

Women in the Mines

STEPHANIE HEMPHILL

Most of us of a certain age are familiar with Rosie the Riveter. Artist and illustrator Norman Rockwell portrayed the war worker as a robust young redhead taking her lunch break with her air hammer in her lap, casually crushing a copy of *Mein Kampf* under her foot. Six million women joined the workforce during World War II, many of them in

defense industries such as airplane and ammunition manufacturing. At the Twin Cities Ordnance Plant, 60 percent of the workers during the war were women.¹

On Minnesota's Iron Range, women also stepped into men's jobs. They went to work in the vast iron ore pits that produced the raw material for the tanks, ships, and planes that won the war. The demand for iron was enor-



mous, and the workforce met that demand. In the peak year of 1942, while many Iron Range men were serving in the armed forces, Minnesota produced nearly 74 million tons of ore, about 70 percent of the national output. Today, with equipment far larger and more automated, the state produces little more than half that amount.²

If riveters were called Rosie, perhaps we should name these Minnesota women “Millie the Miner.” Some were unmarried, some worked alongside their miner husbands, and others worked in place of their husbands while they were thousands of miles away, fighting the war. The women drove trucks and graders, laid railroad tracks, sampled ore, and tended clattering conveyor belts that dumped the ore into roaring crushers and onto the railroad cars that carried ore to steel mills in Chicago, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh. They also filled clerical jobs and performed technical work in the labs—work a few women had done before the war. Their numbers were never high: the St. Louis County Inspector of Mines reported in 1945 that 163 women worked in the mines, compared to nearly 8,500 men.

Starting with such lighter jobs as switch tending and the like, they were ultimately to be found in most every phase of the work from high up at the controls of the enormous, sensitive, traveling cranes in heavy equipment repair shops to cleaning the ore from the bottom rock of open pits with the ordinary mining tools. They have given gen-

LEFT: *Coffee break in a mine. These women worked on a track gang, laying the tracks for trains that hauled ore out of the pit.*

eral satisfaction in the work they did, and are deserving of much credit for standing by and turning to in the country’s emergency.³

Rosie the Riveter is immortalized in posters and a popular song; her experience is analyzed in books and scholarly articles.⁴ The story of Millie the Miner is virtually unknown. After the war, most women miners returned gladly to full-time homemaking. As they lived their busy lives, their work in the mines became a distant memory for them, and few beyond their own families are aware of their contributions.

Many of the women in that generation have died. But several surviving workers shared their stories with me for the Women in the Mines during World War II Oral History Project at the Iron Range Research Center in Chisholm. The five interviews I conducted were initially part of an investigation into the experiences of women in the mines a generation later.⁵ The historical value of these interviews soon became obvious, and all of the women agreed to make the tapes and transcripts available to the public at the Research Center.

One of the women really was named Millie. Mildred Mandich had four children, ages two to ten, when she went to work in 1942 at the Danube, an open pit mine in Bovey run by Pickands-Mather.⁶ Her husband, Dan Mandich, was a brakeman on the railroad in the pit, and when the mines started hiring women, he encouraged her to take a job. Millie had been working as a cook at the Cozy Cafe in Coleraine. “In those days we didn’t have enough money,” she said. “You had to get out and earn some

money.” At the cafe she earned about \$3 a day, equivalent to about \$40 in 2008. Meanwhile, the average wage in the mines in 1942 was \$6.80 for an eight-hour day, or about \$90 today.⁷

The high pay was a sufficient incentive for Millie Mandich. The government was so anxious to persuade women to fill jobs left by servicemen that it conducted various mobilization drives. Techniques included advertising, guidelines to help magazine writers glamorize war work, and even door-to-door solicitation. But for most women, earning money was the primary motivator to take a job outside the home.⁸

On the Iron Range, word got around that the mines were hiring women. People already working in the mines told their friends and relatives. The hiring process was simple and training virtually nonexistent. Women worked with other women on jobs the managers felt they could handle. Few, if any, women operated steam shovels in the pits. Instead, they tended conveyor belts and crushers, laid track, sampled ore, and timed trucks carrying loads of overburden to the dumps.

