

**Rosies of the North: Women's Employment at Canadian Car and Foundry in Fort William
during the Second World War**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

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© May 2026**

Abstract

“Rosies of the North: Women’s Employment at Canadian Car and Foundry in Fort William during the Second World War” is an analysis of women’s employment at the Canadian Car and Foundry (Can Car) plant in Fort William, Ontario, during the Second World War, focusing on the experiences of the “Rosies of the North” who built military aircraft for the Allied war effort. Drawing on employee records, plant newspapers, union publications, oral histories, and wartime media, it situates women’s industrial labour within the broader economic and social context of the Great Depression, wartime mobilization, and post-war demobilization. The study analyzes women’s recruitment, training, working conditions, union involvement, and participation in home front initiatives, alongside persistent gendered divisions of labour, unequal pay, and supervisory practices.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Dr. Michel S. Beaulieu for offering an independent study course on Work and War in Canada and for supervising the writing of this thesis, providing excellent guidance and reassurance every step of the way. It's been a pleasure working together!

Thank you to Kelly Saxberg and Dr. Ron Harpelle for having me assist with the development of the Rosies of the North website and for encouraging me to consider writing about the Rosies for an MA thesis. Thanks to Dr. C. Nathan Hatton for arranging these opportunities through a student placement and digital history project during my undergraduate studies.

The entire Faculty of Lakehead University's History Department deserve recognition for their consistent hard work, expertise and support. Initially, I did not come to Lakehead with the intention of studying History beyond a first-year elective. Now, nearly a decade and two degrees in the subject later, I would like to emphasize just how much my academic trajectory and successes have been a testament to the high quality of instruction offered by Lakehead's History Department and the care the faculty shows to students.

Thank you to the staff at the Chancellor Patterson Library and the Thunder Bay Public Libraries for sharing resources for this project and so many others, and for kindly assisting anytime I needed extra help, especially with all things microfilm!

On a more personal note, I'd like to extend my sincerest gratitude to everyone who advocated for me during my unexpected, but very much needed, leave of absence. It's no exaggeration to say that I could not have completed this project without being met with so much patience and understanding when I needed to step away.

Thanks to my family for encouraging me to continue with my education for as long as possible. (The dream to become "Dr. Henits" and entirely avoid the prefix "Mrs." may come true yet! I'm glad you're proud no matter what!) A special thank you to Eddie for vigilantly guarding the window above my desk, for being the sweetest, most sensitive cat a human could ever hope to befriend.

This thesis, and any future accomplishment of significance, is dedicated to my grandparents, Jessie and Norman Matyczuk (Nana and Papa) and Nancy Doherty (Grandma/G-Ma). Thank you for always looking after me. Love you. Miss you.

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Introduction

In the Northwestern Ontario city of Fort William, located on the shore of Lake Superior, thousands of women, “Rosies of the North,” built essential military aircraft for Allied forces at the Canadian Car and Foundry Plant (Can Car) over the course of the Second World War. The Rosies of the North were primarily second-generation Canadians living in the twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur and surrounding municipalities, together referred to as the Lakehead. The same resource-based industries that had attracted European immigration to the region around the turn of the twentieth century collapsed during the Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s, causing high rates of unemployment and financial hardship for Lakehead residents. Women-led fields of domestic and service work expanded during the Depression, reflective of the need for women to supplement the household income when a sole male breadwinner model could not suffice. The wartime contracts obtained by the Can Car plant in Fort William, most notably for Hawker Hurricane fighter and Curtiss Helldiver bomber aircraft, provided welcome job opportunities and economic revitalization at the Lakehead.

As the Second World War progressed, hundreds more women relocated to work at Can Car from the prairie provinces, a region especially hit hard by the Depression. By 1944, over 255,000 women across Canada were employed in war-related industries and nearly half of these workers resided in Ontario. Owing in large part to the rapid expansion of employment at Can Car, Fort William had a larger proportion of women war workers compared to other Canadian

cities of similar size.¹ In early 1944, women accounted for about 40% of the staff at Can Car, numbering 2,707 out of a total workforce of 6,760.²

Along with women war workers across Canada, the Rosies of the North balanced traditional domestic responsibilities, home front efforts and demanding shift work in an industrial setting, performing just as capably in male-dominated occupations. However, despite women's contributions during the Second World War, gendered labour and social roles were not dramatically altered in the immediate post-war period. Women's presence in wartime industries was largely seen as a duty rather than a right, and any changes to gender roles brought about during the war were regarded as temporary. The short-term status of women workers also impeded full unionism at the Can Car plant in Fort William and saw unequal treatment between men and women on several issues at work. Additionally, none of the women hired at Can Car during the war were considered for apprenticeships or training opportunities that would foster long-term career advancement. Only a select few of the most experienced female shop floor workers avoided mass layoffs shortly after V-J Day on 15 August 1945.

After the end of the war, the re-hiring of returning servicemen took priority at the plant, which already saw staffing cutbacks due to the cancellation of military aircraft contracts. As a result, women were mostly confined to office work in the post-war period, mirroring the division of labour at the Can Car prior to the war. Gendered hiring practices were compounded by the fact that many Rosies got married during the war and shortly after, often to co-workers or servicemen. Both during and immediately after the Second World War, married women faced pressure to exit the workforce in favour of traditional responsibilities of homemaking and

¹ Women and Industry, *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* (hereafter *FWDTJ*), 27 March 1944.

² Gordon Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History, 1912-1992* (Thunder Bay: Bombardier Inc., 1995), 85.

childcare. Hiring and dismissal practices at Can Car reflected the preference for young, unmarried women, and specific supervisory roles were created to oversee this key demographic. By examining the working lives of the Rosies of the North at Can Car, this thesis aims to evaluate the systemic barriers which allowed gendered norms and sexism to persist throughout the Second World War. At the same time, the wide range of women's experiences will be highlighted to show how Rosies contextualized their time at Can Car through other lenses, such as personal and financial independence, a sense of responsibility to support the war effort and enjoyment of the work itself.

The history of the Rosies of the North fits into a larger scholarship about women's labour in Canada during the Second World War, which has emphasized the ephemeral nature of women's employment in traditionally male occupations. The persistence of social expectations around women's right to work and ties to domesticity meant that any subversion of gender roles brought about by women's wartime employment would be reversed in the immediate post-war. In *They're Still Women After All*, Ruth Roach Pierson demonstrates this effect in full force by looking at women's paid labour, volunteer and domestic work, and service in the Canadian Armed Forces during the Second World War. She found that, while women capably adapted to the economic necessities of war and filled the manpower gap, the patriarchal ideals which informed the gendered division of labour went fundamentally unchanged.³ In Pierson's words,

The extraordinary demand for female labour during the war generated a rhetoric of egalitarianism that made it look as if sexual divisions of labour had been significantly modified in the direction of greater equality. In actuality, the rhetoric hid the fact that those changes were more apparent than real and were, in either case, designed to be temporary.⁴

³ Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1986).

⁴ Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All,"* 94.

Similarly, in *Pick One Intelligent Girl*, Jennifer Stephen closely examines how policymaking, namely through the National Selective Service Women's Division (NSSWD), facilitated women's mass mobilization into traditionally male-dominated fields of work during the war⁵

Yet, gendered stereotypes about women's innate abilities and the male breadwinner ideal underpinned employment practices so that, once the war had ended, women could be ushered back into traditional fields of work or domestic roles as seamlessly as possible. Important themes related to wartime labour, such as Canadians' rationing, spending and investment habits are explored in great detail by Jeff Keshen in *Saints, Sinners and Soldiers*.⁶ In particular, his analysis of the social and moral expectations ingrained within Canada's wartime economy has provided a solid framework to evaluate how women's increased economic agency as a result of their wartime employment at Can Car was held to standards of efficacy, duty to the war effort, and selflessness.

Can Car's aviation projects and employment trends during the Second World War have been documented across a handful of secondary sources, with varying degrees of focus on women's contributions. Gordon Burkowski's *Can Car: A History, 1912-1992* provides a comprehensive institutional history of the Fort William plant, divided into distinct time periods.⁷ In addition to chronicling big-picture facts on production outputs and staffing changes, Burkowski's wartime discussions on the persistence of gendered divisions of labour, the challenges of women's integration into a male-dominated workplace, and the mixed success of

⁵ Jennifer Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl: Employability, Domesticity, and the Gendering of Canada's Welfare State, 1939-1947* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

⁶ Jeff Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004).

⁷ See Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History, 1912-1992*.

union organization efforts are of particular interest. This thesis endeavours to delve further into the root causes of these issues.

Information on the types of aircraft produced at the plant during the war have been compiled by aviation historians Jonathan Kirton and David Kemp. Kirton's *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William on the Eve of World War II* focuses on the contracts the company secured before the war's outbreak, as well as the original design projects undertaken by engineering staff.⁸ His work provides insight into how Can Car came to be involved in the aircraft industry, detailing practical aspects of production, such as obtaining licenses and contracts, conducting test flights, accommodating design modifications, and negotiating sales with international and domestic military clients. Similarly, Kemp's "Can-Car: The Aviation Years"⁹ and "Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory"¹⁰ describe the aircraft types produced during the Second World War from both a labour and military perspective, noting the design features and combat uses of the planes, as well as the assembly process. These articles prominently feature photographs of completed planes and shots of the plant, offering a bird's-eye view of employees assembling components at their workstations. Kemp highlights the visible presence of women workers and concludes that, "Can Car's wartime development and its high level of productivity were in no small part due to these women who were willing and obviously very able to fill these non-traditional roles."¹¹

⁸ See Jonathan G. Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William on the Eve of World War II* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2009).

⁹ See David D. Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records* 22 (1994): 59–68.

¹⁰ See David D. Kemp, "Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory," *The Beaver* (June-July 1992): 24-32.

¹¹ Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," 68 and Kemp, "Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory," 32.

Out of the thousands of women who worked at Can Car during the Second World War, by far the most has been written about Elsie MacGill, who served as the plant's Chief Aeronautical Engineer from 1938 to 1943. Full-length biographies about MacGill have been authored by Richard I. Bourgeois Doyle and Crystal Sissons.¹² Pamela Wakewich has also produced a short chapter on MacGill.¹³ Each biographer emphasized MacGill's educational achievements, her aeronautical engineering work, particularly designing the Maple Leaf II trainer aircraft and leading Hawker Hurricane production at Can Car, and her feminist advocacy as commissioner for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and member of the Ontario Status of Women Committee in the late 1960s and 1970s.

While Doyle's biography devotes a relatively equal amount of space to each stage of MacGill's life and focuses on how her familial and professional relationships shaped the trajectory of her career, Sissons' work leans towards MacGill's later years and her involvement in feminist activism. Wakewich analyzes how media accounts of MacGill went to noticeable lengths to portray her as feminine, sometimes at the expense of highlighting her career achievements, focusing instead on her "pint-size" appearance, fashionable work suits, and at-home hobbies. These biographical accounts of MacGill have been useful for understanding how sexism affected women pursuing careers in male-dominated fields. Comparing MacGill's

¹² See Richard Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer: The Life of Elsie Gregory MacGill* (Ottawa: NRC Research Press, 2008) and Crystal Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes: The Fearless Elsie MacGill* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2014). The title of Bourgeois-Doyle's book plays off of *My Mother the Judge*, a biography written by Elsie MacGill about her mother, Helen MacGill, who was the first woman judge in British Columbia. Sisson's book title and cover art borrow from the comic book story about MacGill, "Queen of the Hurricanes," from the January 1942 issue of True Comics. See "Elsie Gregory MacGill Fonds, R4349-0-6-F, MG31-K7," *Library and Archives Canada* (hereafter LAC), n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://recherche-collection-search.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/home/record?app=fonandcol&idnumber=104732&ecopy=>. Images of the full comic can also be viewed via "Photographs," *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/image-gallery/>.

¹³ Pamela Wakewich, "The Queen of the Hurricanes': Elsie Gregory MacGill, Aeronautical Engineer and Women's Advocate," in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O'Rourke (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 396-401.

upbringing, educational opportunities, and employment history with those of women working in other departments at Can Car sheds light on the role socio-economic class played in women's involvement in the aircraft industry and their ability to resist gender-based discrimination or overcome its systemic barriers.

With the recent development of the Rosies of the North website, much of the primary source documentation about Can Car's wartime workforce has been made publicly accessible.¹⁴ The "From The Archives" section of the website hosts multiple digitized collections, including photographs, correspondence, newspaper scans and clippings, plus thousands of alphabetized employee cards of individuals employed at the plant during and, in some cases, the years immediately following the Second World War.¹⁵ In addition to showing basic personal information about each employee (full name, birthdate, home address, marital status), the employee cards have been valuable in identifying employment trends at the plant. The cards document job titles, as well as the start and end dates of employment, oftentimes indicating the reason for departure, such as lay-off, absenteeism, sickness, or marriage.

¹⁴ See "Home," *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/>.

¹⁵ Note: Women's employee cards have been digitized and listed on the Rosies of the North website. See <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/employee-cards/>. The complete physical collection, including cards belonging to male employees, can be found at the Thunder Bay Museum.

32 648 VOLOSHIN MRS A		70-73-76
Anne		
ADDRESS 321 Ogden St., F.WPHONE		
MARITAL STATUS	M-0	BORN Mar. 1920
OCCUPATION	Inspector	MILITARY STATUS
HIRED AND QUIT	Oct. 5. 43	AUG 17 1945
RE-HIRED		

Figure 1. Employee Card. Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section V, Card #64, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/employee-cards/>.

Also featured on the website are biographies of dozens of employees, with information supplied directly by family members or through obituary notices. The “Interviews” page contains recordings of interviews conducted by Kelly Saxberg in preparation for the 1999 documentary film *Rosies of the North*, which itself includes plenty of interview testimony from former employees and people of interest.¹⁶ While this thesis attempts to incorporate as many perspectives from Can Car’s wartime workers as possible through oral and written accounts, recollections of the women interviewed by Saxberg appear the most frequently. For reference, brief biographies of each of these individuals are included below.

Alvena Gibson (nee Boldt) was born on 23 January 1916 in Kinmount, Ontario. She and her family moved to Fort William in 1917. Gibson was first hired at Can Car in June 1940 in the

¹⁶ *Rosies of the North*, directed by Kelly Saxberg (National Film Board of Canada, 1999).

sewing department. Not finding the work to her liking, she took the opportunity to become one of the first two women welders at the plant. While Gibson claimed she was often too busy to socialize with her co-workers,¹⁷ this did not stop her from becoming one of Can Car's most recognizable faces. In 1944, she was pictured in the plant's newspaper, *Aircrafter*, for winning a workplace popularity contest. The commentary under her photo read, "Considered exceptionally smart at her job, Miss Boldt has also proved by her recent overwhelming vote that she is also very popular with her fellow employees."¹⁸ Backed by the plant's two unions, Aircraft Lodge 719 and Office Employees Union 23302, she also led the "Popular Lady Contest" held during the 1944 Lakehead Labour Day festivities, receiving 3,966 votes.¹⁹ Gibson was active in organizing recreational events at work, as well as bond canvassing during the war.²⁰ She had the unique experience of being a female wartime hire who stayed until her retirement in 1978. After retiring, she married Kennedy Gibson, who also worked at Can Car. Alvena Gibson passed away on 31 August 1999.²¹

¹⁷ Florence Long and Alvina Gibson, "Florence & Alvina – Part 1," interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d, Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 7:55-8:06, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

¹⁸ "Popular Lady," *Aircrafter*, 26 August 1944, 4.

¹⁹ "Miss A. Boldt Leads Popularity Contest" *Port Arthur News-Chronicle*, 14 August 1944.

²⁰ Long and Gibson, "Florence & Alvina – Part 1," 11:20-12:43.

²¹ The spelling of Gibson's first name (Elvina, Alvina, Alvena) differs across source material. Citations including Gibson's first name are consistent with the spelling in the respective source, but otherwise, "Alvena" is used because it follows the spelling from her obituary. See "Gibson," *Chronicle Journal*, 2 September 1999.



Figure 2. Alvena Gibson pictured in the *Aircrafter* newspaper. *Aircrafter*, 26 August 1944.

Florence Long (nee McLeod) was born on 4 August 1923. She attended the Fort William Vocational High School, and her first job was at Can Car, where she worked as a welder for most of the Second World War.²² Long was also one of the few women welders to return to Can Car in the immediate post-war. Although she enjoyed her work experience, Long felt her time at Can Car was temporary and “was through” after the war ended.²³ She quit Can Car in April 1946, found work at the Dominion Bank of Canada by 1947 and later worked at the Toronto Dominion Bank. She married Lorne Long in 1949. Taking time off work to raise four children, Long returned to the Toronto Dominion Bank and retired in 1985.²⁴ She passed away on 17 August 2007.²⁵

²² Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section M, Card #740-741.

²³ Long and Gibson, “Florence & Alvina – Part 1,” 9:22-9:43.

²⁴ Florence Long and Alvina Gibson, “Florence & Alvina – Part 2,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 5:28-5:50, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

²⁵ “Florence Amy Long,” *Chronicle-Journal*, 16 August 2007.

Nina Godecki (nee Harney) was born on 9 September 1921 in Port Arthur, Ontario. She began working during the Depression at 13 years old, cleaning homes with her mother.²⁶ Godecki attended the Fort William Vocational School and found work at Can Car as a riveter, beginning in January 1940.²⁷ At the plant, she met Tony Godecki, who worked in riveting alongside her. Due to prejudices against the employment of married women, Nina lost her job at Can Car when she married Tony in 1943. After travelling across Canada with Tony to sell Victory Bonds with the Air Force Band, Nina Godecki stayed home to raise their seven children.²⁸ She passed away on 28 May 2012.²⁹

Mary Riddoch (nee Sundell) was born in Hurkett, Ontario, on 19 January 1918 to immigrant parents from Norway and Sweden. The family later moved to Port Arthur and ran the Scandinavian Café. Riddoch was first hired at Can Car on 6 February 1941 and worked as a riveter with Nina Godecki, with whom she shared a lifelong friendship.³⁰ Beginning in August 1942, Riddoch had to take a year off from work to be treated for a collapsed lung. She returned to Can Car to work in the Commercial Stores office and stayed until shortly after V-E Day in May 1945, then departed for the West Coast to be with her family.³¹ After the war, she married Ridge Riddoch, who served with the Winnipeg Grenadiers and was captured as a prisoner of war

²⁶ See “Biographies: Nina Godecki (nee Harney),” *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/biographies/>.

²⁷ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section H, Card #162.

²⁸ See “Biographies: Nina Godecki (nee Harney).”

²⁹ “Nina Godecki,” *Chronicle Journal*, 30 May 2012.

³⁰ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section S, Card #702-703.

³¹ Nina Godecki and Mary Riddoch. “Nina & Mary – Part 1,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 6:33-7:17, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

by the Japanese for nearly 4 years.³² Mary continued working a variety of jobs and raised their three children after she and Ridge separated.³³ She passed away on 6 May 2000.³⁴



Figure 3. Nina Godecki and Mary Riddoch at the Rosies of the North reunion in 1998. Rosies of the North Film Shoot Stills, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/image-gallery/>.

Joan Brigden (nee Dickson) began working at Can Car at age 17 as a riveter and later as a clerk.³⁵ During the war, she volunteered as a Miss Canada, selling War Savings stamps. Brigden was passionate about the issue of unequal pay at Can Car, considering that women's starting wages were lower than what she had made working previously in retail.³⁶ In 1944, she married Laurence "Laurie" Brigden and the pair relocated to Alberta, where Laurie worked as a flight instructor. Joan Brigden passed away on 26 May 2000.³⁷

³² "Ridge James Riddoch," *Chronicle Journal*, 9 September 2010.

³³ See "Biographies: Riddoch (nee Sundell)," *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/biographies/>.

³⁴ "Mary Riddoch," *Chronicle Journal*, 6 May 2000.

³⁵ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #169.

³⁶ Joan Brigden, "Joan Brigden – Part 1" interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 2:17-2:40, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

³⁷ "Joan E. Brigden," *Chronicle Journal*, 26 May 2000.

Daun Nalezty (nee Kannegiesser) was born 14 January 1924 in Schrieber, Ontario, and began working in riveting at Can Car in January 1941 at age 16.³⁸ Her sisters, Mary Frances and Noreen “Molly,” were employed at the plant during the war as well, in the blueprint and wings departments, respectively. Daun married Lenord Nalezty in November 1942, who returned to work at Can Car after serving with the Royal Canadian Navy, and they had two children.³⁹ She passed away on 16 December, 2025.⁴⁰



Figure 4. Daun Nalezty and the set of tools she used on the job (rivet, screwdriver and hammer). Daun Nalezty Photos & Artifacts, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/image-gallery/>.

Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth) was born in Mission City, British Columbia, and grew up on a farm in Murillo, Ontario. McCallum was hired at Can Car in April 1938 and did both riveting and sewing work during the war.⁴¹ She continued working at the plant sewing fabric for the interior of buses produced at Can Car in the post-war and stayed on for a total of 24

³⁸ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section N, Card #9-10.

³⁹ “Lenord Nalezty,” *Chronicle Journal*, 10 December 2008.

⁴⁰ “Hilary Daun Nalezty,” *Chronicle Journal*, 10 January 2026.

⁴¹ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section M, Card #595-596.

years. Afterwards, McCallum worked as a clerk at Dresswell Cleaners for 20 years until her retirement in 1979. She passed away on 31 January 1998.⁴²

Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) was born in St. James, Manitoba, and raised on her family's dairy farm in Russell, Manitoba. McKay's family moved to Port Arthur in 1943, and she was hired at Can Car to work in inspection.⁴³ She was elected to the union executive and was very active in organizing home front efforts as well as entertainment activities at the plant. McKay became interested in labour politics during her time at Can Car and joined the local CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) club, which led her to become a lifelong member of the NDP (New Democratic Party). Shortly after the war, McKay found work driving dry cleaner trucks. She married Jerry McKay on 19 September 1947. After raising five children, she managed the Lakehead Labour Centre Credit Union until retirement. Rhoda McKay passed away on 21 June 2013.⁴⁴

Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) was born on 22 February 1926, in Humbolt, Saskatchewan. In 1944, she boarded a train to Fort William with three schoolmates to find work at Can Car. Gandier stayed in the women's staff house, Winston Hall, and worked across four different departments on both the shop floor and in the offices.⁴⁵ She met Don Gandier at the plant after he completed his tour of duty in the Air Force in 1944. They married in 1945 and had three children.⁴⁶ Margaret Gandier passed away on 6 November 2003.⁴⁷

⁴² "Mrs. Maisie McCallum," *Chronicle Journal*, 3 February 1998.

⁴³ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section W, Card # 276-277.

⁴⁴ "Rhoda McKay," *Chronicle Journal*, 24 June 2013.

⁴⁵ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section K, Card #101.

⁴⁶ "Donald Gandier," *Chronicle Journal*, 7 November 2005.

⁴⁷ "Margaret Gandier," *Chronicle Journal*, 14 November 2003.

Jadwiga “Liddy” Kondakow (nee Kwiatkowski) was born in Fort William in 1924 and did farm work before the war. She attended the Fort William Vocational School and was hired at Can Car as a fitter in 1942.⁴⁸ In June 1945, Kondakow was recognized with a merit award for being one of the top-ranking employees in her department.⁴⁹ She married Mikolaj Kondakow in 1951, and together, they ran a watch repair business in Port Arthur. Liddy Kondakow passed away on 10 April 2007.⁵⁰

An additional effort to document the history of the Rosies of the North through interviews was led by Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith between October 1996 and September 2000. In total, 38 interviews with women who had been employed at Can Car during the Second World War were completed. While the original audio recordings and transcripts are not currently accessible, their content informed a series of articles co-authored by Wakewich and Smith, which occasionally quote from interviews directly.⁵¹ However, the subjects’ real names are protected by pseudonyms in the articles, so there are likely a few cases of overlap with the women

⁴⁸ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section K, Card #380-381.

⁴⁹ W. O. Will to Jadwiga Kondakow, 18 June 1945.

⁵⁰ There are multiple spelling variations of Kondakow’s first name (Ledwiga, Ledwika, Jadwiga), which vary between different source materials. Citations including Kondakow’s first name are consistent with the spelling in the respective source, but otherwise, her nickname, “Liddy,” or “Jadwiga” will be used because it follows the spelling from her obituary. See “Kondakow,” *Chronicle Journal*, 14 April 2007.

⁵¹ See Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, “‘I Was Not Afraid of Work’: Female War Plant Employees and Their Work Environment,” in *Canadian Environments: Essays in Culture, Politics, and History*, ed. Robert C. Thomsen and Nanette Hale (Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, 2005), 229-247; Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries and Health during the Second World War: Nationalist Discourse, Media Representations and the Experiences of Canadian Women War Workers,” *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (April 2012): 56-73; Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith, “The Politics of ‘Selective’ Memory: Re-Visioning Canadian Women’s Wartime Work in the Public Record,” *Oral History* 34, no. 2 (2006): 56-68; and Pamela Wakewich, Helen Smith, and Jeanette Lynes, “Women’s Wartime Work and Identities: Women Workers at Canadian Car and Foundry Co. Limited, Fort William, Ontario, 1938-1945,” in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women’s History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O’Rourke (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 409-416. Smith and Wakewich’s “‘I Was Not Afraid of Work,’” also appears in *Essays in Northwestern Ontario Working Class History: Thunder Bay and Its Environs*, ed. Michel S. Beaulieu (Thunder Bay: Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies, 2008), 263-282.

interviewed by Saxberg, where real full names were used.⁵² Wakewich and Smith stressed the importance of timeliness in the interviews since, by the late 1990s, most of the Rosies of the North were “in their seventies and eighties, many have recently become widowed, and some are in the process of moving from family homes to seniors’ housing. Because of these significant life changes, the women are eager to reflect on their own pasts.”⁵³

While conducting interviews with the Rosies, Smith and Wakewich found that women’s working experiences during the Second World War are better understood when their pre-war and post-war experiences are considered.⁵⁴ Relying on national narratives and wartime propaganda without considering women’s fuller life stories risks reducing their wartime working lives to an archetype. They argue that popular images like Rosie the Riveter

caricature women's wartime contributions as selfless, heroic and temporary responses to the unnatural work and family circumstances brought on by war. While it can be argued that such images acknowledge and valorise women's war work, they oversimplify and render invisible the complexity of women's wartime working lives.⁵⁵

As such, existing historical accounts of women’s labour during the Second World War tended to be framed around women’s collective responsibility towards “selfless patriotism.” Little emphasis was placed on women’s own economic agency, or personal identification with their work, and a false dichotomy was created between their domestic and working experiences.⁵⁶

Building on many of the thematic issues raised by Wakewich and Smith, this thesis critically evaluates overarching wartime media depictions of women, particularly when they

⁵² When Wakewich and Smith’s interview excerpts are included in this paper, the pseudonyms are maintained unless the subject’s identity can be confirmed with certainty and similar information about them is offered without privacy restrictions in another source.

⁵³ Wakewich, Smith, and Lynes, “Women’s Wartime Work and Identities,” in *Framing Our Past*, 411-413.

⁵⁴ Wakewich and Smith, “The Politics of ‘Selective’ Memory,” 56-68, 58.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

deviate from the Rosies' memories recounted in interviews. By considering the Rosies pre-war experiences, their motivations for working at Can Car becomes more varied than pure "selfless patriotism," and even patriotism itself is made more tangible when narrowing in on the Rosies' social and familial relationships with those in service, or how home front efforts became intertwined with their work-lives. At the opposite end, looking back at their wartime experiences in retrospect provides a great insight into how the Rosies perceived gender roles at the time, the extent to which their views and relationship to work changed throughout their lives, and issues they might have brushed off or kept to themselves during the war to avoid disrupting the status quo.

