided color and entertainment for the propertied population and helped to redistribute some of their income. It was not uncommon, although it put the women in continuing personal and legal jeopardy.

**Combining Informal and Seasonal Work**

By the 1930s increasing numbers of women, both young and mature, were combining informal work with seasonal work in meatpacking, a pattern that reached back to the nineteenth century for some Iowa farm producers (McCarty and Thompson 1933). As the packing industry grew, it was absorbing more labor. Mary Ashlock was one who left the sugar beet fields and presented herself for work at the Decker plant in Mason City, Iowa, in 1931 at the age of sixteen. With her father disabled, she was contributing a major part of the support of her family (ILHOP: Ashlock 1981).

Meatpacking, as a manufacturing job, was a step up from illegal, domestic, or farm labor. It paid more money than domestic labor, and a meatpacking company offered a worker a more substantial place of employment; but it was not an easy job to get. During the Depression would-be workers would crowd around packing plant gates and wait for a boss to come out and select those to be hired for a particular day. Some of the job seekers would appear daily for months hoping to be selected. Through intercession with a friend of her mother, Mary Ashlock was fortunate to be hired to make bacon cartons.

However, this hiring was by no means the simple or straightforward procedure that might have been apparent to a casual onlooker or even to those seeking work. With many times as many job seekers as jobs, a woman almost invariably needed an inside connection to get a job in a packing plant. Jeanette Haymond, who as a single mother of two children sought a job in the
Wilson plant in Cedar Rapids after being laid off at this plant earlier, explained:

Now this is the way it worked back then. I met a fellow that went around to dances when I did. I knew him real well and that, and he was working in the beef department there. He asked me what I was doing there. I said, “Well, I’m trying to get back on again. If I ever get in I’m never going to quit again.”

He said, “Well, that’ll be a problem won’t it.”

I said, “It might be. I don’t know. So far, nothing.”

You know, you go down there in the morning, and you sit and wait, and they say, “Well, that’s all. We’re through hiring.”

And he told me that he was a good friend of the fellow that did the hiring. He says, “I’ll talk to him for you. You come back down tomorrow morning.”

And I did, and the next morning the guy that did the hiring called my name. I went in there and talked to him and he says, “Well, I’ve got an opening this morning, a couple of openings, but it’s on the killing floor. I don’t think you’d like that very well, but you come back day after tomorrow and I think I can get you on in the trimming floor. It’s cleaner there, and I think you’d like that better.”

I says, “I think I would too.”

So I went back. If you know somebody and they pull the strings a little bit for you you can get on. There was no union then. (ILHOP: Haymond 1977:7-8)

Even after she got this job she was forced to work a half hour before she clocked in in order to keep it. Mary Ashlock initially got into the Decker plant because her mother knew someone to whom she could make a plea that their family was destitute and dependent on her income. A man who hired meatpacking workers explained in an interview that he would never hire a married woman unless her husband was gone or incapacitated; he screened all of the women for need. While there were plants that did hire women with employed husbands, it was still true that their personal connections to influential plant personnel were critical (See also ILHOP: Fritz 1978:1).

For women wage earners, the shift from farm and informal work to packing plants and other factories seldom occurred all at once. Seasonal layoffs at the packing plants could be expected; other layoffs could come at arbitrary times. Both Mary Ashlock and Jeanette Haymond were laid off.
shortly after they first started working at the plants. Ashlock returned to the sugar beet fields and Haymond worked an interim stint sewing overalls in Cedar Rapids.

But even while workers thought of themselves as employed, the work was sporadic. Jeanette Haymond reported that in the plant where she worked the probation period was sixty days, and it was common for women to work fifty-eight days, get laid off for two weeks and then rehired (ILHOP: Haymond 1977:23-24). Velma Wetzel, who also worked at this plant in the 1930s, said that she worked for nine years before she was allowed to complete her probation (ILHOP: Wetzel 1979:4).

