

## **Excerpts from Phone Interview with Dr. Carrie Brown, October 13, 2013**

**Interviewer:** Ok, so my first question is, do you think the employers' view of women laborers changed during World War One?

**Brown:** I do. I do for many of them. I think that we know that in some industries, the employers wanted to keep the women and in other industries they did not. It's not like it's all one way or the other, but we do know that for example, in one of my chapters, [of Rosie's Mom] it talks about a company called Johnson Lamson in Springfield, Vermont and the head people there tried very hard to keep the women...I think your question is more about not did they keep their jobs or lose their jobs but did attitudes change, and I think attitudes changed a lot, just in the idea of what women could actually do-whether you wanted them to do it or not is a separate question. Women demonstrated that they could do a lot of things that no one expected them to be able to do-running machines, for example. So there was a lot learned by the employers about things women were good at and could do that people had just assumed that they never wanted to do.

**Interviewer:** So my next question is, what do you think the greatest impact of the war was on women?

**Brown:** I think that it's probably the fact that it helped women get the vote, because they've been trying-women had been trying for a hundred years. But when it mostly was a matter of where well-educated, well-to-do women tried to get the vote, they didn't succeed. It was finally during the war, when President Wilson said, "Women had been our partners in this war," and they you know, basically earned it. Woodrow Wilson originally had not been in favor of women's suffrage before the war and even though there were a lot of intelligent and powerful women pushing for it. .. Of course it has made a huge difference in the lives of women in this country. It had made a big difference immediately in their respectability as citizens.-finally they were considered full citizens. But also, it gave them a greater opportunity to know what was happening politically. At the time it wasn't even considered decent for a woman to speak out in public at a meeting or on a street corner-it was very disrespectful.

**Interviewer:** So what role did increasing technologies play during the war?

**Brown:** It had a large role, because it did allow women to do jobs that previously required much more physical strength than most women had, although there were a lot of women who demonstrated that they were stronger than people would have thought. Of course the strongest women have always been stronger than the weakest men. That's one reason why

it doesn't make sense to discriminate by gender for jobs. The smartest women-even when they didn't have much of an education-were smarter than a lot of men. Technology certainly allowed for women to do jobs that previously they wouldn't have been able to do. Both in physical strength and in skill level because most women did not spend enough time in the workforce and have long apprenticeships and develop a lot of skill in a job;they had generally been thought of as having to do unskilled work, but new machinery made it possible for much more complicated tasks to be done by less skilled workers. So you could take a person who didn't know how to run a machine and-20 or 30 years earlier would have to had a great deal of skill-and with changes in technology you could train them in a couple of weeks to run that machinery. So technology had a big impact...especially in the weapons industry.

**Interviewer:** So what were specific ways women demanded rights?

**Brown:** There were a lot of marches in Washington;they picketed out in front of the White House they sent delegates there to talk to the president... Another thing is just getting some women in the Labor Department. Managing to get a bureau to fill the gap for women in the war made a big difference because then you had women inside of government trying to get access to equal wages and better working conditions. A lot of different things had to come together-it wasn't just the government or just the strikers out on the picket line. One really interesting thing that happened during the war was a kind of coming together of the middle and upper-class women with the working women who had always kind of been separated before the war. It was during World War One when they first began to think, we ought to give women the right to vote just because they ought to have the right to vote.

**Interviewer:** Do you think employers had increased responsibilities after the war to oversee their employees?

**Brown:** As an effect of the war, they were forced-because employers had in many cases not taken good care of their workers. There were so many immigrants-so many hungry people coming-and you could do anything, you could treat them very badly. And if they tried to join a union, you could just fire them and there was a whole boatload of people coming in who you could hire. When the war came along, there was a labor shortage. Immigration stopped short when the war broke out. So in 1914 all of a sudden there were no longer boatloads of people who could be exploited and abused by businesses that were trying to make as much money as they could and pay their workers as little as possible. So the pool of available labor suddenly got much smaller and they had to start treating people better... You also had these people in the government agencies who would say, "If you want to have a government contract for making rifle parts or shells or uniforms or food for the army then

you have to follow our rules.” And they began to impose safety standards and wage standards and hour standards so the industries could no longer do anything they wanted and be free to abuse their workers, because now the government agencies had this power that they never had before.