Given the wealth of primary source material from the wartime localised specifically to Can Car in Fort William, there's ample opportunity for further research into how gender dynamics played out at the workplace and how women's experiences were documented. From Spring 1944 to Summer 1945, the Fort William plant kept a weekly newspaper, called *Aircrafter*,⁵⁷ which offers a detailed record of the plant's activities in the late stage of the war. New issues were released on Saturdays, and many employees would pick up their copy from the plant's main gate at the end of their shifts on the following Mondays.⁵⁸

Since the *Aircrafter* ran during the Curtiss-Wright Helldiver Bomber contract at Can Car, the paper regularly featured photos and stories of Helldivers during various phases of production at the plant, as well as updates on the aircraft's performance in the war, being used by the United States Navy. Stories about Helldivers often contained messages specifically encouraging Can Car

⁵⁷ A few issues of the *Aircrafter* have not been located. These are volume 1, issue 1. It was presumably published in late April 1944, as the *Aircrafter* celebrated its one-year anniversary in volume 2, issue 16, published 21 April 1945. Volume 1, issues 9-11 (first half of July 1944) and volume 2, issue 20 (the last week of May 1945). All other issues have been digitized and can be viewed on the "Rosies of the North" website.

⁵⁸ "Quitting Time Monday Means Aircrafter Time," *Aircrafter*, 9 December 1944, 3.

employees to feel proud of the work they were doing to bring the Allied Forces closer to victory. The paper's editor, R. M. Walker, had previously worked for the *Fort William Daily Times Journal* and was a city alderman before the war.⁵⁹ Each of the plant's departments had designated reporters who could submit news relevant to their respective departments.⁶⁰ Other popular ways employees contributed to the paper were through short stories, poems, or cartoon artwork.

The majority of *Aircrafter* issues were eight pages in length, with a similar structure. The cover page featured headline news stories which applied to workers across all departments, such as major events at the plant or information about the war. Next, the editorial page had the editor's column printed on the left side, and the remaining space was usually occupied by shorter articles, a cartoon, and a "Did You Know?" section with quick facts about the war and Canadian industry. The top of page three showed headshot photos and quoted responses from employees on a new question each issue, ranging from serious topics, such as "Do You Think Rumors Are Dangerous to the War Effort?"⁶¹ to preferences about music, hobbies, or the latest trends in women's hats. Otherwise, page three also contained miscellaneous articles, department news, and creative writing from employees. Page four of the *Aircrafter* was dedicated to a section called the *Feminine Touch*, which was aimed directly at the plant's women workers. The two regular columns of the *Feminine Touch* were called "Breezy Bits" and "What's News from the Library." The former was an advice column offering quick tips for home, health, beauty, and lifestyle topics, while the latter summarized the latest stories from publications available at the plant's library, located in the main office. The magazines and booklets featured by the librarian, which would have been of particular interest to wartime aviation industry workers, included *Aviation*

⁵⁹ "R. M. Walker "'Aircrafter' Editor" *Aircrafter*, 23 June 1945, 2.

⁶⁰ "Information for Department Reporters," *Aircrafter*, 22 July 1944, 1.

⁶¹ "Do You Think Rumors Are Dangerous to the War Effort?" *Aircrafter*, 20 January 1945, 3.

News, Canadian Business and *Aero Digest*. *The Feminine Touch* also regularly featured seasonal recipes and nutritional advice, updates on wartime measures and industry, poems and short stories, or additional news about plant events, like parties and special guest visits. The Sports section typically followed on page five with results and stories about the plant's recreational activities, while the remaining three pages were, for the most part, dedicated to department bulletins.

Another primary source from Can Car, which has been overlooked in previous scholarship about the Rosies of the North, is the union paper called *The Effort*. From February to December 1942, Lodge 719 printed nine monthly issues (skipping May and September) of the newspaper, written by and for the shop floor workers at Can Car in Fort William.⁶² The paper's primary objective was to inform workers of the union's gains and to encourage non-members to consider joining to meet the goal of 100 percent unionism at the plant. Secondly, it hoped to situate the Lodge's role in the larger history of organized labour in Canada and the United States and to build awareness about the labour movement in general.⁶³ Most issues of *The Effort* were four pages in length. The title page featured big-picture news and announcements, focusing on the union's activity in the local community or the national labour scene. In one of the bottom corners, there would also be a tally of the membership gains for the union over the previous month, averaging 208 new members per month. *The Effort* not only provides valuable insight into the union's objectives and achievements, but it also gives voice to the concerns raised by employees on unionism or issues affecting working life at the plant. Stories from *The Effort* and *Aircrafter* will be incorporated throughout this thesis to show how gender social norms were

⁶² It is uncertain whether the publication of *The Effort* continued past 1942, as further issues could not be sourced.

⁶³ "Why This Paper," *The Effort*, February 1942, 2.

reinforced by media representations. The occasions the Rosies of the North documented their own perspectives in these sources will also be noted.

The first chapter of this paper examines the working and educational backgrounds of the women who would go on to be employed at the Can Car plant in Fort William during the Second World War. Looking at the regional history of Fort William and its twin city, Port Arthur, the effects of the early 1930s economic Depression had struck particularly hard as the region's leading industries, namely pulp and paper production and grain storage suffered some of the biggest losses in product export value. The resulting wide-scale unemployment in male-dominated fields and increases in domestic and service jobs saw more women working to support household incomes, challenging the male breadwinner archetype. Most Rosies had engaged in paid labour to support themselves and their families through the economic Depression, although having to find work during their formative years meant that educational opportunities for Rosies at the secondary and post-secondary levels were highly restricted, as most did not have the chance to finish high school or receive a post-secondary education. The training courses needed for shop floor jobs at Can Car were much more accessible and affordable than other educational paths, and as the war progressed, paid on-site training became the norm.

Throughout this chapter, women's motivations for choosing to work at Can Car are highlighted and compared to their previous jobs. For many, employment in a wartime industry offered higher wages and an opportunity to build greater financial independence and stability, especially after a period of economic hardship. Additionally, working in a factory setting proved to come naturally to women who were familiar with using tools and machinery in their previous jobs or housework, particularly those whose families ran farms. Despite the welcome benefits of wartime work, employees at Can Car did not overlook how closely their jobs were tied to the war

effort, especially knowing family members, friends and co-workers who enlisted. Thousands of men and women from Can Car served in the military during the Second World War, and their co-workers followed updates about them in the plant's newspaper, *Aircrafter*. Through both paid and volunteer work at the plant, it was clear that the staff at Can Car showed their support for the war effort.

Chapter one ends with an overview of Can Car's early hiring practices and aviation projects, namely the production of Grumman G-23s for a series of Central and North American clients and the development of a few aircraft types designed by the plant's engineers. During G-23 production, women's occupations at the plant were almost all but restricted to traditionally feminine fields of clerical work in the offices and sewing in aircraft assembly. An early exception to the gendered labour divide at the plant was Elsie MacGill, who was hired as the plant's Chief Aeronautical Engineer in 1938 and was the first woman in North America to hold such a position. MacGill's educational and career background will also be explored, as she faced her own set of obstacles being a woman in the heavily male-dominated field of engineering and having a permanent physical disability after falling ill with polio at the end of her graduate studies. Still, by way of her family's support, both personal and financial, MacGill was afforded educational and career opportunities that set her apart from most working women at the time.

Chapter Two is centred on wartime aircraft production at Can Car and details the production of Hawker Hurricanes for Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF), which was the plant's most extensive project during the war. In just over two years since the first Hurricane order was made, Can Car's employment numbers increased from 300 to over 3,000. After the Second World War was officially declared and the national labour pool began to be affected as more Canadians left their jobs to enlist in the military, women accounted for a larger share of the

workforce, especially on the shop floor, which had previously been an all-male space. This chapter will also cover Elsie MacGill's tenure as Chief Aeronautical Engineer at the plant. MacGill has been remembered for having a mixed reputation among Can Car's workforce, and female employees did not identify with her purely based on gender. Based on recollections from women interviewed by Kelly Saxberg, MacGill was respected for her achievements in the male-dominated field of aeronautical engineering. However, her position as a boss and lack of personal interactions with lower-level workers meant MacGill was often perceived as a distant or intimidating figure. Another defining event of MacGill's legacy at Can Car was her unexpected departure in late spring of 1943. Rumour was that she had been dismissed alongside Works Manager Bill Soulsby after it was discovered that the two had been in a romantic relationship. The theory that MacGill's relationship with Soulsby was the deciding factor in their dismissal from Can Car aligns with gendered employment practices at the time.

Wartime industries across Canada preferred hiring women who were unmarried and, more importantly, did not have children, over fears of disrupting the traditional family structure where mothers were homemakers. As such, special efforts were made to encourage young, single women to find work at Can Car and monitor their integration into the factory setting. Female-specific supervisors, called matrons, were tasked with ensuring that women remained productive at work and were regularly stationed in the women's restrooms, as well as the women's staff house, Winston Hall. Many of the Rosies of the North felt as though the matrons were primarily hired to protect the reputation of the single women and to curb romantic relationships between men and women. It will be argued that, despite the matrons' best attempts, romantic and sexual interactions were still a regular feature of social life at Can Car, which ultimately took a toll on women's morale and confidence on the job.

The remainder of the second chapter will delve further into women's employment trends as the war progressed and Can Car secured its second major wartime contract of 1,000 Curtiss Helldiver Bombers for the US Navy in May 1942. While it took the better part of a year for the first Helldiver planes to roll out of the plant, Can Car Fort William was reaching employment, production, and profit highs by 1944. Women's representation at the plant also peaked in 1944, although gendered stereotypes that women were better suited for precise, repetitive jobs meant that more women worked in sub-assembly over final assembly. Most leadership roles were occupied by men, but women with specialized skills and background experience occasionally acted as lead hands in various shop floor departments, overseeing both men and women workers. The gendered division of labour and leadership in the plant hints at the role sexism played in the working lives of Can Car employees.

The third chapter addresses women's representation and engagement in different aspects of workplace culture at Can Car throughout the war, including the union and Labour Management Production Committee (LMPC) initiatives, as well as the many home front efforts encouraged at the plant. In existing scholarship about the Rosie's of the North, women's involvement in the union has been overlooked due to their lower membership numbers compared to men. It has been reasoned that women saw their work at Can Car as temporary and had little incentive to participate in formal labour committees. However, primary source evidence in the form of the shop floor union lodge's newspaper, *The Effort*, sheds further light on how gender inequalities affected worker solidarity during the war.

While women appeared with less frequency than men in formal union membership, they were not silent on the issues which affected their work. Furthermore, the union's inability to address some of the key issues raised by women workers, including gender pay gaps and worker

autonomy, likely played a role in women's disinterest in joining the union. By analyzing a variety of concerns from female employees (both union members and non-members), gender-specific barriers that impeded women's fuller engagement in organized labour efforts will be identified as well. Rosies have noted that a lack of familiarity with unions in their previous jobs and very limited seniority at Can Car left many women feeling out of the loop on union activities or without the reassurance that their membership would be valued equally to that of longer-serving male colleagues. Women's apprehension was not misplaced, considering how sexist attitudes often diminished women's contributions at work or how they were made to shoulder the blame when productivity maximization initiatives fell short. Furthermore, on a practical level, the Rosies alluded to women having a harder time making commitments outside of regular working hours because of existing domestic responsibilities and supporting the war on the home front.

The remainder of the third chapter examines women's participation in the home front efforts promoted at Can Car during and after working hours. As a plant producing military aircraft, home front efforts were taken very seriously at Can Car, and employees went to great lengths to show their support. The home front effort which consistently surpassed goals set by plant management was the Victory Loan Drives, held twice a year to promote investing in the war effort directly through the purchase of Victory Bonds. On top of the efforts organized at the plant, women workers were also asked to lead the charge in home front efforts situated in the domestic sphere. By examining the advice columns, recipes and articles featured in the *Aircrafter*, it will be shown that women were expected to adapt domestic responsibilities like finances and shopping, gardening, food preparation and diet to a wartime climate, all while balancing the dual role of industrial worker and homemaker. Women's home front duties existed

both to support the war effort and maintain traditional gender roles, which lent further justification for women to step back from traditionally male-dominated occupations, or the workplace altogether, once the war ended and servicemen returned home.

The conclusion, “Rosies in the Post-war,” addresses the mass dismissals at Can Car following VJ-Day and the immediate cancellation of the Helldiver contract. Only three women were still employed on the shop floor after August 1945 and the gendered division of labour at the plant reverted to how it had been prior to the war, with women being confined to traditional roles in office work, or cleaning and maintenance. Despite women being able to successfully perform jobs across nearly every department at Can Car, once the war was over, women faced an expectation to exit the workforce in favour of raising a family and homemaking. Looking at the emerging narratives in local newspapers about women’s post-war rights to work, the pressure was even more intense for married women. Can Car’s hiring practices followed suit and employee cards show that most women working at the plant in the post-war were single. First-hand testimony revealed that some women embraced homemaking or female-dominated career paths after the war, while others would have preferred to continue working at Can Car or in a similar field, if it were possible. In either case, Rosies found many reasons to celebrate their time at Can Car and took notice of the lifelong impacts of their experiences.

For women who had previously worked isolating, low-paying jobs close to home, finding a job at Can Car helped them establish a personal independence and confidence that would propel them forward for the rest of their careers and lives. The social aspect of having such a large workforce was another standout and multiple Rosies shared that the best part about working at Can Car was being able to meet friends, and in many cases, their future husbands. These treasured memories and relationships must have played no small part in the attendance to

the Rosies of the North reunion some five decades later, on 29 August 1998, when 250 former employees from all corners of Canada gathered to commemorate their wartime work.

Chapter One: Can Car, Lakehead Industries, and Women's Labour Leading up to the Second World War

The sod turning ceremony on 17 July 1912 at the site that would become the Canadian Car & Foundry plant in Fort William, Ontario, was attended by Canadian railway company representatives and mayors of the twin cities Fort William and Port Arthur (together, referred to as the Lakehead, being situated at the head of Lake Superior).¹ Despite aircraft assembly being its mainstay during the Second World War, the Canadian Car & Foundry Company originated as a railway stock manufacturer in 1909 as an amalgamation of the Canada Car Company, the Dominion Car & Foundry Company, and the Rhodes Curry Company. Its headquarters were in Montreal, Quebec, where both Canada Car and Dominion Car & Foundry Company had already been based.²

While the City of Fort William won out, having invested \$270,000 in grants to the company by 1913,³ neighbouring Port Arthur had been just as eager over the opportunity to produce railway stock through Can Car. The establishment of railways at the Lakehead had a large influence on local economies in the preceding decades, both in terms of the growth of commercial networks provided and labour within the rail industry itself. Construction of the portion of the Canadian transcontinental railroad connecting Lake Superior westward to Winnipeg, Manitoba, began on 1 June 1875, off the bank of the Kaministiquia River in Fort William. In less than a decade, the first train was able to roll in from Winnipeg on 8 July 1882.⁴

¹ Port Arthur and Fort William amalgamated in 1970 to become the present day City of Thunder Bay.

² Gordon Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History, 1912-1992* (Thunder Bay: Bombardier Inc., 1995), 3.

³ Thorold J. Tronrud, "Building the Industrial City," in *Thunder Bay: From Rivalry to Unity*, ed. Thorold J. Tronrud and A. Ernest Epp (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1995; 2008), 107.

⁴ Michel S. Beaulieu and Chris Southcott, *North of Superior: An Illustrated History of Northwestern Ontario*, (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 2010), 55-57, and James Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," in *Thunder Bay: From Rivalry to Unity*, 39.

Over the following years, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), the Port Arthur Duluth and Western Railway (PeeDee) and the Canadian Northern Railway (CNR) all operated within the region. At the same time construction began at the Can Car plant in October 1912, railways were still making their mark on the local labour. An expansion of the CNR line eastward from Port Arthur that started in 1912 had 7,000 workers on the job by the next year.⁵

It was not until 1917 that construction was complete at the Can Car plant in Fort William. Its first boxcar orders came in 1918 from the Canadian Government for 5,000 boxcars and another 4,000 for the CNR. Despite the number of years it took for production to begin at the plant, output rates climbed very rapidly within the first few months. Can Car's workforce, numbering over a thousand, went from completing 14 boxcars per day in early March to churning out 32 completed boxcars daily by mid-May 1918.⁶ With the First World War ongoing, the plant received another order from Manitowoc Shipbuilding to construct a dozen minesweeping ships for the French Navy in February 1918 and have them ready for delivery by October. All twelve minesweepers were completed on schedule, but tragically, two were lost following their departure to Sault Ste. Marie on 23 November 1918.⁷

The disappearance of the 76 men on board the *Inkerman* and the *Cerisoles* marked the largest simultaneous loss of life on Lake Superior. While the remaining minesweepers did not arrive overseas before the war's end, they were purchased by the French Government and saw a variety of uses in the decades to come, from merchant vessels to private yachts.⁸ After the First

⁵ Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 39.

⁶ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 7-10.

⁷ See Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Ratz, Thorold J. Tronrud, and Jenna L. Kirker, *Thunder Bay and the First World War, 1914-1919* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2018), 87-89.

⁸ For more information about Can Car's foray into shipbuilding and the individual fates of all the minesweepers, see Beaulieu, Ratz, Tronrud, and Kirker, *Thunder Bay and the First World War, 1914-1919*, 89. Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 12-16; Diane Robnik, "New Light on 1918 Minesweepers Mystery," *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records* XLII (2014): 3-15; Jeff Sumner, "Picture essay: Launching minesweepers at Can Car,

World War, production contracts were harder to come by and activity at the Fort William plant declined. Between 1919 and 1920, Can Car was awarded two railcar repair contracts, an order for 2,000 boxcars from the CPR, and one more ship, the *E.D. Kingsley*, was constructed.⁹

However, with a steep drop in post-war demands for rail stock and no other prospects in sight, the plant shut its doors in March 1921 and remained closed throughout most of the interwar years. While the Can Car plant experienced a period of relative quiet, other local industries were booming in the 1920s.¹⁰

Economic activity at the Lakehead during the interwar period was led by pulp and paper. Just over half a decade after production began in 1918 at the first local mill, the Port Arthur Pulp and Paper Company, three more mills had been constructed. Before the full effects of the Depression took force in 1929, the forest industry accounted for 57% of the twin cities' total value of production and was the primary source of wage earnings for 59% of the local manufacturing labour force.¹¹ According to James Stafford, the demand for pulp and paper, particularly for newsprint in the United States, likely "accounted for the largest part of the growth and prosperity of the Lakehead in that decade," as the 1920s saw the highest local rates of growth since the immigration decade of 1901 to 1911 when the population more than

1918," Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society *Papers & Records* XVI (1988): 32-40; Richard Ticknor, "The sinking of the French minesweepers *Inkerman* and *Cerisoles* in 1918," Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society *Papers & Records* I (1973): 1-4.

⁹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 15-17.

¹⁰ For overviews of the economic development of the Lakehead, see Michel S. Beaulieu, "A Historic Overview of Policies Effecting Non-Aboriginal Resource Development in Northwestern Ontario, 1900-1990," in *Governance in Northern Ontario: Economic Development and Policy Making*, ed. Charles Conteh and Robert Segsworth (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 94-114; Michel S. Beaulieu and Jenna L. Kirker, "The Continued Evolution of Fort William and Port Arthur into the City of Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada," in *Twin Cities across Five Continents: Interactions and Tensions on Urban Borders*, ed. Ekaterina Mikhailova and John Garrard (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 35-47; Thorold J. Tronrud, *Guardians of Progress. Boosters and Boosterism in Thunder Bay, 1870-1914* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1993); and Thorold J. Tronrud, "The Search for Factories in a Staple Economy: Thunder Bay's Manufacturing Industries, 1880-1980." Research Report #28, Lakehead University Centre for Northern Studies, 1991.

¹¹ Tronrud, "Building the Industrial City," 111.

quadrupled from around 8,000 to over 38,000. Immigration between 1921 and 1931 brought an additional 6,000 residents to Fort William and Port Arthur.¹²

Another staple of the local interwar economy was grain storage and trade. Being situated at the head of Lake Superior made the twin cities an optimal point of connection between the grain being produced by the Prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta) and its shipment eastward to domestic and international markets. It was this very trade network that inspired the production of railway stock by Can Car since, according to Burkowski, at the time of the plant's establishment, "the Canadian grain trade was expanding madly; thousands of carloads of grain were coming east, not nearly as many goods were going west. It made sense to build boxcars closer to the Prairies, rather than transporting empty rolling stock hundreds of miles from eastern factories."¹³ During the 1920s, Canada became the world's leading exporter of wheat, and after the completion of the Saskatchewan Pool No. 7 elevator in Port Arthur in 1929, the Lakehead housed the largest grain elevator capacity in North America.¹⁴

Demographically, the workforce that formed at the Can Car plant in Fort William during the Second World War was reflective of local interwar labour and immigration trends. Can Car's women workers mostly came from working-class families and had either immigrated to Canada as children during the 1920s,¹⁵ or more commonly, were first-generation Canadians who identified with the work ethic of their immigrant parents, particularly from Northern Europe (Norway, Sweden, Finland), Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine, Russia), and Southern Europe

¹² Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 48-49. See also Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 3. For a detailed account of immigration, industry, and women's labour participation at the Lakehead prior to and during the First World War, see Jenna L. Kirker, "A Matter of Principal": Female Involvement in Politics and Labour at the Lakehead, 1903-1918" (MA thesis, Lakehead University, 2017).

¹³ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 4.

¹⁴ Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 41-42.

¹⁵ For a selection of biographies of Can Car employees who immigrated to Canada as children, see "Biographies," *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/biographies/>.

(Italy and Greece).¹⁶ Liddy Kondakow, for example, while working at Can Car as a fitter noticed her co-workers came from a diverse range of European backgrounds, remarking, “There were Greeks, there were, like I am, Polish, Ukrainians, and English, and Italian; every nationality that you could wish for!”¹⁷ Similarly, riveters Mary Riddoch and Nina Godecki found that the ethnic composition of the Can Car workforce reminded them of their own neighbourhoods in Port Arthur, where there were many Greek, Polish, Finnish, and Italian families.¹⁸

Growing up during the Depression years, the challenging economic conditions heavily influenced women’s working and educational experiences before finding employment at Can Car. Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith found during their interview project in the 1990s that “the women remembered their work experiences at Can Car in relation to how their families coped during the Depression.”¹⁹ The effects of the Depression were felt especially hard at the Lakehead. The region’s most prolific exports during the 1920s were among those to take the biggest hits by the end of the decade. As Michiel Horn has observed, “Canada’s deteriorating export picture was partly the result of international overcapacity in several industries, most notably wheat and pulp and paper.”²⁰ In fact, the shrinking prices of exports began to be felt at the Lakehead before the American stock market crash in October 1929, as the global price for lumber started to drop in 1928.²¹ With the American economy suffering in tandem, Canadian

¹⁶ Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, “‘I Was Not Afraid of Work’: Female War Plant Employees and Their Work Environment,” in *Canadian Environments: Essays in Culture, Politics, and History*, ed. Robert C. Thomsen and Nanette Hale (Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, 2005), 238 and Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries and Health during the Second World War: Nationalist Discourse, Media Representations and the Experiences of Canadian Women War Workers,” *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (April 2012): 68.

¹⁷ Ledwiga Kondakow, “Ledwiga ‘Liddy’ Kondakow (nee Kwiatkowski) – Part 2,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 6:33-6:45. <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

¹⁸ Nina Godecki and Mary Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 24:40-25:16, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

¹⁹ Smith and Wakewich, “‘I Was Not Afraid of Work,’” 238.

²⁰ Michiel Horn, *The Great Depression of the 1930s in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1984), 5.

²¹ Beaulieu and Southcott, *North of Superior*, 88.

pulp and paper lost a foothold in the market it had relied on almost exclusively, as the United States had accounted for 90% of exports.²² In 1921, a ton of newsprint that could be sold for \$135 was reduced to \$30 by 1934.²³ As European grain industries continued to recover after the First World War, the 40% of wheat produced by the Prairie provinces destined for international export accumulated in Canada's grain pools.²⁴ Despite a bad harvest in 1929, grain elevators continued to be filled with unsold product, and the price of wheat declined sharply into the 1930s. The average price per bushel of No. 1 Northern wheat dropped from \$1.60 in 1929 to 53 cents by September 1931.²⁵

As the Depression reached its climax, major employers in Fort William and Port Arthur had to lay off large portions of their workforce or close their doors altogether until economic conditions improved. The Great Lakes Paper Mill was the only one of the four paper mills at the Lakehead that remained in operation throughout the Depression.²⁶ Unemployment skyrocketed, and in 1931, the Lakehead had the highest experienced jobless rate out of all Northern Ontario communities. In June 1931, 28% of wage earners within both twin cities were unemployed, which was 10% worse than the average unemployment rate in urban Canadian centres. Within the previous year, 40% of wage earners in the twin cities lost their jobs, compared to the 25% average across all of Ontario.²⁷ With wage-earners often going months at a time without finding work, many families had to turn to unemployment relief. Recent immigrants to the Lakehead, especially those of non-Anglo-Saxon origin, were among the most affected by the limited employment opportunities and faced additional difficulties accessing support during the

²² Pierre Berton, *The Great Depression 1929-1939* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), 27.

²³ Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 48-49.

²⁴ Berton, *The Great Depression*, 27.

²⁵ Harold A. Innis, "Economic Conditions in Canada in 1931-2," *The Economic Journal* 42, no. 165 (1932): 1-16, 2.

²⁶ Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 49.

²⁷ Tronrud, "Building the Industrial City," 113.

Depression.²⁸ While Lakehead residents of all ethnic backgrounds were listed on municipal relief rolls, new and non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants were among the most prominent. A sample from Fort William in April 1931, representing 1,000 relief applicants, showed that 90% were of non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, and 80% had been living in Canada for less than five years.²⁹ However, as municipal resources were stretched thin, financial assistance and employment opportunities could only be accessed by a select few. A Fort William relief officer at the time drew attention to the fact that the order of priority for relief first went to Fort William-born residents, followed by Canadian-born residents, then British-born residents, and finally, non-British-born residents, leaving little to no help for applicants of non-British backgrounds.³⁰

While traditionally male-dominated industries at the Lakehead suffered substantial cutbacks during the Depression, female-dominated service occupations were on the rise, especially domestic work. Between 1921 and 1931, jobs in the service sector increased by 800 in Fort William, with 600 of these being domestic jobs. This period's increase in service work can be attributed to the fact that women sought out paid labour to supplement or replace household incomes lost by men and that unemployment during the Depression predominantly affected the working class, while middle-class residents continued to be in a position to afford domestic services.³¹ Across the country, women's participation in the paid labour force increased slightly during the Depression, especially in urban centres where there was usually a greater array of opportunities for typically female-occupied work.³² Before the outbreak of war, women

²⁸ See Michel S. Beaulieu, *Labour at the Lakehead: Ethnicity, Socialism, and Politics, 1900-35* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

²⁹ Beaulieu, *Labour at the Lakehead*, 6-7 and Beaulieu and Southcott, *North of Superior*, 88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 49.