Mary Ashlock told of a day when she went to work at seven o’clock in the morning, worked an hour, got sent home, returned at ten to work a short time before being sent home again, and had to return at three to finish the day’s work. Male packing workers would go downtown to play cards when their workdays were interrupted; Mary Ashlock would go home to do her housework. Unlike most women in previous years, in her second foray into the plant she found herself, as a seventeen-year-old, combining married life and work. By the time she returned to work in 1932 she had a husband and a baby, and she was paying four dollars of her five dollar weekly income to her babysitter. Her husband, also a plant worker, was making approximately nine dollars a week.

Although Mary Ashlock spent another summer in the sugar beets when her packing job failed, the Depression conditions of the 1930s meant that, in general, farm jobs were closing down faster than factory jobs were opening up. Some farm family members returned from cities to find their livelihood on their home farms, and ever fewer farmers had the cash or the work for nonfamily hands. The subsistence economy continued to be critical for those caught in limbo. Packing workers often lived in separate enclaves within or just outside of the packing towns where they could partially support themselves with small scale garden and livestock production (ILHOP: Bankson 1981:47, St. John 1978:1, 11; Warren 1992).

Expanding Opportunities and New Choices: Women, Meatpacking and World War II

All of this changed dramatically when World War II recharged the entire U.S. economy, including the meatpacking industry. Although government programs had relieved the worst symptoms of poverty for some of the workers in the 1930s, it was the burst of wartime production beginning in the
late 1930s that brought good jobs to hourly wage earners. Farm and domestic employment could not compete for workers with manufacturing jobs, as many wage earners gained access to jobs that only the fortunate few could hold previously. The War as remedy for the Depression worked by tapping all available resources. Since women in wage labor households had constituted a large population on the margins of the labor force, recruiting these women workers was seen as a winning tactic.

Women who had pleaded for meatpacking work in the 1930s found opportunity and new choices as World War II descended, even though there remained some plants that still refused to hire them (ILHOP: Stearns 1982:12). With military contracts, meatpackers geared up to maximum production. When male workers left for military service, many plant managers willingly hired as many women as they could get; and they wanted to keep them on the job. Government contracts awarded the companies cost plus ten percent, and this removed some incentive for the plants to hold labor costs down. Workers could improve both their incomes and the profits of the plant owners by taking some time to relax on the job rather than going home when they finished working (ILHOP: Lindner 1981:28). The Morrell plant in Ottumwa hired two women to replace each man who left for the service (ILHOP: Morrow 1981; Erzinger 1981). This and other war industry employment openings in the rural setting further accelerated the drift of rural wage workers away from farms during the 1940s (Goudy et al. 1988:53).

The Continuation of Occupation Segregation

But not every woman who took a job in a meatpacking plant was actually taking over a man’s job. Nearly all of the women who had previously done meatpacking work had been placed in gender-segregated jobs. The 1911 Iowa Bureau of Labor Report listed women as labellers, sausage makers, meat trimmers, and potato peelers (Iowa Bureau of Labor 1913:126), and this was generally the kind of work that women did in packinghouses when they could get it. Although isolated women had found jobs among male workers in kill or cut, most women packing workers had been in sausage, bacon, canning, or packaging departments before World War II. With wartime government contracts calling for large purchases of processed and packaged meats, the women’s departments expanded, and the majority of women continued to be assigned there.

With some exceptions, the use of a knife represented a critical division between a male job and a female job in meatpacking. Knowing how to use a
knife properly marked a worker as skilled. A skilled meatcutter could move his knife quickly and smoothly along the contours of a carcass, feeling precisely where to sever ligaments and sinews so that the separate cuts of meat emerged quickly and in good form. If a worker did not have the right touch, the job would become slow and messy. In addition to knowing how to make the proper cuts, a skilled worker honed his knife constantly to keep the cutting edge razor sharp. This involved drawing the knife over the sharpening steel at exactly the right angle and with exactly the right pressure. The steel, which each knife worker hung on a chain around his waist, had to be prepared with sandpaper of varying textures so that its minute striations were precisely suited to the blade’s edge. While a skilled worker would move effortlessly through his job, novice meatcutters would spend considerable amounts of time trying to learn the deceptively simple procedures. Moreover, they learned these skills on the line, where they would tap the generosity and patience of the more experienced workers. Without the indulgence of
Women Who Worked in Meatpacking

