After the bomber: Life and work for women during and after World War II

World War II brought significant social change to the United States. Blacks served in an integrated military marking the most extensive integration project since Reconstruction. The modern American suburb was born following the war with the development of new housing for returning soldiers. And, women entered the workforce in numbers never seen before. Almost 20 million women worked in some capacity during World War II. This represented a significant increase over pre-war years. Much of this change was a product of necessity. With millions of men removed from the labor force through active military duty and the U. S. industrial production efforts related to the war in high gear, women almost had to work. The U. S. War Department made it a top priority to attract women to the workforce to limit wage inflation and keep production at a peak.

As women entered the workforce, the stage was set for a dramatic series of stories to unfold. First, how would the nation react to changing women roles, particularly with women working in physically strenuous jobs which had almost exclusively been male work? Second, what would be the long term political effect of women in the workplace, particularly given the recent (just two decades prior) successes of the Women’s Suffrage Movement? Third, and perhaps most intriguing, what would happen when the war ended? Would women just quit their jobs, go home and resume life before the war? This narrative explores this third question through the lives of four women who worked at the Bell Bomber Plant. We use interviews with these four women as our primary source of information. The interviews were conducted at Kennesaw State University as part of Dr. Thomas A. Scott’s Bell Aircraft Project. Since the interviews were not conducted with our question in mind, there are no clear answers (often the case in history), but patterns do emerge which can be used to help students better understand the time period.

Ruth Ivey was typical of women who worked at the Bell Bomber Plant. She grew up in Jackson and Clarke counties, just east of Atlanta and after graduating from high school in Athens, moved to Atlanta with a friend to take a secretarial job at Bell Bomber. She worked for three years at Bell Bomber, leaving as the plant began to scale back operations in 1945. One gets the feeling from reading her interview that Ruth did not have to work. Ruth explains her move to Atlanta in the following excerpt from her interview.

Well, I had a friend there, a girl that I had been in school with. She said, "Let's go to Atlanta." Now Mother and Daddy were not very happy about this. "Let's go to Atlanta and get a job with Bell Aircraft." And I said, "Doing what?" "Well, you know, whatever." So we got on the bus, and we came to Atlanta. I wouldn't have wanted my little girl to do it, but anyway -- we came to Atlanta.

Her happy-go-lucky attitude is very different that Betty Williams, who entered the Bell Bomber workforce for a very different set of reasons. As a young girl, she developed an interest in planes and went to vocational school in Evansville Indiana to learn specific skills related to building P-38 fighter planes. Betty’s training was focused working the bulkheads of the plane, but she was also taught “riveting and counter sinking” to broaden her skill set. She worked in the Evansville plant for about a year before being, in effect, transferred to the Bell Bomber plant in Marietta. At the Bell plant, Betty rose to a
foreman’s position, a very unusual accomplishment for women in industrial plants at this time. In another more contrast, Ernestine Slade also came to work at Bell Bomber, but for her it was out of necessity. Ernestine quit a job as a housekeeper in Atlanta to take a better paying job at Bell Bomber. For Ernestine, who is black, the change in jobs was about money, race, and power.

...you made so much money at Bell -- much more money at Bell than you could make working for a permanent family. So me and my friends, we didn't go to the employment office here in Marietta. We went into Atlanta to the employment office. And that's how I got hired. Then I came back, and I told this lady that I had been working for, they hired me that day, told me when I could start to work. So that weekend, I told her. I said, "Now I'm going to start working at the Bomber Club" -- that's what we called it. Well, naturally, she didn't like it, but she didn't fuss too much about. And I said, 'I'll be leaving you." And so I went on that Monday morning to work out at Bell.

All three women found themselves working at the same place, but for very different reasons. Students need to understand that there were a variety of reasons why women worked at places like Bell Bomber. In our three examples we can see evidence of at least three reasons, adventure, profession opportunity, and utility. Each woman had a personal story, unique and equally meaningful. Understanding the conflicting reasons they had for working is a start toward understand why some women left the workplace after the war. For Ernestine, it would be a life of work interwoven with the birth of her children. She worked out of necessity and when she did not work, she describes life as difficult. When talking about a time when she was out of work and at home with young children she said of her husband pay “that was for food, clothing if we needed it, wood or coal and -- well, that covered everything. And we made it somehow.” Ernestine worked most of her life in occupations and places including housekeeping, a bakery, a restaurant, a country club, an insurance agency, and a county government office for senior services.

Betty’s story was very different. After working her way up to a foreman’s position, Betty abruptly left the Bell Bomber plant and moved back to her home in Indiana. She left after finding out that her husband of just three months had died in service while fighting in France. Betty would only stay in Indiana a few months before moving back to Atlanta and remarrying. After the war, she talks about the lack of work and indicated that only her husband worked, in a job at a grocery store. The economic activity which brought people to Atlanta and Marietta during the war would have a long lasting impact and students can she how Betty Williams is a living example of this impact – relocating permanently to Atlanta even after the her work in the city was done.

Although Ruth Ivey went to work at the Bell Bomber plant as an adventure, she was prepared to work, having attended one year of business school after graduating from high school. After the Bell Bomber plant closed, Ruth worked briefly for Sinclair, and then after her husband took a commission in the Army Air Corps, gradually eased out of the workforce. “And so then I started moving around with him. I've had a few odds and ends of jobs and part-time things here and there and volunteer and whatever, but I've never worked at a full-time job since then.” Ruth’s experience was not uncommon and may in-fact be what students think was the norm. It is vital for students to understand the complexity of working life for women during and after the war. Professionals like Betty
Williams were breaking gender barriers with work in male dominated areas. Women like Ernestine Slade worked and raised a family, struggling to make life better for her children in conditions which were often hostile to her. Ruth Ivey and millions like her settled into a pattern of life that would fuel a massive baby boom and change once again the social and cultural patterns of life in the United States.

There are a number of resources which might be useful to teachers and students as they study about women working in the United States during the 20th century. The Harvard Open Library has a massive online collection of resources relating to women at work. Although, the resources in the collection predate our story, ranging from 1870 to 1930, they could be useful in setting the context for women at work during and after World War II. A more relevant resource is an online collection developed by a group of high students in Rhode Island titled “What did you do during the war grandma?” <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/tocCS.html>. The collection includes 26 interviews with women who lived and in some cases worked during World War II all conducted and transcribed by high school students.

Sources:

Interviews in the oral history collection at Kennesaw State University:
http://www.kennesaw.edu/history/oral.htm

These interviews may be of interest:

- Ruth Asbell Ivey [secretary at Bell Aircraft] Cobb County oral history series; no. 22
  Special collections F292 .C6 C62 No.22
- Ernestine J. Slade [black Bell Aircraft employee] Cobb County oral history series; no. 28
  Special collections F292 .C6 C62 No. 28
- Kenneth P. and Frances E. Youngs [former Bell and Lockheed employees] Cobb County oral history series; no. 56
- Dorothy Petty Odom [former Bell employee] Cobb County oral history series; no. 57
- Betty L. Williams [one of the few female supervisors on the assembly line at Bell Aircraft] Cobb County oral history series; no. 73

In the archives of the rare book room the Blair papers contain items about Bell Aircraft.
http://www.kennesaw.edu/history/blair.htm

Scranton, Philip, ed. The second wave : southern industrialization from the 1940s to the 1970s (2001)
  Includes “Winning World War II in an Atlanta suburb : local boosters and the recruitment of Bell Bomber” by Thomas A. Scott.