“We had a meeting: we all got together with the boss. We were told what we were to do,” Millie remembered. “Some were on clean-up, some were on machines. That’s the way it was.” Assigned to tend an ore crusher, she did the same work for about eight months a year in 1942, 1943, and 1944. Her job was sea-

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sonal, due to the nature of iron mining at the time.

Unlike today's taconite, the ore mined during World War II was so rich that it did not require much processing. The hematite sent to steel mills in the 1940s was about 65 percent iron; taconite ore is only about 33 percent iron.⁹ During the winter, workers stripped the surface soil and hauled it out of the way to dumps. In the spring, summer, and fall, steam shovels dug the exposed ore. It was loaded onto railroad cars, which hauled it to a wash house—a building about four stories high, where conveyor belts on steel rollers carried the rocks to crushers and on to waiting railroad cars.

"The rocks came down off the belt and went into the crusher," Millie explained. "It was very noisy." She does not recall wearing ear protectors. If a big rock got stuck in the crusher, "you had to stop it in a hurry," Millie remembered. "And men would go down with bars and things to unplug it." Sometimes ore would fall between the belt and the steel rollers, and the women used shovels and scrapers to clean it out.

Millie said her job was not physically hard, but it was constant work. "Our coffee breaks were right on the job; we couldn't leave the belts. They're running steady eight hours. You eat on the fly; it wasn't like nowadays," she said with a laugh.

The mines ran 24 hours a day, and Millie rotated through all three shifts. Her sister-in-law, Mary Mandich, whose husband was in the service, lived with the family and helped with Millie's and Dan's four children. But when Millie was on night shift, she cared for them during the day and then put in an eight-hour shift at the mine. "I'd take care of the kids, I'd sleep a couple hours, get up and do my work."

In the days before automatic washing machines and TV dinners, raising a family was a lot of work, but Millie

RIGHT: Largest shovel on the Range—formerly steam, now electric—dumping ore into 50-ton cars, Hull-Rust Mine, 1945



Glamorous wartime worker, recruitment poster, 1943



remembered it matter-of-factly. “During the summer, the kids were out playing, and in the fall they got ready for school. It kept you going—raising a family and working.”

Millie was typical in her choice of childcare. The federal government made a half-hearted attempt to provide childcare centers in communities with large numbers of war workers. But the vast majority of mothers arranged for family members or neighbors to look after their children.¹⁰

Millie’s sister, Zorey Rukavina, went to work at the same mine in 1945. “My sisters and cousins were working. They needed extra help, so I was called,” Zorey said. Her husband, Steve, worked in the same mine. On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, Steve was injured while dumping surface soil from a railroad car. His right arm was broken in two places and, as a result, he had a medical exemption from service. He returned to work, however, and eventually became a mechanic in the truck shop. Zorey’s mother took care of their three-year-old son.¹¹

Zorey thought the job was “kind of fun.” But she teased Millie: “I didn’t have an easy job like my sister. I was clean-up. The ore would go on those belts and then it would fall off. And you had to clean everything on the floor and put it on the belt.” The ore was about the consistency of rocky gravel, and the belt was waist-high. “You cleaned it all, then you turned around twice and it was full again. You heaved it on the belt, that’s all you did, all eight hours.”

The work was not only hard, but it was dangerous. In 1943 Theresa Seiratore had the same job at a Butler Brothers mine near Hibbing.

According to the St. Louis County Inspector of Mines report that year, “While cleaning under the belts, her right arm was caught in roller. Fracture of both bones of forearm and third metacarpal; laceration of hand.”¹²

The following year, Seiratore was assigned to a different job: “managing the pumps.” The *Butler Miner*, a monthly newsletter for employees, celebrated the contributions of Seiratore and other women in a July 1944 column called “From the Skirted Side.” Most of these regular features were devoted to the comings and goings of female office staff. But this

particular column detailed the work done by women who have “stepped in and taken over the jobs left vacant by men leaving for the service—jobs for which no masculine replacements could be found.” Several of the women had sons or husbands in the service. “The versatility of these women is truly amazing,” the newsletter continued. “They work in the plants, the pits, the shops, the laboratory, and the office.” As for the two women assigned to the pumps: “Pump-houses are lonely places. The responsibility of keeping them going or stopping them is no small one.” The article mentioned only 11 women