Figure 2. During World War II meatpacking companies met government purchase orders of meat by boxing meat for shipment. Women provided much of the increased labor in the Tobin packing plant. Photograph courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa–Iowa City. Labor PA120 H. Dodge #17.

Ethel Jerred who went to work at the Morrell plant in Ottumwa in 1942, recalled that the jobs in the women’s departments paid fifty-nine cents an hour, while the jobs in the men’s departments paid from seventy-two to seventy-seven cents an hour (ILHOP: Jerred 1981:5). But women’s jobs in the plant were still better than women’s jobs outside the plant. A woman who went to work in a woman’s department job in 1940 compared the forty-seven cent hourly wage she got in the plant with the twenty-four cents she had been receiving as a clerk in a dime store in Ottumwa (ILHOP: Erzinger 1981:1).

Ethel Jerred was one of eighteen women who went into men’s departments at Morrell during World War II. She remembered that some men in

a master cutter a new hire trying to learn knife skills on the job would have a hard time (ILHOP: Morrow 1981:25).

Historically men’s packinghouse jobs, calling on knife skills or other specialized knowledge, were higher paying than women’s jobs (Iowa Bureau of Labor 1913:126; The Woman Worker 1938, ILHOP: St. John 1978:21-22). Ethel Jerred who went to work at the Morrell plant in Ottumwa in 1942, recalled that the jobs in the women’s departments paid fifty-nine cents an hour, while the jobs in the men’s departments paid from seventy-two to seventy-seven cents an hour (ILHOP: Jerred 1981:5). But women’s jobs in the plant were still better than women’s jobs outside the plant. A woman who went to work in a woman’s department job in 1940 compared the forty-seven cent hourly wage she got in the plant with the twenty-four cents she had been receiving as a clerk in a dime store in Ottumwa (ILHOP: Erzinger 1981:1).

Ethel Jerred was one of eighteen women who went into men’s departments at Morrell during World War II. She remembered that some men in
these departments resented women coming in, and that women had trouble because no one would show them how to sharpen their knives. She herself had the advantage of having her husband in the plant and working on the cut floor, and he taught her how to handle a knife. Unlike this Morrell plant, other meatpackers such as the Tobin company in Fort Dodge, Iowa, hired a substantial number of women but did not integrate them into men’s knife jobs (ILHOP: Jones 1981:18, Lindner 1981:28).

The meatpacking unionization that effectively transformed the structure of the industry during World War II was significant for women workers because it put an end to much of the informal hiring and layoffs, formalized grievance and job bidding procedures, and raised wages. Although packing workers had organized through the AFL in 1897, the major packing companies had overpowered them and left the unions in disarray. The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), which organized under the CIO during World War II, succeeded largely because of the altered economic climate of the war period and the support of the War Labor Board, whose maintenance of membership policy effectively produced a union shop in any organized plant. The government-generated demand, together with wartime regulation of prices and wages, reduced companies’ incentives to fight union growth in this crucial incubating period. While women did not take major leadership positions in the packinghouse locals or in the international union hierarchies, they were hard working grass-roots organizers (Horowitz 1989/90:252; ILHOP: Ames 1978:23, Ashlock 1981:30, St. John 1978:24; Perry and Kegley 1989:102-5).

“No Decent Woman...”

Although the depth of the overall change should not be overstated, women’s World War II work in packing plants represented more than simply an increase in numbers. Gender-based job structures remained in effect and were unquestioned by the unions, yet there was a shift in the gender division of labor on the production floor. Moreover, women were part of a drive to consolidate cross-gender advances through union organizing, which had never been a part of their previous experience.

