

“EVERYONE MUST MARCH ON THE ROAD TO VICTORY”:
WISCONSIN AMERICAN INDIAN WOMEN AND THE OFF-RESERVATION
WAR EFFORT DURING WORLD WAR II

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ABSTRACT

During World War II, approximately 12,000 American Indian women moved off their reservations to find employment. American Indian women in Wisconsin were no exception. This paper follows six Wisconsin American Indian women and their experiences with off-reservation employment throughout the war. Four of the women enlisted in various branches of the military. The remaining two found work in the booming war industry, filling jobs that were normally held by men. Still more women took work in domestic fields, including one of the military women before she enlisted. Utilizing interviews with these women and the few secondary sources on the topic, this paper seeks to explain why these women sought work off their reservations, how they were recruited to these positions, and how they benefited from their experiences. By seeking off-reservation employment, American Indian women were able to take advantage of opportunities that were otherwise unavailable to them.

Introduction

One thing about the service, you get two pair of shoes and you get a bed and you get to eat.

—Marge Pascale, interview with Kristina Ackley, 1992

Marge Pascale, an Ojibwe woman who grew up on the Red Cliff reservation in northern Wisconsin, joined the Air Women's Army Corps in 1943. During her enlistment she traveled across the country, rode in airplanes, and generally enjoyed the prosperity of the wartime economy, experiences she would not have had if she had stayed on her reservation during World War II. Like Pascale, many Native women, including those in Wisconsin, took advantage of new opportunities presented off-reservation during World War II. These women volunteered for military service, found jobs in defense industries, and took over work that was traditionally done by men. Opportunities such as these drew many Native women away from their reservations in search of better financial prospects. By seeking off-reservation work Native women were able to take advantage of war-time opportunities that were previously unavailable to them.

Instead of speculating why these women enlisted or how they heard about a job opening, this paper utilizes the voices of the women themselves. Oral histories are often dismissed by historians because they are not considered as reliable as other sources. However, oral histories are a vital part of American Indian cultures and should be treated as legitimate sources. Devon Mihesuah, an Oklahoma Choctaw writer and scholar, argues, “that without the inclusion of feelings and an understanding of motivations, the histories of Indian women—of all Indians—are boring, impersonal, and, more important, merely speculation and not really Indian history.”¹ By

¹ Devon Mihesuah, *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 47.

utilizing the voices of Native women who lived during World War II, a more accurate account of their experiences can be given, as well as a more personal one.

Following the trend of overlooking oral histories, Native women and their role in World War II have also been largely overlooked in historical literature. In general, historians did not become interested in the history of minorities, including American Indians, until the 1960s. Peter Iverson, a former professor of history at Arizona State University, follows American Indian history through different events and policies in the twentieth century in his 1998 book *“We Are Still Here”*: *American Indians in the Twentieth Century*. Many American Indian history books end at the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, which perpetuates the stereotype that Native people and their cultures are in the past; after the Indian Wars their history stopped being noteworthy. Unlike these books, *“We Are Still Here”* takes up Native history after the massacre. The book contains one section on American Indians during World War II, with one paragraph focusing on women workers. Iverson’s work briefly mentions women, but does not shed light on how much their lives changed during the war. Iverson’s work provides good background on the overall topic of Native people during the twentieth century.²

American Indians and World War II, published in 1991, was a groundbreaking book because it was the first to focus on American Indians and their efforts to assist the United States throughout World War II. The author, Alison Bernstein, is the director of the Institute for Women’s Leadership at the State University of New Jersey. In *American Indians and World War II*, she details the state of Indian affairs just before the war to the uncertainties soldiers faced when returning home after fighting ceased. The book mainly focuses on men’s contributions to the war through military service and defense-related jobs, discussing women intermittently

² Peter Iverson, *“We Are Still Here”*: *American Indians in the Twentieth Century* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1998).

throughout the chapter about efforts on the home front. The wide field of Natives and the Second World War is set by Bernstein throughout this book.³

Shortly after Bernstein published this book, other historians began attempting to fill this literary gap. Jeré Bishop Franco published *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II* in 1999. While this book contains multiple references to women's efforts during the war, the book mainly focuses on Native men's contributions, as Bernstein's book does. Kenneth William Townsend, author of *World War II and the American Indian* (2000), also reports on the overall experience of Natives during the war. Townsend argues that the experiences and skills Natives gained during the war helped prepare them for life in mainstream America after the war's end. Also, like the aforementioned books, the author only briefly discusses Native women in the chapter on war efforts on the home front. The literature on American Indians and the war is scant and mainly focuses on men.⁴

A few sources do exist that do not leave out the important role Native women played in the off-reservation war effort during World War II. Grace Mary Gouveia's dissertation, "Uncle Sam's Priceless Daughters: American Indian Women during the Great Depression, World War Two, and the Post-war Era," written in 1994, addresses the changes in American Indian women's lives because of the war. Dissertations are a type of source that do not reach as wide of an audience as published books, but they still provide valuable information and sources. Gouveia's dissertation discusses a subject that other authors had mostly ignored to that point: American Indian women in the military. She also discusses women on the home front more thoroughly than

³ Alison Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II: Toward a New Era in Indian Affairs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), vii.

