

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Session 1: Women, Work, and War

March 2016

The Impact of World War II: Mexican American and Japanese American Women at Work in Indiana

Nancy N. Conner*

Two groups of women, each representing a distinctive minority community within Indiana, earned a place in the history of Hoosier Women at Work as a result of World War II. In different ways, the war brought Mexican American defense workers in northwest Indiana and Japanese American factory workers in Indianapolis into the Hoosier workforce.

Industry provided the impetus for twentieth-century development of numerous cities in The Region, that is, the northwest Indiana counties of Lake, Porter and La Porte. One city in particular has a long history of Mexican immigration, dating back more than a hundred years. That city is East Chicago, Indiana, on the shore of Lake Michigan.

Although East Chicago is the formal name of this city, it was once called the "Twin City," comprised of East Chicago on the east side of town and a section known as Indiana Harbor on the west side. Indiana Harbor was home to Mexican immigrants – many originally from Jalisco, Guanajuato and Michoacán – who came to work in the nearby steel plants. To this day, the population of East Chicago is slightly more than 50% Hispanic.¹

A confluence of factors led to this unusual demographic. As the great steel mills of The Region rose to prominence around the turn of the twentieth century, they became a magnet for new

*Nancy Conner served as Director of Grants & Novel Conversations at Indiana Humanities from 1982 until her retirement in 2016.

¹ "A Brief History of the City of East Chicago," City of East Chicago, accessed March 25, 2016, <http://www.eastchicago.com/page80/page101/index.html>; Powell A. Moore, *The Calumet Region: Indiana's Last Frontier* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1959), 216; Senoras of Yesteryear, *Mexican American Harbor Lights*, (East Chicago, IN: Senoras of Yesteryear, 1992), 4-7.

immigrants, especially from Eastern and Southern Europe. Difficult conditions in the factories led to the Great Steel Strike of 1919, while at the same time the Mexican Revolution was creating chaos in west central Mexico, forcing people to leave their homes. Unions eventually brought about improved working conditions in the steel industry, and without the 12-hour workday, more shifts of workers were needed. However, the Immigration Act of 1924 restricted the flow of European immigrants. As a solution to all of these dilemmas, the steel mills set out to hire Mexican American workers locally employed by railroads, as well as recruiting them from places like Kansas City, Laredo, and El Paso. Throughout the 1920s, approximately 30 percent of Inland Steel's 7,000 employees were Mexican American, making it at that time the nation's largest employer of Mexican labor. By the 1930s, despite the Great Depression and consequent repatriation of many workers to Mexico, Indiana Harbor (or "la colonia") had experienced a time of prosperity and had gained women and families, developing into a strong ethnic community.²

* * *

Then came World War II. Although it is not often highlighted in histories of the war, Mexican American women should be pictured alongside their blonde, blue-eyed coworkers as the iconic Rosie the Riveter or "Stella the Steelmaker." As men joined the armed forces, women defense workers from East Chicago took jobs opening up at Inland Steel Company, Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, U.S. Steel Corporation and Bethlehem Steel Corporation. For example, Raquel Alvarez was a pipefitter, and Paula Flores made axel parts for aircraft. Mary Machuca and Aurora Gonzales worked as loaders of 50 MM and 45 MM shells. Luz Prado Diaz was a sheet metal cutter, Mary Hero was a cannon steel presser, Susie Pineda was a riveter and inspector, and Esperanza Maravilla was a crane operator. Women also worked at Fruit Growers Express, where they handled food for troop trains.³

As these young women began to receive their first paychecks, they found that they could make good money and become more independent of their families, no longer living sheltered lives under the watchful eyes of their parents. They worked long hours and were capable of hard physical labor, taking pride in their jobs and their contribution to the war effort. A number of them continued in their careers after the war ended, becoming members of Inland Steel's 25-Year Club, with 25 to 43 years of service in the mills.

One of these women, Ermelinda Murillo, became known as Mela, Queen of the 12-Inch (referring to the 12-inch Bar Mill at Inland Steel). Although she expected to be let go when the men came home

² Francisco Arturo Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience in the Urban Midwest: East Chicago, Indiana, 1919-1945," in *Forging a Community: The Latino Experience in Northwest Indiana, 1919-1975*, ed. James B. Lane and Edward J. Escobar (Chicago: Calumet Regional Archives and Cattails Press, 1987), 137-142.

