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Article Summary: Construction of the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant began on March 24, 1942, and ended six months later. At its peak, the COP employed 4,229 people. It opened in the fall of 1942 and closed in the fall of 1945, after the end of World War II. It reopened for Korean War operations between 1950 and 1957 and for Vietnam operations from 1965 to 1973. During its history, it had a profound effect on the people of Grand Island and the surrounding areas.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Henry Wit, Marie Eriksen,, Frank Jusek, W G Sabine, Joan Bierbower, Bernice Carl, Avis Crouch, Betty Jean Gustin, Betty Jane Gustin, Letha Edwards, Florence Rehder, Ileene Jurgensen, Myer Avedovech, H R Schultz, Harry Grimminger, R E Murphy, Lola Britten, Betty Ledford, Mart Burke, James Moon, Earl W Brown, Albert Otto Schultz, George Wilkins, Fred Abraham, Ambrose Welch, Marian Mitchell, Birdean Thibault, Ella Martin, Frances Dutton, Miriam Dethloff, Bertha Titterington, Beulah Reeder

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Photographs / Images: painting bomb casings; Women Ordnance Workers pouring hot liquid TNT from kettles and buckets; woman operating a Pellet press; bomb stenciling equipment; pour machines; uniformed production workers; Myer Avedovech; blind production worker on the job; flag raising ceremony at the Army-Navy E Award for excellence, October 17, 1944; 100 passenger buses transporting employees; uniformed women chauffeurs; war savings bond parade in downtown Grand Island

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II MUNITIONS MANUFACTURE ON GRAND ISLAND, NEBRASKA

By Tracy Lynn Wit

In the early 1940s Grand Island was a small rural town struggling to recover from a decade of severe drought. The Great Depression had forced a large segment of the population to leave the area, and many of the remaining 19,130 people were anxious to secure better jobs.

Then in May of 1941 a team of surveyors arrived. They gathered statistics on local conditions – population, labor supply, health conditions, housing, schools, highways, hospital facilities, the capacity of the local utilities, weather, and topography – and sent a comprehensive report to the Army Chief of Engineers. Rumors flew that the army had plans for an ordnance plant in Grand Island.

Construction of the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant began on March 24, 1942, and ended six months later. The COP offered high wages and attracted a variety of people to Grand Island, making it the city's largest and most diverse industry during the World War II era. Over 15,000 workers clocked into the plant between its opening in the autumn of 1942 and its closing in the autumn of 1945. At its peak, the COP

employed 4,229 people, and some of these commuted daily from towns sixty miles away. Similar numbers worked at the plant when it reopened for Korean War operations between 1950 and 1957 and for Vietnam operations from 1965 to 1973. The COP's layout of loading lines and production capacity was similar to that of the Nebraska Ordnance Plant near Mead.¹

Of the sixty ordnance plants controlled by the army's Armament, Munitions and Chemical Command during World War II, few were more favorably located than the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant. Grand Island was equally distant from battles on either ocean and safely insulated from enemy attacks on supply lines. The city's strategically secure location made it attractive to the army. Dependable railroads served the city. Water, power, and labor supplies were abundant; over 4,500 Grand Islanders were immediately available for work, and nearby Hastings and Kearney residents could fill an additional 3,420 jobs. In addition, "the desire of the Roosevelt administration to pacify midwestern business and political interests who demanded that defense contracts be distributed throughout the country" was a factor in the army's decision to build a plant in the area.²

The navy liked the area as much as the army did. On July 14, 1942, just three and one-half months after COP

construction began, groundbreaking ceremonies for a naval ordnance plant took place in Hastings. The Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot (HNAD) loaded its first bomb on July 4, 1943, and employed 8,000 civilian workers at its peak.³

The presence of the HNAD intensified a longstanding rivalry between Hastings and Grand Island. In a recent interview, Henry Wit, a retired musician who worked at the COP as a property accountant and production line foreman during World War II, remembered "a little [local] jealousy when the navy built that ammunition depot there in Hastings. We used to have people drive from Grand Island to work there."⁴ Apparently HNAD wages were competitive with COP pay. Marie Eriksen, a homemaker who capped COP bombs during the war, said, "Hastings paid better money than Grand Island did."⁵ The COP rose to the competition by establishing a superior safety record and by implementing an administration-employee feedback program that encouraged workers to stay.

The COP was one of the last World War II plants built for the army. A. Guthrie and Company, Incorporated, of St. Paul, Minnesota, and the R. J. Tipton Company of Denver, Colorado, handled the construction work. Originally, three load lines were built, each one housing its own showers, cafeterias, first aid station, and field

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Bomb casings are painted before they are started through loading lines. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.

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office for the line's administrative personnel. A fourth line was added in March of 1945. COP workers poured the first bomb on November 11, 1942, and loading operations continued until August 16, 1945, the day after Japan's surrender.

