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No Favors for these “Fine Little Ladies:” Employment Discrimination against Tampa’s Women Workers at the End of World War II

Rebekah Heppner

Upon opening their daily newspapers the morning of July 28, 1942, Tampa residents were introduced to their first woman welder, Mrs. Alma Brown of Tampa Shipbuilding Company. Here is how the paper chose to “spin” the story:

Mrs. Brown is 35, weighs 135 pounds, is five feet six, and the mother of two youngsters, a daughter 3 1/2 years old and another younger . . . and let it be said right here for the boys, from the bigshots to the fellow at her elbow, they were gentlemen, trying to ease a rough road for a fine little lady. . . making 89 cents an hour as a ‘welder learner,’ and no favors.¹

In the months following Pearl Harbor, the nation was desperate for workers on the home front. Employment at Tampa Shipbuilding Company, for example, had been at 1350 in 1940. At the beginning of the war, it had grown to 9000 and it peaked in 1944 at 16,000. In May 1942 American shipyards were turning out merchant vessels at the unprecedented rate of five a day. In Tampa, workers commuted from rural areas to participate in the greatest economic boom of their generation. It was estimated that shipyards in the gulf area could use 30,000 more employees.²

Turning to those “fine little ladies” for help was unavoidable, although most men still did not want their wives to work. A 1943 Gallup Poll showed that 79 percent of married men opposed war work for their wives and 78 percent of female homemakers agreed.³ But by mid-1944, the Tampa area War Manpower Commission appealed to every non-working woman to take a war job. By the end of the war, over 17 percent of workers in Tampa’s shipyards were women, nearly double the national average.⁴

The women of Tampa took over jobs vacated by men who had gone to war and filled many new jobs created by the war. In addition to the story of Tampa’s first woman welder, the Tampa Morning Tribune wrote of women driving buses, repairing typewriters, farming, patching airplane parts, repairing flying equipment, and reporting the

Plucked, poised, cool, and coiffed: the womanly ideal of the 1940s collided with the realities of women in the workplace. (Juanita Heppner, c. 1945, Courtesy of the author.)
news. As well, the paper ran feature stories and photo essays of women butchers, bank tellers, pilots and an air traffic controller at Peter O. Knight airport. The coverage of these atypical women continued steadily throughout the war. Many of the stories included personal descriptions (and condescending verbiage) like that in the story of “Tampa’s first honest-to-goodness woman electric welder”: coverage that would be considered inappropriate (and possibly actionable) today.

These are some phrases used by the Tampa press corps to describe these avidly-recruited and truly valuable war workers. “With her rose sprigged frock and pearl ear bobs beneath neatly bobbed auburn hair, she looked a little out of place in an airplane hangar but she seemed to know what she was doing.” “Wearing a blue and white dress that matched the deep blue of her eyes, Mrs. Warfield hastily patted her hair and straightened her collar before posing for the photographer.” “Chubby little Mrs. Vera Sylvester.” In a story headlined “Another Man's Field is Invaded; Girl Becomes Typewriter Repairer,” eighteen year-old Inna Mae Cox garners this compliment: “There isn’t a lazy muscle in Miss Cox’s trim little body.”

This distinctive journalistic approach was not reserved for women in industrial work. The Tallahassee Daily Democrat reported that Mary Lou Baker, a member of the Florida legislature who made a career of defending women’s rights, had “led a floor fight... with such poise, ability and strategy as to prove that women can make first rate legislators. We offer her in evidence as Exhibit A.” The Jacksonville Journal described the legislator as an “attractive St. Pete attorney.”

Granted, these stories were written in a very different era and it is unfair to judge the Florida newspaper reporters of the 1940s by today’s standards. While it is hard to say how the women themselves felt about their portrayal, the collective commentary by the press helps explain why working women’s obvious success during the war years seems to have had so little impact on the future of women in the workforce. The popular press, both in Tampa and nationally, was trying to recruit more women to work in all types of jobs but was not ready to concede, even after four years of success, that it was normal or natural for women to work.