³ Mexican American Harbor Lights, 34-35.

from war, management knew that Mela was a widow with a child to raise, and they asked her to stay on. She became the first woman assigned to many formerly all-male jobs. "She has worked as a heat chaser, recorder, push-out operator, hot shear expediter, hot bed operator, and second helper to the loader at the 10-inch Bar Mill where she logged her first quarter of a century at Inland." In an interview, Mela explained: "When I arrive at work I immediately check what I have on the tracks. . . . I have to know where the loads of steel are, where they go, and what condition they're in. I also get the paperwork moving because we have to stay at least 16 hours ahead of the rolling mill." Mela learned to speak some Polish, Serbian, and Croatian, in addition to English and Spanish, to help her communicate with her coworkers on the job.⁴

* * *

In a very different way, World War II was the historical event that resulted in Japanese American women immigrating to Indiana and joining the Hoosier workforce. Roger Daniels' analysis of the 1960 census showed that the migration of young women from Japan accounted for a major shift in the sex ratios of the national Japanese American population. In the cohort of those aged 20 through 39, foreign-born Japanese women outnumbered foreign-born men by just over four to one, a difference that was even greater in areas where military brides made up a large percentage of the ethnic population. The office of the American Consul General stated that "Between June 22, 1947, and December 31, 1952, 10,517 American citizens, principally Armed Service Personnel, married Japanese women." During the late 1940s and the 1950s a strong American presence in Japan continued due to the post-World War II Occupation, the Korean War, and the Cold War.⁵

These historical events, combined with the passage of legislation, had a direct effect on the number of Japanese women entering the United States during a given postwar year. Ever since the "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1907-8, followed by the Immigration Act of 1924, few Japanese (or other Asians) had been permitted to immigrate to the United States. On December 28, 1945, Congress passed the War Brides Act, waiving visa requirements and provisions of immigration law for nationals of foreign countries married to members of the American armed forces. Racial barriers were not dropped, however,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988; reprint, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 312 (page citations are to the reprint edition); Anselm L. Strauss, "Strain and Harmony in American-Japanese War-Bride Marriages," *Marriage and Family Living* 16 (1954): 99.

until Public Law 213, sometimes called the Soldier Brides Act, was enacted on July 22, 1947, extending the benefits of the War Brides Act to persons of “racially ineligible races.”⁶

Military wives were also affected by the course of the war and the Occupation. The Occupation of Japan officially ended on April 28, 1952. The Korean War began in June 1950 and ended in July 1953, but many soldiers were rotated home during the previous year. When large numbers of men prepared to leave Asia and return to the United States, they sought to bring their wives with them. All of these factors came together in the year ending June 30, 1952, during which a total of 4,220 Japanese wives and 221 children of U.S. citizens immigrated to America. With the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952, the special legislation that allowed their entry into the country became an established law.⁷

The sudden influx of Japanese war brides was so striking that feature articles also appeared in the popular magazines of the day, including *Life*, *Look*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Ebony*. A *Saturday Evening Post* article, titled “They’re Bringing Home Japanese Wives,” stated that “Six thousand Americans in Japan have taken Japanese brides since 1945, and all the little Madame Butterflies are studying hamburgers, Hollywood and home on the range, before coming to live in the U.S.A.” Consistent with the timeline detailed above, these articles began to appear in late 1951 and early 1952.⁸

* * *

The war bride phenomenon affected the Japanese American population in Indiana, just as it did in other parts of the nation. Two factors contributed to the choice of destination, a choice that was made by (or, in some cases, for) the husbands. One was the presence of military installations in Indiana; the other was the desire to locate near families living in Indiana. Fort Benjamin Harrison plays a part in a number of stories told by Indianapolis-area Japanese wives. Beginning in September 1940, Fort Harrison Induction and Reception Center was expanded into a complex that by 1943 had become the largest facility of its kind, equipped with its own administration building, mess halls, theater, chapel, recreation hall, and Post Exchange (PX). The center inducted nearly 200,000 men into military service during World War II.⁹

Fort Harrison declined in importance as the war ended, but became more active as mobilization for the Korean War strained the ability of the Army Finance Center at St. Louis and the Adjutant General’s

⁶ *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Year Ending 1947* (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1947), 1, and Tables 6 and 9.