The Quaker Oats Company was responsible for managing the plant during the war. The Ordnance Department chose its contractors on the basis of their managerial ability, financial stability, efficiency, and integrity, and assumed that the processes used to manufacture ammunition could be learned. Apparently this policy worked well; the COP was highly productive during its World War II operations. Before the plant closed, COP workers mixed 5,346,350 pounds of ammonium nitrate and built 330,562 1000-pound demolition bombs; 20,698 2000-pound demolition bombs; 1,506,373 260-pound fragmentation bombs; 126,747 220-pound fragmentation bombs; 261,205 90-pound fragmentation bombs; and 11,476,545 105-mm shells.⁶

Most of the people in Grand Island were excited about the COP's arrival. The plant promised to provide immediate help to an area that was still suffering from the blows of the Great Depression.

Not all Grand Islanders welcomed the plant with equal enthusiasm. Almost 100 people were forced to vacate their homes when the federal government used the right of eminent domain to purchase their land. For these farmers, the arrival of the plant meant sacrifices, not opportunities.

The tract taken for the COP was a four by five mile area comprising twenty sections of fertile river valley land. Because the soil was unusually rich in this particular area, the farms on the COP land had retained various degrees of productivity during the Depression era. One farmer, 65-year-old Frank Juzek, told a newspaper reporter that he had worked his farm for thirty-three years and had never suffered a crop failure. Juzek expected to lose up to \$3,000 in the process of

moving, since he would have to sell his calves, abandon his alfalfa, and take a loss in egg money on the flock he had just wintered.⁷

Many farmers were disappointed with the prices they received for their land. In thirty-one cases, landowners declined the offers made for their property by government purchasing agents. A federal board of appraisers began hearings on the COP land values on October 19, 1943. Although details of the settlements with the Grand Island farmers are not available, similar cases filed by former Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot landowners met with little success. Only eight Hastings landowners received prices higher than the amount originally offered by the navy, and most farmers had to settle for \$30 to \$70 per acre. In Grand Island, the COP land was acquired at a total cost of \$912,233. Since 12,791.88 acres were purchased, the average price received by former COP landowners came to \$71.31 per acre.⁸

Despite their dissatisfaction with government terms, most Grand Island farmers left their homes willingly. They had an attitude of quiet acceptance that differed from the angry outbursts of the Wahoo farmers whose land was taken for the Nebraska Ordnance Plant in October 1941. Juzek explained that the difference was related to the government's timing. "When the government decided to build an ordnance plant at Wahoo this country wasn't at war," Juzek said. "Now the thing to do is cooperate in every way we can, and that is what we are trying to do out here."⁹

After production began at the COP, the plant management encouraged area farmers to work there between mid-August, when potatoes and small grains were harvested, and October, when sugar beets and corn were harvested.¹⁰ Both the farmers and the plant benefited from this arrangement: The farmers earned high wages during their slow periods, including winter, and the plant regained the help it lost

when teachers and students returned to school. The plant relied heavily on such seasonal, part-time help.

Surprisingly, Grand Island's businessmen initially showed much more antagonism toward the plant's construction than did the farmers, chiefly because of the wage scale at the plant. COP laborers were first offered fifty cents an hour, a wage that exceeded the local rate by twenty cents, though it still fell short of the national average. The local merchants were understandably worried about workers leaving for work in the plant. At a conference in the summer of 1942 merchants asked COP officials to lower plant wages by at least ten cents an hour, which would more closely approximate the wage that the merchants were willing to pay. However, the COP officials decided to raise the rate to seventy cents per hour, bringing it in line with the national average for construction workers. One official who attended the conference later remarked that Grand Island simmered for three days afterward.¹¹

New business from the plant workers soon mollified the merchants. On June 11, 1942, COP officials announced an additional pay raise of ten cents per hour for project workers, and Grand Island merchants responded by extending business hours. The stores were kept open on Thursday evenings to accommodate the general increase in consumer demand and to give workers on the 8 A.M. to 4 P.M. shift a convenient time to shop.

From the beginning of the project, the COP administration actively recruited workers within a fifty-mile radius of Grand Island. With fresh labor flowing into the city, the availability of housing plummeted. Complaints about the difficulty of finding suitable places to live appeared in the plant's biweekly newspaper, the *Coplanter*, even before the first bomb rolled off the lines.

Concerned about this situation, the COP administration developed its own special housing programs. Fifteen staff houses were maintained on COP

grounds, including ten six-room and five five-room residences. For the workers, four dormitories were built: two for men, one for women, and one for married couples. Single rooms rented at \$2.50 per week, and double rooms went for \$4.00 per week. The dormitories operated for almost three years after opening in December 1942, accommodating 4,150 guests during that period. The maximum number of people housed in the dormitories at one time was 597, on January 24, 1945. The dormitories were overflowing that day, and twenty-five people were sent to the Grand Island Soldiers' and Sailors' Home to relieve the crowding. The dormitories continued to operate at full capacity until V-E Day in May 1945, and the COP administration kept the dorms open until the plant closed three months later.¹²

Only COP workers could stay in the dormitories; workers with children had to find homes outside the area. The COP administration set up a special housing section within its Employee and Public Relations Division in February 1943 to help such workers.¹³