³² Ruth A. Frager and Carmela Patrias, *Discounted Labour: Women Workers in Canada, 1870-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 26.

represented 17% of Canada's official labour force and over a third worked domestic jobs.³³

Economic need was identified as the main cause for women to enter the paid workforce, even prior to the Depression, as most working-class households could not afford to rely solely on the wages of one male breadwinner.³⁴ Still, as the Depression brought high unemployment rates, working women, especially married women and mothers, were frequently subject to scorn for occupying jobs.

Despite the changing economic conditions and labour opportunities during the Depression years, there remained a popular belief that it was men's responsibility to provide for their families. Frager and Patrias observe that during the Depression, while "unemployed family men may have avoided minding the children and doing the housework, the 'threat' of the female breadwinner loomed large. Masculinity itself seemed under siege when men could not support their families."³⁵ Ultimately, societal backlash did not result in a diminished presence of women in the paid labour force in the 1930s. The percentage of employed women above the age of fifteen in Canada remained stable from the start of the decade to the early years of the Second World War, rising from 22% in 1931 to 23% by 1941.³⁶ Consistent with national trends, the majority of women hired at Can Car during the war had worked previously out of the need to maintain the household income during the Depression. Wakewich and Smith found that almost all the women they interviewed had engaged in some form of paid labour before they were hired

³³ Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1986), 9.

³⁴ Frager and Patrias, *Discounted Labour*, 24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82. For a case study on housework in Montreal's working-class neighbourhoods that supports Frager and Patrias' claim that unemployed men did not tend to engage more with household tasks during the Depression, see Denyse Baillargeon, "Working for Pay and Managing the Household Finances," in *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*, ed. Bryan D Palmer and Joan Sangster (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2008), 223-239.

³⁶ Frager and Patrias, *Discounted Labour*, 26.

at Can Car, with the most common employment fields being domestic work, clerking, and waitressing.³⁷ For example, before coming to Can Car to work in riveting and sewing, Maisie McCallum had done housework jobs throughout the Depression and recalled that during those years, “Housework was about all girls could get unless you went to a store or something.”³⁸

For working-class women who had engaged in paid labour to support their families during the Depression, secondary and post-secondary education was often, by necessity, put on the back burner. Wakewich and Smith noted that out of 38 women they had interviewed, 25 had not completed high school, having to find work instead.³⁹ Margaret Cook, who did domestic work prior to finding an electrical job at Can Car, explained, “When we were young, there was no money. We had just come through the dirty thirties. It was a struggle to make ends meet in the 30s, and very few people had enough dough for university.” Welder Irene Fedeli recalled that most of the women she knew had completed eighth grade, but their families could not continue to afford to keep them in school during the Depression and, instead, “you worked at St. Joe’s (St. Joseph’s healthcare) for ten dollars a month, or you did housework for ten dollars a month.”⁴⁰

The educational background needed to secure a shop floor job at Can Car for aircraft production would have been far more accessible compared to the costs of university, especially as worker training and recruitment became more streamlined over the course of the war. Many of the early wartime hires at the plant had completed training courses offered at the Fort William Vocational School (Selkirk High School).⁴¹ The cost of tuition at the Vocational School was \$2,

³⁷ Smith and Wakewich, “I Was Not Afraid of Work,” 239.

³⁸ Maisie McCallum, “Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth),” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 0:39-50, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

³⁹ Smith and Wakewich, “I Was Not Afraid of Work,” 239.

⁴⁰ *Rosies of the North*, 11:06-11:30.

⁴¹ Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” 1:57-2:31. She also “Plant to Open for Plane Building – Two Distinct Types of Airship Ordered For Production Here,” *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* (hereafter *FWDTJ*) 26 January 1937.

and successful candidates could graduate as early as two or three months.⁴² The training was comprehensive as Nina Godecki remembered, “We learned how to use a hammer and how to use a punch, everything to do with riveting, the riveting gun and how to saw. You had to know everything.”⁴³

After Can Car began production of Curtiss Helldivers, the Fort William Vocational School ramped up recruiting efforts for “War Emergency” classes. In January 1942, the school set a goal of enrolling 100 new trainees weekly and entry requirements were made even more accessible. The elementary training required to find a job at the Can Car plant was given free of charge. As the *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* reported, substance allowances of \$9 weekly were offered to single workers in training and \$12 weekly to those married with dependents. Applicants were assured that “educational qualifications are not so important for entry to the training classes...” and otherwise, requirements for enrolment were to be in good health and at least 16 years old for men or 18 years old for women.⁴⁴ However, it was not unheard of for women to enroll at the vocational school and find work at Can Car while still younger than 18.⁴⁵ By mid-1943, the War Emergency Training Program was established at the plant itself and paid

Prepare For Production of Airplanes at Plant – Despite Difficulty in Getting Machinery, Progress Made at Local Works, *FWDTJ*, 27 May 1937.

“Fort William Now Plane-Manufacturing Centre – Plant Here is Made Hub of New Aviation Branch of Canadian Foundry Co.,” *FWDTJ*, 18 December 1937.

⁴² Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 58.

⁴³ Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” 3:37-3:48.

⁴⁴ “100 Trainees Week Needed for Aircraft,” *FWDTJ*, 29 January 1942.

⁴⁵ Brigden, “Joan Brigden – Part 1” 0:33-43. See also Dorothy Hurley to Kelly Saxberg, April 13, 1998; Margaret Nixon to Kelly Saxberg, July 2, 1998. (Dorothy Hurley started training at the vocational school at age 17 and Margaret Nixon started working at the plant at age 16.) Margaret’s married name is Cook.

training consisted of only seven days of general mechanical skills, plus three days of department-specific training.⁴⁶

While most women and men hired at Can Car during the war did not have previous work experience in a factory setting, much less aircraft assembly,⁴⁷ their existing skills from previous jobs and housework adapted well. Many women remembered learning how to use tools before coming to Can Car by working on household repairs and vehicles, and some had been taught more specialized skills like welding by friends or family.⁴⁸ Margaret Cook, who would begin working in the electrical department at Can Car age 16 found that her hobbies and interests aligned well with her job, saying, “I never had nice, clean fingernails like the other girls... I was always a tomboy. I was more likely to strip a carburetor than bake cookies.”⁴⁹ Those who lived and worked on family farms were usually among the most well-equipped to handle work in an industrial setting, as Wakewich and Smith note,

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.⁵⁰

Work attire did not differ drastically between farm and factory either. Rhoda McKay, whose family kept a farm near Russell, Manitoba, before she found inspection work at Can Car

⁴⁶ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 58-59. See also Daun Nalezty. “Daun Nalezty (nee Kannegiesse),” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, video, 0:36-0:53, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

⁴⁷ Leslie Roberts, *Canada's War in the Air* (Montreal, QC: Alvah M. Beatty, 1943), 57.

⁴⁸ Smith and Wakewich, “I Was Not Afraid of Work,” 240

⁴⁹ Rosies of the North, *Chronicle-Journal*, 10 September 1998.

⁵⁰ Pamela Wakewich, Helen Smith, and Jeanette Lynes, “Women’s Wartime Work and Identities,” in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women’s History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O’Rourke (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 413. The Rosies of the North film also emphasizes the transferable nature of women’s skills in traditional occupations to factory work. See *Rosies of the North*, 14:52-15:36.

remarked, “Of course, wearing overalls and everything like that came natural to me because that’s what we wore on the farm all the time.”⁵¹

Given the difficult economic position many working-class families felt at the Lakehead and throughout Canada, the outbreak of war and ramping up of wartime industries offered a welcome expansion of employment and higher earning opportunities. Can Car fitter Ada Dlholy⁵² and sheet metal worker Claudine Kovac⁵³ recalled “the relief and jubilation when the war began, and local manufacturing plants stepped up production, bringing prosperity to the depressed area.”⁵⁴ Women’s employment in wartime industries like Can Car represented an unprecedented chance to bring in higher wages compared to the earnings from domestic and service jobs often worked during the Depression.

Financial considerations were the primary reason for most Canadian women to pursue paid labour during the Second World War. A March 1943 survey of women working in war industries in Toronto, Ontario, found that the majority of respondents, 59%, indicated their decision to enter the workforce was informed by financial considerations. Personal reasons followed at 32%, while 9% answered patriotism.⁵⁵ The financial aspect was an even more significant motivator for working mothers. Another study conducted by the National Selective Service (NSS) on Canadian working women who were married and had children found that two-

⁵¹ Rhoda McKay, “Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 2,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 10:54-11:13, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

⁵² Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section S, Card #737. Note: Ada’s maiden name was Sylvester.

⁵³ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section P, Card #133. Note: Claudine’s maiden name was Perrin.

⁵⁴ Stacey Barker, Krista Cooke, and Molly McCullough, *Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914-1945* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2021), 164.

⁵⁵ See Jeff Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 156-157.

thirds of respondents indicated their main reason for entering the workforce was to supplement the family income.⁵⁶

The Rosies of the North highlighted the important role higher wages played in their decision to come to Can Car and their ability to better support themselves and their families, especially after struggling financially in the 1930s. Before riveting at Can Car, Nina Godecki began working during the Depression at 13 years old doing domestic cleaning with her mother.⁵⁷ Godecki's family, including four other siblings, largely depended on a \$50 per month widow's allowance and she remembered her mother shedding tears of joy when she brought home her first paycheque of \$67 from Can Car.⁵⁸ Ada Dholucky had to leave school after grade nine to work as a babysitter and contribute to her household of eight children, with three brothers in the military. Finding work at Can Car, Dholucky also used her first paycheque to treat her mother and bought her a washing machine, so they would not have to do laundry on the washboard anymore.⁵⁹ After her family could no longer afford to look after her, Iris left her farm in Saskatchewan in Grade 11 and found a waitressing job in Winnipeg. At 17 years old, she learned of the opportunities at Can Car and hopped on a train bound for Fort William with twenty-one other women looking for work. She thought at the time, "Well, there is work there, and it is better paying, so I am going ...we were going to make better money than we did before. At least we'd have a job. We were quite happy."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See "Biographies: Nina Godecki (nee Harney)," *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/biographies/>.

⁵⁸ Godecki and Riddoch, "Nina & Mary – Part 2," 15:26-15:43.

⁵⁹ Barker, Cooke, and McCullough, *Material Traces of War*, 166.

⁶⁰ Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith, "The Politics of 'Selective' Memory: Re-Visioning Canadian Women's Wartime Work in the Public Record," *Oral History* 34, no. 2 (2006): 60.

Towards the end of the war, the Can Car plant in Fort William attracted hundreds more women workers from the Prairie provinces. One of these women, Marta, was the sole breadwinner for herself and two siblings after both of her parents passed away within a decade of immigrating from Poland to their Saskatchewan farm. Marta left her job as a seamstress to come to work at Can Car so she could better support her sister in nursing school and her brother in the Navy. Marta emphasized the sense of relief she felt finding a better-paying job at Can Car, recalling,

Had it not been for this war, there would have been an awful lot of people that would not have got out of all those little (Prairie) farms... and there was an awful lot of hardships at that time because there was no work and then all of a sudden all this opened up for them and it was really, really a great thing... In my memory, I thought I was a millionaire.⁶¹

Also from the Prairies, Margaret Gandier thought the degree of financial independence offered by the salaries earned at Can Car was particularly impactful on mothers, noting that,

For a lot of women, it was the first time that they ever had any money of their own, and I'm speaking of some of the older women, who had children at home... It was the first time they ever had money and maybe that opened their eyes a little bit.⁶²

Through their employment at Can Car, some Rosies were also better able to invest in themselves and achieve greater financial independence during the war or make long-run investments. Can Car riveter and welder Frozina Dysievick⁶³ explained that with war industry wages, women workers “were able to get more, invest more. Some of them even got so far as to have a car if they earned enough which before they never dreamed of because they never earned

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Margaret Gandier, “Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) – Part 1,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 12:41-13:00, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

⁶³ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section D, Card #377. (Dysievick also went by Rose or Rosie. See “Frozina ‘Rosie’ Dysievick (Sportak),” *Thunder Bay News*, December 21, 2023, Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://www.tbnewswatch.com/obituaries/frozina-rosie-dysievick-sportak-8015961>.)

enough.”⁶⁴ Some women, like Olga, remembered their work at Can Car as a launching pad to achieve financial independence and leave their family homes in pursuit of their own ambitions. Olga explained that her choice to work at Can Car was because “it was a wonderful moneymaking job, and that was where the big difference came. Women suddenly realized they could make money on their own. They didn't have to depend on a husband, or if they're still at home, (on) their father...”⁶⁵ Olga was able to save up enough money through her work at Can Car to move to London, Ontario, since her parents were charging her rent to stay at home and refused to pay for her to attend university to become a teacher.

Although financial considerations were the primary cause for women to engage in wartime work in Canada, and the workforce Can Car was no exception, this is not to suggest that a desire to support the war effort did not also weigh heavily on workers' minds, especially since the plant was tasked with supplying aircraft for military use. For some of Can Car's employees, like Pauline, it felt conflicting to be making higher wages during the war. She felt a sense of guilt that “half the citizens are dying, while half are making money.”⁶⁶ Liddy Kondakow emphasized how deeply she felt the work being done at Can Car was connected to the war effort as a whole, because “My brother was in the Army, and I felt that if they're working, they (workers at Can Car) should put their effort in to help out the boys. Even if you haven't got a brother or something, but our boys are there. They're fighting for our freedom.”⁶⁷ Similarly, Laretta Breckon, who had two brothers in the navy and another in the army, hoped that her work at Can

⁶⁴ Barker, Cooke, and McCullough, *Material Traces of War*, 166.

⁶⁵ Wakewich and Smith, “The Politics of ‘Selective’ Memory,” 62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁷ Ledwiga Kondakow, “Ledwiga ‘Liddy’ Kondakow (nee Kwiatkowski) – Part 1,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 8:54-9:20, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

Car would help bring the war to an end sooner and prevent further loss of life. Reflecting on her wartime work, she expressed,

You feel pretty good to be a part of (Can Car) especially when you wanted your brothers home. I felt we did something although I never had any animosity towards the people. I felt like we were working for them too. It's too bad so many people died because of (the war).⁶⁸

During the Second World War, it would have been unlikely for a Can Car employee not to personally know someone in military service, even if none of their immediate family members or friends outside of work enlisted. Between 1939 and 1945, over 2,000 employees from Can Car in Fort William enlisted in the military,⁶⁹ including women, who were represented in all three branches of the Canadian Armed Forces.⁷⁰ The Rosies' sense of wartime patriotism was less about abstract nationalism and more of an immediate concern about bringing their friends, family, or co-workers fighting in the war safely home.⁷¹ The level of care Can Car's employees had for the outcome of the war and their peers in service certainly showed itself through volunteer efforts made at the plant. For two Saturdays in August 1941, employees worked for free to build and donate two Hawker Hurricanes to the Wings of Britain campaign. The two planes were named in honour of former Can Car employees Gary Madore and Philip Taylor, who

⁶⁸ Wakewich and Smith, "The Politics of 'Selective' Memory," 65-66.

See also Laretta Breckon pictured riveting in a Can Car advertisement, where the photo caption mentions her brothers in the military: Canadian Car and Foundry Co. Limited, "Where Men and Women Work Wartime Miracles," advertisement.

⁶⁹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 84.

⁷⁰ Examples of women's employee cards indicating military status are Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC): Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section B, Card #261. Section E, Card #36. Section Z, Card #51; Women's Royal Canadian Navy Service (WRENS): Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section A, Card #64. Section C, Card #39, Section F, Card #65; Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Women's Division: Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #228. Section M, Card #21, Section P, Card #125. For media coverage on Fort William women's enlistment by 1943, see "Canadian Women 'Speeding the Victory' On All Fronts – Ft William's Women Set Record on Home Front in Factories and Enlistments, *FWDTJ*, 18 December 1943.

⁷¹ Wakewich and Smith, "The Politics of 'Selective' Memory," 65.

served in the war as a Pilot and an Air Gunner, respectively, and were both killed in action. After a combined 70,328 man-hours to build the aircraft, the Gary Madore was christened by Maisie McCallum and the Philip Taylor by Peggy Hampton,⁷² and an air show was put on at the Fort William Municipal Airport on 19 August 1941, spectated by a crowd of ten thousand.⁷³ Although the fate of these exact planes is unknown, they were part of a batch of 100 Hurricanes sent to Britain and other Allied Forces, including, notably, to the Soviet Union, and some took part in the Dieppe Raid on 19 August 1942.⁷⁴

Can Car employees kept close tabs on their co-workers serving in the military and news of the war's developments through stories in the plant's newspaper, *Aircrafter*. Half-page spreads listing the names of former employees in the Armed Forces could be found across more than a dozen of the 1944 issues of the paper.⁷⁵ Columns and department bulletins regularly made announcements about individuals enlisting, gave updates on those fighting overseas, and covered stories of servicepeople returning to the plant for a visit. In the third issue of the paper in 1944, an article shared the news that a former employee from sub-assembly, Sgt. Air Gunner Ernest "Bud" Brewer of the RCAF, was found to be missing in action. The story emphasized Brewer's personal connections at Can Car, noting, "While at the plant he was well known in hockey and sports circles... It is with deep regret that his many friends at the plant heard the news of his being missing and sincerely hope he may be safe somewhere over the channel."⁷⁶ Another short

⁷² McCallum, "Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth)," 3:26-4:31.

⁷³ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 68.

⁷⁴ David D. Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society *Papers and Records* 22 (1994): 64-65.

⁷⁵ See "With H.M. Canadian Forces," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944 (Volume 1, Issue 2) to July 29, 1944 (Volume 1, Issue 13). The list of names beginning with "A" was most likely printed in Volume 1, Issue 1 of the *Aircrafter* (currently missing from public archival collections). The 29 July 1944 issue includes a list of employees who had been rehired after military service.

⁷⁶ "Missing in Action," *Aircrafter*, 20 May 1944, 7. Brewer was taken prisoner of war at Stalag Luft III in Germany for 14 months until the war's end. See Royal Canadian Legion Manitoba & Northwestern Ontario Command,

story titled “Once Built Planes – Now Jumps From Them” was written about paratrooper Alfred Scavarelli, who, before enlisting, worked in the Wings Department at Can Car. Scavarelli stopped by the plant for a visit before leaving to go overseas and, like Brewer, his relationships within the workforce were highlighted in the *Aircrafter*’s reporting, which read Scavarelli “is a cousin of Mr. Nels Scavarelli, Chief Timekeeper at the plant... His many good friends in the plant wish him good luck and good hunting.”⁷⁷ The *Aircrafter* also documented the extent of the home front efforts being conducted through the plant and encouraged outside of work. The staff at Can Car consistently exceeded investment goals in Victory Bond Drives and participated in a variety of home front efforts on and off the job. These efforts, with an emphasis on women’s contributions, will be discussed in greater detail in the third chapter of this paper.

The ultimate scale of wartime employment at Can Car in Fort William far exceeded the benchmark predicted at the time of its reopening. When staffing for aircraft production began in January 1937, employment was “expected to number more than 200 with the possibility that the payroll will ultimately reach 540.”⁷⁸ Despite some attempts at selling, the company retained ownership of the Fort William plant during the full length of its sixteen-year closure. During the Depression, rarely more than a dozen people were employed to look after security and maintenance, especially keeping the boiler room running in the winter. The live-in supervisor during these years, John Merlin, made a home with his family on the third floor of the administration building and was tasked with selling the unused machinery and furnishings or shipping them to other Can Car-owned facilities.⁷⁹ Between the company having to spend

Military Service Recognition Book, vol. 8 (Winnipeg: The Royal Canadian Legion, 2017), 49, http://mbnwo.ca/forms/msrb_vol8.pdf.

⁷⁷ “Once Built Planes – Now Jumps From Them,” *Aircrafter*, 26 August 1944, 3.

⁷⁸ “Plant to Open for Plane Building – Two Distinct Types of Airship Ordered For Production Here,” *FWD TJ*, 26 January 1937.

⁷⁹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 23.

\$400,000 in taxes and \$821,000 on infrastructure upkeep and salaries for the skeleton crew, the buildings as well as the grounds were used for various side functions to bring in money, including repossessed car storage in the “C” Bay, laundry in the basement and farm animal grazing in open field spaces.⁸⁰ Can Car management could not have predicted the eventual scale that would become of the Second World War, but they had reason to believe military aircraft might see increased use in the foreseeable future and was worth investing in if it meant re-opening the mostly abandoned Fort William plant.

While Canada’s air force during the interwar period was very modest in size and performed mostly civilian functions, in the 1930s priorities began to shift in favour of its military capabilities. Beginning in 1932, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) set plans to make national defence, particularly coastal defence, its primary objective. Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King affirmed the RCAF’s responsibility to defend Canada by air and the portion of the defence budget allocated to the RCAF tripled in 1937.⁸¹ As political and economic support for military aviation in Canada was steadily building, developments in Europe were equally beginning to raise concerns. As early as 1935, a few key Can Car officials “notably in the persons of the late W. W. Butler, its then President, Victor Dury of Montreal, (Butler’s successor), and L. A. Peto, the present Managing-Director...” estimated that the aircraft industry in Canada could primarily act as a reserve for British needs, “...because of the conviction shared by these three men that a new clash of arms with Germany was not far off.”⁸² A key aspect of Adolph Hitler’s early rearmament plans was, in fact, a substantial expansion of the German Air Force and, by extension, its aircraft industry. In 1933, two million German workers built airfields

⁸⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁸¹ Michael Hood and Tom Jenkins, *Pathway to the Stars: 100 Years of the Royal Canadian Air Force* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), 11.

⁸² Roberts, *Canada’s War in the Air*, 19.

and aircraft factories, paving the way for workers directly involved in the aircraft industry to number 16,000 by 1934 and nearly quadruple within another year.⁸³

In light of international developments in aviation and militarization, Can Car management sought out aircraft production licenses and, in November 1936, announced that if the company “receives orders for any considerable production of airplanes, it will manufacture some of them at its Fort William plant.”⁸⁴ While orders had still yet to be placed, earlier in June, Can Car acquired the rights to produce the Grumman G-23 (or GE-23, called “Goblin” in Canada), a two-seat biplane fighter from Grumman Aircraft, based out of Long Island, New York. This type of aircraft, which first flew in 1931, had been used by the United States Navy under the FF-1 designation and was known for being the first carrier-borne fighter with a retractable undercarriage.⁸⁵ According to aviation historians Jonathan Kirton and David Kemp, while the Grumman G-23 was becoming outdated by the time Can Car acquired the manufacturing rights, it was a reliable design option with features that would support building a skilled workforce that otherwise had minimal previous experience with aircraft assembly.⁸⁶ Grumman Aircraft also supplied and registered a demonstrator G-23 under the ownership of Howard Klein, who conducted a sales tour across Central America along with fellow Can Car test pilot George Adye beginning 17 March 1937.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the Second World War, 1933-41* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 25.

⁸⁴ “Confirm Report Plant to Reopen – ‘Logical Location’ Company Heads Say,” *FWD TJ*, 14 November 1936.

⁸⁵ Kemp, “Can-Car: The Aviation Years,” 61.

⁸⁶ David D. Kemp, “Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory,” *The Beaver* (June-July 1992): 24; Jonathan G. Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William on the Eve of World War II* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2009), 14; and Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 32. The Grumman Aircraft ceased production of FF-1s/G-23s by 1937.

⁸⁷ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 13-14.

As the sales tour sought out potential clients, the company reportedly spent over a million dollars to outfit the Fort William plant for aircraft production.⁸⁸ Hiring the workforce began in January 1937, and by the early summer, a staff of 25 men were busy “conditioning the plant, setting up new equipment and building up the various working units of the new industry...”⁸⁹ In order to conduct test flights, Can Car also purchased the local airport, Bishopsfield, in May 1937 and obtained a private airport license just over a year later.⁹⁰ The plant officially re-opened on 3 August with a total staff of 114 and assembly of the first Grumman G-23s began in October.⁹¹ By the end of the year, staff numbered around 200 and predictions for further growth were very optimistic. On his first visit to the Fort William plant, Can Car President Victor Drury announced that the company was planning “to make Fort William the hub of all aviation division activities and to build it into a large concern as air transportation in Canada moves inevitably forward.” It was reported that with its new machinery and upgrades, the Fort William plant was, at the time, in a position to produce more than 200 aircraft per year.⁹²

By the summer of 1938, the Fort William plant was producing completed planes at a rate of at least three per week.⁹³ During Grumman Goblin production, only a handful of women were employed at Can Car in traditionally female-occupied fields of work. The first woman to be hired at the plant after re-opening was Margaret “Peggy” Hampton on 15 January 1937.⁹⁴ She began working as a secretary for the original Plant Manager, Charles “Chuck” Hunter,⁹⁵ and by

⁸⁸ Kemp, “Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory,” 24.

⁸⁹ Prepare For Production of Airplanes at Plant – Despite Difficulty in Getting Machinery, Progress Made at Local Works, *FWDTJ*, May 27, 1937.

⁹⁰ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 32.

⁹¹ See *Family Day Souvenir Program* (Fort William: Canadian Car & Foundry Co. Ltd. Aircraft Division, 1944) 4 and Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 9.

⁹² “Fort William Now Plane-Manufacturing Centre – Plant Here is Made Hub of New Aviation Branch of Canadian Foundry Co.,” *FWDTJ*, December 18, 1937.

⁹³ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 36.

⁹⁴ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section H, Card #44.

⁹⁵ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 31.

the end of the war in 1945, Hampton was secretary to V. J. “Shorty” Hatton, Chief Inspector at the Fort William plant.⁹⁶ She continued to be employed in the offices after the war, until 9 March 1949.⁹⁷ Before the 1940s, women were confined to the offices working as clerks and secretaries, aside from a few exceptions.⁹⁸ While the shop floor remained exclusively male until mid-1939,⁹⁹ the first women to work directly in aircraft production were nine fabric workers hired in January 1938 to sew the planes’ wings and tails.¹⁰⁰ Sewing would remain an all-female department throughout the Second World War.¹⁰¹

Shortly after the sewing department was established, the total workforce at the plant was approaching 300, and on 3 February 1938, the first completed Goblin took part in two fifteen-minute test flights conducted by Captain Adye.¹⁰² Reported on extensively by local media, after the runway at Bishopsfield was cleared of snow and final inspections were made to the aircraft, Adye took flight by 4:20 pm. Employees were only permitted on-site at the airfield, but Adye ensured the public would be able to catch a glimpse of the flights. He flew above the Can Car plant just as workers were clocking out for the day and continued over the city of Fort William around 5 o’clock. According to the *Fort William Daily Times-Journal*, the Goblin was put through a series of stunts, including loops, stalls and barrel rolls, with

One of the most thrilling stunts which startled onlookers by its daring was when Captain Adye brought the machine down with a roar over the flying field. After skimming the

⁹⁶ “Chief Inspector and Secretary,” *Aircrafter*, 14 April 1945, 1.

⁹⁷ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section “H,” Card #44.

⁹⁸ Kemp, “Can-Car: The Aviation Years,” 68 and Kemp, “Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory,” 32.

⁹⁹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 84.

¹⁰⁰ Wakewich, Smith, and Lynes, “Women’s Wartime Work and Identities,” 410-411. For employee cards showing women being hired in early 1938 in the “covering department,” see Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section H, Card #448 and Section K, Card #86.

¹⁰¹ McCallum, “Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth),” 2:44-2:51.

