

INTRODUCTION

“Everybody just pitched in and did their part. We scrimped and saved, but everybody else was doing the same thing, so there wasn’t any feeling that it was so different.”¹ That was the answer given when Caroline Swails was asked what she remembered about World War II. She lived in Wilmington, North Carolina, a port city surrounded by military bases and home to a thriving shipbuilding company and numerous USO buildings. With its location on the East Coast, Wilmington’s citizens experienced blackouts and air-raid sirens in addition to the rationing and budgeting that citizens across the country faced.

This thesis examines the propaganda and rhetoric directed at women found in the society page of the *Wilmington Star News* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* for the messages conveyed to women about their domestic roles. For the purpose of this thesis, propaganda is defined as national and local advertisements and posters created or influenced by the federal government to encourage women’s participation in the war effort. Rhetoric is defined as the language used by authors of articles and advice columns aimed at women that defined the domestic roles of women on the home front.

This thesis argues that World War II disrupted the domestic roles of women in Wilmington, North Carolina, but that these roles did not change. The war disrupted domestic life through relocation, rationing, and changes in family budgets. As a result of these disruptions, a new urgency was placed on the roles of women in the home. Propaganda by the federal government politicized the daily expectations of women, instructing women that their domestic roles were the cornerstone of the victory on the home front.

World War II altered Wilmington with a surge in population, both military and civilian. Even with the changes that surrounded women, their domestic role did not change. The society page of the *Wilmington Star News* mirrored the articles in *Ladies' Home Journal*. Women faced more pressure to embrace their domestic duties, even as these duties transformed from managing a functional household to defeating enemies abroad. The responsibilities women had in the home were not new, but the sense of urgency placed on accomplishing those tasks was new. Performing domestic duties became patriotic and a vital part of the war effort.

In addition to propaganda and rhetoric directed at women, this project also examines the recollections of Wilmington's female population. I chose to use oral history in order to create new primary sources pertaining to Wilmington during World War II. The interviews provided evidence about the daily lives of women, but were interrogated for biases and silences just as with any primary source.

Over the past thirty years, historians have considered the impact of World War II on the role of American women. William Chafe's *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Role, 1920-1970* (1972) marked the beginning of the scholarly analysis of the effects of World War II on women, their subsequent employment opportunities, and the development of the second women's movement. Chafe concluded that the war was a watershed event for women based on wartime employment numbers. While a few historians agreed with him, the historiography shifted by the end of the 1970s.²

¹ Caroline Swails, interview by author, 12 December 2002, Wilmington, North Carolina, tape recording.

² William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Role, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). For examples of works agreeing with Chafe's argument see

Leila Rupp's 1978 work, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945*, debunked Chafe's argument. Rupp concluded that women in the work force were a solution to a temporary problem. The same propaganda that recruited women into the work force also stressed their primary roles of wives and mothers. Even women depicted in factory work on recruitment posters maintained a feminine appearance complete with manicured fingernails.³

Over the next two decades, scholars continued to explore the role of women in the workforce and their limited opportunities. Historians Susan Estabrook Kennedy, Maureen Honey, Karen Anderson, and sociologist Ruth Milkman concluded that World War II did not advance equity for women. They agreed that war work was just that; work that women performed for the duration. Any opportunities for advancement that women received during the war ended with the war itself, as women were systematically fired from the time an Allied victory looked promising to the time soldiers returned home.⁴

World War II literature also explored women's domestic lives. Two of the more relevant monographs to this thesis are *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (1984) and *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women in the Second World War* (1987). D'Ann Campbell's *Women at War with America* focuses on the daily

Chester W. Gregory, *Women in Defense during World War II: An Analysis of the Labor* (New York: Exposition Press, 1974); John Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1976).

³ Leilia Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁴ Susan Estabrook Kennedy, *If All We Did was Weep at Home: A History of White Working-Class Women in America* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1979); Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Karen Anderson, "Last Hired First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II," *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982): 82-97; Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

lives of women during the war and their domestic role. Campbell concentrated on women in the home instead of the workforce. Mary Martha Thomas's *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie* not only considered women's domestic tasks, but also shifted the discourse from women in the North and Northeast to women in the South.⁵

This thesis focuses on the domestic roles of women in a prosperous southern town. Wilmington's female population received opportunities to work at the Carolina Shipbuilding Corporation. Countless volunteer opportunities and a few paid positions were also available to women at the John Walker Hospital, the Red Cross, and the USOs. The town and surrounding areas swelled in population. The population of New Hanover County grew from 47,935 in 1940 to 63,272 in 1950. This brought the county from the twenty-fifth largest in the state to the eighteenth largest in just a decade.⁶

Even among the opportunities and the growth brought on by the war, Wilmington's female population, like women across the nation, remained grounded in their domestic roles. Propaganda and rhetoric directed at women in Wilmington sent the same messages as those distributed nationally. Despite wartime opportunities in the town, the home front messages in Wilmington placed women firmly in the home.

