

Women Workers During World War Two and Oral History Accounts



Acknowledgments

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As part of this research project, we are also grateful to the many expert reviewers that provided constructive feedback.

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We acknowledge the generous support of Ontario Women's History Network, Canada's History, Thinking Historically – for Canada's Future Research project, University of Ottawa Faculty of Education and SSHRC – CRSH.

We also want to thank McGill-Queen's support in granting the rights to use content from the Framing Our Past (2001) original book.

Typesetting and cover design: Dany Lagueux

Cover image: Cecilia Butler, former night club singer and dancer now employed as a reamer in the Small Arms Ltd. section of the John Inglis Company munitions plant, Toronto, Ont., Dec. 1943

Library and Archives Canada/National Film Board
of Canada fonds/e000761869



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Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada



Introduction

There are a number of misconceptions regarding women's work during the Second World War. Contrary to common belief, women held diverse positions of work during the pre-war, war, and post-war periods. Throughout these periods, women faced discrimination based on race and gender.

The perspectives of some women workers were captured and transmitted through oral accounts, through diaries, newspapers and published sources. Each one of these sources provide insight into women's lives, keeping in mind that these narratives were crafted during the restrictions of war. In this lesson, learners will research women's lives using oral history. In addition, through a close examination of photographs, oral accounts, and secondary sources from historians, learners will evaluate how the status of different groups of working-class

women in society changed from the pre-through to the post-war periods. The lesson is not only focused on society's misconceptions regarding women's working lives, it is also about whose histories were initially recorded and celebrated. More upper/middle class women than racialized, working-class women's voices were documented. The imbalance in perspectives also results from how the histories were recorded. Oral history, as a democratizing of history, ensures more women's voices are preserved.

Grade and Strand:

Canadian History since World War I,
Grade 10 (CHC2D), Strand C
Canada: History, Identity, and Culture,
Grade 12 (CHI4U), Strand D

Lesson Topic (s):

Women Workers During World War II and
Oral Historical Accounts

Lesson Framing Critical Questions:

- A) What discriminating perspectives existed within society about women in the workforce during the war? How do these perspectives compare to the lived reality of women working during the Second World War in Canada?
 - B) To what extent (or in what ways) did the Second World War change the status of women in society – if at all?
 - C) Why is oral history important when considering perspectives of the past? And how might oral histories provide perspectives not found in textbooks or public war narratives?
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Estimated Lesson Length (s):

Two to three class periods

Lesson Planning and Curriculum Expectations

Canadian History since World War I, Grade 10 (CHC2D)

Canada: History, Identity, and Culture, Grade 12 (CHI4U)

Links to Grade 10 and 12 Curriculum

A: Historical Inquiry and Skill Development

Overall Expectations:

A1. Historical Inquiry
A2. Developing Transferable Skills

C: Canada, 1929–1945

Specific Expectations:

C1. Social, Economic, and Political Context

C1.1 describe some key social changes in Canada during this period

C1.3 describe some key economic trends and developments in Canada

C2. Communities, Conflict, and Cooperation

C2.5 explain some ways in which World War II affected non-Indigenous Canadians

C3. Identity, Citizenship, and Heritage

C3.1 describe contributions of various individuals, groups, and/or organizations to Canadian society, politics, and/or culture during this period

A: Historical Inquiry and Skill development

Overall Expectations:

A1. Historical Inquiry
A2. Developing Transferable Skills

D. Canada 1867-1945

Specific Expectations:

D.1 Setting the context:

D1.1 analyse some key social developments as well as dominant social attitudes and values

D1.4 analyse key economic trends and developments

D1.5 analyse how key political developments during this period contributed to the development of Canada,

D2. Interactions and Interdependence

D2.1 describe domestic and international conflicts in which Canadian military forces participated

Lesson Learning Goals/Objectives:

(Learning goals can be communicated with learners as follows: We are learning about... / We are learning how to...)