⁴ Jeré Bishop Franco, *Crossing the Pond: The Native American Effort in World War II* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1999); Kenneth William Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 3.

other books on Natives and the war by giving multiple examples of women's experiences off and on reservations.⁵

Patty Loew, a Wisconsin American Indian historian and professor at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, took a more focused approach when researching women and World War II. In her article “The Back of the Homefront: Black and American Indian Women in Wisconsin during World War II,” she discusses the experiences of African American and American Indian women in Wisconsin during the war and how this differed from their white counterparts. Loew's research on this topic provides a good starting point when researching Wisconsin Native women at home during the war years.⁶

The role of Native women off the reservations in World War II has been loosely outlined in these sources, but a more detailed examination why many Native women chose to leave their reservations for work has yet to be investigated. In order to understand why women sought work off-reservation instead of staying home, the benefits of this experience must also be studied. New opportunities in the booming American economy drew these women away from their homes and reservations. Through seeking employment off-reservation during World War II, Native women were able to take advantage of new opportunities that were otherwise inaccessible to them.

Indian Country Economy Prior to World War II

The economic environment in Indian Country prior to World War II was bleak. Centuries of cultural decimation by Euro-Americans drastically changed many Native ways of life. The

⁵ Grace Mary Gouveia, “Uncle Sam's Priceless Daughters: American Indian Women during the Great Depression, World War Two, and the Post-war Era” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 1994).

⁶ Patty Loew, “The Back of the Homefront: Black and American Indian Women in Wisconsin during World War II,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 82, no. 2 (Winter 1998-1999): 83.

United States government had outlawed Native religions, forced tribes to give up their ancestral lands, and sent Native children to boarding schools far from their families and cultures. Tribal lands were also split up into individual plots instead of being left to community ownership. The Dawes Act of 1887 assigned plots of land to tribal members and sold the excess allotments. This caused many tribes to lose a great deal of land from their reservation; by 1934 only three percent of the land allotted under the Dawes Act was still owned by Indians. The ever-shrinking amount of tribal lands often did not yield enough food to feed the community. Most tribes were forced to live off of rations from the government, which were often spoiled by the time they reached the reservation.⁷

These desperate circumstances motivated John Collier, a social worker from New York, and some colleagues to form the American Indian Defense Association (AIDA). The organization condemned government policies, such as allotment, and pushed for better education, health care, and the right to self-determination on reservations. AIDA also began compiling information that brought to light the dismal living standards in Indian Country. This caught the attention of the federal government, creating pressure to inspect reservations. Secretary of the Interior Hubert Work ordered an investigation into conditions in Indian Country in 1926.⁸

The resulting 453 page report, often referred to as the Meriam Report, revealed the desperate conditions caused by United States policy with Native nations. High rates of poverty, disease, and illiteracy were more prominent among Natives than was previously thought.

⁷ *An Act to Provide for the Allotment of Lands in Severalty to Indians on the Various Reservations*, Pub. L. No. 49-43, 24 Stat. 388 (1887); Andrea P. Morrison, *Justice for Natives: Searching for Common Ground* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1997), 143.

⁸ Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian*, 8.

According to Townsend, one of the most immediate concerns uncovered by the Meriam Report was the loss of tribal lands which “reduced the already limited economic potential of most Indians who attempted farming or ranching enterprises.”⁹ Tribal members were barely able to sustain themselves and their families on what little land they had, so running an economically-successful farm was even more difficult. These circumstances contributed to eighty-four percent of all Natives living on less than 200 dollars per year though the national minimum subsistence budget was 1, 136 dollars. The staggering results of the Meriam Report emphasized the poor economic conditions in Indian Country even prior to the Great Depression.¹⁰

During the Depression one of the cofounders of AIDA and Franklin Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, was appalled by the results of the Meriam Report. He consequently appointed Collier as Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1933 to assist him in redirecting federal Indian policy. Collier followed Roosevelt’s example by organizing an “Indian New Deal” which aimed to “end the damaging impact of previous federal Indian policy.”¹¹ To do this, Collier requested money from federal agencies to fund reservation reconstruction. The money would finance projects such as reforesting lands and laying irrigation systems on reservations as well as purchasing land for tribes. He also endorsed the passage of a congressional bill aimed to “structurally alter the very foundation of federal Indian policy.”¹²

⁹ Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian*, 10.

¹⁰ Lewis Meriam, “*The Problem of Indian Administration:*” *Report of a survey made at the request of Honorable Hubert Work, Secretary of the Interior, and submitted to him, February 21, 1928* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1928); Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian*, 10; Cambridge University Press, “Economic Inequality and Poverty: Table Group Be85-259-Poverty Lines,” *Historical Statistics of the United States*, www.cambridge.org (accessed May 10, 2012).

¹¹ Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

The commissioner convinced Senator Burton Wheeler of Montana and Congressman Edgar Howard of Nebraska to present his plan to Congress. The final bill greatly differed from Collier's original plan, but it still had a large impact on conditions in Indian Country. The Wheeler-Howard Bill, also known as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), ended allotment of tribal lands and provided funding for Indian-chartered corporations, loans for vocational and trade schools, and the acquisition of land. Tribes could also organize and self-govern under a tribal constitution. Even more astounding was the fact that tribes were permitted to accept or reject the bill. For the first time since the American government began suppressing their rights, tribes were able to reject a federal policy. The IRA recognized the injustices of previous policies and enacted measures to improve living conditions on reservations.¹³

World War II brought about more changes in Indian Country, such as one of the first mass migration of Natives off of reservations. Thousands of young Native men and women left their reservations to join the military or defense industries. Those who stayed on the reservations confronted labor shortages as nearly 40,000 American Indians moved to urban areas for work. Unemployment was also rampant on reservations due to the lack of jobs in such desolate areas of the country. Many of the changes that occurred during World War II were spurred by financial concerns. For example, joining the military enabled many young Indians to ensure they always had food, clothing, and a place to sleep. Enlisting was a way to escape the poverty-stricken circumstances of reservations and to be sure there was always a steady income of money.¹⁴

¹³ *Indian Reorganization Act of 1934*, Pub. L. No. 73-383, 48 Stat. 984 (1934); Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian*, 15.