Florence Paznar at the edge of a vast ore pit

“I’d take care of the kids, I’d sleep a couple hours, get up and do my work.”

doing work traditionally performed by men. By contrast, 176 men worked at Butler Brothers mines during roughly the same period.¹³

Zorey Rukavina said the women workers were treated well by the foremen and other male workers. “We came there to help out, and I think they respected us for it.” But her husband Steve Rukavina remembered that a few of the men grumbled at the entry of women into the previously all-male mining environment.

Ruth Dolinar, who worked in a mine near Chisholm, said that her male coworkers were “pretty nice. But I think at first it was hard for them to accept us taking their jobs over because we bumped some of the men probably. They had to go down and ride the cars, where they were loading cars before.” However, she said the men who were bumped still received the same pay.¹⁴

Discomfort among some male workers may have led, in a few cases, to harassment. In Thomas Saylor’s oral history collection, *Remembering the Good War*, miner Angelo Le-gueri recalled that “Some of the guys would come along and they would pester the women. Maybe even worse than that, if they could. And the women, the only way they could defend themselves was to turn them in. Some of the men lost their jobs because of that.”¹⁵

Florence Andersen Glasner, who worked in the tool room at the Oliver mine near Hibbing, remembered her male coworkers helping by lift-

ing heavy tools for her. But some workers from other parts of the mine “thought they could come into the tool room and maybe pinch you. I wasn’t used to that, and I didn’t like it one little bit.” She would mention this treatment to her coworkers, “and they’d say, ‘Well, if he comes around, we’ll be up here too.’ Which made me very happy.”

It is probably impossible to know how frequent such harassment was. All of the women interviewed for the oral history project said they were generally treated well. Their description contrasts strongly with the experiences of the next generation, when women once again went to work in the mines. In the 1970s, some women experienced such brutal harassment that they won a class action lawsuit against Eveleth Taconite Company.¹⁶

It probably helped the wartime women that everyone knew they were temporary workers. This was understood and, in at least some cases, explicitly stated. “We were told we’d work during the war, and as soon as the war was over we’d all be laid off, holding no seniority,” Millie remembered. “The men would be back on their jobs.” The women recalled being paid the same as men doing similar work, although they were not allowed to join a union.

One of Millie and Zorey’s coworkers at the Danube mine was another young mother, Eleanor “Peggy” Travica, who had

three children—ages six, eight, and nine—when she began in 1944.¹⁷ She worked there for two summers. Her husband, George Travica, was a “cat skinner” at the Canisteo mine near Coleraine. He operated a caterpillar, digging ore in the pit. Like Millie, Peggy tended a belt carrying ore. As a machine operator, she was paid 95 cents an hour—ten cents more than general laborers.

Peggy said that women brought a positive—and feminine—attitude to their work: “Each shift, the women made sure everything was clean under the belts,” she recalled. “But when just the men were there, it [ore] would spill over until it [the belt] couldn’t drag any more, and then they had to stop to clean it out. So they were thankful for the women,” she said with a laugh.

Some women carried their enthusiasm for cleaning even further. “The windows in the washing plant were all spattered, dirty, and of course the women washed the windows. And this foreman said to me, ‘The first thing I know you’ll be wanting to put curtains up here!’” But Peggy said the women never carried it that far. “We had enough windows to do at home,” she chuckled.

Peggy thought that the work was not difficult or even very demanding. Sometimes she would sit, sometimes stand. Buttons controlled the belt. “On each floor they could stop the belt, but the top floor was the only place they could start it. So when the belt went smooth, I’d sit down and watch it go.”

A black-and-white photograph of the day-shift workers on their last day on the job, in October 1945, shows two dozen women holding metal lunch pails. Peggy said she ate a lot of peanut butter sandwiches. “There was rationing in those days,” she explained. Fruit, cookies, and a thermos of coffee rounded out the meal. But even at lunchtime, workers did not leave their posts.