- Students will learn about key differences and similarities between the oral sources and written sources
- Students will learn how to conduct oral interviews including steps taken to ensure ethical questioning and recording
- Students will learn about the diverse kinds of work women engaged in before and during the Second World War (Royal Canadian Air Force and CanCar Foundry)
- Students will learn how to analyse images and photographs to critically think about the relationship between media representation and women's historical perspectives/experiences
- Students will learn about pervasive post-war racism through the historical experiences of women of colour
- Students will link the historic struggles of women and LGBTQ2S+ communities

Links to Historical Thinking Concepts:

Historical Significance

In this lesson students will identify the significance of oral histories in uncovering realities about women's war and post-war experiences. Learners will examine the significance of women's wartime and post-war work related to shifting intersecting oppressions such as those related to gender, sexuality, race, and class.

Primary Source Evidence

Students learn about the gathering and interpretation of oral primary source evidence as well as the limitations and strengths of oral versus written sources. In this lesson, students will encounter examples of oral primary source evidence as well as be provided with instructions on how to best conduct an oral interview.

Continuity and Change

This lesson surveys changes in women's status in the workplace during and

following the Second World War through an examination of oral accounts and media representations. Students also reflect on the existence of major barriers for women seeking and maintaining employment.

Cause and Consequence

Students will gain an understanding of the major causes of women's exclusion and/or inclusion from the workplace.

Historical Perspectives

This lesson explores how war and post-war realities were not universal, but rather, shaped by intersecting identities. Students are encouraged to think of wartime identities from the diverse perspective of women workers, women of colour, and LGBTQ2S+ women and critically reflect on how such perspectives are both strategically included and distorted in mainstream representations.

Links to Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and/or Transformative Justice

- Students are asked to connect the histories of women workers during and following WWII to authentic, current day events concerning the inclusion of the LGBTQ2S+ community into the military.
- Students are asked to reflect on why women workers continue to face workplace discrimination
- Students' conceptions of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" are challenged by accounts of racism in post-war Canada

Part 1: Minds On

Activity 1

Prompt students to go to Google images or through a generative AI tool on their phone or laptops and search “Canadian Women 1930s” – Write and discuss what students see in terms of contentious content or issues. Next, prompt students to go to Google images or AI generated images and search “Canadian Women 1940s”.

Discussion Questions:

- Describe the places of work (indoor/outdoor workspaces, work within factories/offices, rural/urban):
- What identities do you see being represented or not represented?
- Where were these images sourced from (Library and Archives Canada, War Museum, AI generated, private archives, etc.) and how does this impact what is depicted?
- What kind of work are women depicted doing in these photos (nursing, secretarial, teaching, farming, etc.)?
- Are there changes and/or continuities over time (30s versus 40s)?
How do these images compare to how women at work are represented today?

Activity 2

“A Woman’s Work . . . 1930s take on the woman’s role” (McCall’s Magazine, 1934) up until 2min20

https://archive.org/details/0201_Living_Pages_20_32_34_17/0201_Living_Pages_20_32_34_17.m4v

Discussion Question:

How are women portrayed in this 1930s video and whose perspectives are dominant. Do you think that the woman featured in the video represent most women (race, class) in the 1930s.

To what extent do you think it was in the interest of women, in the 1940s, to leave a life of domesticity (childbearing, children, house-keeping) to work at factory jobs during the Second World War? Explain why? What factors might this decision be dependent upon?

Part 2: Inquiry Groups

Activity 1.1: Introducing Oral History

Focus Question for Inquiry: What can oral accounts tell us about a historical event or period that other sources might not be able to? Students start by examining the differences between written and oral sources.

Suggestions: Library and Archives Canada, War Museum, Archives of Ontario, Rise Up Feminist Archive, Historica, Canada's History

Inquiry Questions	Written Sources	Oral Sources
What are some examples of. . .		
What kinds of institutions or groups of people tend to produce these sources?		
What do these sources capture about the past?		
Find an example of one written source and one oral source and record your answers for the following questions: What are the differences in the kinds of topics or information these two sources place an emphasis on? Note specific examples from the sources. Whose perspective is highlighted? Whose perspective is missing?	Written Source Chosen:	Oral Source Chosen:

Materials and Setup:

(Activities, resources, worksheets, data collection charts, videos/music/images, and others)

Primary Sources Used:

RCAF Handbook – Women's Division 1939-45

Photographs from Framing Our Past

Secondary Sources Used:

Llewellyn, K. R., Freund, A., & Reilly, N. (2015). The Canadian Oral History Reader. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Staton, P. A., Fine-Meyer, R., & Gibson, S. K. (2004). Unfolding power: Documents in 20th century Canadian women's history. Green Dragon Press.