¹⁴ Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II*, 15; *Ibid.*, 16.

Wisconsin Native Women in the Military

Many Wisconsin Native women made the decision to join the military during World War II, a few of whom the Wisconsin Historical Society interviewed in the early 1990s. The aim of these interviews was to capture the experiences of Wisconsin women during the war of various economic, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The historical society interviewed a number Native women, including four that served in the military. These four women's stories shed light on the economic concerns that influenced their decision to enlist as well as the financial benefits they received while in the military.

Marge Pascale, the Red Cliff Ojibwe woman mentioned earlier, born in 1921, moved to Milwaukee after the outbreak of the war to work as a babysitter. After losing that job, she worked at the Ambrosia Chocolate Factory until she joined the Air Women's Army Corps (WAC) in 1943. The Air WAC was a division of the WAC, which assigned women to the Army Air Forces, Army Ground Forces, or Army Service Forces. Women in the Air WAC took jobs such as weather observers, control tower specialists, and airplane mechanics. Pascale served as a photo-laboratory technician during her time in the service. She developed pictures for the military and made maps with those images. Pascale also inspected parachutes for defects and worked as a nurse's aide.¹⁵

Lucille Rabideaux, a woman of Lakota and French ancestry born in 1914, moved to Wisconsin from South Dakota in 1939 to work as a nurse in the Hayward Indian Hospital. After her husband was drafted she enlisted with the 44th General Hospital Unit based out of Madison as a nurse in 1943. Performing many different jobs, Rabideaux worked in the psychiatric and

¹⁵ Marge Pascale, interview by Kristina Ackley, August 24, 1992, transcript, Wisconsin Women during World War II Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; "Women's Army Auxiliary Corps," The Official Homepage of the United States Army: Women in the U.S. Army, <http://www.army.mil/women/wac.html> (accessed December 6, 2011); Pascale, interview, 31.

venereal disease wards of Camp Ansa Station Hospital in California, as well as administered shots to soldiers. Rabideaux was even sent overseas to the Pacific Islands and Australia to dress patients' wounds and pass out medications.¹⁶

Ernestine Murphy, a Stockbridge-Munsee woman born in 1921, left her home just outside the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation to work as a waitress and line worker in the Pabst Brewery in Milwaukee during the early years of the war. Then in 1943 she enlisted with the Marines. The Marines allowed women to join beginning in 1942 due to an increased demand for manpower. Female Marines performed non-combat jobs such as clerical work so male Marines with these jobs could be freed to fight overseas. During her service in the Marines, Murphy performed various jobs such as sorting mail and supervising her barracks. When she was transferred to Washington D.C. she worked with confidential files, mainly monitoring where soldiers were transferred to and if they were killed in action.¹⁷

The Navy also accepted female enlistees during the war. Gwendolyn Washinawatok, a Menominee woman born in 1923, left the Menominee reservation after her high school graduation in 1941. After working various jobs in Milwaukee and Chicago, Washinawatok joined the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES, in 1943. WAVES was formed for similar reasons as to why women were allowed to enlist in the other branches: "to release male officers and enlisted men of the naval service for duty at sea."¹⁸ While in the service, Washinawatok chose to be placed in the communications field, though her dream was to

¹⁶ Lucille Rabideaux, interview by Kristina Ackley, July 11, 1992, transcript, Wisconsin Women during World War II Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, 22; *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷ Ernestine Murphy, interview by Kristina Ackley, July 24, 1992, transcript, Wisconsin Women during World War II Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; Mary V. Stremow, *Free a Marine to Fight: Women Marines in World War II* (Department of the Navy, 1994), 2; Murphy, interview, 36.

¹⁸ U.S. Congress, "Establishment of Women's Reserve," 77th Cong., 2d sess., 1943, www.history.navy.mil, (accessed November 30, 2012).

be a pilot. She was then trained to interpret and record international code messages transmitted by the Japanese.¹⁹

These four women took advantage of the opportunities the military gave them during the war. Though each woman had her own reasons for joining the military, all their lives were drastically changed by this decision. Their choices took them away from their families and into the new world of opportunities that was war-time America. Some women chose to join the military for personal reasons, while others were recruited by posters and advertisements. The United States government did not make a direct effort to recruit Native women during World War II, but the recruitment efforts used for non-Native women often reached them. Pascale found out about military opportunities for women through information on posters and the radio. Washinawatok heard about these positions in a similar way. She remembered



Figure 1. John Falter, *Don't Miss Your Great Opportunity*, 1944.