When the war ended, “no favors” for the women workers in Tampa were to be found. Despite the fact that the press continually reported they had been “doing unusually well,” taking on jobs that required “unusual physical strength for women,” and were “as efficient and effective as employees who enlisted or were called in the draft,” they were the first to be let go at the War’s conclusion. In addition to that blatant discrimination, they were denied unemployment benefits if there was a “woman’s job” available to them, despite significant pay differentials, an interpretation of the law that would never have been accepted by men in the same position.

Undeniably, the returning veterans deserved priority access to the jobs they had left behind. Mrs. Ruth Mathebat, national president of the American Legion Auxiliary, while addressing a delegation of women in Jacksonville, admonished the audience that although “women have obtained many fine jobs since the war began and the men went overseas, we must plan now to give them up and return to our homes when those boys come back. It may be hard to do, but we must face the fact that there are not enough jobs for them and us.”

The preference for hiring men for high paying jobs, however, was not just granted to veterans. Driven by what was known as the family wage ideology, public policy makers assumed that men needed to support families and that women were only supplemental wage earners who did not need the same level of pay as men. Where did this leave single or widowed women, or women whose husbands could not (or would not) find work? A woman trying to make her way under such rules had no option for economic independence; marriage was her only practical choice.

Few women fit the stereotype now immortalized as “Rosie the Riveter,” a married woman working in a traditionally man’s job only to help the war effort. In April 1943, The Tampa Daily Times reported that “contrary to general public belief that women have moved en masse from the kitchen sinks to the war production bench, only 3,200 of the 25,000 persons in essential war industries in Hillsborough County are of the feminine sex.” In the shipyards, only 85 women were doing highly skilled work, contrasted to 5200 men. National statistics show that this picture changed as
the war progressed. In July 1944, nineteen million women were employed, an increase of 47 percent over the 1940 level. National statistics also showed more married women than single women in the workplace at the end of the war. But, contrary to the press coverage in feature stories, women were concentrated in clerical positions.

Most women who worked during the war did so out of economic necessity, and many of them had worked before the war. For example, Mrs. Eva Fette, the woman “named head of Tampa’s first plane work class” in 1942, had been a fabric worker for eight years and had done virtually all of the fabric work at Peter O. Knight airport for the two years prior to the class. Miss Betty Bookis, who had been an assistant secretary at Hillsborough High, explained in her letter of resignation that she “did not feel that she should return to her $72 per month school job when she could continue to make ‘exactly double’ that figure in a defense job.” Among her reasons for seeking war work, Mrs. Grace Warfield told reporters that she was “looking around for some way of steadying the family’s finances.”

We also must not ignore the fact that some women worked during the war, as they do today, for the satisfaction not only of being financially independent, but of the work itself. Mrs. Warfield, who worked in the fabric department at Tampa’s Drew Field, said of her work, “it’s fascinating, something new all the time.” Mrs. Vera Sylvester, who repaired airplane parts, told reporters, “Anything mechanical appeals to me, and this is just mechanical enough for me to love it.” And Mrs. Helen Wickham, one of five women students in the first welding class ever offered for women at Brewster Vocational School, said she signed up for the course because she always “wanted a trade.” In an article titled “Hats Off to the Gals on the Job,” the Hooker’s Point Log, in July 1943, interviewed some of the women working at McCloskey’s shipyard. Mrs. Mabel Tillman, a welder, admitted, “This work gives me a great feeling of accomplishment.” Mrs. Dorothy Thompson, a junior draftsman said she “wouldn’t trade my job here for anything else.”

Of the women war workers portrayed in their oral history, mother-daughter authors Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise conclude, “most . . . consider it one of the highlights of their lives and retain the same pride and sense of accomplishment they felt half a century ago.” The women spoke of gaining self-confidence that allowed them to try new things, one welder becoming a sculptor. Their children, too, were often inspired and grew up feeling that women could do whatever they wished.