At the beginning of a shift, the women would change into overalls. “Women didn’t wear slacks in those days, but we had to wear them,” Peggy pointed out, not sounding particularly happy about it. “We had to keep our hair covered, and we weren’t allowed to wear rings.” Presumably those safety rules applied to male workers, too.

Peggy’s younger brother, Charles

Elwood Neary, was killed while manning a gun turret on the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. His clothes were returned to his mother, and Peggy wore some of the heavy woolens to work.

Peggy described the workers as “a happy bunch.” The mines have always been a place for practical jokes, and wartime was no exception. Peggy remembered one older man who liked to play jokes on the women.

In those days they had grease guns; of course all these belts had to be greased, and he thought it was a great joke: he’d come with his grease gun and squirt [the women]. So the women thought, “We’ll get even with him someday.” One day we grabbed him and took him and put him in the big sink in the men’s bathroom

and turned the water on him. He never played no more jokes.

Dorothy Ban was a young bride when she went to work in the Scranton mine in Hibbing in 1944. Her husband, Martin Ban, was in the service, and she lived with her mother, who was still raising Dorothy’s younger siblings. She worked on a track gang for the summer with a crew of about a dozen women, tamping the earth and laying ties for railroad tracks for the trains that carried the waste rock away.¹⁸

“We tamped ties, we spiked ties, we did just what the men did,” she said proudly. “Swung the sledge hammers, carried the ties, did the job.” They used jacks to lift the railroad tracks and carried the ties using



The last day for women workers at the Danube mine wash house, Bovey, October 20, 1945. Among them: Eleanor Travica (front row, far left), Millie Mandich (front, third from left) and her sisters Mary Jokinen (smiling behind Millie’s left shoulder) and Zorey Rukavina (back row with pin curls).

picks, one woman at each end. The crew also included a male foreman and a boy too young for the service. Other women drove service trucks—pickups that ferried workers and equipment from one part of the mine to another.

Dorothy said that, as a girl, she had never entertained the idea of working in a mine; it just was not done. “We thought that was a big deal, all of us women going to work in the mines, while the men were all gone. It was something different, something women never did before. And we made good money at that time!”

Dorothy also recalls a lot of joking and pranks among the women. “You’d come in real fast, grab your lunch pail, and it would be nailed to the bench or something. Or you’d open it and see a rock or something in there.”

The following year she switched to the enormous Hull-Rust mine near Hibbing, where she got a better job sampling ore. As the trains carried ore from the pit, she’d climb to the top of the cars and fill a ten-pound sack with ore to be analyzed at the lab. This may have been easier work than on the track gang, but it was still dangerous. Alice White, another sampler at the Hull-Rust Mine, broke a rib climbing up onto an ore car to take a sample. She lost 24 days of work.¹⁹

Dorothy Ban’s husband came back from the service in January 1946, and that was when her mining career ended. She remembered that some women kept working after the war, however, sampling ore and driving service trucks.

Dorothy’s friend Ann Lendacky



Dorothy Ban (left) and a friend in the jaw of a steam shovel, Scranton mine, 1944

worked in the Scranton mine with her. The two women are still friends, and they got together to reminisce over coffee in Ann’s dining room. They giggled as they looked at snapshots of themselves and coworkers, holding shovels, posing in the jaw of a steam shovel, sitting on rocks to eat lunch.²⁰

Ann’s husband, Jack Lendacky, was in the Navy, serving in the South Pacific. Their daughter was less than a year old in 1944. Ann’s mother and two of her sisters took care of the baby while Ann and another sister worked. Ann liked earning money at the mine, but after just six weeks on the job, her sisters moved away. Her mother could not cope with the baby alone, and so Ann had to quit.