Source: www.history.navy.mil, accessed November 29, 2011

¹⁹ Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview by Kristina Ackley, July 17, 1992, transcript, Wisconsin Women during World War II Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; Regina Washinawatok, interview by author, telephone conversation, March 2, 2012.

advertisements being put up in factories and shop windows with images of military personnel (Figure 1). While this information did not specifically target Native women, it was effective in catching their attention.²⁰

The posters that advertised military opportunities for women during the war had an appeal to both Native and non-Native women. The advertisements suggested that by enlisting, a woman would be performing a patriotic service for the country: men would be freed to fight overseas because women were brave enough to take their place at home. While this sense of patriotism may have appealed to both Native and non-Native women, another underlying message of the posters may have caught Native women's attention. The women pictured in the posters appeared to be put together, well respected, and economically stable—they could take care of themselves. Joining the military seemed to assist these women in improving their lives, both economically and socially. Native women, with limited job opportunities because of their ethnicity, gender, and often remoteness on reservations, desired this kind of advancement which would otherwise be beyond their reach. The posters convinced many Native women to enlist by suggesting that women who joined the military would dramatically improve their lifestyle.²¹

While the military did not make a direct effort to recruit Native women, boarding schools found subtle ways of encouraging students to enlist after school. Newsletters at schools such as Haskell Institute in Kansas and Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma praised former students who enlisted. In one issue of the *Indian Leader*, Haskell Institute's newsletter, the paper commended its female graduates for serving in women's auxiliaries. The *Indian Leader* declared “not to be outdone by the male warriors, former Haskell girls are stepping in to claim their share

²⁰ Gouveia, “We Also Serve,” 159; Pascale, interview, 18; Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview, 14.

²¹ Gouveia, “Uncle Sam's Priceless Daughters,” 123.

of warrior glory.”²² Though not endorsed by the military, this form of recruiting encouraged students of the schools to join the military after graduation.²³

It comes as no surprise that boarding schools encouraged students to enlist after they became of age. Students had very few job prospects after graduation. Native females mostly learned clerical or domestic skills while in school. While these jobs began paying better during the war, they still did not have as many benefits as the military offered, such as free medical and dental care. Many women chose to simply return to their reservations after school where there were even fewer employment prospects. Enlisting was an easier way to find employment and economic stability after school.²⁴

The experience at boarding schools assisted Native women in adjusting to military life as well as aided their decision to enlist. Murphy, a graduate of Flandreau Indian School, found her school experience helpful once she joined the military. Though not recruited at or during school, Murphy enlisted in the Marines one year after she graduated from Flandreau. Her experience with following orders and having someone control every aspect of her life at school made her transition into the military an easy one. Many boarding school graduates who enlisted had similar experiences to Murphy’s. These Native women were accustomed to marching, drilling, inspections, and barracks-living because of years spent at boarding schools. This familiarity with a regimented lifestyle helped Native women excel where many non-Native women did not. Because non-Native women did not attend boarding schools they often questioned military practices instead of simply following them. These women questioned the standards of the

²² “With the Warriors,” *Indian Leader* 47 (September 24, 1943): 2, quoted in Gouveia, “Uncle Sam’s Priceless Daughters,” 116.

²³ Gouveia, “We Also Serve,” 159.

²⁴ Gouveia, “Uncle Sam’s Priceless Daughters,” 122; Office of War Information, *Women in the War...For the Final Push to Victory*, (Washington. DC: Government Printing Office, 1944), 5.

military such as punishing an entire barracks for one person's mistake. The strict lifestyle required at boarding schools helped many Native women ease into military routines.²⁵

Native women's reason for joining the military varied as much as how they were recruited. One reason for joining the military was for the sense of adventure that went along with experiencing something new. Washinawatok joined the WAVES in January 1943 because the group provided her with the adventure she was seeking. "I thought it would be...something interesting and a[n] adventure that was not offered that often."²⁶ Because of her enlistment, Washinawatok was able to travel to New York, Ohio, Washington, and California, an experience she would not have had if she did not enlist. A longing for something new drew Rabideaux, the nurse from Hayward, into being a nurse for the military. She believed doing something different with her life was a positive change; otherwise she would stay in one place and be "in a rut."²⁷ Rabideaux traveled to California, the Philippines, New Guinea, and Australia while she was a nurse for the military. She wanted to do something more with her life, so like many other Native women, she joined the war effort.

World War II caused one of the first mass migrations of Natives off their reservations. The promise of work in the prosperous war economy lured many Native women into urban settings and the military. Murphy, the Stockbridge-Munsee Marine, believed that if World War II had not occurred she never would have left Shawano County in Wisconsin. Moving to urban areas for a job or joining the military provided ways to earn more money than would have been

²⁵ Murphy, interview, 32; Gouveia, "Uncle Sam's Priceless Daughters," 124; Ibid., 125.

²⁶ Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview, 15.

²⁷ Rabideaux, interview, 22.

available on a reservation. Jobs in Indian Country were scarce and moving to an urban area and joining the military made finding a job and securing economic stability easier.²⁸

Besides this sense of adventure, military service also provided many women with a sense of pride in what they were doing for their country. Native women responded to the war with acts of patriotism just as non-Native women did. Washinawatok (Figure 2) knew her work with international code was vital to fighting the Japanese. She expressed her sense of pride to Kristina Ackley in an interview in 1992 for the Wisconsin Historical Society, saying, “It made you feel good that you knew you were doing really important work.”²⁹



Figure 2. Gwendolyn Washinawatok, second from right, January 1944.

Source: Patty Loew, “The Back of the Homefront: Black and American Indian Women in Wisconsin during World War II,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 82, no. 2 (Winter 1998-1999), 90.

²⁸ Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II*, 74; Murphy, interview, 75.