Wakewich, P., Smith, H., & Lynes, J. (2001). Women's wartime work and identities: Women workers at Canadian Car and Foundry Co. Limited, Fort William, Ontario, 1938-1945. In S. A. Cook, L. R. McLean, & K. O'Rourke (Eds.), Framing our past: Canadian women's history in the twentieth century (p. 409-416). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Teaching Strategies:

(collaborative learning, culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy, inquiry-based learning, differentiated instruction)

- Independent inquiry-based digital exploration (Minds On Activity 1)
- Group discussion and collaborative learning
- Differentiated instruction and learner choice (Introducing Oral History Activity and Consolidation Activity)

Assessment:

Assessment Tools (checklist, rubric, observations), peer and self-assessment

Assessment for, as, and of learning. (AfL, AaL, AoL)

- Activity 1: Introducing Oral History (AfL, AaL)
- Activity 1b: Oral History Methods Group Discussions (AaL)
- Activity 2: Misconceptions about Women and Work During the Second World War (AaL)
- Constructing a Critical Response to an Article: Feminism, Pinkwashing, and the Military-Industrial Complex (AoL)

Accommodations:

(Students with IEPs, ELLs)

- Activities encourage multiple types of responses (oral, written, etc.)
- Overview of key concept "oral history" provided in Activity 1 and 1b
- Provide extra time as needed for group discussion and class activities
- Provide learners with digital and paper copies of lesson materials

Activity 1.2: Oral History Methods Group Discussions

In small groups have learners read the following excerpts from the *Canadian Oral History Reader*. The excerpts below touch on differing definitions of oral history, what information oral histories can provide to historians, and ethical protocols for conducting oral interviews. Different protocols are important to address when exploring different communities, such as Indigenous communities.

Learners should also read or be familiar with “Women’s Wartime Work and Identities” (pp. 409-416) (excerpts are included in the appendix). Afterwards, task the groups with recording answers for the following two discussion questions. Additional video resources on the topic of oral history are also provided below.

Discussion Questions:

1. The idea of methodology, which is central to oral history work, requires different approaches, questions and protocols to honour ethical practices. What sort of differences are present when we consider diverse groups (seniors, children, vulnerable populations, women in minority groups)?
2. The methodology provided below applies to the specific context of interviewing an Elder of an Indigenous community. How might this interview process be different, depending on who the historian decides to interview?
3. Formulate five questions that a historian might ask women who worked in the CanCar factories during World War II.

Excerpts from “Canadian Oral History Reader” (2015) on Defining Oral History and Considerations for Methodology (pp. 30-36)

DEFINING ORAL HISTORIES

Distinctions are made among academics regarding different types of oral history. First, there are “collective” histories that are the “official” group versions. Then there are “individual” histories, which are personal reminiscences shared with others. Historians are aware that oral histories passed down over a number of generations may not be as reliable as personal reminiscences because the former are hearsay while the latter are direct accounts. Both personal reminiscences and collective histories, however, provide valuable information that should be recorded and interpreted (as history) Bennett Ellen McCardle defined oral history as “evidence about past life, events, and traditions, taken from the spoken word of people who have personal knowledge of these facts.” Although this definition is adopted here for purposes of explanation, oral history can and should be broad enough to include Indigenous peoples’ definitions of oral history. Although differences exist in what oral history means to varying Indigenous groups, there are enough similarities to form a core definition. A richer definition of oral history would include all types of narratives, stories, songs, storytelling and speeches passed along to successive generations about the past. The gathered materials – interview tapes or videos, notes, summaries, transcripts, and translations (all) constitute primary sources that historians and other researchers can utilize and interpret.