Of course, the COP could locate housing only if it was available. The scarcity of housing in Grand Island was no exception to the national trend during World War II; by June 1945, over ninety-eight percent of American cities were suffering from a shortage of single-family houses.¹⁴ In Grand Island's case the government decided to step in when most of the homes were gone. Federal funds were granted for the construction of 225 temporary dwelling units west of Broadwell Avenue, and groundbreaking ceremonies took place in August 1942. The project was well underway when the Grand Island Real Estate Board, reluctant to surrender local control, succeeded in shutting it down by sending copies of its August 1943 resolution to various state and local legislators and officials. According to this resolution, members of the board unanimously opposed the project for the following reasons: (1) sufficient private money

was available for the necessary construction; (2) the number of new houses allotted to Grand Island, together with federal wartime conversion programs, provided sufficient housing; (3) the COP had cut its personnel since the original housing allotment was made; (4) the use of government funds for housing units was wasteful; and (5) the government's entry into the rental business reduced investments made by private owners of rental units.¹⁵

The increasing demand for bombs and ammunition for the war effort forced a renewal of the housing project in 1944. The COP required more workers to meet the new production schedule, and these workers needed housing near the plant. In October of 1944, the Federal Public Housing Authority awarded a \$162,274 contract to the National Homes Corporation of Lafayette, Indiana, for the construction of 100 portable dwelling units on the Broadwell Courts site. The War Production Board followed in February 1945 with a \$680,000 grant to jointly expand the Broadwell Courts project and the COP dormitory project.¹⁶

For people who wished to avoid the housing situation in Grand Island, commuting was an option. About half the COP workers lived outside Grand Island, and the *Coplanter* reported that many of these out-of-towners drove daily from as far away as sixty miles.¹⁷ Since they were employed in an essential defense industry, they received extra ration coupons for gasoline. The plant management also encouraged workers to carpool and "help win the war through conservation of scarce supplies of tire rubber and other now irreplaceable automobile parts."¹⁸ Those unable to obtain a ride could take a bus; by the summer of 1944, the COP ran buses to and from Kearney, Gibbon, Shelton, Wood River, Aurora, Central City, and St. Paul. No buses ran between Grand Island and Hastings, presumably because the cities were only twenty-five miles apart.

Special housing was provided for the 190 Jamaicans who worked at the COP

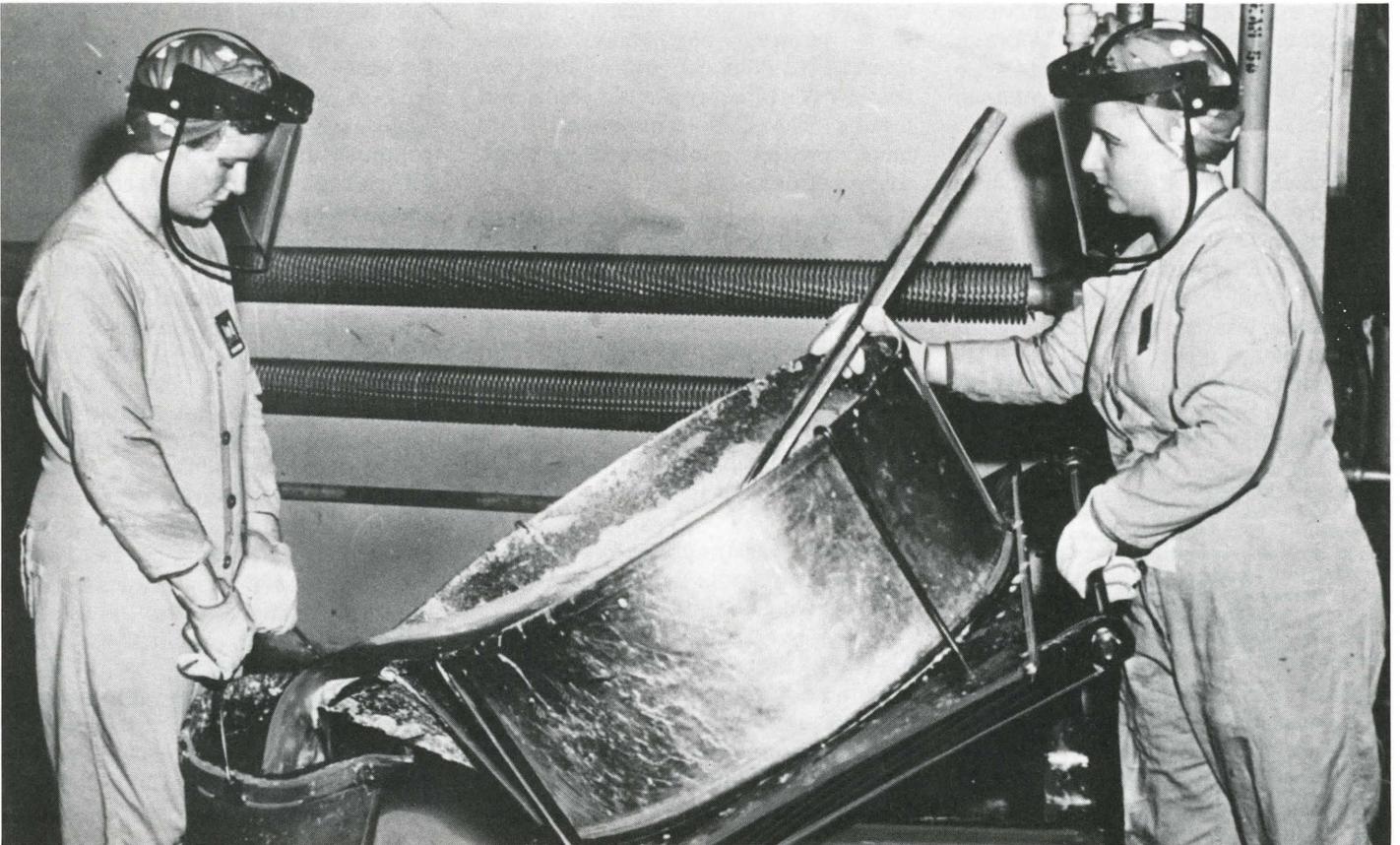
from November 1944 to June 1945. These men were black laborers, aged eighteen to forty-five years, who had been working in sugar beet fields at Fort Lupton, Colorado, for the previous three months. They came to the plant under a special agreement between the War Manpower Commission and the British government. The COP hired the Jamaicans only after the local labor supply was exhausted and employed them primarily to load and unload the boxcars carrying heavy equipment.

