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Women and the Hanford Site

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When we study the technical and scientific history of the Manhattan Project, women's history is sometimes left out. At Hanford, a Site whose past is rich with hard science and heavy construction, it is doubly easy to leave out women's history. After all, at the World War II Hanford Engineer Works – the earliest name for the Hanford Site – only nine percent of the employees were women. None of them were involved in construction, and only one woman was actually involved in the physics and operations of a major facility – Dr. Leona Woods Marshall. She was a physicist present at the startup of B-Reactor, the world's first full-scale nuclear reactor – now a National Historic Landmark. Because her presence was so unique, a special bathroom had to be built for her in B-Reactor. At World War II Hanford, only two women were listed among the nearly 200 members of the top supervisory staff of the prime contractor, and only one regularly attended the staff meetings of the Site commander, Colonel Franklin Matthias. Overall, women comprised less than one percent of the managerial and supervisory staff of the Hanford Engineer Works, most of them were in nursing or on the Recreation Office staff. Almost all of the professional women at Hanford were nurses, and most of the other women of the Hanford Engineer Works were secretaries, clerks, food-service workers, laboratory technicians, messengers, barracks workers, and other support service employees. The one World War II recruiting film made to attract women workers to the Site, that has survived in Site archives, is entitled "A Day in the Life of a Typical Hanford Girl." These historical facts are not mentioned to criticize the past – for it is never wise to apply the standards of one era to another. The Hanford Engineer Works was a 1940s organization, and it functioned by the standards of the 1940s. Just as we cannot criticize the use of asbestos in constructing Hanford (although we may wish they hadn't used so much of it), we cannot criticize the employment realities or the social practices of those days. If we can simply understand the past, then maybe we can learn from it. This presentation will highlight the success stories of many of Hanford's women. About 4,000 women came to the gargantuan, remote desert location, most of them young and away from home for the first time. Almost all of them were coming to a place they had never heard of and undertaking a mission that could not be explained to them because it was Top Secret. Faced with decidedly unequal opportunity, they came and took the jobs that were available, because they felt a personal dedication to the war effort. They had fun at Hanford, despite living in dusty barracks and eating mess hall food, and they left their mark on Hanford and its memories in many ways. Without them, the Site could not have functioned, and the war might not have been won as soon as it was. They then became the grandmothers of Richland, Washington, who told their stories to me in the 1990s. This presentation will show the lives of these women at Hanford during the Manhattan Project, as they worked to make the best of the situation, contribute and do their jobs. Their feelings about the work 50 years later will also be discussed.