Pre-Interview Preparation

Appropriate protocol must be followed before interviewing a member of an Indigenous community. One cannot simply go to an Elder and begin questioning without preparing the ground. First, the topic must be given much prior thought and consideration. Second, one must request and obtain permission from the local authority. Third, after it has been decided which Elders will be interviewed, their personal agreement must be sought.

Topic or Research Question

Giving a topic serious thought beforehand is a mark of respect for the Elders. They can tell immediately by the questions whether sufficient forethought has been given and, if they perceive the absence of prior research, may turn away an interviewer. Therefore, it is important at the outset of the preparation to establish the objectives. With respect to the research question, they must clearly reflect the project’s objectives. What is the issue? Where is it situated? What is to be accomplished with the gathered information? Is the information for a written report or for future use?

The Interview Process

Choose a quiet, comfortable spot for the interview. Background noise or interruptions can cause serious problems at the stage of playing the audio back for transcription. Try to create a relaxed atmosphere and put yourself and the Elder at ease. Set up the equipment and get everything ready. As with interviewees in any oral interview, discussions may begin by sharing material objects such as older photographs or maps.

Additional Introductions to Oral History

[What is Oral History? Canada’s History](#)

[Oral History at the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21](#)

[Oral History at Home – Five Easy Steps Smithsonian Institution Archives](#)

[The Oral History Centre: What is Oral History?](#)

Activity 2: Misconceptions about Women and Work During the Second World War

Challenging Popular Perceptions about Women's Work and WWII

The following excerpt by Wakewich et al. dispels the myth that all women were housewives or working at home prior to the Second World War. The authors find that many women were engaged in different kinds of work that often required similar skills.

"These [oral accounts] challenge the popular perception that women who worked in war production were primarily housewives prior to the war and that war industry work itself was experienced as non-traditional, or distinctly different from their prewar work. For the many women who migrated from prairie farms to the Fort William plant, as well as local rural women, work with machinery in the plant was not dissimilar in terms of physical demand and skill to the farm work with which they had grown up. For women employed as domestic workers prior to the war, the work at CanCar was described as preferable because of its higher pay, more clearly defined job expectations, more employee autonomy, and workplace camaraderie. While a few of the women spoke of their relief at returning to a more domestic role after the plant's closure, many others indicated that they would have preferred to remain in a similar type of employment at the plant if the opportunity had been available to them." (Wakewich et al., 2001, p. 413)

Discussion Questions:

1. What kinds of jobs might have existed for women prior to the war?
Ask students to study the photographs included in the article that represent women at work (Wakewich et al., 2001, pp. 407-415) OR look at the Royal Canadian Air Force Handbook which lists "Trades of the Women's Division" (See [Appendix](#))
2. In what specific ways did the division of labour manifest during World War II?

Race, Gender, and Post-War Experiences

The following excerpt by Wakewich et al. describes the way in which inequities in race, class, and gender were often obscured in favour of the "greater good" during World War II:

"To ensure that all employees remained working at full capacity, the paper emphasized themes in line with government propaganda – while differences exist among people based on region, sex, class, and race, those differences must be put aside not only for the greater good of the local community, but for Canada, the Allies, and the World. A key rhetorical device to keep workers united was the constant repetition of the words "teamwork" and "family." (Wakewich, 2004, p. 414.)

Read the following oral accounts of women of colour and their experiences of work in wartime and post-war Canada and answer the following questions in groups or as a class.

1. **Hazel Chong was one of the first Canadian women of Chinese origin to become a teacher in 1949. Hazel taught home economics in the rural community of Armstrong, British Columbia.**

Hazel asserted that, as a Canadian woman teacher of Chinese origin, she was a "third-class citizen." Upon graduation from university, she was instructed by the head of the home economics department to state her "Chinese origin" on all applications, because, unlike her Anglo-Saxon name, her maiden surname Joe, sounded "Native West Coast Indian, and that would prevent me from getting a job." She laughed uncomfortably when she observed astutely, "They were left out more than we were, I guess". (p. 187)