²⁹ Gouveia, “Uncle Sam’s Priceless Daughters,” 123; Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview, 34.

This sense of importance was a big change from the feelings of helplessness many women may have felt prior to enlisting. It was much easier to see the impact one made on the war effort in the military compared to an isolated reservation. Having a steady job also fostered a sense of purpose for Native women. Women were recruited so male military personnel would be freed to fight overseas. Taking a job in the military and freeing a man to fight afforded a great source of pride during the war. These feelings of pride and personal accomplishment in one's work helped push approximately 800 Native women to take part in the American military during World War II.³⁰

Murphy offered another reason for entering the military: education. In the course of her service in the Marines she was able to travel across the country and meet new people, experiences she would not have had if she had stayed in Shawano County. Many people did not get an education after grade school during the World War II era, and because of this they had little hope in getting a good-paying job that would require more schooling. Some women who joined the military also hoped to receive job training that would help them in the civilian world. Murphy enlisted hoping to learn a new skill, "something that I could do when I got to be a civilian."³¹ Women who did not have an education past the eighth grade were not likely to be hired into well-paying jobs, especially if they lived on a reservation. The military helped these women make money while learning a new skill that could help them advance in mainstream America's work world.³²

³⁰ Douglas R. Hurt, *The Great Plains during World War II* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 364.

³¹ Murphy, interview, 21.

³² *Ibid.*, 9; *Ibid.*, 6.

Having a stable job that provided food and income was another benefit of military service. With poverty levels remaining high in Indian Country before and during the war, the service was a way to ensure food, clothing, and shelter were available and there was always a steady income. According to historian Alison Bernstein, “One of the most significant benefits of Indian participation in the military was that thousands of young Indian men and women made a decent living for the first time in their lives.”³³ While Washinawatok was working during the war before she enlisted, she became homesick and called her father. He told her to stay where she was because there were not many opportunities for her on the Menominee reservation. The armed forces offered an economic opportunity to Native men and women that would have been otherwise unattainable on reservations.³⁴

Many women earned more money per week at civilian jobs than in the military during the war, but this did not include living expenses. Pascale was paid more at her job in a chocolate factory during World War II than in the Air WAC, but her living costs were covered in her military pay. Service members did not have to pay for food, housing, and clothing as civilians did, so though they were not paid much, it was often worth the loss in monthly income to receive these amenities. On average, a woman in the armed forces earned approximately fifty dollars per month, plus food and quarters allowance. Including these allowances women would earn 142 dollars per month, or roughly thirty two dollars per week. With promotions women could earn around 200 dollars per month. Washinawatok also remembered being paid more at her civilian job in a defense plant, but she did not seem to regret her decision to enlist.

³³ Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II*, 59.

³⁴ Gouveia, “Uncle Sam’s Priceless Daughters,” 122; Regina Washinawatok, interview, March 2, 2012.

I did make more money in the defense plant than I did in the service. But, again, in the service it's your food and your clothes and your housing...all of that you didn't have to worry about. Your physicals or dental work or if you got sick you were taken care of. So all of that expense was something you didn't have to worry about. And we had good food. You didn't even think about the rationing after you got in service because you didn't have to do any of the cooking, it was done for you...we ate very well.³⁵

Washinawatok did not have to pay for personal expenses during her time in the military, so she was able to use any money she made for leisure activities instead of buying food and clothing.³⁶

Murphy recalled the services and discounts she received while in the military in place of a higher salary. Soldiers were able to go to the general store on base to “buy things really cheap.”³⁷ They also got some things for free, such as soft drinks. In addition to free commodities, medical and dental care and clothing were free. Murphy believed it was difficult to adjust to life after the military because “you got kind of spoiled” with the discounts and free services. Though women earned less money in the military than in civilian jobs, these women did not mind earning less up front because their personal expenses were covered and they received discounts that civilians did not.³⁸

Another contributing factor in Native women's decision to enlist was discrimination in the civilian work force. Minority women during this era were often restricted to clerical work and domestic jobs. Pascale worked as a babysitter and housekeeper for a family in Milwaukee before the war. According to Pascale, there were quite a few Indian girls working for families as domestic workers in that area. Domestic employment was not a well-paying job, but joining the military was a way to escape the low-paying positions offered to minority women. Women in the

³⁵ Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview, 29.

³⁶ Pascale, interview, 23; Office of War Information, *Women in the War*, 5.

³⁷ Murphy, interview, 27.

³⁸ Office of War Information, *Women in the War*, 5; Murphy, interview, 27.

civilian workforce also received lesser pay than their male equals. Pascale was hired at Ambrosia Chocolate Factory after she lost her babysitting job. She recalled being paid less than the male workers at the factory who were performing the same job. Discrimination in the type of work and the pay contributed to some Native women's decision to join the military.³⁹

Once a Native woman enlisted in the military, she had little need to worry about discrimination. Native soldiers were placed in integrated units. According to Patty Loew in her article in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and some tribes actually requested that Native soldiers be put into segregated units. They "insisted that American Indians would perform better in segregated units since many did not speak English and had had little experience with whites."⁴⁰ This request was not honored. Secretary of War Henry Stimson ordered that Natives serve in integrated units with white soldiers. Pascale recalled being the only American Indian in her unit of the Air WAC, and Washinawatok was listed as white when she joined WAVES. Once Native women joined the military they did not have to face the discrimination they did in the work force based on race.⁴¹

Native women had little need to be concerned with discrimination when being assigned a job in the military either. African American enlistees were placed into segregated units and were often assigned less desirable jobs because of their race. Their economic situation may have been compromised because they received the least attractive, lower paying jobs, but Native women did not have the same experience. Indian females "entered all branches of the service with

³⁹ Gouveia, "Uncle Sam's Priceless Daughters," 122; Pascale, interview, 11; *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁰ Patty Loew, "The Back of the Homefront," 84.