Women who did not work before the war may have been unable to find jobs at that time. At the height of the Great Depression, twelve million Americans were unemployed. The impact of the depression was compounded in Tampa by the decline of the cigar industry. Women were included in Works Progress Administration programs, but mostly in low-wage traditionally female jobs. In Tampa, the WPA employed women as nurses, teachers, nursery school workers, secretaries, and clerks. Prior to the war, women comprised only twelve to eighteen percent of WPA workers, and most ended up in sewing rooms. In her History of Women in Tampa, Doris Weatherford profiles Verna Brooks, who in 1941 at the age of 38 was supporting nine children on the $46 per month she earned in one of Tampa’s WPA sewing rooms. Although her two oldest children were working and contributing to the household, Mrs. Brooks was having difficulty making ends meet, since she needed to spend $40 a month on groceries alone.

It was these women who had the most to gain from the opportunities created during the war. As Mrs. Irene Grant, Tampa-based director of the women’s division of the WPA expressed, “And are they pleased; they are absolutely delighted. They’re proud of their new jobs, and of the jobs for which they are
 qualifying. They want to be independent.”27

In her interview for the Tampa Morning Tribune, Ms. Cox, (Tampa's girl typewriter repairer), who had previously worked picking strawberries, said “Best of all, I am making my own way.”28 Given their newly found economic independence and job satisfaction, relinquishing their jobs — whether they were high-paying men's jobs or not — was, as so aptly put by Mrs. Math-ebat, going to be hard to do. Nevertheless, over 40,000 women in Florida were asked to do it.29

In an interview with the Tampa Morning Tribune in July 1945, W.J Ray, business manager of the local boilermaker’s union, admitted that “the majority of women laid off from shipyard welding jobs don’t like their enforced inactivity.” Archibald Rea-gin, personnel manager of McCloskey Shipbuilding Company added that many of the women who chose to leave before being laid off “become restless and come back in a few weeks.” Reagin doubted the women would be “satisfied to return permanently to housekeeping, particularly those who’ve learned a trade.”30

In her advice column in the Tampa Daily Times, Dorothy Dix encouraged women to find work that they enjoyed because, she predicted, there would be a shortage of husbands after the war.31 Ms. Dix obviously did not consider this a negative. She felt that due to the opportunities made available to them during the war, women could now “roll their own and pay for their own cakes and ale, and whether they get married or not, is just as much a matter of taste and inclination as whether they invest their money in a mink coat, or salt it down in a Government bond.”32

Upon being let go from her shipyard welding job after 28 months, Miss Christine Connell said that she wanted “to keep on with my trade, but I can’t find employment in it here.” Mrs. Maxine Sloan, trained as a welder but only able to find work as a draftsman after the war, said that she “definitely wants to continue working.” Mrs. Angela Deslate, a streetcar conductor for Tampa Electric Company, said she wanted to continue working after her husband returned from overseas, so they could “buy all the things we want to for our post-war home.”33 Mrs. Dorothy Thompson, the junior draftsman interviewed in 1943 for the Hooker’s Point Log, said she also “would like to continue my work after the war.”34

The enjoyment of work, of course, was not universal. Complaining that economics were driving wives and mothers to work, a woman industrial worker stated: “The number of women working for the sheer joy of working is at best infinitesimal.”35 Sherna Gluck’s oral history interviews with aircraft workers in Los Angeles confirmed that the majority of former housewives planned to return to full time homemaking.36 Seventy-six percent of returning homemakers responded to a poll conducted after the war by stating that they did not mind giving up their jobs.37

Many times during the war, Jane Hughey, in her “Tribune Talkies” man-on-the-street column in the Tampa morning paper, dealt with the issue of the working woman. On August 15, 1943, she asked, “Will the men be able to find a housewife when this war is over?” Miss Ruth Moore, a student from Plant City answered yes, but said “I don’t know whether the women who are working will want to give up their jobs.
Jane Hughey's "Tribune Talkies" column called for responses to the reader-submitted question "Can a woman combine a career with marriage?" (Tampa Morning Tribune, March 9, 1944.)