But it did not come easily for women; they paid for their admission into male territory. Meatpacking was hard and dirty work, and at a basic level moving into that world called their fundamental decency into question. It was money that drew the women into the plants; there were few if any intrinsic rewards in the work itself. For the women who moved into men’s
departments, the work could be excruciatingly unpleasant. Ethel Jerred recalled her first day of work, in which she lifted livers:

I thought I was the most abused person in the whole world, and I just knew I was never going back to that job again. I was dirty, blood all over me. I’d never been that dirty before. But you learn to swallow your pride. When you look at that big paycheck, you swallow your pride. (ILHOP: Jerred 1981:6)

She said that during World War II most people thought that no decent woman would go to work with a group of men in a packinghouse. Indeed, it had not been unusual in years past for low-income women to experience sexual exploitation. It was up to the women to prove that their presence in the plants did not mean that they were seeking sexual income. They had to prove that they were “decent.” One man described the shame of women coming to work in the Tobin packing plant in Fort Dodge and tellingly inserted the fact that his own wife did not do it:

Oh, man, they brought ‘em in there. All the wives got to work. All but mine. She didn’t. A lot of women downtown you meet, you know. Hot shots, you know. I spoke to one of them one day. I says, “Hey, you remember when you worked in the packing plant?” “I never worked at the packing plant!” (ILHOP: Lindner 1981:28)

Work in the packing plant would put an uppity woman in her place.

Contributing to the women’s discomfort both in their jobs and in their lives outside their jobs was the pervasive assumption that their sexuality belonged to their male coworkers and to their bosses. The sexual abuse of women in the plants had been pervasive during the 1930s, and it did not go away during the 1940s. Women from various plants reported that it was common for bosses to expect sexual favors in exchange for favorable working conditions (ILHOP: St. John 1978:26, Jerred 1981:29, Wetzel 1979:27, Bohaty 1981:17, Otterman 1981:27). In addition to the discomfort of being used by men in the plant, the sexually charged atmosphere alienated women from each other, making them suspicious of whatever favors or privileges other women were able to garner. One woman recalled that they had no clear sense of this behavior as sexual harassment, terminology which emerged from feminist theorists in the 1970s (MacKinnon 1978; ILHOP: Bremer
Although many women disliked the sexual liberties that men took they did not formulate or act on their suffering in an organized way.

The sexual saturation of the work environment was men's effective way of resisting women's entry into their space. Through their control of women's reputations they were able to retain power in both the worksite and the union locals, even as women entered and pressed limited claims to jobs and wages.

What the 1940s Changed

When World War II was over, the soldiers returned and reclaimed their jobs. The majority of women who had worked in kill and cut gave up their jobs without protest. The work in the men's departments had been strenuous both mentally and physically. Some women left the packing plants after the War, but others stayed on in women's departments. For the fifteen years after World War II their jobs were stable, and the union contracts secured wages that, while less than those of men in the plants, were more than any they could earn elsewhere. Although the women continued to experience sexual violations on the job, their separate worksites with female coworkers offered a modicum of protection. The protection that the union afforded against arbitrary dismissals served as limited security against unfair reprisals from rejected bosses. One of the most prized of the union benefits was the seniority system that relieved them from some of the burden of having to flatter and placate in order to retain their jobs and be considered for advancement (ILHOP: Jerred 1981:61). Through union contracts they also got maternity leave immediately after World War II.

By the end of World War II children in meatpacking workers' households were able to complete high school while being supported by their parents' incomes. Mothers would go to work while children went to school. The overall prosperity of the country meant a robust market for meat, and the major meatpacking companies and unions had made their peace with each other, each dependent on the fortitude of the other to maintain their own strength. Thanks to union wages, some of the sons and daughters of packing plant workers even went to college and succeeded to jobs that would take them far away from the working conditions their parents had faced. This would have been only a distant and unrealistic goal before World War II.