⁴¹ Gouveia, "Uncle Sam's Priceless Daughters," 114; Pascale interview, 25; Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview, 18.

ease.”⁴² This effortless process to obtain good-paying jobs was another incentive for Native women to enlist in the military.⁴³

Native women had many reasons for finding work off their reservations and enlisting, but one universal theme was the economic benefits they received. Military women earned enough money to participate in the booming wartime economy in their free time. Washinawatok recalled working forty eight hour shifts, but when she would get an extra day off she and her friends would go sight-seeing. While stationed in California they often went to Los Angeles or Hollywood on their days off. Murphy also remembered going out during her free time. She and her friends would go to town on weekends when they were stationed in Oklahoma. They would go dancing and out to eat with each other or a date. Fairs and shows were also popular ways to spend time and money.⁴⁴

Having money to spend on leisure activities was a first for many Native women who joined the service. Before the war, some had to work to earn money for their families, and others were sent to boarding schools because their families could not afford to feed them at home. Murphy’s parents, who lived just outside the Stockbridge-Munsee reservation, sent her to Flandreau for this reason, though they would send her packages of food and clothing when they could. Once in the military, Murphy was able to use her newly-found financial freedom to go to shows and eat out with friends. Money for leisure activities was rare on reservations, so Native women in the military took advantage of their disposable income.⁴⁵

⁴² Gouveia, “Uncle Sam’s Priceless Daughters,” 117.

⁴³ Kristin Ceello, “World War II: The Home Front,” University of Virginia, www.vcdh.virginia.edu, 2005, (accessed February 2, 2012).

⁴⁴ Gwendolyn Washinawatok, interview, 27; Murphy, interview, 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

Instead of spending extra money, some women chose to save it. Rabideaux saved the extra money she earned while overseas. She received a small amount of money each month and the rest was sent to a bank where she kept a few thousand dollars of her income. In Indian Country, having enough money to keep some in a savings account was uncommon, so this extra income was a first for many Native enlistees. Growing up during the Depression and in the poverty of reservations, Native women were not able to save money toward their futures. The possibility of saving extra income was another way in which Native women benefitted economically from joining the military.⁴⁶

Choosing to enlist in the military assisted Native women in taking advantage of new opportunities that were previously unavailable. Their decision took them away from their loved ones and threw them into mainstream America. While it was not the intention of the government to recruit Native women, many enlisted to fulfill their patriotic duty and to ensure economic stability. The skills that they acquired in the military helped them find this financial freedom. Not only did they have a steady income in the military, but they also learned new skills that would help them find jobs in the civilian world after the war. They also earned enough money to enjoy their downtime with friends and save for their futures. Enlisting was a life-changing decision for Native women.

Defending the Off-Reservation Home Front

Instead of enlisting in the armed forces, many Native women chose to assist in whatever ways they could on the home front. As part of the mass migration to urban centers during the war, it is estimated that 40,000 American Indians left their reservations to find work.

⁴⁶ Rabideaux, interview, 68.

Approximately 12,000 of this number were women.⁴⁷ Many of these women worked in traditional roles such as secretaries, domestic servants, and cashiers, but many more broke gender roles and filled jobs left vacant by men who enlisted such as factory work. Similar to Native women who enlisted, Native women who moved off of the reservation often did so for financial reasons. Jobs were scarce in Indian Country, but grew more plentiful in urban areas as the war progressed and more men left their jobs to serve in the military. Working off the reservation during the war provided new economic opportunities for many Native women.⁴⁸

Native women who already lived off of reservations also sought work in the higher-paying defense industry. Christine Mann, a Ho Chunk woman, lived in Wisconsin Dells during the war. For a short time she was employed by a souvenir shop there, and later by Badger Ordnance, a munitions plant, making gun powder. Another Native woman who lived off the reservation before and during the war is Alice DeNomie Loew. DeNomie grew up in an Irish neighborhood in Milwaukee with her Irish mother and Bad River Ojibwe father. She worked at Perfex Corporation in Milwaukee during World War II, assisting in the production of the Norden bombsight. These women chose to improve their financial situation by seeking work in defense plants during the war.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Bertha M. Eckert, "Indian Girls Now at War Jobs; Others Serving as Army Nurses," *New York Times*, February 6, 1943; This number cannot be verified because so many Native women were classified as white when they enlisted; however, Bertha Eckert, secretary for Indian work of the National Young Women's Clubs of America, stated that by 1943, 12,000 Native women had left their reservations in search of work.

⁴⁸ Bernstein, *American Indians and World War II*, 68; *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁹ Christine Mann, interview by Kristina Ackley, July 31, 1992, transcript, Wisconsin Women during World War II Oral History Project, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI, 15; Alice Loew, interview by author, February 18, 2012, Madison, WI.