Asked what prompted her to work, Ann replied, “It wasn’t for the nation or anything; we needed the money! We were young, we came from families that didn’t have a lot, and we wanted something for when

our husbands got home.” She remembers bringing home about \$100 every two weeks, “and that was considered good money at that time!” It was, in fact, almost double the average income of a female manufacturing worker.²¹

When she started work, Ann was worried about how she would be able to handle the jacks used to raise the railroad tracks. “They must have weighed fifty pounds, about four feet high and two feet thick. I weighed 105 pounds and couldn’t pick it up.” She recognized the foreman; her father had helped him immigrate to the Iron Range from Yugoslavia. She called him by his nickname, Mr. Zuban (“big teeth”), and reminded him about her father’s help. He assigned her to hand out the shovels instead of working the jacks. Ann laughed at the memory of her lucky break: “It isn’t what you know; it’s who you know.”

The following year, Ann went to



For an overview and further resources on women and war work, see *Women and the Home Front During World War II*, www.mnhs.org/homefront.

“We tamped ties, we spiked ties, we did just what the men did.”

live with her in-laws and took a job at the wash house at a Cleveland-Cliffs mine outside of Calumet in Itasca County. Like Millie Mandich, she ran a belt that carried ore. The pay at this job was better, and Ann enjoyed her mother-in-law's cooking, which included pork chops two-inches thick. Just thinking about them made Ann's mouth water 60 years later. “I had the best lunch pail there; everybody would look to see what I was eating!”

Ann and Dorothy remembered how they entertained themselves while their husbands were away at war. “Working three shifts, it was hard,” Dorothy said. “But when we had time off we'd all get together. We had coffee socials; we'd play cards.”



*Ann Lendacky strikes a pose
at the Scranton mine, 1944*

Ann added, “We'd go to the Royal Bar and dance with other women, to the music on the nickelodeon.”

In November 1945, Jack Lendacky came home after four years in the service, and Ann never worked again. “I got pregnant again, and when you got pregnant you didn't work in those days! I liked staying home. I enjoyed my family; that's about it.” They used the money Ann had saved from working in the mines, and Jack's Navy pay, to buy a house. “We're still here after 60 years,” said Ann with pride.

It was a pattern repeated endlessly across the country. As servicemen returned, women were encouraged to resume the “ideal” feminine life of marriage and motherhood. And most women were comfortable with that idea. A Roper-Fortune poll in May 1943 found that only 12 percent of women placed careers ahead of marriage. But in spite of the domestic ideal, many women went on working for pay. A Labor Department survey in 1944 showed that “eighty percent of the women in war production plants wanted to be rehired at comparable rates of pay and in comparable jobs after reconversion.”²²

Sixty years later, all the women who recorded their stories for the Iron Range oral history project said they were happy to return to full-time homemaking when the war was over. Perhaps mine work was less desirable than other defense work; perhaps Iron Range women were more tradition-minded than their

sisters in other parts of the country. Perhaps as we near the end of our lives, it's natural to feel satisfied with our choices.

Only Millie Mandich took another paying job after she left the mines. She worked at a grocery store for ten years and at a five-and-dime for another 30 years. She never earned nearly as much as she had made in the mine. But she did not complain about that; she regarded the mine work as an aberration, a lucky break arising from the unique circumstances brought by world war.

Peggy Travica said she was happy to be done with mine work. “Oh, it was nice to be home again. But they [mine bosses] thanked us, and said they couldn't have done it without us, and that we appreciated.” She believes most of the women felt the same way about leaving their jobs: happy to have done it, and happy to return to full-time family life. “It was an experience that a person will never forget, and I was just glad I could do it.”

Thirty years later, a new generation of women became miners, but the world was different then. In the early 1970s, Iron Range mines began to hire female laborers for the first time in a generation. Some of them met a hostile reception, as depicted in the 2005 Warner Brothers movie *North Country*, a fictionalized version of the Eveleth Taconite workers' class action suit. But the women who shared their memories of mining during World War II describe their time as a period of hope, camaraderie, and pride. □

Notes

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1. Women and the Home Front During World War II, Minnesota Historical Society, www.mnhs.org/homefront (accessed July 7, 2008).

2. American Iron and Steel Institute, *Annual Statistical Report* (New York, 1944), 92, showing that Minnesota in 1940 produced 47,736,810 tons of ore; 1941: 62,750,906 tons; 1942: 73,937,446; 1943: 69,084,907; and 1944: 65,069,000. For current figures, see Minnesota Department of Revenue, *Minnesota Mining Tax Guide*, Sept. 2007, p. 3.