While the war brought new opportunities to women in the workforce, even if only temporarily, the war was also marked by consistency. Women's domestic roles remained constant during the war. Women, employed or not, shouldered the responsibilities of domesticity during the war. Although their tasks remained unchanged, what was new during the war was the sense of urgency placed on fulfilling their domestic role. Women

⁵ D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984); Martha Mary Thomas, *Riveting and Rationing in Dixie: Alabama Women in the Second World War* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1987).

received advice on finding a husband, starting a family, preparing meals, and raising children. These tasks were not new to women, but during the war authors of women's articles in *Ladies' Home Journal* and the *Wilmington Star News* and advertisers placed more emphasis on these activities. Routine, mundane, tasks in peacetime became a way to fight the enemy during wartime.

Evidence of propaganda and advice columns for women came from the *Wilmington Star News*, the daily paper during World War II. The women's section of the paper consisted of the society page. This section covered such social events as parties and wedding announcements. The society page also expanded to cover the war. An advice column, written by a local woman, Ruth Millett, covered such topics as war marriages, starting a family, and maintaining positive morale on the home front. A column headlined "The War Kitchen" by another local woman, Ruth Maddox, provided nutritional advice and ideas for meals that complied with rationing guidelines. Advertisements on the society page also emphasized women's domestic responsibilities. These responsibilities were representative of the advertisements on the society page such as furniture stores, grocery stores, dry cleaners, and cleaning products.⁷

Evidence of articles, advice columns, and advertisements aimed at women at the national level came from *Ladies' Home Journal*. Of the five top magazines of the era, *Ladies' Home Journal* claimed the largest readership through subscriptions. In the 1940s and 1950s, all of the top five women's magazines claimed their subscriptions reached between two and eight million women, but certainly the readership was greater as women

⁶ United States Census Records, 1940 and 1950.

⁷ *Wilmington Star News* (Wilmington, North Carolina) June 1941- October 1945.

shared the magazines with friends and relatives.⁸ I examined a woman's magazine with a national audience for two reasons. First, it provided examples of the images and messages women across the nation received during the war. Second, because of the wide readership through subscriptions, it was likely that women in Wilmington read the magazine during the war.

During World War II, no African American women's magazines existed. Women's magazines did not cater to an African American audience until after World War II. *Ebony* was founded in 1944, but publication did not begin until late 1945. *Jet* commenced publication in 1952. Advertisements in such magazines featured white women until the publication of *Essence* in 1970.⁹ The archives of the *Wilmington Journal*, the local African American newspaper, were destroyed in a fire. The *Wilmington Journal* was a weekly publication during World War II, so African Americans in the community read the *Wilmington Star News* for daily news, but the society page did not cover African American events. Therefore, the women's rhetoric and advertisements used in this thesis were directed at white women.

The total war of World War II targeted people on the home front. Civilians, numbering 130 million, had to keep working, rationing, and purchasing war bonds if the Allied forces were to defeat the enemy. President Roosevelt established the Office of War Information (OWI) through an executive order in June 1942. The OWI was closely tied to wartime advertisements of products of all sorts. The Advertising Council became the War Advertising Council. Images and messages in advertisements and articles in

⁸ Nancy Walker, ed., *Women's Magazines, 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press* (Boston, Bedford/St. Martin Press, 1998) 1-2.

⁹ Walker, *Women's Magazines*, 7.

women's magazines were outlined by the Magazine Bureau, a division of the OWI.¹⁰ In an effort to mobilize the home front, the federal government became involved with wartime advertisements and articles. Women were enlisted into the war through the images that reminded them of their obligation to the war effort.

The federal government used advertisements and articles in women's magazines to emphasize the domestic role of women during World War II. The propaganda created and influenced by the federal government placed a new sense of urgency on women to embrace their daily tasks with patriotic fervor. The images created by the propaganda sent the message to women that the war could not be won without their sustained efforts at home. The war itself disrupted the domestic life of women in America. Many women married men who had courted them for only a few months. Some women found themselves separated from their husbands. Other women relocated to new cities away from friends and families in order to be closer to their husbands' military bases. Women faced new challenges during the war. Rationing, blackouts, air-raid sirens, and budgeting for the purchase of war bonds added to the peacetime responsibilities in the home.