During their stay at the COP, the Jamaicans lived in five barracks which had been converted for their use by the COP Engineering Department. They had their own mess hall near the administration area and their own recreational facilities. Except when they provided some music and dance entertainment at the 1944 Quaker Oats Company Christmas party, the Jamaicans were completely segregated from the bulk of the workers. This segregation of the black Jamaicans and the white workers resembled the segregation in the armed forces during World War II. Most of the COP employees who worked at the plant did not even know that the Jamaicans were there.

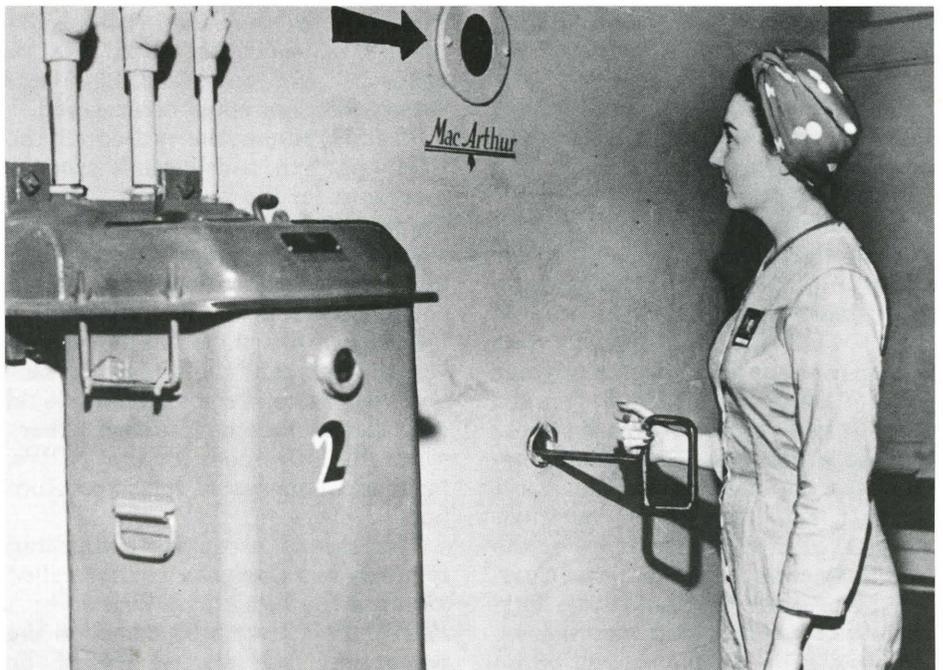
The Grand Island community generally ignored the Jamaicans. The new laborers put no additional pressure on housing, and they were not accused of stealing jobs, since they were hired only after the local labor supply dried up. The plant did not hire any other minority workers during the war. When a change in production schedule eliminated the need for Jamaican helpers, they were sent to farms in Illinois.

The vast number of women who took jobs outside the home during World War II was a significant trend at both the local and the national levels. The national female labor force expanded by more than fifty percent during the war, growing from 11,970,000 women workers in 1940 to 18,610,000 in 1945. Their most spectacular gains were in

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WOWs wearing safety visors pour hot liquid TNT from kettles and buckets... (right) This woman is operating her Pellet press on the other side of an explosion-proof wall by means of a periscope and mirror arrangement (see arrow). "MacArthur" is the nickname of the machine. Both courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.



factory work, particularly in industries producing defense materials.¹⁹ Women who took jobs at ordnance plants were called WOWs (Women Ordnance Workers).

Over forty percent of COP employees were women. Women accepted jobs at the plant for various reasons, but wages were an important factor. The COP not only offered more money than most Grand Island businesses, it hired women at the same rates of pay as men.