Using the old worn out saying 'the mosaic of Canada is a fusion of all these different nationalities' – no, there was only one way to do it and it was the English way. . . (p. 191)

I was teaching a lesson on less tender cuts of meat. . . All of a sudden, I heard a chair snap, and this girl stood up. . . She said, "I'm not gonna take anything from a goddamn Chinaman anymore!" She banged out the door. My only salvation was that I did have lots of Kleenex, and I dried my eyes, and the kids knew I was visibly upset. And the bell rang, luckily, for lunch. (Llewellyn, 2013, p. 192)

2. **Majorie Lewsey was a Black factory worker in living in Ontario.**

. . . I worked in a factory down on John Street; they made suits. There was lots of that domestic work, going and cleaning up other people's dirty place. Really and truly, we [Black women] weren't allowed to go into factory work until Hitler started the war, and then they'd beg you, 'Would you like a job in my factory?' But we weren't allowed in [before]. We were left more or less to clean their dirty houses. Which I never did, I'll tell you that. Then we had a chance to go and work in the ammunition dump.

They called it GICO. That's where Centennial College is now used to be the war plant. I lasted about a week there. . . [The work] was filling magazines, little pellets with gunpowder for the soldiers. . . I have pictures of some of us that were out there. There were many Black women out there. I had to go back to other factory work. (Brand, 1994, p. 179)

Discussion Questions

1. How do these accounts challenge the idea of wartime unity and post-war "diversity"?
2. How has the type of anti-Black and anti-Asian racism seen in these accounts transformed and/or endured today?
3. In what ways do these accounts highlight the way in which race and gender intersected when it came to workplace discrimination?

Part 3: Consolidation and Debrief

Wrap Up and Action: actionable consequences of learning, connections to present day, gaps in learning, and further questions.

Activity 1: Constructing a Critical Response to an Article – Gender and Sexuality Issues in Canada’s Military History

Women not only participated in work related to the war on the home front, they were also involved directly with the war effort as members of the Canadian military and auxiliary services. The roles of women and LGBTQ2S+ individuals within Canada’s military have changed over time, however, questions related to gender equity and LGBTQ2S+ rights remain important lenses for historical and present-day analysis.

Learners choose one of the following three articles to create a critical response to. Responses can be in the form of an oral or video recording, written paragraph, or artwork and description.

Remind learners that a critical response can accomplish one or more of the following things: disagree, agree, or both with the ideas present within the text, consider an alternative understanding of the topic presented by the text, apply the ideas of the text to a historical or contemporary event, or even bring two texts together, in order to synthesize a new idea.

- Students demonstrate and reflect on learning
- Student share research work
- Provides opportunities for consolidation and action plans
- Links back to the historical thinking questions

1. Women and Feminism has been Co-opted by NATO & the Military Industrial Complex with “Girl-washing”

Quote from Article: “War and militarism are anathema to feminism. They are opposites, they cannot be reconciled. Anyone who tries to reconcile them, anyone who tries to abuse the language of gender equality to justify war and violence - those people are not advancing the cause of feminism, which is the cause of equality, of resistance to all forms of violence, exploitation and discrimination, the cause of care - for each other and the planet that sustains us.”

2. Who do we picture when we think of veterans?

Quote from Article: “Most school-aged children in Canada can recite In Flanders Fields and are taught about its author John McCrae. But the people buried in those fields have more complex and intersectional identities than the history books have cared to share.

These individuals – whether they’re racialized, queer, disabled, women, religious minorities or all of those things – are too often omitted from the history lesson.”

3. She was among those purged from Canada’s military. Today, Michelle Douglas looks back on the pain and the progress

Quote from Article: “An estimated 9,000 were surveilled, interrogated and purged from the armed forces, RCMP and public service between the 1950s and mid-1990s. Expulsion left victims traumatized and adrift, with many carrying the weight of unceremonious public outings in a world often unsupportive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex people.”