The memories of the women interviewed for this thesis contained evidence of these disruptions. However, the majority of the women interviewed interpreted their wartime experiences as largely unchanged. Many women recalled the era with a great sense of nostalgia. The war was a symbol of their youth. The sense of pride they felt for having participated in the war effort also contributed to nostalgia. The fiftieth

¹⁰ Blum, 35-37; Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 247-258; Sue Hart, "Madison Avenue Goes to War: Patriotism in Advertising during World War II," in M. Paul Holsinger and Mary Anne Schofield, eds., *Visions of War: World War II in Popular Literature and Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1992), 114-126; Jordan Braverman, *To Hasten the Homecoming: How America Fought World War II Through the Media* (New York: Madison Books, 1996) Chapter 1, 44; Nancy Walker, *Shaping Our Mothers Worlds: American Women's Magazines* (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 78.

anniversaries of Allied victories were commemorated with a surge of patriotism and remembrance surrounding World War II. Labeling these recollections nostalgic should not be read as deeming them inaccurate or flawed. The construction of memories is a complex process and oral history is not to be confused with “truth”.

I conducted the oral interviews used in this thesis. The conduct of the interviews and the methodology of oral history were modeled after Donald Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History* (1995) and Paul Thompson’s *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (2000).¹¹ The women interviewed lived in Wilmington during World War II. Their ages at the onset of the war ranged from eight to twenty eight, but the majority were between eighteen and twenty-four. I conducted and tape recorded all interviews in the homes of the informants.¹² Each informant signed a release form giving permission for the use of the interviews in the thesis and their deposition in an appropriate archive. Oral historians have an obligation to share their evidence with other scholars and the community, as they create new primary documents with every interview. The notes taken during the interviews, the partial transcriptions, and the tape recorded interviews will be donated to the Special Collections Room at the Randall Library at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

This thesis considered the works of oral historians and gerontologists to interpret the recollections of the narrators. Gerontologist Peter Coleman considered the importance of the process of the life review and its significance to the elderly believing that they had accomplished a meaningful life. Oral historians Paul Thompson, Hugo

¹¹ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Slim, Sherna Burger Gluck, and Daphnie Patai considered the impact of gender on memory and speech. Thompson and Slim argued in *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Development* (1993) that oral history allows voices often muted in society a chance to speak. The testimonies of women more often contain references to home life and personal matters. Gluck and Patai edited a compilation of essays that considered the way in which women remember past events. In one such essay, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis," Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack argued that women remembered what they perceived as "good" roles and actions and their memories reflected this.¹³

The female population in Wilmington felt a new urgency to perform their domestic roles. Government propaganda convinced women they could contribute to the war effort by getting married and raising children. The battlegrounds for women were their living rooms, their pocketbooks, their kitchens, and the nurseries of their children. Under the government's direction, articles and advertisements directed at women placed women firmly in the center of the institutions of home, marriage, and motherhood. The center of the home was not a new role for women. The emphasis on women's role in the home was new. Even in a town with wartime opportunities such as paid labor in defense work or volunteer work, World War II was not a watershed event for women. Although

¹² All interviews were recorded except that of Manette Mintz. She requested that she not be recorded and stated that she did not care for the sound of her recorded voice. In this case, I took extensive notes and quoted her directly.

¹³ Peter Coleman, "Issues in Reminiscence with Elderly People" in Ian Hanley and Mary Gihooly, ed., *Psychological Therapies for the Elderly* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1986), 41-63; Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Development* (London: Panos Publication, Ltd., 1993), 5-6; Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analysis," in Sherna Berer Gluck and Daphnie Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 11-26.

the war disrupted domestic life, government propaganda rooted women more deeply in their homes.

Recollections of women sixty years after the war reflected evidence of wartime disruptions. Even with these disruptions, the domestic lives of women remained unchanged. Most women did not even interpret such obvious disruptions as rationing and blackouts as affecting their lives on the home front.

Propaganda and women's articles systematically targeted the American home room by room. In every room of the home, the domestic role of women was not only unchanged, it was emphasized with a heightened sense of urgency. Women's actions in the home could contribute directly to winning the war abroad. This thesis is divided into five chapters that reflect the emphasis placed on women's domestic responsibilities. Chapter One considers marriage and the establishment of a home. Chapter Two focuses on the living room and the way war disrupted women's domestic roles as entertainers and hostesses. Chapter Three, "The Pocketbook", considers family finances. Chapter Four explores the kitchen and women's unchanged duties to provide nutritious meals as they grappled with the new requirements of rationing, canning, and saving fats. Chapter Five examines the disruptions in child rearing, the emphasis on having and raising children, and the quandary of childcare. All chapters include the recollections of Wilmington's female population.