Another major reason that women worked at the COP was patriotism. According to a 1942 *Coplanter* report, many of the women employed at the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant sought work in the plant in order to do what they believed was more than they otherwise could have done to back up their husbands, sons and sweethearts who are fighting with the armed forces of the United States. They have a genuine desire to do all in their power to keep the supplies, materials and munitions needed by the fighting men flowing at an ever increasing rate.²⁰

Eriksen told the author that a strong sense of patriotism was also necessary to conquer her discomfort over the thought of the destruction and deaths COP bombs would cause.²¹

A third reason women joined the defense industry was the new status and respect they could earn at their jobs. Their work was arduous and routine, but it was important work. The same *Coplanter* report that discussed women's patriotism also praised their production record.²²

Many male employees at the COP also admired the women's efforts and praised their work. "Women had a pretty tough job out there . . . They were doing men's work most of the time."²³

The COP did not officially ban women from any job, though in practice women were never hired for the heaviest types of labor. Exclusion from these jobs was seen not as discrimination, but as recognition that most women lack the sheer muscular strength of men. Ten percent of the maintenance department, thirteen percent of the guard force, and forty-three percent of the office staff were women. WOWs filled sixty-five percent of the

loading line jobs, and women could be seen pouring explosives, driving mechanical donkeys, and pulling tote trucks full of freshly poured shells and bombs. The COP appreciated them most, however, in jobs requiring a high degree of dexterity.

It was apparent that men would not stand there and string ignitors all night long. If you observed where women were put, it was in those kinds of areas where the dexterity was vital for speeding up. The one man used the big screw gun because it was heavier, and it took some power to get that done. Both of the men we had [in the room where I worked] were doing that part of it; they weren't standing there using the glue gun, which was simply squirting glue on a screw, or they weren't the ones to screw it in, or they weren't the ones to put the wires together and crimp it, and they weren't the ones to string the ignitors or push powder. They didn't have the patience or the dexterity to do it.²⁴

Several assumptions prevented women from demanding more freedom than the war had already given them: (1) employers and public officials asserted that women were filling traditionally male jobs only until the soldiers returned; (2) women were expected to maintain their femininity even in masculine jobs; and (3) the media emphasized traditional feminine motivations behind women's willingness to step out of customary roles (i.e. to bring men home more quickly, or make the world safe for children).²⁵ In Grand Island, all three of these conditions could be observed.

The first assumption arose from the COP's purpose, which was to produce munitions for the war effort. Because the need for ammunition would cease when the shooting stopped, every COP job was a temporary job. Grand Island community leaders anticipated that a tremendous run on the local job market would accompany the return of peace and that veterans coming home would only exacerbate the problem. There would be little room for the WOWs, most of whom would have to return home.

The second assumption appeared regularly in a *Coplanter* column called "Toward the Feminine." Written by a WOW, the column was based on the perception that women should be

feminine even when performing a man's work. Typical "Toward the Feminine" articles gave advice on how to look well groomed and cook nutritious meals in spite of rationing.²⁶ The column's author never tackled more difficult topics, such as discrimination, competition between female workers, or careers for women.

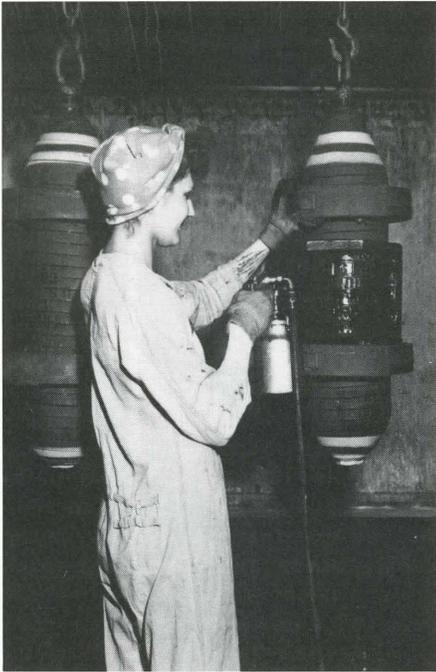
The limitations of "Toward the Feminine" were related to the third assumption, a media emphasis on the feminine motivations of the WOWs. *Coplanter* articles in particular stressed the idea that women sought nontraditional jobs for traditionally feminine reasons. Women workers seemed to take genuine pride in their femininity and to derive satisfaction from their traditional roles, reinforcing the attitudes of community leaders, the plant administration, and the media.

When the COP closed at the end of the war, most of the WOWs did return home or sought traditionally feminine jobs such as teaching. If some had regrets, few expressed them either verbally or in print. Those women who had been separated from their husbands were eager to spend some time with their spouses, and others simply felt worn out from the hard work and the physical side effects of their defense jobs. Eriksen said:

[After the war was over, I] just took care of my house. I never did any other work. It took me quite a while to get all that [TNT] toxic out of my system. For a long time, I was just worthless, pert-near. It took all I could do just to do my housework.²⁷

Many of the COP's policies were directed toward minimizing disruption of family life. One important social tradition followed in rural towns like Grand Island was that of families working together on a farm or in a business. The COP administration recognized this and hired whole families or parts of families, depending on how many members wanted to work. In a few cases, the plant employed as many as four family members, usually a couple and their grown children. Husband and wife combinations were actually quite common at the COP; there were twenty

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Bomb stenciling equipment (above) and pour machines (mechanical cows) were operated by WOWs. Both courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.





