

Female Munitions Workers in WWII

Facts:

- There were 900,000 workers, male and female, in Canada's factories in WWII when the population was around 11 million.
- In 1943, not yet at the peak of production, The Globe and Mail printed a chart showing one week of Canada's contributions towards the war effort: six vessels, 80 aircraft, 4000 motor vehicles, 450 armoured fighting vehicles, 940 heavy guns, 13,000 smaller weapons, 525,000 shells, 25 million cartridges, 10,000 tons of explosives and \$4million worth of communications equipment.
- Canada's war time production was valued at more than \$9.5 billion in 1940's dollars—the equivalent of more than \$100 billion today. 53% of Canada's war production went to British and Commonwealth nations.
- Canada's Gross National Product went from \$5.6 billion in 1939 to \$11.8 billion in 1945.

During WWII there were almost 50,000 Canadian women in uniform, nearly 250,00 women involved in Canada's war industries, 440,000 in the civilian labour force and hundreds of thousands of farmerettes tending the land.

The story of one munitions worker, Louise Johnson, shows that many women were in fact 'drafted' to work in munitions factories such as the shell filling plant in Ajax called Defence Industries Limited or DIL.

Louise Johnson's story, one among millions, represents the Canadian women who heeded the call to help Canada in a time of need. She said: *"Young people today don't realize that the Battle of Britain was almost lost. In our hearts, everyone knew we had to pull together to do whatever had to be done."*

Louise Johnson came from Saskatoon to Ajax to do what had to be done—prepare explosives for war.

Louise's family were homesteaders who came from England in the late 1800s. After a time in Ontario, her family moved to Sturgeon River, Saskatchewan for a land grant. *"Our family had to 'prove up the land' which meant cultivating and living on the land we cleared."*

The community was so small that at seven years of age, Louise went to Shelbrook to live with her grandmother to go to school. *"At 13 when I was old enough to get my brother and I to school by horse, I returned to Sturgeon River. I didn't stay long. Those hard Depression times meant I had to leave school. I went to Saskatoon at 16 to live with an aunt. I looked after children until I got a job in the Saskatoon City Hospital in housekeeping."*

In 1940–41 as the Canadian government struggled with conscription, every Canadian over 18 years of age was registered with the government. *"I received a phone call from Alec Russell in DIL's Personnel Department. With the government's list of 18 year olds, he was calling to set up interviews. They had teams going east and west in Canada to look for munitions workers."*

After Louise's interview she was offered a position where she would make almost twice what she was making in the hospital. DIL guaranteed transport, comfortable lodgings, a cafeteria and a safety net. If after three months Louise didn't like what she was doing, DIL would pay to send her home.

"It was a big decision, but, I figured that I could serve my country in a way that was a piece of cake in comparison to those serving in uniform. I wrote my dad and he wrote back, 'Go for it!'"

The train ride, with three car loads of women from Saskatoon, took three days to reach Toronto. *"I'd estimate there were at least 100 girls in each car. I didn't know anyone but lots of girls traveled with friends. We arrived on a bright sunny day to see busses lined up to take us to Ajax where we were made very welcome. The residences were great, hardwood floors and all. We were bunked two to a room."*

The recruiters had told Louise very little about her job at DIL. All she knew was she'd be filling shells in a plant near Toronto. *"I'd only been on a train once before in my life. I didn't want to go on a long train trip just to clean toilets!"*

Louise need not have worried. She was assigned the Blue Shift filling 3.7" shells with cordite. There were three colour-coded shifts in the plant that worked around the clock six days a week.

The safety bandanas that the women wore to cover their hair were different colours for each shift. The shell filling wasn't difficult but the threat of static electricity around explosives made the job dangerous. *"We couldn't wear rings, hair pins or have safety pins on*

our clothes. We were issued special shoes. The man from what is now Moody's in Pickering lost an eye and there were some fingers lost but when you consider that there were 9,000 people working, DIL had an excellent safety record."

Louise lived in the DIL residence from November 1942 to September 1943 when she moved to 51 Glynn Street, a 'temporary' war house in Ajax. She and her friend Dorothy Bleutt from D'Arcy, Saskatchewan rented the back room from the Chevrier family. They had moved to obtain kitchen privileges to do their own cooking.

"Dorothy wore a white bandana because she was on Quality Control. In June 1944 when she transferred to Toronto, I filled my time by taking a typing course at Lord Elgin School."