⁷ Daniels, *Asian America*, 306-307; *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Year Ending 1952* (Washington: U.S. Department of Justice, 1952), 20-1.

⁸ *Life*, November 5, 1951; *Look*, February 12, 1952; *Saturday Evening Post*, January 19, 1952, 27.

⁹ Stephen E. Bower, *The American Army in the Heartland: A History of Fort Benjamin Harrison, 1903-1995* (Fort Benjamin Harrison, IN: Command History Office, US Army Soldier Support Center, 1995), 135-42.

Office in Virginia to run schools for their trainees. These schools were established at Fort Harrison in 1951, and a new Army Finance Center was built there. At its completion in 1953 the Finance Center covered a million and a half square feet, forming a complex second in size only to the Pentagon.¹⁰

The Army presence in central Indiana made it possible for soldiers to secure assignments near the homes of their parents and siblings, as revealed in the oral history interviews upon which this paper is based. In February 1952 one interviewee, "Chieko," took the train across country from the port of Seattle with her husband and daughter to Detroit, where they stayed with her husband's sister. After one month, the family moved to Indianapolis where her husband's father and brother lived and where the husband was posted first to Fort Harrison and then to Camp Atterbury. Another interview subject, "Tae," arrived in Seattle in April 1952, then drove across country to Indianapolis with her husband and two other military couples, one of them headed for Fort Harrison. Tae and her husband stayed with in-laws in the city; the Army then sent the husband to Oklahoma and later to Europe, but Tae remained with his family in Indianapolis. The couple later separated.¹¹

The most crucial difficulty for these women was their inability to speak English well. In many cases, their education had been interrupted by the war. The transition from Japanese to English speech is a notoriously difficult one to make, due to nature of the languages and Japanese methods of teaching English conversation. Tae and Chieko had been office workers in Japan, but, as a result of their lack of proficiency in English, when they sought employment, the women wound up in blue collar occupations (or, as Tae calls it, "the assembly line").

Indianapolis in the 1950s had a lot of these jobs to offer. Tae and Chieko both worked at RCA putting tubes into radios and televisions. Tae described her job as very hard at first; she had to place the tubes in the televisions quickly with pliers. After getting used to the job, though, she could almost do it with her eyes closed. Eventually, Tae was moved to the RCA model shop where she helped build prototypes for the engineers.¹²

Chieko started out doing piece work, then also worked at RCA in a tube plant, and she did soldering. She faced some discrimination on her job, especially from one supervisor who did not like Japanese because her son had been killed in the war. Plant executives, however, appreciated Chieko as a good worker who never took time off. She later went on to jobs at Western Electric and Naval Avionics.

¹⁰ Bower, 192-203.

¹¹ Chieko Jacobs, interview by author, May 3, 2004; Tae Carter, interview by author, September 19, 2004. All oral history interviews referenced in this paper are on deposit in the collection of the Center for the Study of History and Memory at Indiana University (Bloomington).

¹² Tae Carter interview.

When the loss of government contracts began to cause layoffs during the Nixon Administration, Chieko applied for a job at one of Eli Lilly and Company's manufacturing facilities, where she worked from 1970 until she retired in 1992, in quality control on the capsules and with machinery.¹³

America's bicentennial year, 1976, was a landmark for the Japanese American community in Indiana, as it was for many other ethnic communities. The city decided to celebrate with an International Festival, calling upon leading organizations to contribute their talents and recruit volunteers to put the event together.

Although they had no previous experience, the women from Japan were called upon to provide cultural entertainment for the festival. They put together a demonstration of Japanese folk dance, an art form known as "Minyo." Following the festival they decided to continue as a group and as a cultural resource for the city and state. In demand for performances at schools, nursing homes, hospitals, libraries, and organization meetings, the dancing troupe practiced weekly and occasionally worked with teachers from Chicago and Japan. With Chieko as president, one segment of the group later incorporated and continued to perform as the Indianapolis Minyo Dancers, Inc.¹⁴

* * *

One thing that the Mexican American and Japanese American women described in this paper have in common is their longevity as workers. They were all employed for three or four decades in their occupations. Another is that they worked in manufacturing, in jobs that, since they retired in the 1980s and 1990s, have gone into decline, lost to automation and globalization. It is the women who came to stay, to work, to raise families, and to become a permanent part of the Hoosier story.

¹³ Chieko Jacobs interview.

¹⁴ Chieko Jacobs interview.