Uniformed production workers: Joan Bierbower (left), Bernice Corl, Avis Crouch, Betty Jean and Betty Jane Gustin, Letha Edwards, Florence Rehder, and Ileene Jurgensen . . . (right) Myer Avedovech, ordnance plant general superintendent. Both courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

such pairs working on line three alone.

For COP mothers with young children, child care (an unusual provision at this early date) was available. The child care center, operating jointly under the Grand Island Board of Education and the Federal Works Agency, was open from 7 A.M. until 6 P.M. daily and charged \$3 per child per week. The staff included eight adults, plus a trained nutritionist, who provided the children's lunches. Despite the good publicity the center received, few COP mothers used it. The center cared for only twenty-eight children at the peak of plant production, although it had a capacity for fifty.

Another COP policy that benefited Grand Island's social and economic environment was the management's practice of hiring certain categories of workers who had unsuccessfully sought jobs during the Depression. These

groups of workers included local teenagers, senior citizens, and the physically handicapped.

The COP's recruitment of teenagers was especially important because the plant gave them the chance to be productive and to regain the self-esteem they lost in the Depression. The COP sought teenaged help as early as November 5, 1942, when W. G. Sabine, the COP employment office manager, met with the senior class of the Grand Island high school. Sabine discussed student aid to the war effort, the types of COP jobs available, and the proper application procedure for plant employment. Initially the students had to be at least eighteen years old to apply for a COP job; but this age restriction was lowered in May 1944, when the Department of Labor decided that sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds could be employed in non-explosive areas. The COP immediately

responded by hiring eighty of these younger workers for summer jobs in the plant's lumber salvage yard. A few other teenagers were accepted for paper baling jobs in the ammonium nitrate building. In all cases, the minors were closely supervised.²⁸

Unlike the teenagers, senior citizens could work at any COP job. Some took their places on the line. More than one worked in the janitorial department, where the employees' ages ranged from nineteen to seventy. The oldest WOW that the COP employed, sixty-seven-year-old Addie Campbell Hendrickson, earned her wages in a line cafeteria. According to several *Coplanter* reports and interviews by the author, patriotism was the major reason that senior citizens came out of retirement to take jobs at the COP.

The COP also hired physically handicapped individuals, including veterans who had been wounded in

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World War I. In 1944 the plant management worked with the state services for the blind to place four sightless workers in COP jobs. The workers, two single men and one married couple, lived in the dorms and traveled to and from their booster line jobs without assistance.

Male COP workers tended to leave their previous jobs for the same reasons that women sought work outside the home — they needed the extra money, they were patriotically motivated, and they liked the respect they could earn in their defense jobs. At the peak of plant employment in February 1945, a job in downtown Grand Island paid fifty cents per hour, whereas the typical starting wage for COP laborers was seventy cents per hour. According to some, the expression of patriotism was an equally important incentive; when interviewed, H.R. Schultz said he left a higher-paying nondefense job in Omaha and moved to Grand Island, because he felt he needed to do more to help the country win the war. Finally, the COP administration knew that it was good management to respect its employees. The plant's strict production schedules could be met only through the all-out effort of the workers, and workers would exert the necessary effort only if they were happy and healthy.

One sign of the management's concern for its employees was that it required weekly and biweekly medical examinations for the employees who worked with hazardous materials. COP doctors and nurses conducted the examinations at no charge to COP workers, so that work-related illnesses could be identified and treated before they became a serious problem. Women were prohibited from wearing makeup on the lines, because it discouraged proper washing and masked signs of TNT poisoning such as blueness of the lips. Employees who displayed any symptoms of this potentially fatal illness could receive free treatment in the COP infirmary.

Besides caring for the medical needs

of COP workers, the plant administration organized recreational and social programs for the employees. Bowling leagues and singing groups formed even before the construction work on the plant was complete. Just before Christmas in 1942, the administration created ice ponds for COP skaters by flooding two excavations between the dormitories and administration area. Softball, tennis, badminton, croquet, horseshoe, and volleyball areas on the COP grounds were ready for employee use by July 1943. An indoor recreation room opened in the main cafeteria that same month. In addition, individual departments often held their own picnics and parties, and the administration sponsored all-plant dances.

All workers employed by the plant during its early operations learned about the COP from the media or from word of mouth. When advertising alone failed to bring in an adequate number of employees, the plant administration awarded COP workers \$5 for each new

employee they successfully recruited. In the summer of 1944, the administration sent a red, white, and blue COP bus with an interviewer's desk and pictures of the plant from town to town.