¹⁰² Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 36.

field, not more than 25 feet off the ground, he gave her the gun and shot straight upwards and completed the climb with a beautiful loop.¹⁰³

This first plane, out of a total of fifty-two produced in Fort William, was the only one purchased directly by the Nicaraguan government. It was delivered in June 1938 and used by the Nicaraguan Air Force until 1942.¹⁰⁴

Following an order from the Japanese Imperial Navy for one aircraft, an additional fifty G-23s were ordered in July 1937, seemingly by the government of Turkey. The fifty-second and final Goblin was fully assembled by 26 May 1938.¹⁰⁵ However, this last order was destined for use by the Spanish Republican Air Force in the Spanish Civil War, and representatives of the Spanish Nationalists blew the whistle on the deception. At the time, the United States had an armaments trade embargo in place, and since the G-23s were made using American components, the shipping process to Spain was intercepted. Sixteen planes were successfully returned to Canada, and no charges were laid against the company for the mishap. One of the returned planes was used to replace the demonstrator aircraft that had since been lost during the Central American sales tour. On 29 September 1937, during the Nicaraguan leg of the tour, the original demonstrator G-23 unexpectedly ran out of fuel while George Adye was flying near San Juan Del Norte. The plane sunk into the sea and Adye was successfully rescued.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ “First Local Made Plane Thrills in Test Flight: Canadian Car Works Product Is Put Through Evolutions by Capt. Adye,” *FWDTJ*, February 4, 1938.

¹⁰⁴ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 32-33. By a happy accident, it also happens to be the only surviving aircraft of its kind. Having spotted the plane in Managua at the Zoltian Airfield’s scrapyard in 1961, American pilot J. R. Sirmons purchased and restored it to flying condition. After touring the plane from Nicaragua to the United States, Sirmons presented it to Grumman officials in New York, who completed restoration work and refurbished the aircraft to the American FF-1 designation. In June 1967, the aircraft was acquired by the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Florida, where it can still be found on display today. See “‘Fifi’ Has Early Ties to Museum,” *National Naval Aviation Museum*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://navalaviationmuseum.org/fifi-has-early-ties-to-museum/>.

¹⁰⁵ *Family Day Souvenir Program*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 30.

Still looking to sell the remaining aircraft, Can Car approached the RCAF in September 1938, and testing began in March of the following year. In the meantime, Can Car had struck a deal to send one of the G-23s to Mexico for the government to consider licensing and producing the design. Mexican officials ultimately decided against obtaining a license to manufacture G-23s, and the lone plane was then re-sold to the Nicaraguan Air Force. The RCAF reports on the G-23 were generally positive, although funding negotiations persisted until July 1940, when the sale had been made official through the Defense Purchasing Board.¹⁰⁷ The remaining fifteen Goblins, including the demonstrator plane, were used by RCAF Squadron No. 118 for defence on the East Coast of Canada.¹⁰⁸ Just as the case was in Nicaragua, these planes were phased out by 1942.¹⁰⁹ As for the fate of the thirty-four G-23s used in the Spanish Civil War, it is estimated that eleven survived and were captured by the Spanish National government. They were later used in Spanish Morocco until all had been scrapped by 1955.¹¹⁰

During these first few years of aircraft production, the Can Car plant in Fort William also worked to establish its engineering department by employing experienced aeronautical engineers who could create and potentially oversee the manufacture of original designs in-house. The first of these projects was the development of the Gregor FDB-1 Fighter Dive Bomber, the first fighter designed in Canada by Chief Aeronautical Engineer Michael Gregor, beginning 9 April 1938.¹¹¹ By the winter, a prototype for the Gregor Fighter was completed and brought to Bishopscfield Airport for system testing. However, the plane could not take to the air because Can

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 47-49.

¹⁰⁸ Allan Botting, *Grumman Goblin: World War Two Colour Schemes By Allan Botting*, November 1965, illustration, Canadian Aviation Historical Society. See also Harold A. Skaarup, "RCAF Aviation History: RCAF Squadrons at Home during the Second World War," *SilverHawkAuthor*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://www.silverhawkauthor.com/post/rcaf-aviation-history-rcaf-squadrons-at-home-during-the-second-world-war>.

¹⁰⁹ Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," 61.

¹¹⁰ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 44-46.

¹¹¹ *Family Day Souvenir Program*, 4.

Car was still awaiting certification approval from the Department of Transportation. A snowstorm had also struck the Lakehead in mid-February 1939, and the modest facilities at Bishopfield could not accommodate any flying for the remainder of the season.¹¹² Instead, the prototype was shipped to Saint Hubert Airport, near the Can Car headquarters in Montreal, Quebec, and on 27 February the Certificate of Registration for the FDB-1 was approved. Two test flights were conducted in March with unfortunate results. During the first test flight on 3 March the undercarriage collapsed on the right side of the plane and damaged the wing. After being repaired, the second test flight on 31 March also ended in a mishap when control was lost during take-off, and the plane slid into a snowbank and flipped over.¹¹³ Later in May 1939 the RCAF conducted Certificate of Airworthiness tests on the Gregor Fighter. While no orders were made by the RCAF following the test flights, its report concluded promisingly that “As a prototype, it is considered that the Gregor Aircraft is a most successful effort,” and a few modifications were listed.¹¹⁴ If the problems that affected the Gregor Fighter had been fixed, it had the potential to be “one of the most advanced biplane fighters ever built...”¹¹⁵ However, Michael Gregor left Can Car shortly after the RCAF test flights, and the Gregor Fighter prototype was put into storage at Cartierville Airport in Montreal, where it was eventually destroyed by a fire in 1945.¹¹⁶

Michael Gregor’s successor, Elsie MacGill, marked an early breakthrough in women’s employment at the plant when she accepted the position of Chief Aeronautical Engineer in July

¹¹² Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 72-77.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 86-89.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹⁵ Kemp, “Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory,” 25.

¹¹⁶ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 43 and Kemp, “Can-Car: The Aviation Years,” 64.

1938.¹¹⁷ Elsie MacGill was the first woman in North America to hold the position of Chief Aeronautical Engineer, adding to the list of firsts achieved by women in the MacGill family. Elsie's mother, Helen MacGill, was the first woman in the British Empire to receive a bachelor's degree in music from Trinity College in 1886 and was the only woman in her master's class, which she completed in 1890.¹¹⁸ Helen MacGill was a prominent advocate for women's voting and educational rights and served as the president of the Vancouver Women's Building following its construction in 1911. Helen MacGill described the decade that followed Elsie's birth in 1905, as the height of the women's movement in Vancouver.¹¹⁹ As such, Elsie and her older sister Helen Jr., born in 1903, were familiar with the feminist movement in Canada from an early age. Another first was achieved for Helen MacGill when she was appointed judge of the juvenile court of Vancouver in 1917, making her the first woman judge in British Columbia.

The education of their two daughters was a high priority for Helen and James MacGill, who had the means to send Elsie and Helen Jr. to a private girls' school, but Helen decided against it, reasoning it was more likely that they would go on to attend university if they received a public education.¹²⁰ By keeping the girls close to home, it was also possible to arrange further opportunities outside of their formal schooling. The third floor of the MacGill family home in Vancouver's West End was converted into a classroom¹²¹ where Elsie and Helen Jr. partook in a variety of studies, including piano lessons from Ada Marshall and drawing lessons from Emily

¹¹⁷ There is an overlap between Gregor and MacGill's tenures as Chief Aeronautical Engineer. It seems MacGill was hired knowing that Gregor would be leaving the following year. See Crystal Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes: The Fearless Elsie MacGill* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2014), 47.

¹¹⁸ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 11.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹²¹ Richard Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer: The Life of Elsie Gregory MacGill* (Ottawa: NRC Research Press, 2008), 26.

Carr.¹²² According to Dr. Lorna Marsden, whose grandmother was a close friend of Helen Sr., the children's lessons with Emily Carr spoke to the strong economic position and social network of the MacGill family. She believed that Emily Carr was brought on to teach the children drawing "mostly because they wanted to help Emily Carr earn a living, not because they thought their daughters had any talent."¹²³

Helen MacGill's commitment to seeing her daughters through to university was realized in 1921 when Elsie and Helen Jr., at ages 16 and 18, began post-secondary studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC).¹²⁴ In their second year of studies, Helen Jr. chose to pursue a general arts degree, and Elsie was the second woman to apply to the Faculty of Applied Science at the university.¹²⁵ However, Elsie's education at UBC was cut short when the Dean of Applied Sciences asked her to leave the program after one term, telling her he "simply did not want women in engineering studies at UBC."¹²⁶ Elsie was encouraged by her parents to continue her education in engineering at the University of Toronto (U of T). Both Helen and James MacGill were Trinity College alumni, which federated with U of T in 1904, and heard the university was the best option in Canada to study electrical engineering.¹²⁷ Elsie was accepted at the University of Toronto's School of Practical Science and was the first woman in the program to study electrical engineering, while other Canadian institutions continued to reject women from engineering disciplines well into the 1940s.¹²⁸

¹²² Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 17.

¹²³ *Rosies of the North*, 7:45-7:55.

¹²⁴ Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 43.

¹²⁵ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 21.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 47-48.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 23.

In 1927, Elsie MacGill was the first woman in Canada to graduate with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, and soon after, she accepted a junior engineer position at the Van Austen Company, located in Pontiac, Michigan. The Van Austen Company began working with aeronautics shortly after MacGill was hired and she found that her skills in electrical engineering transferred well to aviation.¹²⁹ MacGill decided to enhance her knowledge in the field by studying at the University of Michigan. In 1929, she became the first woman in North America to graduate with a master's degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the University of Michigan, although she received her degree from a hospital bed. Just before graduation, Elsie began to experience flu-like symptoms and woke up one morning to find she could not move her legs. She was diagnosed with polio at the University of Michigan Hospital, and it was predicted that she would have to use a wheelchair for the rest of her life.¹³⁰ Using two metal canes for support, she taught herself to walk again and sold her wheelchair in 1932.¹³¹ MacGill's stepdaughter, Ann Soulsby, described Elsie's disability as something that did not "pervade her attitude to life" and agreed with a comment made years later at MacGill's funeral service that she had a way of making her physical disability "the least important thing about her."¹³²

Taking some time to recover, MacGill continued to independently study and write about aeronautical engineering. After three years, she was accepted into doctoral studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), receiving financial support from her parents, which she described as a "loan."¹³³ MacGill did not ultimately complete her doctorate degree at MIT, as she received an opportunity in 1934 to work at Fairchild Aircraft Limited in Longueuil,

¹²⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹³⁰ Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 70-71.

¹³¹ Ibid., 81.

¹³² Ann Soulsby, "Ann Soulsby Interview," interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 10:34-11:17, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

¹³³ Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 82.

Quebec, where she specialized in aerodynamics and aircraft stress testing.¹³⁴ Luckily, the aircraft industry did not suffer tremendously during the Depression,¹³⁵ and Fairchild was the only Canadian aircraft company in a position to produce new aircraft designs.¹³⁶ Elsie MacGill had built a strong professional network and was encouraged by one of her close colleagues, E. J. Soulsby, to consider joining him at Can Car in Fort William.¹³⁷ By September 1939, Soulsby was the acting Works Manager of the plant and had previously been Assistant Manager since the plant's re-opening.¹³⁸ She accepted the job of Chief Aeronautical Engineer at Can Car, with an impressive annual salary of \$4,200, especially considering she had just turned down a job with the Civil Aviation Branch, which offered her a salary of \$2,700 per year.¹³⁹ MacGill was quickly recognized in local and national circles for her contributions to engineering. On 10 June 1942, she was elected Chairman of the Lakehead branch of the Engineering Institute of Canada.¹⁴⁰ Later that winter, she was named one of twenty "outstanding women" in Canada, selected by Canadian women news editors through a survey created by the Women's Committee of International Relations.¹⁴¹

One of MacGill's first major projects at Can Car was to continue the development of original aircraft designs. Her contribution was the Maple Leaf II, considered to be the world's first aircraft designed and tested by a woman.¹⁴² By late 1938, the Mexican government

¹³⁴ Pamela Wakewich, "The Queen of the Hurricanes": Elsie Gregory MacGill, Aeronautical Engineer and Women's Advocate," in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O'Rourke (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 396.

¹³⁵ Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 86.

¹³⁶ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 42.

¹³⁷ Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 101.

¹³⁸ "David Boyd Promoted, Leaving City," *FWDTJ*, 23 September 1939.

¹³⁹ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 46.

¹⁴⁰ Miss MacGill Heads Engineers' Institute: Elected Chairmen at Meeting Last Night," *Port Arthur News-Chronicle*, 11 June 1942.

¹⁴¹ "Col. Elizabeth Smellie And Elizabeth MacGill Outstanding Canadians," *FWDTJ*, 7 November 1942.

¹⁴² Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer*, 120.

expressed interest in a trainer aircraft with an altitude limit which had been met by the specifications of the Maple Leaf I, another example of Can Car's early aircraft design projects, which first flew 18 April 1938.¹⁴³ In the spring of 1937, Can Car hired Leland Stamford Wallace and by June, acquired the manufacturing rights of his Wallace Trainer, which was renamed the Maple Leaf I. The trainer had piqued some interest in Nicaragua, and a Maple Leaf I prototype was soon created. The first test flight, held on 18 April 1938, went very poorly and Captain George Adye was nearly killed in the process.¹⁴⁴ Just a year after the rights to manufacture the Maple Leaf I were acquired, the project was cancelled, Wallace left Can Car, and the prototype was dismantled at the plant.



Figure 5. Elsie MacGill and E.J. Soulsby in front of a Maple Leaf II trainer. 28 November 1939. Elsie Gregory MacGill Fonds, Library and Archives Canada. R4349-0-6-E, MG31-K7.

¹⁴³ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 145. *Family Day Souvenir Program*, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 45.

MacGill created a completely new design for the Maple Leaf II, incorporating some of the parts that would have been used for the Maple Leaf I. The prototype for the Maple Leaf II was completed on 27 October 1939, six months to the day since the project began. MacGill advocated for close collaboration between test pilots and aircraft designers.¹⁴⁵ When the Maple Leaf II took off for its first test flight at the newly built Fort William Municipal Airport on 31 October, she rode in the front cockpit.¹⁴⁶ Although MacGill's disability prevented her from pursuing a pilot's license of her own, she made a habit of being actively involved with test flights since working at Fairchild.¹⁴⁷ The Maple Leaf II was tested by the RCAF in May 1940, and the report was positive, but if the RCAF were to consider purchasing the trainer, it would require a series of modifications.¹⁴⁸ The general consensus was that, in practice, the Maple Leaf II was too easy to maneuver for training purposes.¹⁴⁹

With a deal with the RCAF largely out of the question, the completed Maple Leaf II prototype and parts for two additional aircraft were sold to the Columbia Aircraft Corporation in Long Island, New York. Columbia Aircraft went on to sell the Maple Leaf II to the Mexican government, where a modified design was manufactured for use by the Mexican Air Force.¹⁵⁰ Although work on the Maple Leaf II was discontinued at Fort William, Elsie MacGill was set to oversee the plant's largest project during the war, the production of Hawker Hurricanes.

¹⁴⁵ "Miss Elizabeth MacGill Local Aircraft Plant Expert Addresses Engineers Tells of Test Flights," *FWD TJ*, 9 February 1940.

¹⁴⁶ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 146-149.

¹⁴⁷ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 43.

¹⁴⁸ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 152-159.

¹⁴⁹ Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," 63. See also Soulsby, "Ann Soulsby Interview," 8:39-9:09.

¹⁵⁰ Kirton, *Canadian Car & Foundry Aircraft Production at Fort William*, 160.

Chapter Two: Wartime Aircraft Production and Women's Employment at Can Car

Before the outbreak of the Second World War, consultations were already underway for the Can Car plant in Fort William to produce aircraft for Britain's Royal Air Force (RAF). In 1938, the British Air Mission assessed the potential for aircraft production across Canada and the plant was visited by RAF Marshal Sir Edward Ellington in August.¹ While there were concerns from British officials that Fort William was too remote and lacked a sufficient labour force, Member of Parliament for the neighbouring City of Port Arthur and Canada's Minister of Munitions and Supply, C. D. Howe, offered the reassurance needed to secure a deal.² Can Car received its first order to construct 40 British Mark I variants of the Hawker Hurricane for the RAF before the year was up, on 5 December 1938,³ and assembly began on 13 January in the new year.⁴

The British-designed Hawker Hurricane fighter, which first flew on 4 November 1935, was an ideal choice for the impending war in that it was cost-effective and easy to repair while boasting eight mounted machine guns and a top speed of 330 miles per hour.⁵ Initially, the planes were built using almost all British materials, and after Britain declared war against Germany on 3 September 1939, overseas shortages and shipping delays caused interruptions in production at Can Car until 1941, when planes could be shipped out every so often as airframes, without

¹ David D. Kemp, "Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory," *The Beaver* (June-July 1992): 26.

² Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, "'I Was Not Afraid of Work': Female War Plant Employees and Their Work Environment," in *Canadian Environments: Essays in Culture, Politics, and History*, ed. Robert C. Thomsen and Nanette Hale (Brussels: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes, 2005), 221.

³ Gordon Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History, 1912-1992* (Thunder Bay: Bombardier Inc., 1995), 54.

⁴ *Family Day Souvenir Program*, 4.

⁵ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 53.

engines installed.⁶ Margaret Cook remembered how supply disruptions affected her and her colleagues in the electrical department, as

One of the reasons things would be quiet was supply, the German Submarines worked hard at keeping the war materials from reaching Canada. One took out our entire supply of Bakelite components for about 30 aircraft, so we had to wait for more to come before we could assemble anything.⁷

Stalls on production were alleviated once engines could be sourced from American and Canadian suppliers. Otherwise, the Fort William plant had to process their own materials like aluminum sheeting and steel tubing.⁸

The plant's first Hawker Hurricane was completed and ready for a test flight piloted by V. J. "Shorty" Hatton on 9 January 1940, at Bishopsfield Airport.⁹ After the success of the initial order, the contract was renewed, and an additional 120 Mark I Hurricanes were constructed at Can Car. From these orders, at least 20 aircraft were shipped overseas in time to participate in the Battle of Britain from August to September 1940, and others were distributed throughout British Forces according to need.¹⁰ As the Battle of Britain took place, the Fort William plant was contributing 10% of all service planes produced in North America.¹¹ Future Hurricane orders at Can Car were also made as needs arose and, at most, 340 aircraft were requested at a single time.¹² After the first orders, Mark I Hawker Hurricanes had their fair share of testing in combat, and the RAF advised Can Car to switch to constructing Mark II variants, which incorporated a

⁶ Kemp, "Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory," 26.

⁷ Margaret Nixon to Kelly Saxberg, 2 July 1998.

⁸ David D. Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records* 22 (1994): 64.

⁹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 56.

¹⁰ Kemp, "Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory," 29.

¹¹ "Works Manager Tells of Development of Aircraft Production at Local Plant," *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* (hereafter *FWD TJ*), 18 December 1943.

¹² Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 58.

series of new design features, including 12 mounted machine guns, over the original 8.¹³ Hurricane production at the plant peaked in 1942, by which time nearly 700 aircraft had been produced at an output rate of 15 completed planes per week.¹⁴ Due to the piecemeal nature of Hurricane orders, a weekly output limit of 15 had actually been imposed at the plant. Uninhibited, the workforce was able to achieve outputs of up to 25 aircraft a week as early as April 1941.¹⁵ From start to finish, one Hawker Hurricane required 12,000 manhours to assemble and inspect its 60,000 individual parts.¹⁶



Figure 6. Spectators gather around a Hawker Hurricane on the airfield in Fort William. Historical Aircraft Photographs, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/image-gallery/>.

Following peak production, the majority of Hawker Hurricanes built at Can Car were Canadian Mark X, XI and XII, some of which were retained by Canadian forces. 30 Hurricane

¹³ “Local Plane Plant Best in Canada, Kiwanis Told,” *FWDTJ*, 13 February 1942.

¹⁴ Kemp, “Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory,” 28.

¹⁵ Leslie Roberts, *Canada’s War in the Air* (Montreal, QC: Alvah M. Beatty, 1943), 29.

¹⁶ “Local Plane Plant Best in Canada, Kiwanis Told,” *FWDTJ*, 13 February 1942.

Mk Xs remained in Canada, as per request of the Canadian government, and 400 XIs were specifically destined for the RCAF.¹⁷ Over 200 Mark XI and XIs were shipped to the Soviet Union after Germany's invasion in June 1941. Still, the majority of Can Car's Hawker Hurricanes were sent to Britain and, from there, went on to serve in every theatre of the Second World War.¹⁸ By 1943, Can Car in Fort William built 1,451 Hawker Hurricanes, representing nearly half the company's total production during the war and 10% of Hurricanes produced in total.¹⁹ Can Car's Chief Aeronautical Engineer, Elsie MacGill designed a winterized version of the Hurricane, which had skis, a feature that was incorporated by at least two aircraft used by the RCAF.²⁰ Currently, there are at least five surviving Hawker Hurricanes in Canada that were built at Can Car, all of which are Mark XII variants. They can be found in the collections of the Calgary Mosquito Aircraft Society, the Reynolds-Alberta Museum in Wetaskiwin, Alberta, the Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum in Brandon, Manitoba, the Vintage Wings of Canada, in Gatineau, Quebec, and the Canada Aviation and Space Museum, in Ottawa, Ontario.²¹

The ambitious scale of Hawker Hurricane production caused employment numbers at Can Car Fort William to expand dramatically. When the first batch of 40 Hurricanes was ordered in December 1938, the total workforce numbered only 239, and by the first Hurricane test flight

¹⁷ For a more detailed distinction between Hawker Hurricane variants, see Kemp, "Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory," 28-29.

¹⁸ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 53.

¹⁹ Kemp, "Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory," 29.

²⁰ Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," 66 and Kemp, "Hurricane: Can Car Re-Tools for Victory," 28.

²¹ For more on the surviving Hurricane's see, "CCF (Hawker) Hurricane Mk.XII (s/n: 814) RCAF 5389," *Calgary Mosquito Society*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://www.calgarymosquitosociety.com/5389.htm>; Justin Cuffe, "Aviation," *Reynold's Museum*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://reynoldsmuseum.ca/aviation>; "Our Aircraft," *Commonwealth Air Training Plan Museum & RCAF WWII Memorial*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://airmuseum.ca/collections/our-aircraft/>; "The Willie McKnight Hurricane Mk XII," *Vintage Wings of Canada*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://www.vintagewings.ca/hurricane-mk-xii>; and "Hawker Hurricane XII," *Canada Aviation and Space Museum*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://ingeniumcanada.org/aviation/artifact/hawker-hurricane-xii>.

in January 1940, employment had more than doubled to 610.²² This figure doubled once again by August 1940 when the first order of Hurricanes was complete and the staff numbered 1,269.²³ By the 1941 new year, the plant employed a staff of approximately 3,500 and women represented around 10% of the total workforce.²⁴ Within only a few more months, employment during Hawker Hurricane production would peak in April at 5,966 workers, with women's representation increasing to 17%.²⁵

As women's presence at the plant grew, they began to appear more prominently on the shop floor, working jobs traditionally reserved for men. One of the first female welders, Alvina Gibson, was originally offered a job in the sewing department in June 1940. Although, not finding that the work suited her, Gibson started welding only a month later, when she and Jo Gardener took on the first two available welding jobs offered to women at the plant. Gibson found that she became skilled in welding so easily that management was encouraged to consider hiring more women as welders.²⁶ Employee cards confirm that women were regularly being hired as welders beginning in the latter half of 1940.²⁷ Irene Fedeli, who took to welding after being hired in August 1940, thought hiring women to do welding was no mistake because "women were steadier welders. It didn't go over well with the men, but we were."²⁸

Amongst the growing workforce at the Fort William plant, a highly mixed reception was had about Chief Aeronautical Engineer and overseer of Hurricane production, Elsie MacGill.

²² Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 58.

²³ *Family Day Souvenir Program*, 4.

²⁴ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁶ Long and Gibson, "Florence & Alvina – Part 1," 0:00-0:35.

²⁷ Examples of women being hired as welders in 1940: Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #247, Section E, Card #10, Section J, Card #24, Section H, Card #54.

²⁸ *Rosies of the North*, 4:49-4:55. See also Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #110. Fedeli's maiden name was De Piero. Her card shows "clerk" as her job title, but this is likely because she was first hired as a clerk and later switched to welding.

Between personal recollections, media depictions and the existing scholarship about MacGill, there has been noticeable disagreement about the nature of her interactions with lower-ranking office and shop floor workers. “Women in the plant knew Elsie and at times she interacted with them,” historian Crystal Sissons argues, “but she spent most of her time in the company of her male colleagues.”²⁹ Alex Horbrow, a production worker and later draftsman, described MacGill as someone who made efforts to engage with shop floor workers personally. He claimed that MacGill “would walk down to the shop with her cane, she had difficulty walking. She’d come to see how the men were doing with her work. She would cheer the men up, anytime she came walking through the shop; she had a lot of respect for the workers of Can Car.”³⁰

Descriptions of Elsie MacGill taking the time to personally engage with workers are inconsistent with the recollections of the women interviewed by Kelly Saxberg in the 1990s for the film *Rosies of the North*. While those who remembered MacGill tended to think very highly of her and thought it was inspirational to have a woman engineer working at the plant, they also stressed that her job status as a superior made her inaccessible to most workers. Joan Brigden felt personally inspired by MacGill and said, “She was a definite role model... certainly that we had a woman engineer and that she was so capable did give me a boost as a woman.”³¹ However, having worked both on the shop floor and in the blueprint offices, Brigden never recalled MacGill stopping to talk with the workers. Echoing Brigden’s remarks about MacGill’s achievements, Mary Riddoch believed MacGill’s position as an engineer put her above other

²⁹ Crystal Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes: The Fearless Elsie MacGill* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 2014), 65.

³⁰ Quoted in Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 65. This quote from Alex Horbrow and a few others in Sissons’ book are borrowed from Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 46. Both Sissons and Burkowski found that impressions of MacGill were very mixed and included various favourable and unfavourable comments about her from former co-workers.

³¹ Joan Brigden, “Joan Brigden – Part 2,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 6:57-7:36, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

female employees, exclaiming, “It was very interesting for a woman to do all those things at the time, you know, to be an engineer?! ...She wasn’t dealing with people... She had a bigger job than that! She was the engineer, and she had her own office. We never spoke to her!”³² Alvena Gibson, who worked on welding jobs all over the plant and became popular among co-workers in her own right,³³ never personally met Elsie MacGill and did not think it was her place to approach MacGill when the two did cross paths. Gibson explained that she was able to recognize MacGill in person, having seen her before in pictures, but the two never interacted. In Gibson’s words,

...Of course, we didn’t work next to (Elsie MacGill) because she was higher up, she was in the office. So, I never did get to work with her, but you don’t dare say anything to her because she was the boss! ...I didn’t get to talk to her at all because I had my head down all the time... but it didn’t bother me because I wasn’t involved with her.³⁴

Alice Taylor, who worked in the sewing department, recalled that MacGill “didn’t come down very often, but she always had a chip on her shoulder when she did come down.”³⁵

Unfortunately, during one of the few visits, MacGill was so displeased with the sewers’ work that she slit one of the airplane’s covers with a knife. Ultimately, there is evidence to suggest that Elsie MacGill was aware that much of the workforce at Can Car was inexperienced at aircraft assembly and took measures to ensure she would not have to spend time directing shop floor workers herself. According to Helen Smith and Pam Wakewich, in a speech addressing worker productivity and management at Can Car, MacGill emphasized,

taking into account the fact that in the main our labour would be unskilled from the standpoint of experience in building aircraft...” the parts required to build Hawker

³² Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” 17:05-17:27.

