

1945 July 2-8

La Crosse's Own Rosie the Riveter

With nearly all qualified men in the armed forces, women stepped into new roles during World War II on the homefront. Homemakers worked in the factories producing war equipment and material, and they also tended the farms that produced food to feed armies and civilians alike. Because of war necessity, women assumed jobs that had been almost exclusively the domain of men.

The popular belief that almost all women took part in the war effort includes some elements of myth. During the war years, about 70-75 percent of American women stayed at home. Of the 19 million American women who "worked for wages" during the war, 12 million of them already had jobs in 1940. That means six million American women joined the labor force during the war. Half of those were young, single, and recent school graduates. One source estimates that 2.7 to 3.5 million women went to work outside their homes to aid the war effort. About two million women worked directly in defense industries, with a quarter of them in aircraft production and shipbuilding.¹

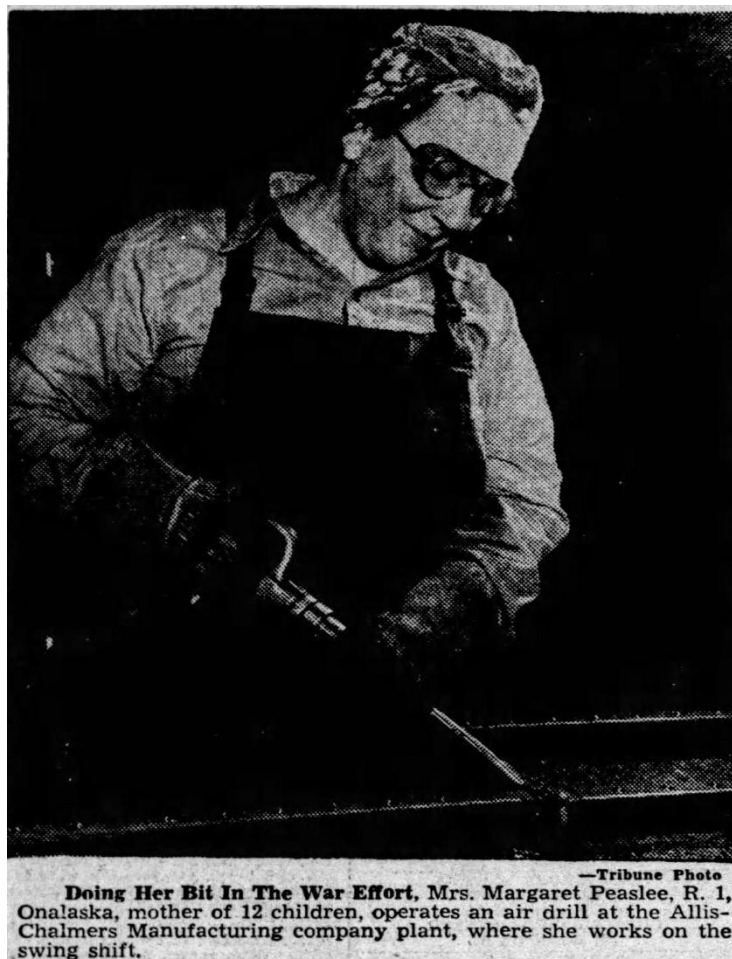
Regardless of the percentages, American women made substantial contributions to the labor force during the war. Government propaganda, such as this poster, encouraged women to do their part to support the men on the front lines.



(Labadie Collection, University of Michigan)

This is the singular image that comes to people's minds when they think of the homefront during World War II. There have been [competing claims](#) about who was the [inspiration](#) or model for this poster.

Women in La Crosse County also contributed to the war effort in various ways, whether they worked outside the home or not. Here are just two examples of a married woman and a single woman who worked in war industries.



Margaret Peaslee

(La Crosse Tribune, 1944 May 14, page 12)

Starting on April 3, 1944, thirty-two-year-old Margaret Peaslee of Onalaska worked 48 hours per week at the Allis-Chalmers plant in La Crosse. It was her first job outside the home. Her work schedule was 3:30 p.m. to midnight six days a week. After sleeping from 1:00 a.m. to 6:30 a.m., she cared for her 12 children and tended a three-acre Victory garden. Her 36-year-old husband, William, also worked the "swing shift" at Trane Company from 4:00 p.m. to midnight.

While both parents were working, their children, ranging in age from four months to 15 years, were supervised by the two oldest, Billy 15, and Betty, 14. Peaslee's job at Allis-Chalmers was scaling and cleaning welded parts.²

Margaret Peaslee died on November 20, 1969.³



Jane Furber

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 July 8, page 4)

Before the war, Jane Furber of La Crosse was known as a "slapstick" dancer in high school and amateur theatre productions. She was also a dance teacher.⁴

Furber moved to Seattle in August 1942. She had a very personal motivation for working at the Boeing aircraft factory there--her brother was a ball turret gunner in a Boeing B-17 bomber operating in Italy. She worked the third shift, from 12:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., at a Boeing aircraft factory. Her first job was riveter's assistant; then she was a riveter for a year before becoming a

personnel clerk. Furber remarked that her job as a personnel clerk put her in contact with people from all over the country who worked at Boeing.⁵

In 1944, Boeing put out a call for performers to put on a musical revue as a benefit for the Army Air Forces Aid society. Furber volunteered and went to evening rehearsals before reporting for work at 12:30 a.m. The show was called "Flyin' High!" during its seven-day run at the [Seattle Metropolitan Theater](#). Furber appeared in seven scenes as a singer, dancer, and actor. A Seattle radio station interviewed her after the show and asked if she wanted to be a professional performer after the war. Furber replied, "I want to crawl in a hole after the war---and get a long rest . . . Right now, we must all think of our real job---building Boeing Superfortresses."⁶

Such was the spirit of the American women who did their part to help win World War II.

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Sources & Notes:

¹ David M. Kennedy, *The Library of Congress World War II Companion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 868-869. By contrast, 70 percent of British and Soviet women worked outside the home during the war.

² "Mother Of 12 Children Takes War Job In Allis-Chalmers Plant Here," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 May 14, page 12.

³ "Margaret A. Mach Peaslee," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1969 November 21, page 15.

⁴ "Jane Furber," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 July 8, page 4.

⁵ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 8.

⁶ *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 July 8.