Most full-time employees were required to work at least forty-eight hours a week, but many worked overtime. On weekdays employees were paid time and one-half for their extra work; on Sundays they could earn double wages. To maximize efficiency, the COP administration ran the plant continuously in three shifts, the day shift (8 A.M. to 4 P.M.), the swing shift (4 P.M. to 12 A.M.), and the graveyard shift (12 A.M. to 8 A.M.). All shifts changed every two weeks. After ten months' service, full-time employees were entitled to two weeks of paid leave, which could be taken between April 1 and October 31.²⁹

The COP also employed part-time workers. The typical part-timer held a regular daytime job in downtown Grand Island and came to the plant for

This blind production worker was one of a number hired by the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant. Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.





A flag raising ceremony accompanied presentation of the Army-Navy E Award for excellence in war production on October 17, 1944. Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

a few hours in the evening. Certain part-time employees, such as teachers and farmers, worked seasonally. In addition, some of the soldiers who were stationed at the Grand Island Army Air Field would use their three-day passes to help out at the COP.

The extra effort of Grand Island workers was just one example of cooperation between the community and the COP. Community leaders, par-

ticularly the politically active, had been behind the plant from the very start. At the flag-raising ceremony on November 14, 1942, Mayor Harry Grimminger urged the people of Grand Island to cooperate with ordnance plant personnel. They did more than this; in 1944 concerned citizens organized a plant support group, which helped maintain and expand the COP work force through public education. Chairman R.

E. Murphy, a local employer who saw the value of the plant, and Vice Chairwoman Mrs. Orville Ruby, who was also the president of the city's Parent-Teacher Association, led the group in its pro-plant campaign.

The COP management returned the favor by contributing both time and money to local programs, especially athletics. During the war, plant-sponsored baseball and basketball teams played with teams from the towns surrounding Grand Island. A more permanent contribution to the city was the plant's \$3,000 gift to the Grand Island Memorial Stadium Fund. The plant also supported the local Boy Scouts by lending two trucks to the Scouts' 1945 paper salvage pickup.

On October 17, 1944, the COP received the Army-Navy "E" award for excellence in war production. The "E" was the highest honor that the armed services could bestow upon ordnance workers, and the plant proudly flew the award flag every day until it closed.³⁰

Less than a year after COP workers received the army-navy "E" award, the plant suffered its only major accident. At 1:30 P.M. on Saturday, May 26, 1945, an explosion leveled the main pour building of line four. The blast rattled windows in Grand Island and was heard in two other towns more than ten miles away. Most of the people who worked in the three-story reinforced concrete building were at lunch when the explosion occurred; nine were not so fortunate. Lola Britten, Betty Ledford, Mart Burke, James Moon, Earl W. Brown, Albert Otto Schultz, George Wilkins, Fred Abraham, and Ambrose Welch lost their lives in the accident. The administration halted the production lines that day and the next, while investigators made an unsuccessful attempt to determine the cause of the explosion. Newspaper stories speculated that lightning from a passing thunderstorm may have caused the blast.

There was no time to construct a new main pour building for line four. All

Munitions Manufacture



This 100-passenger bus transported employees living in the dormitories to and from their work (right) Uniformed women chauffeurs of the ordnance plant motor pool: Marian Mitchell (left), Birdean Thibault, Ella Martin, Frances Dutton, Miriam Dethloff, Bertha Titterington, Beaulah Reeder. Both courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.



COP production ceased immediately after Japan agreed on August 14, 1945, to surrender; the government terminated the Quaker Oats contract on September 1. The entire COP work force was released over this two-week period. The plant was immediately mothballed, and the army completely stripped the COP buildings over the next few years. Virtually no equipment was spared; even the window glass and the electrical wiring were sold.

The city adjusted to the plant's closing with surprising ease. Former COP employee Henry Wit felt that preparation was a key to the relatively smooth transition:

Grand Island kind of got built up for [the plant's closing], and they were preparing for it. We had a little notice, so I don't think it hurt Grand Island as bad as a lot of them expected it to, really. Because in the meantime we got other industries.³¹

Schultz, who gave up his COP job toward the end of the war in order to open a grocery store, agreed that the plant's closing inflicted minimal damage on the city. "There were so many people from out of town . . . that just melted back into the rural community . . . [Grand Island businesses] coped with it pretty good."³²

The transition was also helped by the spirit of jubilation which accompanied the end of the war. A positive, can-do attitude was in the air, and people could easily tolerate the confusion and inconvenience which followed the plant's closing. The city of Hastings, on the other hand, was shocked by the August 24, 1949, announcement that the HNAD would be closed. Hastings residents fought hard to keep their depot open and succeeded temporarily, but the plant still went inactive on December 31, 1949.³³

Until the COP was reactivated on February 1, 1950, its buildings were used for grain and fertilizer storage. The Korean War brought a massive cleanup and a new management contractor, the Silas Mason Company. Korean War production ceased in 1957, and the plant remained quiet until its

Vietnam operations, from September 1965 until October 1973.³⁴

In February 1989 the U.S. Armament, Munitions, and Chemical Command told the press that it wanted to transfer or sell the COP. Before the COP could be sold, the army had to declare the area free of the groundwater contamination that resulted from explosive chemical runoff during all three wars. The U.S. Army did extensive cleanup on the plant itself, but a trail of contaminated water outside the boundaries complicated efforts to transfer the facility.