³³ “Popular Lady,” *Aircrafter*, 26 August 1944, 4 and “Miss A. Boldt Leads Popularity Contest” *Port Arthur News-Chronicle* (hereafter *PANC*), 14 August 1944.

³⁴ Long and Gibson, “Florence & Alvina – Part 1,” 8:37-9:21.

³⁵ *Rosies of the North*, 18:00-18:16.

Hurricanes were designed by her and her team “so that the parts would fit together like a child’s Meccano set.”³⁶

MacGill’s apparent lack of approachability may have also been rooted in the vastly different educational and previous career experiences between herself and the majority of women working at Can Car (detailed in the previous chapter). After making comments about how impressive it was to have a woman engineer at the plant, Mary Riddoch admitted before being hired as a riveter, she had doubts about fitting into the work environment since “I thought I was kind of stupid because we were made to feel that way. ‘You’re only a woman. You can’t do this. You can’t do that. So don’t even expect to do these things.’”³⁷ On the other hand, MacGill’s relatively high socioeconomic class and the consistent support from her family helped her to surpass educational and career barriers which otherwise disempowered working women, including women in her own field.

When Elsie MacGill accepted the position at Can Car, it did not appear that she realized she was the first woman to occupy a Chief Aeronautical Engineer role, remarking that “To be Chief Engineer at 33 years of age is not bad.” While MacGill had experienced discrimination based on her gender in both education and work opportunities, Crystal Sissons argues, her “failure to acknowledge the special position she held at this point in history indicates that she did not yet recognize discrimination in engineering.”³⁸ Much of MacGill’s later life was dedicated to feminism and bringing awareness to employment inequalities between men and women. Between 1967 and 1970, she served as a commissioner for the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and advocated for women’s independence in finance, work, and education, among

³⁶ Smith and Wakewich, “I Was Not Afraid of Work,” 236.

³⁷ Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” 17:28-17:43.

³⁸ Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 48.

other issues.³⁹ After Elsie MacGill's departure, the next woman engineer would not be hired at the Fort William plant until August 1984.⁴⁰

Regardless of individual opinions about Elsie MacGill, there was a collective sense of surprise among employees when she was dismissed and marched out of the plant gate along with Works Manager Bill Soulsby in late May 1943. On 22 May 1943, members of the Lakehead Branch of Professional Engineers, of which MacGill served as Chairman, presented her with a gift of a leather handbag, aware of the news that she was planning to move away shortly.⁴¹ Five days later, a notice appeared in local papers of Helen MacGill announcing Elsie's engagement to Bill Soulsby.⁴² The marriage was held on 4 June at Elsie's sister's home in Chicago. Newspaper announcements stated that the pair planned to make their home in Toronto, as Bill Soulsby had already accepted an Assistant Manager position at the Avro aircraft plant in the nearby neighbourhood of Malton.⁴³ In Toronto, Elsie MacGill continued her work in engineering and opened her own independent aeronautical engineering consulting office.

MacGill and Soulsby's hasty departure from Can Car, followed by the news of their marriage led to rumours that the pair had been dismissed over their romantic relationship.⁴⁴ From Mary Riddoch's recollection, "Elsie MacGill was very famous. She'd been written up in journals and everything... because she was an aeronautical engineer... She had an affair with the

³⁹ Pamela Wakewich, "The Queen of the Hurricanes': Elsie Gregory MacGill, Aeronautical Engineer and Women's Advocate," in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O'Rourke (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 400.

⁴⁰ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 90.

⁴¹ "Engineers Entertain Miss MacGill, Davies," *PANC*, 22 May 1943.

⁴² "To Marry Soon: E. M. G. MacGill," *PANC*, 27 May 1943.

⁴³ "Soulsby-MacGill," *FWDTJ*, 12 June 1943.

⁴⁴ See Richard Bourgeois-Doyle, *Her Daughter the Engineer: The Life of Elsie Gregory MacGill* (Ottawa: NRC Research Press, 2008), 181-184; Sissons, *Queen of the Hurricanes*, 68-70; and *Rosies of the North*, 34:47-37:15.

manager who was a big strapping fellow... and I think that subsequently they got married.”⁴⁵

Addressing the rumours about her father and stepmother’s relationship, Ann Soulsby stated,

As for their personal life, I seem to think they were engaged before they were fired but that again is from memory & may be wrong! In any case, David Boyd... was here in Toronto & wanting Dad to come & work with him at Avro & Elsie was interested in having her own consulting business so it was a good time to make a break. Think it was just as well we left since there was so much gossip going the rounds...⁴⁶

While the official deciding factor in Soulsby and MacGill’s departure from Can Car can only be speculated about, the theory that their romantic relationship influenced it is certainly not inconsistent with wartime trends in hiring and dismissing women.

During the early stages of the Second World War, there was a preference at Can Car to hire unmarried women, as it was feared that hiring married women, especially mothers of young children, would have negative repercussions for the family unit. Additionally, women who were found to be pregnant would have likely been dismissed from work.⁴⁷ Working mothers were put in a particularly tough spot since public childcare services were not accessible locally, and young children would have to be looked after by neighbours, family and friends or be left to their own devices.⁴⁸ The problem persisted well into the war, as in November 1943, women’s organization representatives met with Fort William Mayor Garfield Anderson to discuss opening day nurseries, especially for children of war workers. The Port Arthur Children’s Aid Society raised concerns that without locally established daycares, “some mothers engaged in war work are being victimized by individuals who are not taking proper care of the children left in their

⁴⁵ Godecki and Ridloch, “Nina & Mary Part 2”, 16:28-17:02.

⁴⁶ Ann Soulsby to Kelly Saxberg, 5 June 1998.

⁴⁷ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 85.

⁴⁸ Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries and Health during the Second World War: Nationalist Discourse, Media Representations and the Experiences of Canadian Women War Workers,” *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (April 2012): 69. See also *Rosies of the North*, 21:28-22:16.

charge.”⁴⁹ During a meeting at the Port Arthur council chambers the following January, women’s council members continued to stress the “great need for a nursery (in Fort William and Port Arthur)... owing to the many mothers who are present employed in war work.”⁵⁰ With the lack of available childcare and expectations around women’s familial roles in mind, “leaving to be married” was a relatively common reason indicated next to departure dates on women’s employee cards at Can Car during the war and in the immediate post-war.⁵¹

Women’s hiring restrictions at Can Car had to be relaxed as the war progressed, however. Due to the increasing number of Canadians leaving their jobs for military service, industries across the country began to experience a manpower shortage. On 24 March 1942, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King announced the formation of the National Selective Service (NSS) to address the national worker shortage, with the highest importance being attributed to industries which supplied the war effort most directly. As part of the Department of Labour, the NSS classified all civilian jobs by priority, and those that were involved with the war and heavy manufacturing were at the top of the list.⁵² Women were looked to in solving the manpower crisis, as King indicated that women’s employment was “the most important single feature of the program.”⁵³

Through the NSS, the Canadian Government invested in training programs and ran a campaign to attract women into war industries while putting pressure on industries to ease

⁴⁹ “Day Nurseries Proposed For War Workers’ Tots,” *FWDTJ*, 13 November 1943.

⁵⁰ “Study Need of Day Nursery,” *FWDTJ*, 29 January 1944.

⁵¹ For examples of women’s employee cards showing marriage as the reason for quitting, see Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section A, Card #9, Section A, Card #62, Section B, Card #236, Section B, Card #238, Section C, Card #18, Section F, Card #124, Section P, Card #61, Section Z, Card #53.

⁵² Jeff Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada’s Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 58.

⁵³ Ruth Roach Pierson, *“They’re Still Women After All”: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1986), 23.

gendered hiring restrictions.⁵⁴ The Women's Division of the NSS (NSSWD) was formed shortly thereafter in May 1942, and a national registry of women aged 20 to 24 was compiled from September 14 to 19 of the same year.⁵⁵ All unemployed women who were born between 1 January 1918 and 31 December 1922 were asked to register at their nearest Selective Service Office or post office in rural areas.⁵⁶ Although both married and unmarried women were included in the registry, the early twenties age range was chosen by the NSS because it was expected to produce the highest rate of single women without children available to work.⁵⁷

The NSSWD worked to sway public opinion in favour of women working in war industries, as well as convincing women themselves that it was their duty to seek out wartime employment.⁵⁸ Assistant Director of the NSS, Mrs. Rex Eaton, found that the NSS's efforts to draw women into the labour pool to address the national manpower shortage were fruitful, and women were successfully performing jobs previously held by men. In November 1943, she remarked that women, "In addition to filling the vacancies in less essential work as men are moving into war work, they are also taking work in essential industries ...many thousands are today performing men's work."⁵⁹

Following a personnel conference in December 1942, one of the NSSWD's main strategies to facilitate a mass influx of women workers into war industries was the introduction of female-specific supervisors. Women's supervisors were used to "help in fitting women into factory life, solving personnel problems and helping with the interpretation of company

⁵⁴ Jennifer Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl: Employability, Domesticity, and the Gendering of Canada's Welfare State, 1939-1947* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 25.

⁵⁵ Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, 149-150.

⁵⁶ "National Registration of Women in Canada Sept. 14 to Sept. 19, 1942," *Port Arthur News-Chronicle*, September 12, 1942.

⁵⁷ Pierson, "They're Still Women After All," 24.

⁵⁸ Smith and Wakewich, "I Was Not Afraid of Work," 233-234.

⁵⁹ "Thousands of Women Filling Men's Jobs," *FWDTJ*, 10 November 1943.

policy.”⁶⁰ Director of Women for Canada’s aircraft industry, Ethel Colwell, explained that most women working in aircraft during the war were not familiar with factory work, and other factors impacted women’s ability to seamlessly adjust to their new jobs, including having to relocate away from their hometowns, as well as domestic or childcare responsibilities. Colwell justified the use of women’s supervision because,

Whatever the case may be, there is frequently a problem of adjustment – and such problems require most careful and sympathetic treatment. For this reason, many aircraft plants have engaged, older, more experienced women as plant ‘housewives’ whose duties are to keep a watchful eye on the needs of women workers.⁶¹

Colwell thought that the initiative would, above all, protect the “glamour” of women employed in industrial settings, adding that “our women workers want to retain their beauty, their complexion, their smooth hands. They want to work in clean surroundings and have enough pep left when they go home to take in the odd dance, take care of the children or clean up the house.”⁶²

The Can Car plant in Fort William adhered to this initiative and consistently employed eight matrons to supervise the female workforce.⁶³ Described as a combination of “nurse, nanny and cop,”⁶⁴ the matrons’ front-facing duties were to support women workers’ well-being and productivity on the job, but a closer examination reveals that matrons were likely brought on to protect the personal reputations of young and single women workers. Since there were no matrons or an equivalent position specifically overseeing men, some women felt as though the matrons presented more problems than they resolved. Matrons could be found most often

⁶⁰ Smith and Wakewich, “I Was Not Afraid of Work,” 234-235.

⁶¹ “Glamor Girls Enjoy Aircraft Industry Jobs,” *FWDTJ*, 14 September 1943.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Smith and Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries,” 62.

⁶⁴ *Rosies of the North*, 22:43-22:50.

stationed in the restrooms to make sure women wouldn't use their break time to go "wandering around flirting with the guys – well what was left of them."⁶⁵ Smoking became a popular habit among the workers and another cause for getting in the matron's bad graces. Sneaking a smoke in the bathroom was seen less as a health or fire hazard, but rather a drain on productivity,⁶⁶ and punishments for being caught varied. Maisie McCallum recalled that the one time she was caught having a smoke in the bathroom, a matron only scolded her and let her off with a warning.⁶⁷ However, when Mary Riddoch was caught, she was reported to management and sent home early for the day.

Both Riddoch and fellow riveter Nina Godecki thought that by punishing and sending women workers home for minor infractions, matrons were hurting productivity overall. Godecki felt as though matrons were only hired to fill a position, and Riddoch similarly questioned, "What were they even there for? We didn't need them at all! So what if you have a cigarette in the toilet? So what?"⁶⁸ Godecki's negative opinion of the matrons was founded on another common reason women workers got into trouble with supervisors, which was having their hair uncovered while working. Godecki explained that sometimes when she was riveting in awkward angles, her hat would slide off her head, and it annoyed her that the matron would yell at her to put her hat back on. She felt that the matrons interrupted her work, as she explained, "You're busy doing the rivets. That's the important part, eh? And here (the matron) was bugging me. We'd have to stop and put my hat back on and all this. She had no idea what it was like to be underneath there, up and in between the wing."⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Smith and Wakewich, "Regulating Body Boundaries," 62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶⁷ McCallum, "Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth)," 6:22-7:17.

⁶⁸ Godecki and Riddoch, "Nina & Mary – Part 1," 4:41-6:33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5:08-5:43.

It has been suggested that the most immediate reason for matrons being hired at Can Car was to curb the overwhelming amount of romantic and sexual interactions occurring between employees.⁷⁰ Riveting supervisor Jock Elrick remembered, “They had this matron who would go through the plant and watch (so) there’d be no hanky-panky going on... You know, things could get out of hand with guys and women working together.”⁷¹ Despite matrons being designated as women’s supervisors, it was usually men making advances on women. Crossing the plant floor to go to the women’s washroom would often invite “whistling and winking” from men in different departments.⁷²

Jock Elrick met his wife, Nora, at Can Car, who worked alongside him in riveting. After they married in 1943, Nora returned to the plant but was separated from Jock and placed in the electrical department. Nora Elrick was among the many women who regularly brought lunches from home “rather than braving whistles and cat-calls from male co-workers” while waiting in line at the cafeteria.⁷³ Nora also recalled being tricked by her co-workers to fetch a tool in a different area of the plant, where she would be cat-called and whistled at while she walked. She would return to her department to find the tool wasn’t needed in the first place. Ethel Paxson, a riveter and one of two women in the spars department in the early 1940s, noticed that those new to the job were particularly susceptible to this sort of trick, which invited harassment from men.⁷⁴ She recalled that “The men had their fun at times, sending us new girls for left-handed wrenches and sky hooks – didn’t exist – until we got to know better.”⁷⁵ Electrical worker Margaret Cook

⁷⁰ Smith and Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries,” 65.

⁷¹ Stacey Barker, Krista Cooke, and Molly McCullough, *Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914-1945* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2021), 172.

⁷² Smith and Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries,” 64.

⁷³ Barker, Cooke, and McCullough, *Material Traces of War*, 172.

⁷⁴ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section D, Card #255-256. Note: Ethel’s maiden name was Dowling.

⁷⁵ Ethel Paxson to Kelly Saxberg, 15 May 1998.

likewise remembered how more experienced staff members would send “some poor-newcomer to the Tool Crib to pick up a tool that of course didn’t exist... a left handed screwdriver, or a right handed drill bit, but the butts if these jokes were almost always some one just out of the West, often from a farm or small town.”⁷⁶

Teasing, flirting, and romantic or sexual advances were even more difficult to avoid coming from close co-workers or even supervisors. Margaret Cook noted that she and her colleagues preferred working without the supervision of their foreman, whom the workers nicknamed “Patty-Cake,” because he “just couldn’t keep his hands to himself.” She reasoned that the foreman didn’t bother her though, because her father, Jack Nixon, was head of security at the plant, “6ft 2” and around regularly!!”⁷⁷ Riveter Mary Riddoch had trouble escaping unwanted attention from a man in her own department as well, and she eventually bought herself an engagement and wedding ring to wear at work because “that was the only way I could get rid of him.”⁷⁸ Historian Gordon Burkowski describes the plant during the war as a “pretty lively place” for intimacy and although matrons were hired to put a stop to employees expressing their affections while on the job, a former employee found that their efforts at “population control” were largely made in vain.⁷⁹ Pregnancies resulting from workplace relationships were identified as a top concern as Riddoch explained that matrons were hired “just for the women to keep us in line, you know, so we wouldn’t tempt the men... You don’t want to bring any babies home to your mother to raise!” and her co-worker Nina Godecki added, “...It’s very unusual to be with

⁷⁶ Margaret Nixon to Kelly Saxberg, 2 July 1998.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 1,” 1:16-2:06.

⁷⁹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 88.

all these men and not knowing anything. You had to make sure that you didn't disgrace your family."⁸⁰

The matrons' reach extended to employee housing as well, as they could be found watching over the women who stayed in the staff house called Winston Hall, which opened on 22 January 1944.⁸¹ Winston Halls were built across Canada to help with housing needs for war industry workers, and the one in Fort William was designated specifically for the large influx of women coming from the Prairie provinces to work at the Can Car plant, 400 of which began arriving in late March 1944.⁸² Fort William's Winston Hall had enough rooms for 420 residents in addition to communal areas, including lounge spaces, letter-writing rooms, a bowling alley, a snack bar, and a cafeteria where dances were held.⁸³

For all the amenities offered at the staff house, childcare services were not among them. As Wakewich and Smith have argued, "Winston Hall was for the ideal female worker – a young girl requiring a housewife/mother, rather than being one herself."⁸⁴ Margaret Gandier, a former resident of Winston Hall, recalled matrons patrolling the common areas to make sure that residents acted appropriately with guests and did not sneak men up into their rooms. She said that men "could come visit, but certainly not upstairs. They could come visit in the lounge and that's where you stayed. The matrons were around, and there was nothing untoward going on there. Not in those days!"⁸⁵ Indeed, number 18 of the Staff House Rules & Regulations stated

⁸⁰ *Rosies of the North*, 23:37-24:15.

⁸¹ Wartime Housing Limited, "The Women's Residence" advertisement, *FWDTJ*, 20 January 1944, 6.

⁸² "400 Workers Coming Here; Homes Needed, *FWDTJ*, 21 March 1944.

⁸³ Margaret Gandier, "Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) – Part 1," interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 3:09-3:52, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>. See also Wakewich, Smith, and Lynes, "Women's Wartime Work and Identities," 413.

⁸⁴ Smith and Wakewich, "Regulating Body Boundaries," 67.

⁸⁵ Gandier, "Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) – Part 1," 3:53-4:15.

that “Men shall not be allowed in the building except in the public rooms and at hours permitted by the Company’s regulations from time to time issued.”⁸⁶

Some female employees, however, were sympathetic to the matrons and thought that they played an important role in keeping the workforce in order. Liddy Kondakow thought it was an effective choice to have matrons stationed in the bathrooms to make sure that women were not taking longer than they needed on breaks because “a lot of them were just trying to get away from work, just to dilly dally, you know.”⁸⁷ In a poem featured in *The Feminine Touch* called “Doing Our Share,” Mrs. C. Gillies stood up for the matrons who were upset over the fact that some women had been vandalizing the bathrooms by writing messages on the walls. Through her poetry, Gilles encouraged her co-workers to “give (the matron) a treat and keep our washrooms clean and neat.”⁸⁸ Joan Brigden found that the matrons disrupted her so little that she was hardly aware there was supervision uniquely for women, saying, “I never ever spoke to any of the matrons, and they never searched me out,” adding that the female co-workers that she worked closest to, who were at least 10 years older than her, kept her under their wing.⁸⁹

Brigden's comment about how her older co-workers protected and guided her in place of the matrons reveals an interesting role age played in the dynamics between female employees. Looking at the ten available matron employee cards with birthdates indicated, nine would have been over the age of 40 by the end of the war in 1945, and all but one had been married.⁹⁰

Matrons would have been in a better position to act as role models, being comparatively older in

⁸⁶ Wartime Housing Limited. “Staff House Rules and Regulations Form No. 16,” 1-21. See “Misc. Staff Rules & Regulations,” 3, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/extras/>.

⁸⁷ Kondakow, “Ledwiga ‘Liddy’ Kondakow (nee Kwiatkowski) – Part 2,” 4:48-5:09.

⁸⁸ “Doing Our Share,” *Aircrafter*, 10 February 1945, 4.

⁸⁹ Brigden, “Joan Brigden – Part 2,” 13:25-14:00.

⁹⁰ Ten matron employee cards: Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section A, Card #23, Section A, Card #113, Section D, Card #323, Section G, Card #185, Section H, Card #284, Section M, Card #382, Section M, Card #697, Section M, Card #723, Section L, Card #279, Section R, Card #217.

age than the overall female workforce at Can Car, which was predominantly single women, many of whom were still in their late teens and early twenties. The age gap between matrons and other female employees would support the consensus that the matrons acted as workplace chaperones to protect the personal reputations of the younger women workers, including those staying in staff housing (and away from family supervision), by keeping them out of trouble of any kind.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the United States joined the Second World War and needed fighter bomber aircraft for the Pacific theatre. In May 1942, Can Car was the recipient of a contract to produce 1,000 Curtiss SB2C Helldivers, a two-seated monoplane which could drop up to a thousand-pound bomb load.⁹¹ The Curtiss Helldiver bomber was first developed in 1939 and gradually replaced the Douglas SBD Dauntless, a staple in U.S. Navy and Marine Corps dive-bombing squadrons. Helldivers were able to carry a larger bomb load faster and farther than any other dive-bombers manufactured up until that point.⁹² However, Helldivers had so many structural issues that made none of its variants “particularly well-liked by those who flew them.”⁹³ The Helldiver’s reputation for instability would cause major production disruptions at Can Car almost immediately when the contract began on 1 July 1942.⁹⁴ While the first Helldiver from Can Car took flight on 21 July 1943 (piloted by Orville J. Wieben),⁹⁵ constant corrections and changes to its design led to only 30 aircraft being completed by the end of 1943. It was not until the following year that production rose to expected levels.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Kemp, “Can-Car: The Aviation Years,” 67.

⁹² Kemp, “Can-Car: The Aviation Years,” 66.

⁹³ Kemp, “Can Car Re-Tools for Victory,” 31.

⁹⁴ *Family Day Souvenir Program*, 4.

⁹⁵ Kemp, “Can-Car: The Aviation Years,” 66.

⁹⁶ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 76.



Figure 7. Workers complete the final assembly stages of Helldivers at Can Car. c. 1944. National Film Board of Canada Fonds, R1196-0-7-E, RG53.

Company-wide, Can Car operated at its peak during 1944 and 1945, with a total of 15,000 employees across its half a dozen locations in Eastern Canada.⁹⁷ The Fort William plant served as the company's main plant as it was the largest at 900,000 square feet of floor area.⁹⁸ In May 1944, Fort William was outputting at least two completed aircraft per day and boasted that "the record for the production of aircraft in the Fort William plant of the Canadian Car and Foundry Company Ltd. is unbeaten in the entire dominion."⁹⁹ Most of the Helldivers produced by the plant were used by the United States Navy, although the British Fleet Air Arm squadron used borrowed planes briefly during the war and returned its planes after it disbanded.¹⁰⁰ The

⁹⁷ Kemp, "Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory," 31.

⁹⁸ Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," 59 and Kemp, "Hurricane: Can-Car Re-Tools for Victory," 31.

⁹⁹ "Fort William Plant Says," *Canadian Car Journal* (May 1944), 5.

¹⁰⁰ Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," 67.

remaining Helldivers went to the RCAF, although some of the earlier orders were diverted to the Americans per request.¹⁰¹

While Canadian Car and Foundry reached a new height in profits by 1944, there were signs that aircraft production momentum would dip in the following year. With respect to the Helldiver contract for the Fort William plant, the company's 35th annual report indicated they had "received instructions to reduce the production schedule which will have the effect of prolonging the contract to the end of 1945 without reducing the total number to be produced under the original contract."¹⁰² However, when V-J Day was announced on 15 August 1945, work on the Helldivers immediately ceased, and all the semi-completed aircraft at the plant were scrapped. In all, Fort William produced a total of 835 Helldivers by the end of the war.¹⁰³ It seems as though there are no surviving Helldivers constructed at Can Car in existence today.¹⁰⁴

In late 1943, a year and a half into Helldiver production, Can Car management foresaw that women would make up most of the wartime hires at the Fort William plant moving forward.¹⁰⁵ At this time, the staff numbered around 5,600 and women made up about 40% of the workforce. Women's employment at the plant was at its height in March 1944, when 2,707 out of the total 6,760 employees at Can Car were women and could be found in almost every aspect of production. Women also represented a third of the production line jobs. On the shop floor, women were still most highly concentrated in sub-assembly over final assembly, which was

¹⁰¹ "Local Plant of Canadian Car is Pride of Its Management – Men and Women Work Side by Side In Building Aircraft for the Allies," *FWDTJ*, 18 December 1943.

¹⁰² "Cancar Plant to Operate at Capacity During Year," *FWDTJ*, 5 January 1945.

¹⁰³ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 97-98.

¹⁰⁴ Kemp, "Can Car Re-Tools for Victory," 31. One of the last known airworthy Helldiver examples, owned by the West Texas Wing of the Commemorative Air Force, performed at the Thunder in the Air show in the summer of 1998. See "The Last Flying FDB-2 Curtis Hell Diver in the World", *Chronicle-Journal*, 22 August 1998. This aircraft appeared in the *Rosies of the North* film with electrical worker Margaret Cook riding in the gunner seat. See *Rosies of the North*, 0:10-1:41, 44:07-45:24.

¹⁰⁵ "Works Manager Tells of Development of Aircraft Production at Local Plant," *FWDTJ*, 18 December 1943.

reflective of the stereotype that women were better suited to jobs that used precision.¹⁰⁶ For example, inspection worker Rhoda McKay noticed that in her department men tended to be in charge of larger pieces of the plane, whereas women worked with smaller components. She reasoned this was not due to differences in physical strength, but that men likely had more mechanical experience.¹⁰⁷

Stereotypes about women's innate abilities played a role in labour assessments and hiring practices during the Second World War, with long-lasting consequences. Around the time of women's mass entry into the wartime industrial labour force, Canada's Department of Labour tasked the engineering firm Steven and Kellogg to investigate any potential issues in labour that detracted from the war effort. The resulting report from Steven and Kellogg deemed that office and clerical jobs were the least productive or essential to industry and advised that women should take up as many of these positions as possible to allow men to occupy higher-priority work. The firm also suggested that "Work at Which Women Excel" included "work requiring care and constant alertness', good eyesight, limited physical exertion, manipulative dexterity, and speed and work requiring considerable skill but little strength."¹⁰⁸

A commonly held belief by management was that women were more adept than men at precise, repetitive tasks using minimal physical strength. This belief created not only gendered divisions of labour but also limited women's advancement opportunities and access to training for jobs using a more varied skill set. As Pierson has argued, while wartime training programmes were often designed to match workers to jobs as quickly as possible,

¹⁰⁶ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 84-85.

¹⁰⁷ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 1," 3:45-7:04.

¹⁰⁸ Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl*, 34-35.

A minimum of training had brought the largest proportion of women war workers onto the production line at the lowest levels of skill where they could be concentrated in ‘feminized’ tasks that depended for smooth performance on the allegedly superior female capacity for monotony and intricate work.¹⁰⁹

Stereotypes about women’s labour and the resulting lack of access to skilled training continued to have an effect well after the war. At Can Car, the first woman to enter the skilled trades was not until 1985, and the first apprenticeship held by a woman came another five years later.¹¹⁰

While secondary scholarship has alleged there were no female foremen at the Fort William plant during the war,¹¹¹ at least one employee card exists where a woman, Mrs. Lottie O’Brien, has “Foreman” written in the occupation line. O’Brien was hired on July 17, 1943, and was let go on 17 August 1945.¹¹² Although higher-up supervisory roles were still, by and large, occupied by men, workers across different departments remembered there was a fairer balance between men and women lead hands.¹¹³ According to Rhoda McKay, women lead hands tended to have more mechanical experience or had received some higher education. For example, McKay’s lead hand in the inspection room had a more extensive knowledge of mathematics and knew how to set the gauges that allowed her to measure parts.¹¹⁴ Riveter Dorothy Hurley became a lead hand overseeing a bench of fifteen to twenty workers, but some had trouble accepting women in leadership roles. Hurley found that “The older ones, especially the men – they didn’t like a girl being their boss. I was one that wanted things done right – so I was mean, so they said.”¹¹⁵ At Can Car, gender not only influenced the distribution of jobs but played a noticeable

¹⁰⁹ Pierson, “*They’re Still Women After All*,” 76.