or not, now that they have had a taste of freedom. On the other hand, some of them may be glad to have a man look after them again. It will depend on the woman." Miss Gladys Isbell, an office assistant, also said yes and added that she felt "the majority of women who are working are doing it to relieve the men for fighting, and they'll be glad to don an apron and go back to the kitchen." The only married woman who answered, Mrs. Clyde Bergwin, said yes, but added "the women who are working and making big money may have a hard time finding a husband unless they are already waiting for a certain man to come home. Those who are already married will be happy to let the men take over the offices and factories." The two men who responded both stated emphatically that women should forget her career." Two women who said yes, both married and one working, gave examples of how it could be done. Mrs. Marie Clark, a clerk, said, "the important thing is the establishment of a routine." Mrs. Kathryn Simmons, a housewife, used her sister, a stenographer, as a successful example of a working woman who "had a good schedule and sticks to it," adding that "a man doesn't want his secretary ordering groceries at the office and a husband doesn't want to hear about his wife's job."39

Shortly before the end of the war, the "Tribune Talkies" asked, "After the war, what will happen to women working in war industries?" Three of the four women who responded felt that women would want to continue working, but that it would be "hard on the children." Mrs. Charlotte White, who identified herself as a housewife, went so far as to say "they're going to ruin part of the family life of the whole people." Surprisingly, the two men who answered, both in uniform, felt that the women would "want their independence" and keep working. They also cautioned

On March 9, 1944, Hughey asked, "Can a woman combine a career with marriage?" Three of the five women asked said no. Miss Nina Romano, a clerk, added "I may not be up with the times, but I think a woman's place is in the home. When a girl marries
that “they may harm the kids” and admonished “the women with children” that they “owe it to them to be at home.”

Despite union membership during the war and involvement in wartime strikes, women were essentially ignored by labor unions as they faced dismissal on the grounds of being female at the end of the war. In his discussion of labor and culture in the 1940s, Rainbow at Midnight, George Lipsitz recounted several examples of women who filed grievances and protested their dismissals. A female delegate to the 1946 UAW convention told the membership, “Certainly we are not going to work to organize the union and then go back to work for $15 a week.” Even during the war, few businesses or unions paid women equally for equal work.

According to a survey of 13,000 women by the Women’s Bureau of the Department of Labor, three quarters of working women wanted to stay employed after the war, including over half of the working wives. This contrasts with other studies that revealed a majority of middle-class women who could afford to wanted to quit. For those who stayed in the workforce, the prospects dimmed. Women’s pay declined twenty-six percent after the war, compared to the national average decrease of four percent for all workers. As well, what limited childcare options that had been made available disappeared. Those who moved to the suburbs found that leaving the kids with Grandma was no longer an option. The for-profit childcare industry did not yet exist; middle-class children were to be cared for by non-working mothers. In Tampa, Mrs. Elizabeth Ingram made a plea to the school board to continue at least those nursery schools that served “children of mothers who must work and will continue to hold jobs after all war industries have closed.”

As age at marriage and first childbirth began to lower, an older female workforce, concentrated in low paying jobs, developed. The number of women employed actually continued to increase after the war, but now it was often for that second, supplementary income imagined by the family wage ideology. Between 1940 and 1960 the number of women working tripled, but fewer than half of them worked full time.

Even Rosie the Riveter herself, Rose Wil Monroe of Ypsilanti, Michigan, continued to work after the war. She drove a taxi, operated a beauty shop and started a construction firm in Indiana called Rose Builders. For a Tampa-area example, Weatherford offers Mabel Claprood Simmons, who moved to Ruskin in 1949 to set up a branch of her family’s floral business. She “went on to win many state and national awards, with ‘only woman ever’ as an apt summation of her career.”