Native women heard about available off-reservation work in a variety of ways. Many employers published advertisements for positions that needed to be filled. Mann recalled seeing advertisements that Badger Ordnance posted during the war. Government agencies also published ads and posters that attempted to attract women to war work. Similar to military posters, the employment posters suggested that by working during the war, women were doing their patriotic duty for the enlisted men overseas (Figure 3). Also, like the military recruitment posters, the woman or women pictured appeared feminine, hard-working, and successful—she was able to support the war and be independent while maintaining her



Figure 3. Adolph Treidler (1886-1991) *She's a WOW*, 1942.

Source: www.rockwell-center.org, accessed March 6, 2012.

femininity. This rewarding, self-governing lifestyle was often out of reach for Native women on reservations. The lack of jobs in Indian Country presented few opportunities to find economic security. Employment posters made war work seem glamorous and inspired many Native women to pursue work off the reservation.⁵⁰

Mobilization literature also pushed women to find work during the war. The Office of War Information distributed a bulletin in 1944 to various media outlets to begin a program called

⁵⁰ Mann, interview, 25.

“Women in the War.” The aim of the program was to recruit women for the war effort by publishing information on why they should find work or enlist. The bulletin stressed that “when the Nation is at war, women must work as men must fight...everyone must march on the road to victory....”⁵¹ Programs like this motivated many Native women to find work not only because they could earn money, but also because of a sense of patriotic duty.⁵²

When the subject of women working during World War II is discussed, the image that often comes to mind is ‘Rosie the Riveter’. Rosie represented a strong, independent woman who assisted in the war effort by doing a man’s job. While some Native women did find jobs that were directly related to the defense industry, this was not typical. Many found positions in traditionally female-driven fields such as domestic service or cashiering. Pascale moved away from the Red Cliff Reservation to Milwaukee during the war. One of her friends informed her that families there were looking for people to babysit, so she took the opportunity and was hired by a family with three children. Pascale looked after the children and cleaned the home. She recalled families in that area hiring “quite a few Indian girls” for housekeeping and babysitting jobs. Positions in factories and defense work were opening up to women for the first time, but white women were getting most of these jobs. Employers were often nervous to hire minority women because they feared resistance by their white employees. Because of this, Native women often took the lower paying, less desirable jobs during the war out of necessity.⁵³

While domestic and clerical workers often earned less than their factory counterparts, many Native women took whatever jobs they could find; it was still an improvement over

⁵¹ Office of War Information, *Women in the War*, 1, 4.

⁵² Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women during World War II*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1947), 28.

⁵³ Patty Loew, “The Back of the Homefront,” 87; Pascale, interview, 10-11; Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 37.

poverty on the reservation. Murphy moved to Milwaukee with some of her friends “because there’s no work up here [on the reservation].”⁵⁴ Native women started work as soon as possible in order to afford their new lifestyle—i.e. moving to an urban center, paying rent, and buying food cost money that many Native women did not possess.

Fortunately for Native and other minority women, domestic servants were in high demand during World War II. Before the war mothers typically stayed at home to take care of children and clean the home. During the war it was common for the mother in a family to work outside the home while the father was away serving in the military. As more women took jobs in traditionally-male trades, the number of women in domestic service shrank, causing a high demand for women still willing to take care of household duties. This demand caused an increase in pay and a decrease in hours for women like Pascale. By accepting these jobs, Native women were able to earn a decent living, often for the first time in their lives.⁵⁵

As men left their work for the military, many jobs opened up to females for the first time. Many women found work in factories, though not all factory work was related to the war. Shortly after Murphy moved to Milwaukee to find employment, she saw an advertisement in the newspaper that help was needed at the Pabst Brewery. Murphy’s first job was to patch boxes the company used to deliver beer. After thirty days of this, she received a pay increase when she began working on a machine. Like many Native women, Murphy had come from an area where jobs were scarce, paid less, and rarely provided a chance for upward mobility. The man power shortage during the war presented new opportunities for Murphy and other women across the country. Previously, work was difficult to find because women were restricted to a small number

⁵⁴ Murphy, interview, 11.

⁵⁵ Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 34.

of trades. After the war began and more jobs opened up to women, it became easier for a woman seeking employment to find a job. Factory work offered Native women a chance to have a steady income which was previously unavailable to them because of their location, race, and gender.⁵⁶

A few Native women had the opportunity to live up to the ‘Rosie the Riveter’ image during World War II. Some Native women, like Alice DeNomie and Christine Mann, were able to secure jobs in defense plants and contribute directly to the war effort. Before her job at Perfex, DeNomie attended Layton School of Art. It was because of this experience she was able to obtain her position producing the Norden bombsight. DeNomie had learned to read blueprints at school, so she was placed in a better position than many women in the factory. Instead of working in a dark room welding and screwing parts together as the other women did, DeNomie worked in a well-lit room, lining up the cross-hairs of the bombsight. Working at Perfex gave DeNomie the opportunity to contribute her talents directly to the war effort. Mann also had the experience of working in the defense industry. She worked for Badger Ordnance, a munitions plant 30 miles northwest of Madison, making gun powder.⁵⁷

Finding a job in the defense industry was rare for a Native woman, but provided a big economic advantage. As with women employed in domestic services and non-war related jobs, there was a pay increase to be found in factory jobs because of the labor shortage. DeNomie remembers earning forty-five dollars per week at Perfex. For a woman who had been earning fifteen dollars per week before the war, earning three times her previous income was a substantial improvement. Though women typically earned less than their male coworkers, women often experienced a greater increase in earnings because they had earned less before the

⁵⁶ Murphy, interview, 13-14.