Louise was working on Line 3 when the floor lady told her to see the area foreman. *"Someone took my scale and I went up and along a catwalk. I was worried as few of us on the line were ever called to the area foreman. Art McCartney said, 'I understand you can type.' The course I'd taken hadn't amounted to much so I told Mr. McCartney that I only knew where the keys were, but, if he wanted, I'd give it a try."*

Using an old manual typewriter, Louise started in the Shipped Office typing production reports of what went out of the plant. *"It was all numbers which meant a lot of concentration but it was also four cents more an hour."* Louise typed until she was moved back to Line 1.

"The Blue Shift had layoffs in 1943 going from three to two shifts. There wasn't as great a need for the shells they were producing. The toughest shift was between midnight and 8 a.m. Hour after hour of repetitive work when you had to be careful was rough."

One tiring night on Line 1, Louise really woke up. *"Thisnew, handsome, cheerful fellow came in with some cordite for us. He joked, 'Come on ladies, wake up!' I don't know if it was love at first sight but it was close to it. We got married in August 1944."*

Russell Johnson's family were farmers in the Picton area of Prince Edward County. Russell had been classified 4F for health reasons but was able to work in the munitions industry. He lived in war housing near Cedar Street.

After he was transferred to Louise's line, the two got to know one another better. *"Russell found a minister in Toronto on the Danforth. Our best man, matron and witness were all from the plant. There were five of us in the wedding party."*

My parents sent a Hudson Bay blanket and relatives of Russell's from Oshawa gave us some curtains. We bought a bed-chestfield, dishes and bedding. Since Dorothy was gone, the Chevriers graciously let Russell move in."

November 1944 the newlyweds received shocking news from the Chevriers. The family had been transferred. Russell Johnson went to the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) which was located on Harwood Avenue to ask to remain in the house. He was refused. *"With no place to stay, Russell felt we had no alternative. We both gave our notice. Russell also went to see the Superintendent of Line 1. I don't know what he said during his negotiations but in a couple of days we were told we could have the house as long as we shared it."*

We were fine with that because we knew there was a shortage of living space and long waiting lists. We shared 51 Glynn Street with Sophie and Johnny who were on a different shift. It worked really well because we only saw them on Sundays."

August 1945 production ceased on Line 1. Russell was finished. He found work with CMHC spray painting the war time houses to get them ready for use by the University of Toronto. *"That's when my typing came into play again. The Superintendent asked me to stay on to type all the Quit Slips. They were alphabetic but I kept moving mine to the bottom of the pile. There was no point typing mine until they were all done."*

When Louise finally did type her own Quit Slip, she took it to Selective Service, the forerunner of Unemployment Insurance. *"We received some kind of severance pay and were told NOT TO SEEK WORK. The men needed the jobs now. It had never occurred to me that there wouldn't be work for me outside the home. I'd been working since I was 16."*

In 1946 Russell and Louise took a delayed honeymoon trip out west to see her parents.

"We obtained a car and went to Saskatchewan for six weeks. It was a turning point. My roots weren't deep in Ontario and we could have stayed out there. The deciding part was that my 18 year old brother couldn't find work out west whereas he could get a job in Ontario. We brought my brother back to Ajax and he stayed with us until 1949."

Louise describes the years between layoff in 1945 and the birth of her daughter in 1948 as the worst time in her life.

“Women like me were very frustrated. We knew that the men who had sacrificed their youth needed the jobs, but, what about us? One of my friends joked that she was coming to inspect my house because I’d washed the walls so often that the nails probably showed through.

Female war workers drifted around without money or activities. Few of us could take courses. It wasn’t until the babies arrived that any of us felt that we had a purpose.”

When Louise’s daughter entered school, Louise’s life outside the home re-started very slowly. First she became involved in home and school. Then she sold subscriptions to the local paper.

She’s kept very busy since then receiving awards from Heritage Canada and the Town of Ajax for her community work. In 1965 Louise Johnson was widowed.

Louise Johnson is an active, contributing member of the Ajax community. She continues to live at 51 Glynn Street where she’s been for 64 years.

The war work of women like Louise Johnson turned the tide for the Allies in WWII. Ironically these women served their country twice. When ‘drafted’ to fire up the machinery of war, they proved themselves capable of anything. When the war geared down, they were offered nothing.

War times required that they serve and they did.

Immediate post-war society demanded they step aside and they did.

We are called to remember Louise Johnston and the millions of women she represents who served their country both by working and, then for a while, by not working!

Lest we forget.

Pastor Richard Brown, Tavistock, ON November 8, 2010