3. A. F. Benson, *Annual Report of the Inspector of Mines, St. Louis County, Minnesota* (Virginia, MN, 1945), 3. Reports for the earlier years of the war did not discuss women's participation, although the 1943 and 1944 reports each list one female worker injured in a St. Louis County mine.

4. Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984); Paddy Quick, "Rosie the Riveter: Myths and Realities," *Radical America* 9 (July–Aug. 1975); Sheila Tobias and Lisa Anderson, "What Really Happened to Rosie the Riveter: Demobilization and the Female Labor Force, 1944–47" (New York: MSS Modular Publications, module 9, 1974); Sheridan Harvey, "Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II," transcript of video presentation, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/rr/program/journey/rosie-transcript.html (accessed Aug. 4, 2008).

5. See Catherine Winter and Stephanie Hemphill, "No Place for a Woman," *American Radio Works*, 2006, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/ironrange/> (accessed July 7, 2008).

6. Mildred Mandich, interview by Stephanie Hemphill, Aug. 26, 2005, tape and transcript in Women in the Mines during World War II Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN. All quotes from women, here and below, are from the interviews.

7. Benson, *Annual Report, 1942*, 5. In 1944 the average wage for general laborers was 78 cents per hour; crusher operators



Track gang workers and "scrammers," who raked smaller rocks into piles that could be picked up by a loader

earned, on average, 84 cents per hour. The highest paid hourly workers were shovel engineers at \$1.50; Benson, *Annual Report, 1944*, 5. For all dollar conversions, see Federal Reserve Bank, <http://woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/research/data/us/calc>.

8. Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 53, citing the Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor.

9. Marvin G. Lamma, *Minnesota's Iron Country: Rich Ore, Rich Lives* (Duluth: Lake Superior Port Cities, 2004), 53, 227.

10. D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 14, 133.

11. Zorey Rukavina, interview by Stephanie Hemphill, Aug. 26, 2005, tape and transcript in Women in the Mines Project, Iron Range Research Center; and Steve Rukavina, interview by Stephanie Hemphill, June 30, 2007, notes in author's possession.

12. Benson, *Annual Report, 1943*, 40.

13. *Butler Miner*, July 1944, p. 9; Benson, *Annual Report, 1943*, 11.

14. "Life in a Mining Location," part of the Iron Range Research Center's Soudan Project, presents the memories of Ruth Dolinar, who worked at an Oliver mine, 1943–1945. This videotape is available at the research center.

15. Here and below, Thomas Saylor, *Remembering the Good War: Minnesota's*

Greatest Generation (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 95, 77.

16. *Lois E. Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, 130 F.3d 1287 (8th Cir. 1998); *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, 139 F.R.D. 657, 667 (D. Minn. 1991); *Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Co.*, 824 F.Supp. 847, 889 (D. Minn. 1993). Lois Jenson's legal battle to end harassment is detailed in Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler, *Class Action: The Landmark Case that Changed Sexual Harassment Law* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

17. Eleanor Travica, interview by Stephanie Hemphill, Aug. 26, 2005, tape and transcript in Women in the Mines Project.

18. Dorothy Ban, interview by Stephanie Hemphill, Aug. 26, 2005, tape and transcript in Women in the Mines Project.

19. Benson, *Annual Report, 1945*, 33.

20. Ann Lendacky, interview by Stephanie Hemphill (with Dorothy Ban), Aug. 26, 2005, tape and transcript in Women in the Mines Project.

21. "In 1944, women in manufacturing averaged \$31.21 per week and men \$54.65"; Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 136.

22. Campbell, *Women at War with America*, 225; Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter*, 224, citing U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, *Women Workers in Ten War Production Areas and Their Postwar Employment Plans*, bulletin 209 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946).

The photos on p. 92 and 101 are courtesy Lou Novak; p. 96 and 100, Ann Lendacky; p. 98, Eleanor Travica; and p. 99, Dorothy Ban. All others are in MHS collections; p. 95 is by Fred J. Roleff.



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