¹¹⁰ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 90.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹¹² Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section O, Card #7.

¹¹³ See Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary Part 2”, 11:57-12:24; McCallum, “Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth),” 4:32-4:53; and Long and Gibson, “Florence & Alvina – Part 1,” 7:31-7:43.

¹¹⁴ Rhoda McKay, “Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 1,” interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 1:43-2:12, 5:32-7:04, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

¹¹⁵ Dorothy Hurley to Kelly Saxberg, 13 April 1998.

role in the workplace's culture. Gendered divisions were especially apparent when it came to organized labour and home front efforts at the plant, which despite championing cooperation over common causes, revealed inconsistent expectations for men and women workers.

Chapter Three: Work-Life at Can Car – The Union, Labour-Management Initiatives and Home Front Efforts

On 12 February 1942, Assistant Inspector at Can Car Fort William, James Carmichael, assured members of the Port Arthur-Fort William Kiwanis Club that “The local airplane plant of the Canadian Car and Foundry company is the largest and best of such plants in the Dominion of Canada with perfect harmony existing between the union, representing the men, and the company.”¹ At Can Car, the exclusive bargaining agent for both shop floor and office workers was the International Association of Machinists (IAM, now the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers), based in the United States and affiliated with the American Federation of Labour (AFL). The plant’s office workers were represented by Lodge 23302 and shop workers by Lodge 719, which laid claim to being the first aircraft employees’ union formed in Canada on 28 March 1938.²

Previous scholarship about the Rosies of the North have paid minimal attention to women’s involvement in the union. When discussed, a perceived lack of involvement has been based on the argument that they were less likely to join as members compared to men due to how they viewed the nature of their employment. For example, Gordon Burkowski in *Can Car: A History* notes, “Most women also saw their shop jobs as temporary – and few seemed willing to fight to keep them. At first, only a handful of women were interested in the unions that gained a foothold in the plant during the war.” Burkowski included testimony from former union organizer Karl Steve, who remembered that when approached about union membership, “A lot of women during the war, they’d laugh at you – they weren’t going to join up. But toward the end,

¹ “Local Plane Plant Best in Canada, Kiwanis Told,” *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* (hereafter *FWD TJ*), 13 February 1942.

² “History of Our Lodge,” *The Effort* (February 1942), 3.

we got quite a few stewards, especially in the Foundry.”³ Although Burkowski rightly identified the temporary nature of women’s employment at the plant as a deterrent to joining the union, it is unclear what lengths the union took to represent its female workforce and whether there were other obstacles that prevented women from participating on the same basis as men. The apparent reluctance of Can Car’s women workers to join the union is much more complicated as evident in the union paper *The Effort*. Through membership updates and listings in the paper, *The Effort* reveals a record of formal representation by gender in Lodge 719’s committees, including the union executive for the 1942 and 1943 years.

In 1942, only one woman, Beatrice Kedge, was elected to the Board of Trustees on the union’s executive committee after another trustee resigned halfway through the year.⁴ In July, a month after Kedge’s election, the Lodge hosted its Second Annual Picnic, and she was noted for her leadership in organizing the event. Congratulations in the Lodge News section read, “Sister B. Kedge has proven her worth on the executive, a great deal of the success of the picnic was due to her great work. Let’s have more women workers on our committees.”⁵ Despite the praise and encouragement to see more women elected to union committees, Kedge was not re-elected for the 1943 executive committee and all other positions on the union executive for the years 1942 and 1943, including the president, vice-president, secretaries, treasurer, and other trustees, were occupied by men.⁶ However, women appeared with more frequency in some of the union’s other committees.

³ Gordon Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History 1912-1992* (Thunder Bay: Bombardier Inc., 1995), 89-90.

⁴ “Female Worker Elected to the Executive,” *The Effort* (June 1942), 4.

⁵ “Lodge News,” *The Effort* (July 1942), 4.

⁶ The executive committee members are listed on page two of each issue of *The Effort*. For the 1943 election results, see “1943 Executive Officers,” *The Effort* (December 1942), 1.

Out of six members total, two women, Betty Allan and Marge Purcell, were part of the Shop Committee, albeit specifically in charge of addressing women workers' grievances. Betty Allan was also a member of the Welfare Committee, where men outnumbered women only 5 to 4. While there were no women among the four members of the Medical Committee, the Sick and Visiting Committee, which kept sick and injured workers involved in union activity, was composed evenly of two men and two women. The sole woman elected to the educational committee of six members was Isabell Baird. In 1942, the union was appealing to Can Car management to form a Labour-Management Production Committee (LMPC), and, in its absence, a provisional Negotiating Committee was established of seven union members, two of whom were women.⁷ None of the women served as Chairman for their respective committees.⁸

Although women occupied fewer spots on union committees than men, especially in leadership positions and the executive, their participation is certainly not insignificant. Still, despite a fair formal representation of women in union committees, Lodge 719 struggled to get a foothold over the female workforce at large. Some Rosies consciously avoided certain aspects of union activity such as strikes,⁹ but others expressed they had not been made aware of the union's presence at Can Car at all or knew how to channel grievances.¹⁰ Rhoda McKay, a member of the union executive towards the end of the war, thought that women's lower participation rates had to do with a lack of experience with unions in their previous work, reasoning,

Maybe they just took it for granted... weren't interested in it, never been active in (a) union and didn't know what it was all about, because a lot of those people were brought in never worked outside the home before. It was a lot of people like that. It was their first job they ever had.¹¹

⁷ "An Active Trade Unionist," *The Effort* (October 1942), 1.

⁸ For a complete list of members of the Lodge 719 committees, see "Who's Who?," *The Effort* (February 1942), 4.

⁹ Long and Gibson, "Florence & Alvina – Part 1," 4:58-5:18.

¹⁰ Brigden, "Joan Brigden – Part 2," 3:52-4:10.

¹¹ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 1," 13:28-14:12.

With an apparent disparity in awareness of the union based on gender and work experience, *The Effort* went to noticeable lengths to reach out to women workers at Can Car and appeal for their membership. In the paper, there was a regular section called “Of Special Interest to Women,” edited by Shop Committee member Marge Purcell. Letters to the editor and articles written by women were also featured throughout other sections of the paper, demonstrating a range of women’s views about their employment and union membership. As much as Lodge 719, including its female representatives, seemed to encourage women’s participation in the union, oftentimes, the messaging in *The Effort* hints at further clues for women’s lack of membership since they were not always asked to join for their own sake or benefit.

On multiple occasions, articles in *The Effort* made direct appeals to non-members to join the union, and women were identified as a key demographic to build membership numbers. In “An Appeal to Unity,” published in August 1942, an unnamed organizer declared, “My reason for writing this article, is in the hope that I may arouse some concern among our non-members, especially women workers, of whom there are quite a number among us.”¹² However, beyond this statement of intent, women or issues most affecting their lack of participation in the union were not addressed in the remainder of the article. Instead, the organizer made a broad call for unity among the workforce at Can Car so the union would be in a better position to affect change within the labour movement at the local and national levels. The organizer claimed that by working to combat dictatorship during the war, a “New Order for Democracy” would emerge in peacetime. It is evident that these aims for a strong and united working-class front were situated for the post-war, as the author expressed hope that working-class Canadians would not endure

¹² “An Appeal for Unity,” *The Effort* (August 1942), 4.

economic hardships after the war, as they had in the interwar years, saying, “During these terrible times, we, the working people, often wonder what is to be our lot when peace comes again...Will we fall back in the same rut in which we found ourselves only a few years ago, or will we build and plan together for a future?”¹³ It is important to stress that a question about planning for a post-war life had strong gendered implications, and *The Effort* had already endorsed a particular vision of what the post-war should look like for female employees at Can Car.

A month earlier, the front-page story in the paper was entitled “Aircraft: A Woman’s Viewpoint.” In this article, Clara D. B. Cook praised women workers for rising to the occasion to support the war effort, although she generated the impression that women did not truly belong as aircraft workers. After blatantly stating that using tools like hammers and drills to make implements of war is not “women’s work,” Cook emphasized the differences between traditional spheres of women’s work, rooted in the home, to fields traditionally occupied by men. She suggested that in aircraft production, women seemed out of place and struggled to work as effectively as men, stating,

Watch them come tripping in – lunch kits under their arm – set for another day of steady toil. A far cry indeed from the sheltered atmosphere of the home. They’re taking a man’s place these girls – their main effort to keep their work up to most any man’s standard of efficiency at least.¹⁴

Cook went on to explain that women workers did not tend to think or talk much about the war at hand, despite actively building military aircraft. Instead, she argued that women workers represented the “mothers of tomorrow,” and they were most concerned with the promise of post-war peace, freedom, and democracy. Just as women workers had during the First World War,

¹³ “An Appeal for Unity,” *The Effort* (August 1942), 4.

¹⁴ “Aircraft: A Woman’s Viewpoint,” *The Effort* (July 1942), 1.

they were supposedly dreaming of “getting married and building dream castles for the future.”¹⁵ From this article, it is very clear that women were not only seen as temporary (and perhaps even less effective) replacements for men at work, but their most important roles, as future mothers, wives, and builders of domestic bliss, existed outside of the workplace altogether. The publication of “Aircraft: A Woman’s Viewpoint” subtracted women’s worth as potential union members by painting women workers as alien or lesser than in an industrial space and that their greatest source of value would come after the war when they ceased being aircraft production workers.

The temporary status of women’s employment at Can Car was a consistent theme in the discourses on union membership. In October 1942, an article appealing for union membership was addressed directly “To the Women in Our Plant.” This time, the anonymous author explained that they had spoken to many of the women at Can Car about working conditions, and the most common issue raised by women workers was the fact they were receiving lower wages compared to men. The author claimed that when they asked why women who were concerned about equal pay were not active members of the union, they would often respond that they see themselves as temporary workers, offering reasons like “I am not going to be here very long. I am getting married. I am going to quit...” While others expressed little faith that the union had successfully represented its women workers up until that point, questioning, “Why should I join the union? ...the Union never did anything for us.”¹⁶

In response, the author offered five counterarguments to convince women workers that the union had their interests at heart. The first two reasons spoke to the importance of a united

¹⁵ “Aircraft: A Woman’s Viewpoint,” *The Effort* (July 1942), 1.

¹⁶ “To The Women in Our Plant,” *The Effort* (October 1942), 4.

workforce, as cooperation would promote principles of democracy and the second point simply stated, “united we stand, together we fall.” The following two points also merged together as women were asked to join the union to support their fellow workers and preserve working-class solidarity for the future. The final reason was to help protect the gains already made by the union. Not much more than the appeal printed in August, the specific concerns raised by women, including their temporary worker status and unfair compensation, were not necessarily addressed by the reasons proposed for their union membership. The author only elaborated on the fifth point by stating that the union had successfully negotiated for overall wage increases in the past and asked, “Do you girls know that if it had not been for the Union you would today be receiving wages far less than the present rates(?)”¹⁷ The author’s most promising claim was assuring that the union stood for equal pay and that a growing membership base among women workers would not hurt efforts for future wage negotiations.

The overarching arguments in appeals for women to join the union had less to do with addressing their immediate concerns as workers and more to do with maintaining the stability of the union or the labour movement broadly. In the same way that Cook emphasized that women acted as placeholders for men as workers, their temporary union membership was valued primarily to ensure continued working-class power in view of the post-war environment. For women workers at the plant, who, as Gordon Burkowski suggests, knew it was unlikely they would retain their jobs once the war was over and might never work in aircraft or in an industrial setting again, there was little direct incentive to be interested in the union. Examining some of

¹⁷ “To The Women in Our Plant,” *The Effort* (October 1942), 4.

the key issues addressed by women workers in *The Effort* also leads to further reasoning as to why the union's popularity was coloured by gender.

In the first issue of *The Effort*, the hot-button issue for women employees was the unfavourable style of hats the plant had recently provided for them to cover their hair with at work. Even decades later, memories of the hats provoked a strong reaction from employee Joan Brigden who described them as “most ugly! It was like a khaki-coloured pancake...and there was nothing attractive about them at all.”¹⁸ At the time, some women workers chose to voice their discontent over the style of hats chosen for them in the Lodge paper. In a letter to the editor, an anonymous women worker argued, “If it is essential that we cover our heads, then leave it to us as to what we shall cover them with. I feel sure that in Britain today, where women are in the front line, a woman is still allowed to keep her feminine touch?”¹⁹

The top article in the “Of Special Interest to Women” section similarly voiced discontent about the hat policy, stating that women workers,

are willing to co-operate, but surely a man must have invented the contraption... If we fix them attractively allowing curls to appear over the forehead, the safety feature is destroyed. If we wear them as a coverall, our moral stamina is destroyed and our work will suffer. Who can come forward for the next issue with an answer to this problem!²⁰

Not waiting until the next issue to respond, a poem called “Mary” was printed immediately below the article. The poem reads in full, “Mary had a head of hair and locks of golden hue; and everywhere that Mary went – we followed – wouldn't you? Now Mary wears a cap of brown of hair there is no flicker; but why should little Mary care – for she still has her figure.”²¹

¹⁸ Brigden, Joan. “Joan Brigden – Part 1,” 1:22-1:37.

¹⁹ “Doing Her Bit,” letter to the editor, *The Effort* (February 1942) 4.

²⁰ “Mary,” *The Effort* (February 1942), 4.

²¹ Ibid.

Aside from the women's comments on appearance and femininity being reduced exclusively to sexual appeal, the printing of the "Mary" poem on behalf of *The Effort* editors, and by extension, the union, dismissed the fact that both women highlighted the issue of choice and how input from women workers did not seem to be considered in a policy which affected only them. The most prominent issue raised by women workers and discussed extensively throughout *The Effort* was gender pay gaps. Rosies found that pay at Can Car between men and women was typically unequal, including for the same jobs.²² To combat pay disparities, Rhoda McKay explained that workers could negotiate their salaries on an individual basis by going directly to management and asking for a raise.²³ The success of salary negotiations could certainly vary, as inspection worker Angelina Bradford noted, "I can remember sticking up for myself if I was doing same work as a man and not getting same pay, and sometimes I would get it."²⁴ McKay similarly attempted multiple pay negotiations on her own, but never felt "aggressive" enough to go through the union when her pay raise requests were turned down.²⁵

For many women workers who were not aware of the union, or did not feel supported by it, they did not feel empowered to ask for a pay raise or defend themselves in times of conflict. For instance, when Liddy Kondakow was fired for being unable to work on Saturdays due to her Seventh-Day Adventist religion, she remembered thinking, "Well, if they don't want me, that's okay."²⁶ It took encouragement from her co-workers and foreman to make an appointment with management and successfully argue to get her job back. In the same vein, some women might have feared that asking for raises or defending themselves would cause such a disruption to the

²² Brigden, "Joan Brigden – Part 1," 2:17-2:46 and Long and Gibson, "Florence & Alvina – Part 1," 4:46-4:57.

²³ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 1," 7:33-7:48.

²⁴ Angelina Bradford to Kelly Saxberg, circa 1998. Bradford did riveting before switching to inspection. See Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section "B," Card #248-249.

²⁵ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 1," 8:06-8:39.

²⁶ Kondakow, "Ledwiga 'Liddy' Kondakow (nee Kwiatkowski) – Part 1," 9:34-13:14.

status quo that they risked losing their jobs. Mary Riddoch remembered that when she worked as a riveter, the men she was training were automatically making higher wages than her. She explained, “That’s the way it was, and we had to accept it. I didn’t like the idea, but, you know, we had to go with it.” Fellow riveter Nina Godecki added, “At that time, everyone was so dedicated to their jobs, and they were so afraid of losing their jobs. This was one of my best jobs!”²⁷

On at least one occasion, job security at Can Car was especially precarious for its women workers. In *Can Car: A History*, production supervisor Roy Bicknell shared a story about a time when one of his colleagues became frustrated by the fact that some women were not keeping their hair covered at work that he went through the shop firing any woman with her hair uncovered on the spot. According to Bicknell, this included women who were working away from machinery where covering hair was not as much of a safety concern, as he said the supervisor “got down to inspection where there was no machinery or anything, so they were really slack, they just had bows or something, and he sent them home too. By the time he got back to his office, there was a whole bunch of women crying and sobbing, but they all went home.”²⁸

In April 1942, Lodge 719 endorsed a set of five measures proposed to achieve a total mobilization of labour in Canada, while simultaneously meeting worker needs. These measures were reprinted in *The Effort*, and the fourth point addressed the issue of unequal pay between men and women directly by demanding the “Raising of low wages to a minimum of \$25.00 weekly for qualified workers and equal pay for the women and young people entering the

²⁷ *Rosies of the North*, 16:55-17:23.

²⁸ Bicknell quoted in Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 88.

plants.”²⁹ In an article for the women’s section in the same issue, editor Marge Purcell described gender pay discrimination at the Can Car plant specifically. She called attention to the fact that gender pay gaps persisted at the plant due to management complicity and the lack of solidarity on the issue from male co-workers and union members. Purcell rightly identified that many of the women coming to work at Can Car received significantly lower rates of pay at their previous jobs, and knowing this, management took advantage of their expectations. She explained that women workers at Can Car were automatically at a disadvantage, with the base pay being

five cents per hour less than the male worker, (and) of course many women are thrilled because they can go to work in an aircraft factory and receive what to them is high pay, so we see, that the management does take advantage of women and get them to work for less.³⁰

By paying women workers unfair salaries, Purcell also accused Can Car management of putting company profits before its workers and the war effort at large, as women would continue to fill jobs that were left behind by men who enlisted in the military. Purcell’s article was the first in *The Effort* to invite women to join the union explicitly for their own needs as workers. In its conclusion, she urged women that they would have equal membership with men and that the only way to protect against gender and pay discrimination at work was to become active with the union.

In the later years of the war, another aspect of organized labour was introduced at Can Car through the establishment of a Labour-Management Production Committee (LMPC). As the name suggests, LMPCs encouraged cooperation between management and labour, who had equal representation on the committees. Prime Minister King made a formal call for the formation of

²⁹ “Solution for Total War Effort,” *The Effort* (April 1942), 1.

³⁰ “Women and War Industries,” *The Effort* (April 1942), 3.

LMPCs in all Canadian industries in October 1942 and the initiative found much support within Canadian labour congresses and unions.³¹ By the end of the Second World War, over 1,000 LMPCs had been formed across the country, representing upwards of 300,000 workers.³² While the membership of Can Car's LMPC was not as clearly documented as union committees and executives, traces of its efforts can still be seen in *Aircrafter*, the plant's newspaper from 1944 to 1945. While women workers were frequently pictured in the newspaper and praised for meeting LMPC goals, their contributions were just as often diminished by gendered stereotypes. The overt sexism visible in depictions of women workers' efforts lends further reasoning as to why women at Can Car were hesitant to participate in labour committees at the plant under the promise they would be treated equally to men.

One of the main objectives of LMPCs across Canada was to improve worker attendance rates and Can Car's own committee indicated its plans to "tackle the improvement of general plant morale and 'presenteeism'" in September 1944.³³ As an incentive, workers who maintained perfect attendance for longer than three months would be recognized with plaques and pins.³⁴ Employee attendance was seen as especially crucial in war industries because lost manhours meant a diminished output on resources needed for the war effort. The *Aircrafter's* cover story for 10 June 1944, lamented the fact that

last month right in this plant we lost in production, through absenteeism, approximately four and one-half planes, that should have been off the line and in the air. These boys (servicemen) know that planes are of great assistance to them before they actually land,

³¹ Peter S. McInnis, "Teamwork for Harmony: Labour-Management Production Committees and the Post-War Settlement, 1963-8," in *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*, ed. Bryan D Palmer and Joan Sangster (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2008), 284.

³² Jeff Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 59.

³³ "Bright Ideas Win Praise and Cash for Workers on Planes," *Aircrafter*, 2 September 1944, 1.

³⁴ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 92.

and this four-and-one-half planes lost right here may have been the means of saving human lives...³⁵

A significant aspect of promoting good attendance records at Can Car was minimizing days staff might lose due to work-related injuries and illnesses. A committee of Safety Stewards from all departments across the plant would regularly meet with the Plant Safety Engineer, management, and labour representatives to discuss safety education and enforcement.³⁶ Cartoons and columns used to educate the workforce about safety precautions could be found throughout many issues of *Aircrafter*.³⁷ While announcing the appointment of a new Plant Safety Engineer, the editorial section of *Aircrafter* emphasized the connection between worker safety, attendance and the war effort at large, stating,

the Management of Canadian Car & Foundry Company realize the necessity of having their employees on the job every day in order to keep up with production schedules... use all the safety equipment you can and stay in there fighting on the home front.³⁸

The National Selective Service Women's Division was particularly concerned with women's absenteeism rates while integrating into male-dominated industrial workplaces, and efforts were made to improve women workers' safety and wellness on the job, as well as the quality of employee housing, recreation and amenities across Canadian wartime industries.³⁹ Still, absenteeism was an issue that prevailed regardless of gender. Jeff Keshen has identified a variety of contributing factors to national absenteeism problems, including a lack of available

³⁵ "Would You Let This Fellow Down?," *Aircrafter*, 10 June 1944, 1.

³⁶ "Fort William Plant Launches Safety Drive," *Canadian Car Journal* (May 1944), 5.

³⁷ For a handful of examples across different issues, see "On Your Toes," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 4; "New Appointments in the Plant," *Aircrafter*, 16 September 1944, 3; "Clean Up for Safety," *Aircrafter*, 2 December 1944, 3; "Goggles vs Glass Eyes," *Aircrafter*, 6 January 1945, 2; "Accident Prevention Safety Suggestions," *Aircrafter*, 13 January 1945, 2; and "New Sign to Improve Appearance of Employment Office," *Aircrafter*, 17 February 1945, 4.

³⁸ "Editorial," *Aircrafter*, 30 September 1944, 2.

³⁹ Stephen, *Pick One Intelligent Girl*, 44-46.
Smith and Wakewich, "I Was Not Afraid of Work," 235.

childcare services, income tax evasion and opposition to wartime rationing policies.⁴⁰ At Can Car, a sample of a timekeeper's sheet for 18 March 1944, showed that 8% of the workforce was missing, as 547 out of the expected 6,707 employees failed to report to work. When divided by gender, women absentees outnumbered men 30 to 13 on the payroll, but for salary workers, 305 men and 199 women were absent that day.⁴¹ Rosies themselves claimed that women workers were "more apt to show up every day" and were less likely to cut corners in their attendance by punching out early or taking longer lunch and coffee breaks.⁴²

According to the plant's head nurse during the war, women were also less likely to suffer injuries on the job because they worked more carefully than men.⁴³ Women workers were among those pictured in *Aircrafter* for having remarkable attendance records to encourage others to follow in their footsteps. One feature congratulated two sisters working in the same department, Joan and Muriel Thickett, for having perfect attendance in the six months since they began working at the plant. The headline above their photo asked workers, "Can You Beat This?" and implied management would be keen to celebrate other workers with similar attendance records, as the photo caption ended, "We wonder if any other department(s) have employees with good records like this."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ See Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, 55, 111, and 158.

⁴¹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 89.

⁴² *Rosies of the North*, 4:55-5:07; Godecki and Riddoch, "Nina & Mary – Part 1," 0:03-0:40; and Margaret Gandier, "Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) – Part 1," 6:32-6:49.

⁴³ Helen Smith and Pamela Wakewich, "Regulating Body Boundaries and Health during the Second World War: Nationalist Discourse, Media Representations and the Experiences of Canadian Women War Workers," *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (April 2012): 62.

⁴⁴ "Can You Beat This?," *Aircrafter*, 17 June 1944, 4.

Despite these positive habits, when blame was assigned for absenteeism problems at the plant, women were the targets. When local shops began closing early on Saturday evenings in the summer of 1944, the editorial in *Aircrafter* expressed,

Disturbing to say the least is the news that the retail stores in the Twin Cities will commence immediately to close early on a Saturday night... management have spent considerable time and money collecting information as to what are the chief causes of absenteeism and to date have discovered that with so many married women working in this plant that in many cases they take time off to do their shopping.⁴⁵

Interestingly, while the local shop hours were still being debated, the issue was framed as one that impacted Can Car's day shift workers, rather than married women specifically. Plant Manager J. J. Russell was concerned that,

68 percent of the plant staff are continuously on day shift, most quitting work at 4:30 pm, which gets them downtown about 5:15 o'clock. As the stores close at 5:30, it meant that little shopping could be done during the week and they depended on Saturday evening for this shopping.⁴⁶

Two cartoons printed in *Aircrafter* also used women's bodies and sex appeal as a tool to promote worker attendance. The first of these cartoons, located in the *Feminine Touch* section, pictured a woman carrying a stack of papers in an office, wearing high heels and a body suit, showing her full bare legs, while two men seated nearby looked up from their work to watch her walk by. Below, the caption read, "Since they have hired her, absenteeism has gone down 100%."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ "Editorial," *Aircrafter*, 3 June 1944, 2.

⁴⁶ "Cancar Seeks Staggering of Store Hours," *FWDTJ*, 1 June 1944.

⁴⁷ "Since They Have Hired Her, Absenteeism Has Gone Down 100%," *Aircrafter*, 16 September 1944, 4.

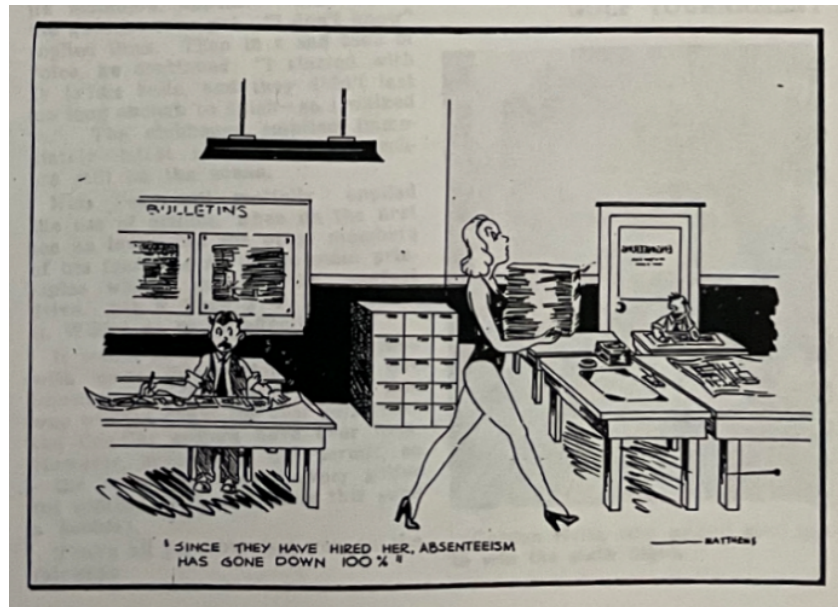


Figure 8. “Since They Have Hired Her, Absenteeism Has Gone Down 100%” cartoon illustration. *Aircrafter*, 16 September 1944.