The hard-earned success of the packinghouse workers overshadowed the compromises that women accepted: They did not have access to the high-paying jobs of the male workers; they had separate seniority lists; and they continued to be controlled by petty harassment on the job. The CIO actively
recruited women, yet men kept control within the UPWA, and through union negotiations these men secured a gender segregation that privileged male workers (Balser 1987:32; Milkman 1987:40).

The unions realized the danger posed to their male members by the presence of a poorer paid female segment of meatpacking workers. As protection for male workers they demanded that women who took “male” jobs receive the same pay as men. Yet this did not actually give women the same pay checks as men. Women were systematically relegated to lower paying jobs, and their separate seniority lists and gendered job assignments meant that questions of equal pay seldom arose. Even when men and women were doing jobs that for all practical purposes were the same, they could have different job titles, enabling the women to be paid less than the men. A U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau study of meat packing pay found an ingenious “equal-unequal pay clause” in a union contract which stipulated that a woman who took a “male” job must be paid the male wage, while a man who took a “female” job would be paid “on the basis of the male basic hourly rate” (U.S. Department of Labor 1953:15). Clearly, the concern of this union was to protect men’s wages rather than to increase the lower wage scales of women.

Although few of the packing women had had steady or above-board jobs before World War II, they were not entering the labor force for the first time. They came into meat packing jobs having been marginal and exploited—but crucial—providers of cash and produce for their households. Their work had long been critical for survival. Women of wage earning families had lived through a history of bare bones subsistence and social separation from the rural mainstream. In too many cases they had been pressed into extending various forms of sexual service in order to secure bare necessities. From the wartime economic conditions and from union struggles they realized a more secure and comfortable living for themselves and for their families. Even though the working conditions they achieved were inequitable, these women had made a quantum leap forward. None of this was preordained; other outcomes could be imagined. They could in large part relate their victories to the organizing struggle that workers themselves had made. They continued to work to maintain their gains as business owners rose to challenge them immediately after the War. The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, Iowa’s subsequent passage of a right-to-work law in 1948, the defeat of meat packing workers in a strike in 1948, and the late 1940s descent of the McCarthy period of union harassment and red baiting would recast the terms of the contest (Stromquist 1993:149-186).
Although some of the World War II women meatpackers left their jobs after the War, there were nearly twice as many Iowa women production workers in meatpacking plants in 1950 as in 1940 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1952:15-51; 1943:869). As Nancy Gabin (1990) found in her study of women autoworkers in the 1940s and 1950s, blue collar women were making positive strides as workers in a time when middle class women's feminism was dormant. Yet middle class as well as working women were continuing to move into the formal labor force, even as they were backing off their World War II encroachment into "men's" jobs. The majority of women who found waged jobs were in the service sector. In manufacturing, the number of women in durable goods manufacturing (welding, riveting) decreased after World War II, while the number working in nondurable goods (food and textile workers) was increasing (Kessler-Harris 1982:287). But the expansion in the number of women in nondurable goods manufacturing came because of the expansion of "women's" work. While this work paid better than most of the women's service jobs, internally women remained in the lowest pay grades.

In the 1940s, feminist discourse, which would later address gender contradictions more directly, was filtered through a dominant patriotic and male-centered ideology (Anderson 1981; Faue 1991; Straub 1973). Class differences divided women and reduced their power (Hartmann 1982:146). It was not a time when many factory women could question their lot or articulate their injustices. When they organized, it was in unions in which men controlled the agenda and reaped the greatest rewards. Enormous changes had occurred in working women's lives and they were processing and consolidating these changes before the contradictions would surface. Their reality was their own, and it imparted its own logic to what they did and did not accept on the job. Only by considering the background of these women can we fully appreciate the meaning of the changes and the reasons why they rested on their gains rather than pushing toward gender equality.

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Women Who Worked in Meatpacking


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