Yet no organized women’s movement developed after the war and women seemed to accept their fate as housewives or members of a low-paid “pink collar” workforce. To understand why, we need to consider the mindset of Americans during the decades that preceded the war. The Roaring Twenties have been characterized as a time of great gains for women, gains that included not only suffrage but also more acceptance of female economic independence. The Great Depression, however, brought about a return to a more traditional family structure. Although many women worked out of necessity in the 1930s, and the actual number and percentage of working women rose (in part due to extremely low wages), government programs (like the WPA examples cited above) were focused on men. The New Deal sacrificed working women in its attempt to salvage American families. Section 213 of the U.S. Economy Act of 1932 is an example of the family wage ideology at its worst. It resulted in hundreds of women being dismissed from their federal jobs, since married women were now, by law, the first to be laid off. Similar “relief” programs in state and local governments followed.

Although Hollywood glorified the independent career women of the 30s, studies of the children of the Great Depression (who became the female workforce of WWII), show that any role reversal that occurred in the era was viewed as abnormal, brought on by hardship, and not expected to continue with future prosperity. When confronted with the economic boom of the 1950s, many of those women, who recalled the hardships of the Depression, were “eager to establish secure families with traditional gender roles that had been so seriously threatened during their childhoods in the 1930s.” Even Hollywood magic could not reconcile the working woman of the 30s with the image of the wife and mother. The media began to introduce the theme of divorce as acceptable instead. As Elaine Tyler May tells us in her analysis of the briefly in-
Despite wartime labor shortages, most jobsites remained male-dominated. Here, a civilian crew builds a reinforced concrete ship at the Mallory Docks in Tampa, 1943-44. (Photograph courtesy of the Tampa Historical Society.)

dependent precursors to the family women of the 1950s, “these tough and rugged career women were admired as women not as wives.”

The divorce rate did indeed climb in the 1930s, but it was not because women were becoming self-fulfilled and self-reliant. It was more likely due to the emotional strain put on marriages by a persistently bleak financial situation. The economic reality for women (real women, not the ones in the movies) was such that they had “little trouble choosing between their ill-paying jobs and the prospect of marriage to a promising provider.” In 1939, women earned on average only 59 percent what men did. As May points out, “Viable long-term job prospects for women might have prompted new ways of structuring family roles. In the face of persistent obstacles, however, that potential withered.”

When the war began, unemployment fell from 14 percent to zero and women were needed in the workforce. But as the tone of Tampa newspapers of the time has shown us, this did not mean it would soon be considered normal for women to work. The longing for a stable family life created by the Depression did not end. After all, wasn’t this what the men were fighting for, “home and hearth?” And as the war ended, the focus turned, justifiably, to the needs of the returning veterans. In addition to their need to take back their jobs, the soldiers needed emotional support to ease their adjustment to civilian life. This, the message of the times suggested, could only be provided by the subservient wife.

May provides examples of the propaganda that faced women during the war years. A wartime pamphlet said of the woman workers: “it is essential that women avoid arrogance and retain their femininity in the face of their own new status . . . in her new independence she must not lose her humanness as a woman.” In a wartime textbook, the authors state — with scientific authority — that “social freedom and employment for women would cause sexual laxity, moral decay and the destruction of the family.”

A conference in Tampa in February 1945 was to be “between women leaders and industrial executives on postwar problems.” The actual speakers and topics, however, had very little to do with women. Only one woman addressed the conference, and she was the only speaker to discuss women’s postwar adjustment: “Clearly, in the minds of those who held the local economic power, victory meant that it was time for women to leave the shipyards and return to the kitchens.” A column in an evening paper at the end of the war provided detailed beauty advice to women under the headline, “Girls Should be Attractive to Returning GIs.”

The women of the “greatest generation” lived through a decade of economic depression and five years of war. Many were very happy to give up their paid work to live the American dream in the suburbs. Despite how that urge might look to feminists later, some scholars contend that, at the time, “housewifery gave women a peculiar opportunity for autonomy.” Even so, their idea of the American dream in the suburbs was not one of subservience. As a survey by the Ladies Home Journal of that era showed, 60 percent objected to the word “obey” in the wedding vows and 75 percent believed in joint decision making. (Whether these beliefs were reflected in the world they experienced is debatable.)