By placing this cartoon in the *Feminine Touch* section, the responsibility of men’s absenteeism was uncomfortably shifted onto women, suggesting that their appearance at work would have a positive impact on male worker attendance rates. Two issues later, another cartoon featuring a woman noticeably underdressed for work could be found on the *Aircrafter*’s editorial section, called “‘That Last Minute Passenger,’ or ‘Presenteeism at All Costs.’” Perhaps taking inspiration from the previous cartoon, this one shows a woman running out the front door of her house wearing only her undershirt and holding her dress while her carpool mates all press their faces against the car windows to catch a look.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ “‘That Last Minute Passenger,’ or ‘Presenteeism at All Costs,’” *Aircrafter*, 30 September 1944, 2.



Figure 7. “‘That Last Minute Passenger,’ or ‘Presenteeism at All Costs,’” cartoon illustration by W.J. Maki. *Aircrafter*, 30 September 1944.

In their analysis of the same cartoons, Wakewich and Smith note that the depictions of women fit into a wider narrative of wartime media and propaganda, which took advantage of women in traditionally male industrial settings, having them fulfill a dual role “using their bodies to manufacture planes and using their bodies as morale boosters to encourage male productivity.”⁴⁹ With regards to absenteeism, the media depictions of women workers in the *Aircrafter* cartoons trivialized women’s presence at work and, by extension, men’s attendance as well. Rather than engaging with any meaningful causes behind absenteeism for men and women alike, the cartoons reduced the issue of absenteeism to personal motivation or choice, suggesting that men could be encouraged to attend work if it meant a chance to sexualize and gawk at their female co-workers.

⁴⁹ Smith and Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries,” 60.

Another aim of LMPCs was to promote productivity in industrial workplaces, which often took the form of Suggestion Plan Committees, inviting workers to submit their ideas in exchange for monetary awards and recognition. At Can Car, the Labour Management Suggestion Plan Committee was first formed in July 1943.⁵⁰ Employees could submit their ideas to improve productivity to the committee through a suggestion box, and if their ideas were implemented, they were awarded Victory Bonds or War Savings Certificates in the spirit of the war effort. In its first year, the Suggestion Plan Committee at Can Car awarded 124 employees for their ideas, which in turn, saved the plant an estimated \$28,000 in time and materials.⁵¹

Lists of employees' names and award amounts were regularly published in *Aircrafter*, and occasionally employees would be pictured and congratulated for their innovations in the paper. When riveter Laretta Breckon was pictured in *Aircrafter* demonstrating her labour-saving idea, a metal pulley that allowed one person to be able to maneuver the aircraft's large stabilizer part that would otherwise require three or four people to move, attention was drawn to her contribution to the war effort, but also the apparent limitations of her gender. The term "weaker sex" was used both in the headline and photo caption, which began, "Emphasizing the fact that the weaker sex has played an important part in Canada's war effort Miss L. J. Breckon, Department 91, is pictured above demonstrating her suggestion..."⁵² Revisiting the *Aircrafter* feature years later, Breckon expressed she felt pride in being recognized for her suggestion with a reward, but the description, which she described as "just typical of the time," annoyed her because she felt it was unnecessary and diminished her contribution.⁵³

⁵⁰ "Bright Ideas Win Praise and Cash for Workers on Planes," *Aircrafter*, 2 September 1944, 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Weaker Sex Swings into Line with Suggestion for Labor-Saving Device," *Aircrafter*, 14 April 1945, 4.

⁵³ Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith, "The Politics of 'Selective' Memory: Re-Visioning Canadian Women's Wartime Work in the Public Record," *Oral History* 34, no. 2 (2006): 63. In this article, Laretta Breckon is referred

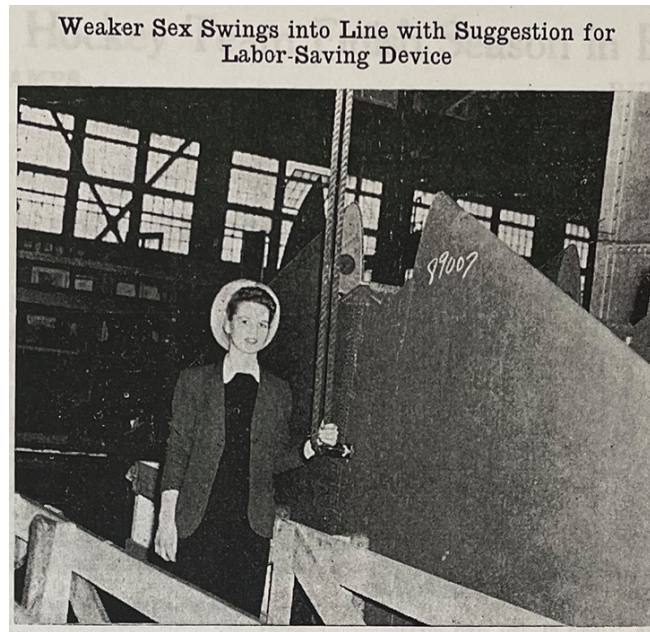


Figure 8. Laretta Breckon pictured in the plant newspaper under the headline, “Weaker Sex Swings into Line with Suggestion for Labor-Saving Device.” *Aircrafter*, 14 April 1945.

Altogether, evidence *The Effort* and *Aircrafter* show that even if women were not appearing in formal labour committees with equal numbers to men, women workers had a noticeable influence over working conditions and productivity at the plant. Yet, the frequent backhanded commentary that accompanied praise for women’s efforts sheds further light on gender inequality at work, which likely played a role in the gender imbalance found within formal labour representation. Outside of the issues raised about women’s union membership in *The Effort* and the controversial depictions of women in *Aircrafter* relating to the LMPC’s

to by the pseudonym “Lois.” The *Aircrafter* did not indicate Breckon’s first name and only used her initials “L. J.” However, Laretta’s identity and appearance in the *Aircrafter* is confirmed via “Biographies: Smyth., Laretta (nee Breckon),” *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/biographies/>.

objectives, there would have also been a host of practical reasons that prevented workers from participating actively in organized labour.

In her study of Canadian automotive manufacturing workers in the post-war, Pamela Sugiman identifies factors that impacted women's involvement in the United Auto Workers (UAW) union at the General Motors plant in Oshawa, Ontario, and parallels can be drawn to women working at Can Car during the war.⁵⁴ Sugiman found that women who had previous work experience in an industrial setting or who had seniority felt they were in a better position to voice their concerns. As Rhoda MacKay identifies, the fact that most of the women coming to work at Can Car had never worked a similar job before helped explain why women were less aware or enthusiastic about union activity. Also, the short-term nature of women's employment at Can Car meant that women workers had less time to build up the confidence and knowledge to get involved in voicing grievances.

Access to transportation was another issue identified that impacted consistent union participation. At Can Car, group events like union picnics or sports games relied heavily on pre-arranged public transportation accommodations, as it was a known fact that vehicle ownership among employees was still relatively low.⁵⁵ Workers without a ride or carpooling arrangements would have had trouble attending meetings regularly and for those who did own cars, their use would have been limited by wartime gas rationing measures. Beginning in April 1942, Canadian motorists had to register for gasoline ration booklets which allowed for a total of 120 gallons of gas per year, equalling around 2,000 miles of total travel.⁵⁶ Electrical worker Margaret Cook carpooled to work in her father's vehicle, and she found that most of her co-workers relied on

⁵⁴ Pamela Sugiman, "Becoming Union Wise, 1950-1963," in *Labouring Canada*, 333-346.

⁵⁵ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 104.

⁵⁶ Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, 99

carpooling or public transportation because “gas was rationed, tires were pretty well a thing of the past, so keeping a vehicle going was a challenge. Many of us used buses and street-cars and we often biked in the summer...”⁵⁷ Personal safety while travelling was a particular concern for the female workforce. Can Car employee Joan Brigden argued that women had “just as hard of a time to get to work as (men) did and probably more so...” She explained that women travelling alone or outside of regular working hours proved to be dangerous, as she remembered one time when she took the streetcar at night, a man jumped out of a laneway and tried to grab her. Since that incident, she walked down the middle of the road if she got off the streetcar after dark.⁵⁸ Riveter Nora Elrick avoided riding the streetcars over similar safety concerns. Instead of using public transportation, she walked home after work with her mother who was “suspicious of the work environment and large numbers of male workers riding the streetcar after their shifts.”⁵⁹

One final reason, which also might be the most obvious, is not having enough time and energy outside of work or other responsibilities to dedicate to active membership in labour committees. Nina Godecki remembered always paying her union dues, but when she was asked to be a union representative, she decided against it, being plenty busy with work and not having enough spare time.⁶⁰ Many Rosies recalled feeling exhausted by the end of their shifts, especially if they had long commutes to and from work by streetcar, on foot, or by bicycle in the summer.⁶¹ Claudette worked at Can Car as a rivet chaser for a year before joining the Air Force, and having to walk back and forth for work every day, she found, “All I remember is that I was damn tired.

⁵⁷ Margaret Nixon to Kelly Saxberg, July 2, 1998.

⁵⁸ Brigden, “Joan Brigden – Part 1,” 2:47-3:13.

⁵⁹ Barker, Cooke and McCullough, *Material Traces of War*, 172.

⁶⁰ Godecki and Riddoch, “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” 21:13-21:35.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15:44-15:58; Long and Gibson, “Florence & Alvina – Part 1,” 8:16-8:23; and Nalezty, “Daun Nalezty (nee Kannegiesse),” 0:15-0:28.

All the time I was tired. I was so darn tired.”⁶² Fatigue certainly took a toll on those regularly working the night shift. At first, riveter Gertie Brazier preferred working at night “because everybody was so sleepy and I was wide awake, only because it was something new to me. Then I got just as sleepy as they were!”⁶³ Inspection worker Rhoda McKay also came to dread working nights, saying, “I know I used to hate the 12 o’clock shift... I managed, but the thing was you just get used to working nights and then you had to go back onto days.”⁶⁴ It was not an uncommon sight to find employees using their break times to catch up on much-needed sleep.⁶⁵

Demanding workdays aside, there were many other aspects to employment at Can Car outside of immediate job duties that occupied the day-to-day lives of its workers. By far, the most celebrated was the range of home front efforts arranged by plant management and committees and undertaken enthusiastically by the workforce. Home front efforts had a gendered element because they were often centred within the domestic sphere and involved responsibilities traditionally taken up by women. Furthermore, with their newfound spending power as wartime workers, women were particularly susceptible to scrutiny for how they used their paycheque to support war-related causes or for “selfish” personal investments. The expectation for women workers in wartime industries, like those at Can Car, was to support the war effort around the clock.

From the extensive coverage of Victory Loan Drives in the *Aircrafter* and local newspapers, bond purchasing was the home front effort which received the most fanfare at Can Car. During the Second World War, nationwide Victory Loan Drives were held twice annually to

⁶² Claudette quoted in Wakewich and Smith, “The Politics of ‘Selective’ Memory,” 61.

⁶³ Gertie Brazier and Virginia Turner to Kelly Saxberg, May 1998.

⁶⁴ McKay, “Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 2,” 15:44-16:43.

⁶⁵ Smith and Wakewich, “Regulating Body Boundaries,” 62.

encourage businesses and individuals to invest directly in Canada's war effort through the purchase of Victory Bonds. Bonds could be purchased in denominations of at least \$50 for a minimum 6-year maturity period. Interest rates would depend on the number of years before bonds matured, after which buyers could cash in their bonds to help fund purchases in post-war life. In the meantime, the bond investments were used by the Canadian Government to cover approximately half the total cost of war-related spending.⁶⁶ During the three-week period Victory Loan Drives took place, there were no purchase limits, and to further concentrate spending on bonds, the War Charities Act ensured that "no other organization was permitted to solicit money" to reduce overlap in spending between the growing number of registered war charities.⁶⁷

From the first Victory Loan Drives, the Canadian Car plant in Fort William established itself as a leader in investment goals. During the Fourth Victory Loan Drive in the spring of 1943, it was reported that "when the aircraft builders resolved to back up the Fourth Victory Loan, they did not take any chances about the success of the campaign." The workers at Can Car in Fort William were noted for their creative ways of generating interest in victory bond purchases through interdepartmental rivalries and decorating Helldiver wings arranged in a "V" for victory with their certificates. By the fifth day into the campaign, over 80% of the workforce had already invested a total of \$391,300 out of the objective of \$460,000.⁶⁸ An advertisement later proclaimed that "Can-Car Men and Women Back the Attack" as Fort William employees had invested over \$479,530 in bonds, exceeding their original goal for the drive by \$19,350.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁸ 3,634 Aircraft Workers Buy \$391,300 of Bonds, *FWDTJ*, 1 May 1943.

⁶⁹ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Can-Car Men and Women Back the Attack," advertisement, *FWDTJ*, 13 May 1943.

Publication of the *Aircrafter* began just as the Sixth Victory Loan Drive was ending and Can Car's staff showed no signs of a diminished support for bond purchasing. The cover story of the paper's second issue read, "Canadian Car Employees Lead the Way in Support of The Sixth Victory Loan Drive," accompanied by an image of a crowded sea of employees listening to speakers at the opening rally, held a few weeks earlier in April.⁷⁰ The employees of Can Car gathered in a similar fashion at the closing meeting for The Sixth Victory Loan Drive on 8 May 1944, likely anticipating impressive results, as the initial objective for the drive, set at \$630,000, had already been surpassed only three days into the campaign. In response to the successful start, the plant's Bond Drive Committee set a new target of \$800,000, which was ultimately exceeded once again, as the final figure stood at \$820,000. Speakers at the closing meeting, including the City of Fort William's Chairman of the Sixth Victory Loan Drive, congratulated employees and management at Can Car for their outstanding response to the campaign.

The *Aircrafter* editorial also gave credit to the department canvassers and the Bond Drive Committee, and expressed that,

...the majority of employees are mighty proud of themselves, and rightly so, since never in the history of the local plant has a loan drive been so well received or so well organized... we feel sure this same thanks is today being tendered by our own boys in the front line of the battle, on the high seas, and in the air.⁷¹

The impact on the war effort was echoed by Canadian Car's company president, V.M. Drury, who declared that "such a showing left no doubt in the minds of everyone in Canada that this plant was war conscious..."⁷² A report showing the breakdown of each department's Sixth

⁷⁰ "Canadian Car Employees Lead the Way in Support of The Sixth Victory Loan Drive," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 1.

⁷¹ "Editorial," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 2.

⁷² "Mr. V. M. Drury, President, Visits Local Plant," *Aircrafter*, 20 May 1944, 1.

Victory Loan Drive quotas was printed in *Aircrafter* on 20 May 1944, and the vast majority of departments reached well over 100%. Department 33 (Woodworking) ranked first overall, reaching 238% of their quota, and the runner-up was Department 35 (First Aid) at 229%.⁷³

When the Victory Loan Drive returned for its seventh occasion in the fall of 1944, General Works Manager W.O. Will again stressed the connection between Can Car's work supplying military aircraft and funding the war through bond purchasing. In a letter addressed to employees in *Aircrafter*, he wrote, "I believe all will agree that a great job of building aircraft at this plant has been accomplished since the start of this great war. However, our fight on the home front is comparatively small to the sacrifices which fathers, sons, brothers and sisters of we who are employed in this plant are making, and we must remember we are not being called to offer our lives – we are only asked to lend our money, and I am sure that all will appreciate the fact that every dollar subscribed is the price which we must pay to help secure a victory."⁷⁴

Will's emphasis on making financial sacrifices on behalf of those fighting in the war was echoed by a full-page spread in the same issue showing photographs of former employees from the plant who had joined the Canadian Armed Forces and had been killed, gone missing or taken prisoner of war. Across the top in bold letters, it read, "If You Think You've Done Enough... Read This!" While the message below asked employees to

"pause for a moment and visualize these boys' thoughts as they went into action – they didn't ask us for any personal help, yet in return they gave all that we might live in peace... It is for sacrifices like these that we are asked to support Victory Bond Drives to bring this war to a speedy and victorious conclusion..."⁷⁵

⁷³ "A Consolidated Report Showing the Swell Job Done by the Employees," *Aircrafter*, 20 May 1944, 7.

⁷⁴ "A Message to All Employees," *Aircrafter*, 14 October 1944, 1.

⁷⁵ "If You Think You've Done Enough... Read This!," *Aircrafter*, 14 October 1944, 7.

Beyond personal appeals made in *Aircrafter*, bond purchasing was ingrained so closely into the culture at Can Car that employees were reminded to not only invest the cash they already had on hand, but to consider reserving portions of their incoming paycheque to the cause “and take advantage of the pay-roll deduction plan thereby purchasing that extra bond which will be your way of telling those men overseas that you are right behind them.”⁷⁶ On Can Car paystubs, there were payroll deduction codes specifically assigned to war savings certificates, charities and war loans.⁷⁷

Just as they had months earlier, employees at Can Car responded promptly to the Seventh Victory Bond Drive, which began on 21 October 1944. A giant thermometer keeping track of the plant’s progress was set up at the entrance of the main gate, and each day, the mercury amount would rise in response to the amount of money invested in Victory Bonds. By the third morning, those entering the main gate would see the thermometer level rise past the \$800,000 quota set by the Bond Drive Committee. Within ten days, the mercury in the thermometer completely burst through the top to celebrate the fact that the employees collectively purchased over \$1,000,000 in bonds. In addition to efforts made at the plant, Can Car workers promoted the Victory Bond Drive within the larger community.⁷⁸

To kick off the Seventh Victory Loan Drive in the twin cities, an aerial show was arranged in partnership with the Department of Munitions and Supply, where a Mosquito bomber would be joined by Helldivers and fly over Fort William and Port Arthur to generate excitement over the campaign. The Helldivers were piloted by Can Car test pilots, as well as RCAF and

⁷⁶ “Seventh Victory Loan,” *Aircrafter*, 14 October 1944, 2.

⁷⁷ Canadian Car and Foundry, “Pay Earning Codes and Pay Deduction Codes.”

⁷⁸ “Loan Drive Breaks All Records,” *Aircrafter*, 4 November 1944, 1.

American navy ferry pilots.⁷⁹ The plant's orchestra, string quintet and singers performed at community theatres, such as the Capitol and Orpheum theatre and promotional events, including the employee Victory Loan Dance held at the Royal Edward Hotel.⁸⁰ In the end, the Seventh Victory Loan Campaign at Can Car "created a record in local industries from both the standpoint of amount of money subscribed and in the time taken to reach the amount," with the final tally resting at \$1,100,000.⁸¹

With each passing Victory Loan Drive and an Allied victory nearer in sight, nationwide, the drives' goals became less ambitious in scale and Canadians' motivations for investing in bonds were increasingly based on post-war returns rather than funding the ongoing war effort. Despite the increased spending power of working Canadians, concerns over war-weariness led the federal government to limit the goals of the Sixth Victory Loan Drive and all subsequent campaigns. At the same time, Victory Bonds were increasingly being valued for their use in the post-war years, as "after D-Day, the emphasis in government advertising shifted away from a 'heavy patriotic, emotional appeal' to one based in self-interest. Publicity emphasized the excellent tax-free investment opportunity represented by Victory Bonds that would pay off handsomely in building a post-war life."⁸² The successes and accompanying patriotic sentiment of the Sixth and Seventh Victory Loan Drives at Can Car defied popular assumptions about a diminishing enthusiasm for investing in Victory Bonds. However, the messaging that accompanied Victory Loan Drive appeals towards the end of the war, in 1944 and 1945, began to more closely resemble the trends promoting post-war returns on investment.

⁷⁹ "Mosquito Bomber Aids Fort William's Bond Drive," *Aircrafter*, 28 October 1944, 3.

⁸⁰ "Can-Car's Victory Dance Winds Up Bond Drive," *Aircrafter*, 11 November 1944, 4.

⁸¹ "Loan Drive Breaks All Records," *Aircrafter*, 4 November 1944, 1.

⁸² Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, 31.

The dual benefit of Victory Bonds as a wartime investment as well as a personal investment was made obvious in an advertisement for the Sixth Victory Loan Drive printed in the local newspaper, which read “An extra bond will mean part or all the payment on the things you want to possess or do after the war so- put victory first.”⁸³ In a written appeal addressed to Canadian Car employees, Fort William Works Manager W. O. Will emphasized how Eighth Victory Loan Drive would fund the war effort and post-war opportunities, by stating,

Let us here at Canadian Car approach the Eighth Victory with the same enthusiasm as we have in the past, ever mindful that we are accomplishing a two-fold purpose, in that we are contributing towards a speedy peace, and at the same time investing in future security.⁸⁴

Advertisements printed in *Aircrafter* similarly spoke to the benefit of post-war returns on Victory Bond investments. One read, “Climb On the Bond Wagon with the 8th Victory Loan/ When Your Department Canvasser Visits You Think of Your Future and Invest to the Limit!”⁸⁵

For the Eighth Victory Loan Drive, the plant’s goal was more modest compared to previous drives, with the initial target being set at \$500,000. The General Chairman of the Plant Bond Drive Committee, Earle Ketteridge emphasized the future investment potential of the Victory Bonds by stating that in addition to supplying the armed services with the necessary equipment to win the war, he stated,

Now look on the bonds from a purely business standpoint: Victory Bonds are as good as cash... When this war is over they form a reserve for replacing worn or obsolete equipment, modernizing our home, installing a bathroom and many other things too numerous to mention.⁸⁶

⁸³ Sixth Victory Loan Drive, “An Extra Bond,” advertisement, *Fort William Daily Times-Journal*, April 29, 1944, 7.

⁸⁴ “To All Employees,” *Aircrafter*, 21 April 1945, 3.

⁸⁵ “Climb on the Bond Wagon with the 8th Victory Loan,” *Aircrafter*, 21 April 1945, 2.

⁸⁶ “Chairman of Plant Bond Committee Makes Appeal,” *Aircrafter*, 21 April 1945, 2.

With the plant's track record in mind, unsurprisingly, the Eighth Victory Loan Drive at Can Car surpassed the original goal within the first two days of the campaign.⁸⁷ The grand total of \$681,700 was announced at the plant on VE-Day, 8 May 1945, when Allied victory was declared in Europe. Guest speakers at the closing meeting encouraged employees to keep investing in bonds and home front efforts to push for victory in the Pacific moving forward.⁸⁸

In between Victory Loan Drives, Can Car's staff continually invested in bonds and other war-related programs. Outside of work, Joan Brigden volunteered as a "Miss Canada" along with a few of her colleagues from the plant. Miss Canada volunteers sold 25-cent War Savings Stamps, which could be used to fill a card with sixteen stamp spots (a value of \$4 total) and then exchanged with the Department of Finance for a War Savings Certificate. These certificates matured after seven years and returned one dollar for every four invested.⁸⁹ Brigden recalled that in their spare time,

We used to run around and sell these 25-cent stamps to help the war effort... We would show up at baseball games. We had a little blue pinafore, little (two cornered) hats like the servicemen wore... with a little brass button in the front ...I felt very patriotic at that time of my life.⁹⁰

In general, it was expected that any spare cash should be used to invest in the war effort. A small ad printed in *Aircrafter* inquired whether any employees had spare golf clubs they were willing to sell to co-workers interested in playing the sport. The ad suggested negotiating a sale and "In this way you would be helping some fellow worker to participate in a grand old game, while at the same time find yourself some ready cash with which to buy more bonds or War

⁸⁷ "Eighth Victory Loan Goes Over the Top," *Aircrafter*, 5 May 1945, 1.

⁸⁸ "Employees Re-Dedicate Themselves at Huge Bond Rally," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1945, 1.

⁸⁹ Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, 31.

⁹⁰ Brigden, "Joan Brigden – Part 1," 13:32-14:00.

Saving Stamps.”⁹¹ In addition to the draws held during the Victory Loan Drives, Victory Bonds and War Savings Certificates were also awarded through raffles at company recreational events. At the Employees’ Picnic held at Chippewa Park on 2 July 1944, guests could buy a ticket for 25 cents for a chance to win one of ten \$50 Victory Bonds drawn after the last event of the day.⁹²

Despite the collective achievement of Can Car employees in exceeding Victory Loan Drive targets each time, there was an additional emphasis on encouraging women workers to invest. Under the “Breezy Bits” column in the *Feminine Touch* section of *Aircrafter*, which usually contained short pieces of advice directed at women workers, one piece read, “Congratulations to the young bride who told us she was putting her wedding check in Victory Bonds. Smart girl!”⁹³ Photo features in the *Aircrafter* congratulated employees who purchased large bond denominations to serve as role models for others to consider investing as well.



Figure 11. Mrs. E. Loiselle purchasing bonds during the Sixth Victory Loan Drive. *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944.

⁹¹ “Have You Any Golf Clubs For Sale?,” *Aircrafter*, 27 May 1944, 6.

⁹² “Chippewa Park Site of Employees Picnic,” *Aircrafter*, 24 June 1944, 8.

⁹³ “Breezy Bits,” *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 4.

On the cover page story for the Sixth Victory Loan Drive, machinist Mrs. E. Loiselle was pictured accepting her bond certificate, having invested \$500. The caption read in part,

With her husband overseas with the Royal Canadian Engineers for the past one and a half years, Mrs. Loiselle finds time not only to look after her little two-year-old son, but also to give her services to producing Helldivers... leaving no doubt that this lady is "Victory First" conscious.⁹⁴

Another photo feature was printed in the *Feminine Touch* section under the title "Putting Victory First" showing Mrs. E. Eastveld from the Quarantine Stores department, who invested \$700 in Victory Bonds. Similar to the caption for Loiselle's photo, the one for Eastveld mentions, "Her husband is a member of the R.C.A.F. Mrs. Eastveld is doing her part for the war effort by helping turn out 'Helldivers' while at the same time takes care of her baby son."⁹⁵ Although doubling the use of Victory Bonds for both war-related and personal investments became normalized towards the end of the war, it did not seem coincidental that the photo captions in *Aircrafter* focused on the women's husbands in service and the notion of putting victory first. In another article, women were overtly discouraged from spending money on themselves or their households, which could have been otherwise dedicated to Victory Bonds. The column right next to Eastveld's picture contained a lengthy story with the headline warning, "The Grablins Will Get You if You Don't Watch Out!" The story described the "all too familiar sight" of walking into a store to find dozens of female shoppers clamouring over one another to grab at the products on display. It explained that their behaviour is the result of a phenomenon called "buying fever,"

⁹⁴ "Canadian Car Employees Lead the Way in Support of The Sixth Victory Loan Drive," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 1.

⁹⁵ "Putting Victory First" *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 4.

which causes wives to plead with their husbands to trade in their Victory bonds in exchange for frivolous purchases. The article advised

If you're thinking of selling your bond for a new rug or new paper for the living room – DON'T... Remember, too, when Bill comes marching home, he'll be looking about to see what kind of a job you've been doing on the home front.⁹⁶

Paradoxically, in the next week's issue of *Aircrafter*, women were asked in the *Feminine Touch*, "Are you Going to Finish a Post-War Home?" Readers were reminded to "Plan now for the future" and that "Decorating is fun! ... Make your living room a soft quiet restful room that you and your guests will enjoy."⁹⁷

Victory Gardening was another popular national home front effort as Canadians could supplement their diets through harvests from home, and, to a lesser extent, community gardens, meaning that more resources could be supplied for the war overseas. In *Food Will Win the War*, Ian Mosby explained that maintaining Victory Gardens was a home front effort that allowed all members of the family to participate.⁹⁸ However, evidence from *Aircrafter* suggested that women were primarily responsible for the success of Victory Gardens and certainly for getting the most out of their yields through food preparation and preservation. While tips for gardening, such as pest management and crop selection, appeared in the general news sections of the paper, they were just as frequently found in the *Feminine Touch* section.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ "The Grablins Will Get You if You Don't Watch Out!," *Aircrafter*, 12 May 1944, 4.