When the army announced in 1941 that it would build an ordnance plant in Grand Island, most of the city's inhabitants were anxious for construction to begin. However, two groups in the area - farmers and downtown merchants - were hurt by the arrival of the plant. Other local groups received direct benefits. The COP gave many women their first jobs outside the home; employed teenagers, senior citizens, and handicapped persons; and improved general working conditions in Grand Island by increasing the financial and social status of local workers.

On more than one occasion, the COP administration found that the goals of the plant conflicted with the status quo of the local power structure. Because these conflicts could have caused a loss in plant production, the COP decision-makers tried to develop programs and policies that would cushion the community against new social stresses. Some conflicts, such as the one between the merchants and the plant, disappeared when the economic situation in Grand Island improved. Other problems, like the Grand Island Real Estate Board's attempt to stop the Broadwell Courts project, were settled according to priorities established by the national war effort.

Before the plant closed, it contributed greatly to Grand Island's economic and social vitality. Likewise, the COP owed its productivity to the

cooperation of Grand Islanders and the residents of nearby towns.

NOTES

¹"Nebraska at War," *Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, July 4, 1943, 66-C. The Nebraska Ordnance Plant (NOP) was managed by the Firestone Company, while the Cornhusker was operated by the Quaker Oats Company.

²Jerrold Simmons, "Public Leadership in a World War II Boom Town," *Nebraska History*, 65(Winter 1984):486.

³Brian Fabry, "The Hastings Naval Ammunition Depot" (Unpublished paper on file with Dr. Philip Jordan, Hastings College, 1988), 1, 8, 9.

⁴Henry A. Wit, retired musician and musical instrument repairman, interview by author, Grand Island, June 22, 1989.

⁵Marie Ericksen, former COP employee and homemaker, interview by author, Grand Island, November 21, 1988.

⁶Mason and Hanger-Silas Mason Company, Inc., "Cornhusker Ordnance Plant 1941-1957" (Unpublished brochure, 1957, Cornhusker Ordnance Plant, Grand Island, 1957).

⁷Jack Bailey, "Sure Uncle Sam - Take Our Homes," *Sunday World-Herald Magazine*, n.d., 9c.

⁸Fabry, "Ammunition Depot," 5. For a discussion of similar land acquisition problems in the Rosemount, Minnesota, area in preparation for the construction of the Gopher Ordnance Works, see Patricia L. Dooley's "Gopher Ordnance Works, Condemnation, Construction, and Community Response," *Minnesota History* 49 (Summer 1985):214-28.

⁹Bailey, "Take Our Homes."

¹⁰"Farmer is Urged to Enter Ranks of COP Workers," 1944 *Grand Island Daily Independent* clipping from scrapbook in 250/46 Military Historian's Files, Cornhusker Ordnance Plant, Grand Island.

¹¹St. George Cooke, "History of the Rehabilitation and Reactivation of the Cornhusker Ordnance Plant, Grand Island, Nebraska, by the Silas Mason Company" (Unpublished paper, 1952, Cornhusker Ordnance Plant, Grand Island), 35.

¹²*Coplanter*, August 7, 1945, 8, on file at Cornhusker Ordnance Plant, Grand Island.

¹³"Employee, Public Relations Division is Set Up by Q.O.," *Coplanter*, February 19, 1943, 4.

¹⁴For a discussion of the problems caused by home construction in one new defense area - Bellevue, Nebraska - and the resulting dispute over local zoning authority for the project, see Jacqueline McGlade's "The Zoning of Fort Crook: Urban Expansionism vs. County Home Rule," *Nebraska History* 64(Spring 1983):21-34.

¹⁵"Big Housing Project Is Shut Down," 250/46 Military Historian's Files.

¹⁶*Coplanter*, February 9, 1945, 1.

¹⁷"Transportation of Workers is Major Problem," *Coplanter*, January 1, 1943, 3.

¹⁸"Share Riders' Program Begun for COP Workers," *Coplanter*, January 1, 1943, 3.

¹⁹Susan M. Hartmann, *The Homefront and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 21.

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War Savings bonds parade in downtown Grand Island. Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

²⁰"Wow's at COP — Their Ranks Are Steadily Increasing," *Coplanter*, December 11, 1942, 4.

²¹Eriksen interview.

²²*Coplanter*, December 11, 1942, 4.

²³H.R. "Stub" Schultz, interview by author, Grand Island, August 12, 1989.

²⁴Elaine DeHarde, principal of Dodge Elemen-

tary School, interview by author, Grand Island, June 21, 1989.

²⁵Hartmann, *Homefront and Beyond*, 23.

²⁶"Toward the Feminine," *Coplanter*, November 27, 1942, 2.

²⁷Eriksen interview.

²⁸*Coplanter*, May 26, 1944, 1.

²⁹*Ibid.*, May 5, 1943, 1.

³⁰*Ibid.*, October 13, 1944, 1.

³¹Wit interview.

³²Schultz interview.

³³Fabry, "Ammunition Depot," 14-15.

³⁴Janis Lovitt-Psota, "Stone Silence," *Grand Island Independent*, March 5, 1989, 2-F.