If giving up their economic independence was a sacrifice, these women no doubt considered it a trivial one compared
The “Tribune Talkies” was still talking in 1945, and the topic then, as earlier, was working women. (The Tampa Times, September [ND] 1945.)

to the sacrifices they had made during the Depression and the war. As historian Doris Weatherford told the Tampa Tribune on the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, the wartime women wanted to believe that their world had not really changed, they wanted to see the war as an aberration.62

Right after the war, fears of another depression were common and, in the 1950s, fear of social annihilation by nuclear war was widespread. This atmosphere caused many Americans to grasp at home life as their only source of security. As May put it “A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation.”63

The anti-Communist sentiments that began shortly after the war also portrayed the nuclear family living in the suburbs as the ideal product of a superior American capitalist system. To exemplify this politicization of home life, May offers us the 1959 example of then Vice-President Richard Nixon’s visit to Moscow for The American National Exhibition, in what has come to be known as the “Kitchen Debate.” Nixon’s knockout punch, according to May, was: “I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want is to make easier the life of our housewives.” Nixon did not seem to even recognize that in the Soviet Union, as Premier Khrushechev tried to point out, they did not have that “capitalist attitude toward women.”64

But the reporters on that visit noticed the difference and used it to bolster the propagandistic line of “our women are better than your women,” suggesting that Soviet women had “desexualized themselves” and showed “few of the physical charms of women in the West,” seeming “uncon­cerned about their looks.”65 In her description of the same visit, Rosalind Rosenberg credits Nixon with the belief that “America’s washing machines, refrigerators, and television sets would stave off class warfare and thwart the appeal of Communism.”66 Certainly, it seemed that the women in America’s suburbs were getting the message.

Interestingly, Rosenberg points out that the juxtaposition of America with the Soviet Union, while undermining women’s rights, worked to empower the struggle for rights for African-Americans. “By celebrating the virtues of the ‘free world,’” she tells us, “leaders in the United States all but invited civil rights leaders to ask how secure could that world be if a significant minority could legitimately claim not to have equal rights?”67

Fears of another depression quickly evaporated in the 1950s as continued military spending for the Cold War combined with growing consumerism, resulting in remarkable economic growth.68 In October and November of 1945, the newspapers in Tampa continually reported on the reduction in the jobless rate.69 Despite the growing sentiment that women should be in the home, they were still needed in a booming workplace. Low birthrates during World War I and the Depression had created a shortage of male workers. Two million clerical jobs and one million service-sector jobs were created nationally in the 1950s, and most of them went to women.70 The concern over displacing the returning veterans was also overstated; a poll of servicemen returning to Florida showed that seventy percent were not interested in returning to the jobs that they left.71 In keeping with the spirit of the times, in October 1945, the Tampa Business and Professional Women’s Club adopted the theme “Jobs Enough to Go Around.”72

More difficult to answer than why some
women left their jobs and some moved to lower-paid ones, is whether or not their successes during the war made a difference. Most scholars agree that individual lives were changed, but public policy did not change along with it. American culture started to change, but cultural change is a slow and complicated process. Anthropologist Tomoko Hamada expresses this well when he defines culture as “a process of creating meanings and practices in webs of agency and power, which are relational, historically situated, shifting, and incomplete.” As individual perceptions change, this process evolves. This description corresponds with Susan M. Hartmann’s “seeds of change” thesis, which posits that while enormous changes occurred in the lives of individuals, the war did not bring revolution for women as a group. Some social change may have surfaced later. Based on her study of Tampa Bay women during the war, Caitlin Crowell concluded, “Many of these women learned things about themselves that they carried with them for the rest of their lives and passed on to younger generations.” Sherna Gluck also felt that “the housewives who went home may have transmitted ‘private changes,’ such as increased feeling of self-sufficiency, to their daughters,” who became part of feminism’s second wave in the 1960s and 70s.