⁹⁷ "Are You Going to Finish a Post-War Home?," *Aircrafter*, 20 May 1944, 4.

⁹⁸ Ian Mosby, *Food Will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front* (Vancouver: UBC Press & Kent State University Press, 2014), 104.

⁹⁹ See "Control of Cabbage Maggots in Garden," *Aircrafter*, 27 May 1944, 4; "Wartime Garden Saboteur," *Aircrafter*, 17 June 1944, 4; "Blitz Technique on Garden Weeds," *Aircrafter*, 24 June 1944, 4; and "That Victory Garden of Yours," 2 June 1945, 4.

In the summer of 1944, one department at Can Car raised a Victory Garden at work to add fresh vegetables to their lunches. However, the bracketed inclusion of men in the announcement from *Aircrafter* suggested it was mostly women participating in this special effort. The short story in *Aircrafter* read, “Employees at the 102nd have gone in for a Victory garden in a big way. Getting to work twenty or thirty minutes ahead of their regular starting time in the morning, these girls (and men) put in the time digging the ground and planting the seed. The odd spare minutes during the lunch period is also used to tend to this garden, and the fruits of their labours are a wonder to behold.”¹⁰⁰ Another example of Victory Gardening being ultimately left up to women can be found in a *Feminine Touch* column entitled “Mothers Can’t Do Everything.” It advised that if children were skipping out on their gardening chores at home, mothers should allow them to tend to the onions, carrots, lettuce, or similar plants that require minimal effort and are practically guaranteed to be successful.¹⁰¹

On top of bringing food from the garden to the table, women were also expected to be responsible for meal planning and preparation. The bounty of recipes and nutritional advice directed at women in the *Feminine Touch* section of *Aircrafter* reveals how women were asked to adapt their existing domestic responsibilities to a wartime climate and as wartime workers. The food preparation advice shared in *Aircrafter* promoted convenience, accessibility, and nutritional value, so women could perform both their work and domestic duties without sacrificing one for the other. In the 20 May 1944, issue of *Aircrafter*, a large part of the *Feminine Touch* was dedicated to meal planning advice specifically for women workers. The opening paragraph of the article spoke to the double responsibility women workers had by saying that proper meal

¹⁰⁰ “Can-Car Employees Have Victory Garden,” *Aircrafter*, 17 June 1944, 1.

¹⁰¹ “Mothers Can’t Do Everything,” *Aircrafter*, 10 June 1944, 6.

planning "...enables the war worker who comes off shift and turns into mother and housekeeper, to produce wholesome satisfying meals on short order and with a minimum expenditure of energy."¹⁰² The article offered time-saving tips which also aimed to get the most mileage out of prepared meals by suggesting that women cook large portions of food on their days off, which could be served as leftovers over multiple days or easily repurposed into new meals, especially for the work lunchpail.

Diet-related health advice was frequently offered to women through the articles featured in the *Feminine Touch*, which also attempted to appeal to both industrial worker and homemaker roles. On 3 February 1945, a large cartoon printed on the *Feminine Touch* touted the importance of eating a complete breakfast every morning before work. The cartoon showed three different scenarios, where a worker ate no breakfast and collapsed on the floor during their shift, a poor breakfast had the worker slumped over the machinery, and a good breakfast had the worker powering the machine with a smile on their face.¹⁰³ If readers were not convinced that a complete breakfast was in their best interest to maintain enough energy to get through the workday, an article on the same page advised that diet is the key to a woman's "charm," good health and appearance, so she is able to entertain guests in the evenings after work.¹⁰⁴ Similar encouragement for women to be responsible for diet and food preparation could even be found in the union newspaper.

In the first issue of *The Effort*, while explaining the importance of appealing to the women workers at Can Car to join the union, the discussion suddenly shifted to women having

¹⁰² "Plan to Eat," *Aircrafter*, 20 May 1944, 4.

¹⁰³ "Which is You?," *Aircrafter*, 3 February 1945, 4. See also a "Feminine Touch" article offering similar advice: "Energy, Efficiency are Products of Good Breakfasts," *Aircrafter*, 9 June 1945, 4.

¹⁰⁴ "Good Diet Builds Best Foundation for Charm," *Aircrafter*, 3 February 1945, 4.

the responsibility to look after their own health and well-being to be optimal workers. Again, women's diet was framed in relation to both roles as workers and homemakers, as *The Effort* article was followed by a recipe for a sandwich shaped like a butterfly to serve while entertaining guests at home.¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, the work and home responsibilities assigned to women during the Second World War existed both to optimize support for the war effort but also to reduce the overall disruption of traditional gender roles. While women at Can Car and wartime industries across Canada defied gendered norms by working in traditionally male spheres, once the war had ended, the vast majority were expected to give up their jobs and find work within traditionally feminine fields or exit the workforce completely.

¹⁰⁵ "Women In Industry," *The Effort* (February 1942), 4.

Conclusion: Rosies in the Post-War and Lifelong Impacts of Wartime Work

The demand for military aircraft instantly plummeted when VJ-Day was declared on 15 August 1945 and Can Car management in Fort William received instructions that “all aircraft contracts in this plant have been terminated and all productive work on these contracts is to be terminated immediately.” The sudden cancellation of contracts triggered a massive wave of dismissals, most of which occurred on 17 August 1945. On this day, approximately 3,000 employees were given a week’s pay in lieu of a week’s National Selective Service notice and exited the plant by noon. Upwards of 700 subcontractor employees’ jobs were also affected.¹ Less than a week later, on 21 August 1945, 600 further dismissals were made.²

Over the course of nearly five 12-hour days between 21 and 25 August, terminated employees were scheduled to pick up their final paycheque and receive clearance from the National Selective Service at the Fort William Armouries in Downtown Fort William.³ In all, the workforce was diminished to fewer than 1,500 employees.⁴ Company-wide, Can Car closed and sold most of its facilities shortly after the war had ended and the plant in Fort William transitioned to bus assembly. Can Car officials stated that the aircraft contract cancellations would not “in any way affect work in the bus project. It is expected that the total employment on the bus project will gradually increase until peak production is reached, which should be approximately the end of 1945.”⁵ Units in the women’s staff house, Winston Hall, were swiftly

¹ “Plane Orders Ended; Can Car Releases 3,000,” *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* (hereafter *FWDTJ*), 17 August 1945.

² “Cancar Layoff Reaches 3600,” *FWDTJ*, 21 August 1945.

³ “Notice to All Personnel Laid Off from Canadian Car & Foundry Company Limited,” *FWDTJ*, 20 August 1945.

⁴ Gordon Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History 1912-1992* (Thunder Bay: Bombardier Inc., 1995), 96.

⁵ “Plane Orders Ended; Can Car Releases 3,000,” *FWDTJ*, 17 August 1945.

converted into 76 three or four-room suites for returning servicemen and their families,⁶ and a tenant's committee was organized by early 1946.⁷ In the 20 years since the plant's reopening, Fort William produced over 3,500 finished aircraft, in addition to component parts for thousands more.⁸ Can Car contributed to a significant spike in employment in transportation equipment manufacturing in the twin cities of Fort William and Port Arthur, a sector which accounted for 24% of the total local labour force during the Second World War.⁹

In the summer of 1946, cutbacks on staff at the plant and the fall in output of three buses per day down to two sparked rumours that Can Car was also going to cease production on the Brill buses and the plant would be shut down once again. However, the Vice President of the company, L. McCoy, told the Mayor of Fort William, Garfield Anderson, that "the company had spent a great deal of money in getting the Fort William plant into production and the firm was satisfied with the result."¹⁰ The Fort William plant maintained a staff of around 1,500 into the 1950s,¹¹ and had few post-war aviation projects. After cutbacks at Can Car, the manufacturing industry at the Lakehead continued to diminish, but growth in the pulp and paper, service and trade sectors outweighed the number of jobs lost. Reflective of the post-war baby boom across Canada, twin city demographics showed a more balanced gender ratio and a growing population due to the increased number and size of families.¹²

⁶ "Conversion of Women's Home To Suites Urged," *FWDTJ*, 5 September 1945.

⁷ "The Committee Report," *The Winston Hall Bugle Call*, 6 March 1946.

⁸ David D. Kemp, "Can-Car: The Aviation Years," *Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society Papers and Records 22* (1994): 60.

⁹ James Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," in *Thunder Bay: From Rivalry to Unity*, ed. Thorold J. Tronrud and A. Ernest Epp (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 1995; 2008), 54.

¹⁰ "Cancar Won't Close, Anderson Assured," *Port Arthur News-Chronicle* (hereafter *PANC*), 30 July 1946.

¹¹ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 98.

¹² Stafford, "A Century of Growth at the Lakehead," 52.

In the immediate post-war, women married at a higher frequency, especially at very young ages. The marriage rate for fifteen- to nineteen-year-old girls more than doubled between 1937 and 1954, from 30 in 1,000 to 62 in 1,000. Despite the growing number of marriages, the percentage of gainfully employed married women in Canada fell from around 35% in 1944 to 30% by 1951.¹³ Nationwide, women's representation in the paid labour force peaked in 1944 at 33.5%, dipped once the war ended, and continued to fall until 1954, hitting its lowest at 23.6%. It wouldn't be until 1966 that women's employment rate bounced back to its 1945 level.¹⁴

The end-of-war dismissals had a profound impact on women's employment at the Fort William plant, most noticeably on the shop floor. Only three out of 1,200 women working on the shop floor avoided the mass layoffs in the summer of 1945.¹⁵ Welder Alvena Gibson was the only female wartime hire who continued working at Can Car until retirement. She worked a total of 38 years and retired in 1978, at age 65.¹⁶ Another experienced welder, Frances Ronecki, first hired on 17 December 1940, remained at Can Car for over a decade in total. Ronecki made a brief leave for health reasons beginning on 2 June 1950, but she returned on 30 April 1951 and stayed for almost another full year.¹⁷

When Margaret Cook began working at Can Car the day after her sixteenth birthday in September 1940, she only planned to stay until she was 18 and able to go to nursing school. However, she became a lead hand for upwards of 20 workers in the electrical department and

¹³ Ruth Roach Pierson, *"They're Still Women After All": The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1986), 216.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁵ Burkowski, *Can-Car: A History*, 90.

¹⁶ Pamela Wakewich and Helen Smith, "The Politics of 'Selective' Memory: Re-Visioning Canadian Women's Wartime Work in the Public Record," *Oral History* 34, no. 2 (2006): 64. Florence Long and Alvina Gibson, "Florence & Alvina – Part 2," interview by Kelly Saxberg, *Rosies of the North*, n.d., Accessed 10 April 2026, audio, 11:32-11:46, <https://rosiesofthenorth.ca/rosie-interviews/>.

¹⁷ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section R, Card #198-199.

enjoyed the work so much that she stayed for the length of the war.¹⁸ Luckily, Cook was able to evade the dismissals at the war's end and continued working at the plant until a short-term layoff in January 1948. During her time away, she saw an ad for a job at Haggglunds Lumber and Fuel, which was much closer to her home, and she worked there until its closure in April 1982.¹⁹

It is also worth highlighting a small group of women welders, who were among the earliest wartime hires, who made post-war stints at Can Car. These include Florence Long, who returned to work between 3 December 1945 to 25 February 1946, and again in April 1946;²⁰ Marion Denison, who continued right after the war from 19 August 1945 to 4 September 1946;²¹ Eva Howe returned on 15 April 1946 and 1 June 1946;²² and Anne Warkentin worked from 6 February 1946 to 13 August 1946, and again between 11 March 1952 and 13 May 1954.²³ Aside from such exceptional cases, women's representation at Can Car had reverted much to how it had been in the late 1930s, following traditional gendered divisions of labour. The vast majority of the women who stayed at Can Car past the 1945 layoffs, or those hired in the latter half of the 1940s and early 1950s, worked in the offices as clerks, typists, stenographers and blueprint workers.²⁴ Outside of the offices, women could still be found in sewing and fabrics, first aid, and cleaning, either as charwomen or coach cleaners for the buses being manufactured at the plant.²⁵

¹⁸ Rosies of the North, *Chronicle-Journal*, 10 September 1998.

¹⁹ Margaret Nixon to Kelly Saxberg, July 2, 1998.

²⁰ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section M, Card #740-741.

²¹ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #96-97.

²² Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section H, Card #422-423.

²³ Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section W, Card #7-8.

²⁴ For examples of employee cards of women office workers in the post-war period, see Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section A, Card #188; Section B, Card #41-42; Section B, Card #117; Section C, Card #141-142; Section C, Card #502-503; Section D, Card #231-232; Section E, Card #94-95; Section J, Card #17-18; Section K, Card #40; Section T, Card #2; Section V, 61-62; Section W, Card #63-64; Section W, Card #8; and Section Z, Card #27.

²⁵ For examples of employee cards of women working in fabrics, first aid, or cleaning in the post-war period, see Sewing and fabric workers: Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #335-336; Section H, Card #1; Section P, Card #21-22; Section P, Card #172-173; Section P, Card #243-244; Section P, Card #343-344; Section T, Card #195-196; and Section V, Card #31-32. See also McCallum, "Maisie McCallum (nee

The near overnight disappearance of most female employees at Can Car, especially those working in traditionally male-dominated roles, did not come as a surprise, given the expectations around women's right to work in the post-war. There was a prevailing sense among women workers that they would be the first to lose their jobs once the war ended, as servicemen took priority when returning to work. Some women did not mind and were eager to take on homemaking roles after the war. For example, when asked in *Aircrafter* "What are your post-war ambitions?" Mrs. C. M. answered, "After this war is over I intend to go domestic, but definitely! My husband will be home again and I'm going to make a good home for him."²⁶ Joan Brigden did not think she had a future in the aircraft industry beyond the war. There was little guidance counselling in school that pointed women towards jobs outside of gendered norms.²⁷ Margaret Gandier thought that working at Can Car during the war didn't change her mind about women's work or gender inequality at the time. She did not realize until later in life, for example, that all her schoolteachers growing up were unmarried, because married women, and especially pregnant women, were expected to stop teaching. She explained, "It seems to me in those days you had a job, and then you got married, and then you had children, and that's just the way things went for most of us."²⁸ Along similar lines, Liddy Kondakow remembered that when the war ended, she felt it was not unfair that the women were laid off because men were supposed to be providers for the family, and she never questioned otherwise.²⁹

Rushworth)," 8:51-9:15. Nurses: Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section A, Card #169; Section C, Card #34-35; Section C, Card #479-480; and Section G, Card #19. Cleaners: Canadian Car and Foundry, "Rosie Employee Cards," Section D, Card #8-9; Section H, Card #399; Section H, Card #451; Section R, Card #281; Section S, Card #21-22; Section W, Card #33-34; and Section W, Card #215-216.

²⁶ "What Are Your Post War Ambitions?," *Aircrafter*, 30 September 1944, 3.

²⁷ Joan Brigden, "Joan Brigden – Part 1," 12:00-13:31.

²⁸ Margaret Gandier, "Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) – Part 1," 9:38-11:32.

²⁹ Kondakow, "Ledwiga 'Liddy' Kondakow (nee Kwiatkowski) – Part 2," 15:30-16:46.

Throughout the war, women were being asked to see their work in war industries, or outside of the home in general, as temporary. There was a popular notion that if women made homemaking less of a priority or abandoned the role altogether, there would be larger societal repercussions. In February 1943, Dr. Charlotte Whitton, who served as a consultant for multiple Canadian government wartime boards, came to the Lakehead to meet with local women's organizations. Despite her recognition that 1 million Canadian women at the time were gainfully employed and rapidly filling the manpower gap, she worried that in drawing on womanpower any further,

We must either shift women from non-essential pursuits or take them from the homes – and it is the home that we are fighting for... Women with responsibilities in the home cannot be moved without grave effects on the life of the country.³⁰

Later that year, an article appeared in the *Fort William Daily Times-Journal* that envisioned a post-war world where the foundation of lasting peace and healthy communities would be rooted in the household with women taking on a leading role. Through homemaking, women would instill values within their families, which would extend to society at large, “for strong, selfless children will mean strong, selfless men and women in government, business and industry.”³¹

The right of married women to continue working became increasingly called into question as the war ended and servicemen returned home. When early layoffs began at the plant in 1945, an anonymous Can Car worker, referring to herself as “married and 21,” wrote a letter to the editor for the local newspaper suggesting the employment of men, especially returning servicemen and young, single women should be prioritized over married women like herself. She explained that she was among “the first to receive notice that my services were no longer needed.

³⁰ “Women Last Reserve Says Dr. Whitton,” *FWDTJ*, 8 February 1943.

³¹ “Women and the Post-War World,” *FWDTJ*, 20 December 1943.

Am I kicking? Certainly not. I am a married woman with my husband in the service and able to support me.”³² She mentioned having worked at the Can Car plant for the past four years and was happy to support the war effort, as well as build financial savings for the future. She argued that in order to improve some of the prominent social issues at the Lakehead, it would be essential to “keep our young people employed and the married women who have been fortunate enough to have a home and family a chance to make a real home for husbands and children, who have, in many ways been neglected.”³³

Marriage had a particularly strong influence on the post war lives of the Rosies of the North, given how common it was for women to meet their life partners while working at Can Car.³⁴ For instance, Nina Godecki met her husband at Can Car after being paired together to do riveting³⁵ and Magaret Gandier recalled, “I had to pass Don’s bench every time I went to the washroom. He caught my eye and apparently, I caught his.”³⁶ As a matter of personal preference, some women did not mind staying at home after marrying. Carol was initially attracted to the higher pay offered at Can Car but found she did not like working in an industrial setting. She met her husband at the plant and when he proposed, she felt relieved when he told her she did not have to work and, remembered thinking, “Boy that was music to my ears... I could stay home and bake and cook and do all the things that I like to do.”³⁷

In June 1944, the fifty-first annual convention of the National Council of Women was held in Port Arthur at the Prince Arthur Hotel, and the first presentation was given by Mrs. Frank

³² “Married and 21,” letter to the editor, *FWDTJ*, 7 April 1945.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Godecki and Riddoch “Nina & Mary – Part 2,” 13:24-13:40; Nalezty, “Daun Nalezty (nee Kannegiesse),” 3:19-3:42; and Margaret Gandier, “Margaret Gandier (nee Kent) – Part 1,” 7:05-8:13. See also Wakewich and Smith, “The Politics of ‘Selective’ Memory,” 64-65.

³⁵ Godecki and Riddoch “Nina & Mary – Part 1,” 2:07-3:10.

³⁶ “Rosies of the North,” *Chronicle-Journal*, 10 September 1998.

³⁷ Wakewich and Smith, “The Politics of ‘Selective’ Memory,” 65.

Ritchie on the topic of “Married Women Outside the Home.” Ritchie argued it was highly important to reaffirm married women’s right to choose work outside of the home, especially given that one out of four Canadian working women at the time were married. She argued that it could be possible for married women and mothers to make better contributions in their careers if they were relieved of the total responsibility of homemaking. Instead, Ritchie believed that maintaining a home and raising a family should be a true partnership between husband and wife, saying,

It is tragic that women discover their economic potentialities during a war period, but having achieved satisfaction in work well done... they will not be content to go back to a life of partial idleness or ineffectiveness. ... in no other fields is there such public prejudice against two salaries going into the home.³⁸

The National Council of Women concurred that every woman should “choose where and at what she will work. Further, we deprecate the tendency, among women or wherever it may occur, to discriminate against the employment of married women.”³⁹ Despite the efforts of the National Council of Women, employee card records indicate that most women who worked at Can Car in the post-war were unmarried when they were hired (with marital status being single, widowed or separated). Comparatively, very few women were already married when they were hired or continued working after marriage.⁴⁰

³⁸ “Right of Wives to Work Defended at Convention,” *Fort William Daily Times Journal*, June 17, 1944.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ For example of post-war employee cards of married women, see Married when hired (or re-hired): Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section F, Card #128-129; Section I, Card #13-14; Section K, Card #330-331; Section K, Card #339-340; Section M, Card #6-7; Section M, Card #10-11; Section M, Card #11; Section R, Card #85-86; Section S, Card #126-127; and Section P, Card #268-269. Continued working after marriage: Canadian Car and Foundry, “Rosie Employee Cards,” Section C, Card #205-206; Section C, Card #463-464; Section D, Card #49; Section G, Card #168-169; Section H, Card #254-255; Section K, Card #77-78; Section L, Card #127; Section R, Card #168-169; Section S, Card #45-46; Section S, Card #635-636; Section T, Card #176-177; and Section T, Card #251.

Although the post-war rhetoric concerning women's right to work was pervasive, many women, especially those who had already worked before the war, indicated they would have liked to have continued working at the plant or in similar roles in the post-war. Across the province, women employed in wartime industries expressed a similar wish to remain in the labour force after the war's end. In early 1944, Canadian Senator Iva Fallis found that upwards of 80% of women consulted in a group of Ontario factories indicated they preferred to continue working in the post-war. For this reason, she advocated that "returned men should have first priority on jobs but after that there should be no sex discrimination."⁴¹

The Rosies of the North cited the "higher pay, more clearly defined job expectations, more employee autonomy, and workplace camaraderie" they experienced at Can Car as reasons to stay.⁴² Mary Riddoch previously worked as a waitress for a restaurant in Geraldton, Ontario, for 80 cents per day, where there were "only about two or three single girls" in town. She thought her time at Can Car was more enjoyable because she made higher wages, starting at 50 cents per hour, and became more independent working and living away from her mother.⁴³ Since the jobs commonly done by the Rosies prior to the war, such as work on family farms or domestic jobs, were much more isolating, they found a sense of community and friendship at work, unlike ever before at Can Car.⁴⁴ As Maisie McCallum put it,

I was working in a plant with a lot of other people. It was different than the type of work I was doing (before the war). You always had company and friends. Whereas if you were

⁴¹ "Equal Opportunity for Women Urged," *FWD TJ*, 3 February 1944.

⁴² Pamela Wakewich, Helen Smith, and Jeanette Lynes, "Women's Wartime Work and Identities: Women Workers at Canadian Car and Foundry Co. Limited, Fort William, Ontario, 1938-1945," in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O'Rourke (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 413.

⁴³ Godecki and Riddoch "Nina & Mary – Part 2," 17:42-18:36.

⁴⁴ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 2," 20:25-21:11.

working housework, you were alone.⁴⁵

Rhoda McKay, who previously worked on a farm before the war, enjoyed hosting weekend parties with coworkers at her family's camp when her parents were away.⁴⁶ Although she was able to find another job soon after the war had ended, the mass layoffs at Can Car had a heavy effect on McKay, who expressed,

I really felt lost because I came here and didn't know anybody and then got into the Canada Car and was able to meet many, many people that we socialized with and worked with all the time, and when the plant closed, was lost... You just didn't know where to turn from there.⁴⁷

In their interviews with Rosies, Wakewich and Smith observed that upon hearing news of the war's end, many women remembered feeling "pulled between relief at the end of conflict and sorrow, and regret at being dismissed from the jobs from which they derived self-respect."⁴⁸ The Rosies of the North took pride in the work they had done at Can Car, both in relation to the larger war effort and in terms of a personal sense of accomplishment. One of the women they spoke with, Nadia, who worked as a riveter, said that her favourite part about her work at Can Car was "the satisfaction ... when you went on something and it was finished and they checked it out and everything was perfect... I really, really liked riveting."⁴⁹ Nadia went on to work as a department store clerk after the war, but continued to take pride in her work as a riveter. She liked that her children were interested in the fact that she did riveting work because it was not something that a lot of other mothers had done. Another woman, Catherine, enjoyed her job welding at Can Car and, after the war, she continued to do welding projects, like creating miniature houses, and held

⁴⁵ McCallum, "Maisie McCallum (nee Rushworth)," 5:32-5:46.

⁴⁶ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 1," 3:08-3:44.

⁴⁷ McKay, "Rhoda McKay (nee Wise) – Part 2," 6:07-6:44.

⁴⁸ Wakewich and Smith, "The Politics of 'Selective' Memory," 62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

onto them for the rest of her life as a souvenir.⁵⁰ Nora Elrick also kept her lunch pail as a souvenir from her time at Can Car. Her lunch pail had a name tag riveted onto it by one of her friends, and all her friends etched their signatures into it.⁵¹

The Rosies' passion for their wartime work remained strong as years passed. On 29 August 1998, a reunion dinner for the Rosies of the North was held at the Port Arthur Prosvita Ukrainian Cultural Centre. The reunion coincided with the Thunder in the Air show at the Thunder Bay Airport, and filming was done for the *Rosies of the North* documentary. The memorabilia preserved over the years took centre stage as attendees were asked to bring photos and souvenirs like jewelry made at the plant using steel and plexiglass. A series of displays at the reunion also included photographs and posters from the plant, a scrapbook of the women who stayed at Winston Hall, components from the wartime aircraft, and a model Helldiver.⁵²

The event was organized by former employees Ione Forsyth, Rhoda McKay, Joan Brigden, Alice Siddal, Margaret Gandier, Mary Riddoch and Isabel Spicer.⁵³ Joan Brigden was “amazed at how enthusiastic all these women are.”⁵⁴ By June, she was expecting that at least 120 guests would attend, some travelling all the way from the East and West coasts of Canada.⁵⁵ Shortly before the reunion, Brigden announced the attendance was expected to be around 250 and tickets for the event sold out. She emphasized the significance of the event, stating

Fifty years have come and gone since these still vital and active people worked together at the Canadian Car & Foundry Ltd... This spirit of energy is still there in the shining 70s

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Stacey Barker, Krista Cooke, and Molly McCullough, *Material Traces of War: Stories of Canadian Women and Conflict, 1914-1945* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2021), 166. See also Lunch Box, 1941-1945, artifact number 2007.94.2.1, Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau, Quebec, <https://www.historymuseum.ca/collections/artifact/2092863>

⁵² “Canadian Car and Foundry staff to reunite,” *Chronicle-Journal*, August 23, 1998.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Reunion coming up – Can Car women getting together Aug. 29,” *Chronicle-Journal*, June 23, 1998.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

plus faces; the Cancar Reunion of the ‘Rosies of the North’ is a one-time event. It will never happen again.⁵⁶

The number of Rosies of the North keen on engaging with their memories of Can Car even decades later is a testament to how the impacts of war work lasted a lifetime. Although traditional gendered labour roles were quickly reestablished in the immediate post-war across Canada, women’s successful adaptability in male-dominated occupations during the war certainly defied preconceived notions of what constituted men’s versus women’s work. The Rosies proved themselves as capable workers, despite their contributions often going underappreciated in the social climate and media accounts of the time. As a wartime workplace, the environment at Can Car was not free from harassment, stereotyping, excessive supervision, unequal pay and other drains on morale, which disproportionately affected female employees. Yet, in the face of these obstacles, the Rosies of the North still managed to balance working in a male-dominated industrial setting, existing domestic responsibilities, and home front efforts, all the while building thousands of aircraft that were instrumental in the Allies securing victory during the Second World War.

⁵⁶ “Joan E. Brigden,” letter to the editor, *Chronicle-Journal*, August 28, 1998.

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