

JENNIE WEATHERFORD AND STELLA PIERCE



WORKING WOMEN OF WORLD WAR I

Most Americans know ‘Rosie the Riveter’ women worked in factories during the Second World War. Less well known is the story of the mothers of these workers. There are many stories about the women who took on work during the First World War to free men for another war effort.

Women have always worked outside of the home in such occupations as store clerks, schoolteachers, nurses, and mid-wives. Women didn’t normally work in many other occupations until a need arose. Just as the Civil War forced many women into heavy farm work because husbands, sons and fathers were in military service, Rosie's mother moved into similar jobs during World War I.

This war brought America to its feet. There is a statue of an American Doughboy outside of the Veterans Administration hospital in Muskogee’s Honor Heights. Doughboys were the GIs of the First World War. Over one million doughboys shipped from American ports for service in France by the war's end. More than twice as many went overseas in military service while America fielded a military force of nearly five million men.

Months earlier, these soldiers were working on farms and in factories. To fill the shoes and boots of servicemen, women began working in non-traditional jobs. One example is Miss Jennie Weatherford, who worked at the Muskogee Garage and became the first woman automobile mechanic in Muskogee in March 1918. She wore "bloomers" while she worked and reportedly left her facial powder at home.

Just as Miss Weatherford worked as a grease monkey, the federal government promoted hiring women. Government altered its policy so that women became eligible for jobs as rural mail carriers in 1918. It was the first time since 1911 that women could apply for these jobs. The Post Office held the first examination for them on April 27.

Miss Stella Pierce of Braggs was the first woman in Oklahoma to pass the examination. She received her appointment as a mail carrier for a rural route in late July. Born about 1900, she was the daughter of Mrs. Charles Pierce. Soon after the end of the war, she became a stenographer with a hardware firm in Muskogee.

Even the railroads employed women in traditional male occupations. Railroads played a major role in shipping of men and material during the war. The United States Army focused its recruitment on railroad men for active service. In filling their boots, the local newspaper reported that women worked in railroad roundhouses and in the railroad blacksmith shops. Before the First World War, women rarely worked in these railroad departments. Supervisors reported the work performed by women to be satisfactory after the war ended.

Despite their successful work record, returning soldiers replaced many women workers. The balance of women working outside of home returned to a more normal level until daughters named "Rosie" were called to serve during the 1940's.