⁵⁷ Patty Loew, “The Back of the Homefront,” 86.; Alice Loew, interview, February 18, 2012; Mann, interview, 24; *Ibid.*, 26.

war. Working in a defense plant presented Native women with the opportunity to earn much more than was possible in their previous jobs.⁵⁸

Besides the obvious economic benefits, many Native women entered the defense industry in order to fulfill their patriotic duty. After DeNomie's brothers entered the military, she too wanted to do her part in the war. "When I heard the clarion call for volunteers and my brothers started leaving I thought well...I have to do something."⁵⁹ Her work at Perfex on the Norden bombsight was vital to the war and gave her the sense that, like her brothers, she too was contributing to the war effort. Aside from producing war materials, taking a job in a defense factory meant that more men could fight in the war. According to DeNomie, the reason so many American Indians enlisted during the war was because "the grandfathers that signed the treaties had pledged to protect the flag of the United States in times of war."⁶⁰ Native people still felt the obligation to defend the country despite the fact that the United States government had not upheld their treaty responsibilities. Native women who chose not to enlist could take over a man's job so that Native people could continue to hold up their promise to protect the country.⁶¹

Filling traditionally-male jobs meant that the country could continue to make materials to support both the American economy and the war effort. According to a bulletin from the Office of War Information, "any job that helps maintain essential civilian production or services—or any job that releases a man or another woman for military service or war plant work, is a war

⁵⁸ Townsend, *World War II and the American Indian*, 177; Alice Loew, interview, February 18, 2012; Anderson, *Wartime Women*, 35.

⁵⁹ Alice Loew, interview, February 18, 2012.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

job.”⁶² Though Pascale did not work in the defense industry, her work at Ambrosia Chocolate Factory was still essential to helping stimulate America’s wartime economy. Feelings of pride and patriotism in one’s work and assistance to the war effort pushed many Native women to respond to the call for workers during the war.⁶³

The part Native women played in the work-force was beneficial to the war effort, and also beneficial to the women because of the financial freedom they gained. Women earned more during the war than before, so they were able to spend money on both necessities and leisure activities. Mann used her money to buy commodities for herself and her parents. She also used her income for leisure activities with friends. Going to the movies or on dates were activities she recalled enjoying.⁶⁴

DeNomie helped her parents with her income as well. She thought it only fair because she still lived with them, she should help support the family. With this money she bought her family a telephone and other items. She also spent some of her money on postage for letters she wrote to her brothers and on their behalf. Her brothers would send letters to her, and she would then in turn write letters to their family and her brothers’ friends reiterating the message. “I was like their post office...I was spending all my money on stamps,” she recalls. Her brothers did not have enough money to pay for this much postage themselves, so DeNomie (Figure 4) was able to assist in this manner. With this new economic freedom Native women were able to help support their families, stimulate the American economy, and enjoy a modicum of disposable income.⁶⁵

⁶² Office of War Information, *Women in the War*, 3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Mann, interview, 27.

⁶⁵ Alice Loew, interview, February 18, 2012.



Figure 4. Alice DeNomie Loew (right) and a schoolmate, August 1943.
Source: Alice DeNomie Loew.

Conclusion

Native women who chose to find work off their reservations found many opportunities awaiting them. The women who enlisted did so for a variety of reasons, some personal, some patriotic, and others economic. Recruitment posters reached many Native women, encouraging them to enlist to do their patriotic duty. These women believed they were freeing a soldier to fight overseas by taking over a home front position. Other women enlisted for personal gain, such as a steady income and education. The skills they acquired could help them continue their financial freedom after the war by assisting them in finding a civilian job. Discrimination in the civilian workforce was another issue. While Native women were often denied jobs because of

their ethnicity in the civilian world, the military did not discriminate against them when assigning units.

Non-military work also provided new opportunities for Native women. Many found work as domestic servants. While this trend was not new, women began to receive more pay during the war as domestic servants because of the lack of women willing to take these jobs. Mobilization literature encouraged women to take any job they could to help the war effort. New job openings factories and other traditionally-male dominated fields gave more Native women the opportunity to earn a decent wage for the first time in their lives. The few Native women who found work in defense plants also had the opportunity for financial security. Their work directly contributed to the war effort and fostered a sense of pride and patriotism. By filling positions in the defense industry more men were able to enlist and fight overseas. As with their military counterparts, these women gained economic stability that had previously been out of reach.⁶⁶

Native women's stories have largely been overlooked in the context of American history as is evidenced by the lack of secondary sources on the topic. Where women are mentioned, the motives for their efforts during the war are often overlooked. Like much of American history, women are pushed to the background while men take the forefront of glory. Most history enthusiasts know of the Navajo code talkers, but nothing of women like Washinawatok and Pascale who also left their families to assist in the war. The reasons many Native women stayed on their reservations must also be investigated, as well as a more in depth look at what women on reservations did to contribute to the war.

Understanding why Native women found work off their reservations is essential to realizing how these women took control over their lives. Native women chose to leave their

⁶⁶ Office of War Information, *Women in the War*, 3.

families to find a more independent, financially-secure life in urban areas. At the outset of the war, DeNomie, “saw the world as an opportunity.”⁶⁷ By taking hold of these opportunities she, like many other Native women, was able to financially assist her family while fulfilling a sense of patriotic duty she had for her country. The Native women who made the decision to seek employment off of the reservation were able to take advantage of new opportunities and new experiences they would not have had before World War II.

⁶⁷ Alice Loew, interview, February 18, 2012.

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