Appendix

1. Workers at the Marcelo Factory (C 5-1-0-129-1, Archives of Ontario). In Framing Our Past, p. 407.
2. Riveters in sub-plant, 1941 (C 190-3-0-0-47, Archives of Ontario). In Framing Our Past, p. 412.
3. Agricultural workers (PA 112712, Library and archives Canada). In Framing Our Past, p. 407.
4. "Pass the ammunition!" (C 142649, Library and archives Canada). In Framing Our Past, p. 408.
5. Two members of WRCNS signalling (1995-176, #21, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management). In Framing Our Past, p. 408.
6. Women of the WRNCS leaving Halifax Harbour (1995-176, #47, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management). In Framing Our Past, p. 408.
7. Nakusp women's jam shipment to troops overseas (C-04658, British Columbia Archives). In Framing Our Past, p. 408.
8. First women hired for aircraft production, CanCar plant, 1938 (Courtesy of Pam Wakewich et al.). In Framing Our Past, p. 411.
9. Making parts for wings, 1941 (C 190-3-0-0-36, Archives of Ontario). In Framing Our Past, p. 412.
10. TTC (Toronto Transportation Commission) (C 5-1-0-135-3, Archives of Ontario). In Framing Our Past, p. 407.
11. Women from the Stores Department on top of Mount McKay, 1942 (Courtesy of Pam Wakewich et al.). In Framing Our Past, p. 414.
12. Aircrafter, 30 September 1944 (Courtesy of Pam Wakewich et al.). In Framing Our Past, p. 415.
13. RCAF Handbook – Women's Division 1939-45. City of Toronto Reference Library – Baldwin Room. (Staton et al., 2004, p. 97)



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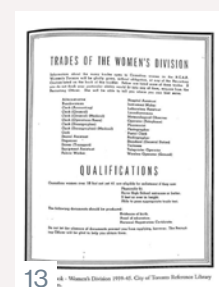
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11



12



13

Excerpt Below From:

Wakewich, P., Smith, H., & Lynes, J. (2001). Women's wartime work and identities: Women workers at Canadian Car and Foundry Co. Limited, Fort William, Ontario, 1938-1945. In S. A. Cook, L. R. McLean, & K. O'Rourke (Eds.), *Framing our past: Canadian women's history in the twentieth century* (p. 409-416). McGill-Queen's University Press.

A central component of this research is the collection of original oral histories of women who worked at Canadian Car and Foundry Co. Limited (CanCar), Fort William, Ontario – an important site of aircraft manufacture during the Second World War. At the height of production in 1944, women made up about 40 per cent of the company's labour force and were employed in all areas of aircraft production. The women's recollections of their wartime work and lives are considered within the broader context of their "full life stories" in order to examine the significance and meanings their wartime experiences hold for them. As Anderson and Jack have pointed out, oral history interviews are "an invaluable means of generating new insights about women's experiences of

themselves in their worlds." The interactive nature of this research technique allows the researcher to explore contrasts between dominant representations of women's interests and experiences, and women's own representations framed in their own words and in a less culturally edited form. . . .

Themes explored in the oral history interviews include family history; early work experience; how and why the women came to work at CanCar during the war; job training and the range and experience of women's employment at the plant; male-female and female-female work and social relations during the war era; relations between women working in "traditional" and "non-traditional" jobs at the plant; relations between local residents/workers and women workers who migrated from the West; company-employee relations and the regulation of "femininity" in the work site; postwar work and family experiences; and women's perceptions of, and responses to, wartime representations of their work in media and popular culture. . . .

Of particular interest in our analysis of the interviews completed to date are the early work histories of many of the CanCar women. These challenge the popular perception that women who worked in war production were primarily housewives prior to the war and that war – industry work itself was experienced as non-traditional, or distinctly different from their prewar work. For the many women who migrated from prairie farms to the Fort William plant, as well as local rural women, work with machinery in the plant was not dissimilar in terms of physical demand and skill to the farm work with which they had grown up. For women employed as domestic workers prior to the war, the work at CanCar was described as preferable because of its higher pay, more clearly defined job expectations, more employee autonomy, and workplace camaraderie. While a few of the women spoke of their relief at returning to a more domestic role after the plant's closure, many others indicated that they would have preferred to remain in a similar type of employment at the plant if the opportunity had been available to them.

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