Nancy Gabin provides examples of the beginning of corresponding changes in public policy. In a landmark case brought by the United Electrical Workers in 1945, the National War Labor Board concluded that General Electric and Westinghouse were arbitrarily reducing wage rates by as much as one-third if the work was performed by women — despite having first systematically and neutrally evaluated the jobs. Gabin says that the union’s position in this case essentially advanced the same argument as our current concept of equal pay for work of comparable worth. Although the Board was dissolved at the end of the war and never implemented a remedy for this case, Gabin considers it support for her conclusion that “if WWII was not the time for permanent change in the status of women in the labor market and for gender equality in the workplace, it was important in establishing precedent for reconsideration of wage disparities.” An article in The Tampa Daily Times in November 1945 reveals that the Labor Department had begun to advocate that pay rates be set “regardless of sex,” in part to protect men’s wages which they concluded were “bound to slide downward if women’s wages are lowered.” Setting pay on “job content” as they recommended, however, opened the door for a low-paid “pink collar” workforce. Public policy change, like social change, is also slow and complicated.

Much of the reason for lack of real progress toward labor equality, according to Gabin, was the fact that many of the women who worked during the war had never worked before and saw no benefit to an organized effort or protest. Also, those who had worked before were earning wages significantly higher than they had received in conventional women’s jobs. Protest was also viewed as potentially unpatriotic and, under the “no-strike pledge,” most strikes were prohibited by law. Women may also have felt that their prospects for retaining their jobs when the war was over were better if they did not cause trouble. Gabin still believes, however, that “the significance of the reconsideration of gender and the work process in industry during World War II ought not be underestimated.”

Most scholars of World War II history have conceded that the reasons that women joined and left the workforce and specific jobs “were as diverse as the diversity among individual women.” With regard to Tampa women, Caitlin Crowell expressed it well: “There is no single overarching story of women’s lives during the war. Women in Tampa were rich and poor; old and young; single, married, and widowed. They were urban and rural; gay and straight; black, white, Latino, Asian, and Native American. Women worked, they stayed at home, they volunteered, they enlisted.”

Women today — as then — also choose to leave the paid workforce to raise children full-time or take a “mommy track” in their careers. However, there remain many women who either choose to work or have to work full time, just as men do. After World War II there were surely women who were happy to become suburban housewives, but there were also women who did not want to give up the independence or the income, and women who needed to work to support themselves and others. But there is a big difference between the women workers of the past and those of the present. Today there are both more protections provid-
ed by public policy and more acceptance within American culture.

In a 1949 article in *American Mercury Magazine*, Edith M. Stern proffered this to describe the predicament of women:

HELP WANTED: DOMESTIC: FEMALE. All cooking, cleaning, laundering, sewing, meal planning, shopping, week-day chauffeuring, social secretarial service, and complete care of three children. Salary at employer’s option. Time off if possible.

No one in her right senses would apply for such a job. No one in his right senses, even a desperate widower, would place such an advertisement. Yet it correctly describes the average wife and mother’s situation, in which most women remain for love, but many because they have no way out.82

It was not long before many voices echoed Stern’s. In 1955, a female UAW member, at the union’s annual convention, stated what is still the feeling of many women today: “Who is to say a woman should work or should not? Where is our democracy in this country if a woman can’t be a free individual and make up her mind, at the union’s annual convention, to have such a choice after the war? It is clear, however, that they noted the absence of options.

ENDNOTES

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8. Tallahassee Daily Democrat June 3, 1943.
11. *Tampa Morning Tribune* November 11, 1944.
19. Ibid.
27. *Tampa Morning Tribune* November 4, 1942.
29. Ibid.
32. *Tampa Daily Times* November 15, 1945
33. Ibid.
34. Hooker’s Point Log July 30, 1943.
36. Glueck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change*.
43. Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change*.
44. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II*.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
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68. Ibid.
74. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*.
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