

Women, Work and the War: Miriam Chrisman's World War II Letters

Context

This collection of documents from the Miriam Chrisman Papers helps students and teachers to explore:

- Women and work in World War II (1939–1944)
- Courtship, war weddings, and gender roles (1939–1944)
- Using correspondence as historical evidence

Introduction

Letters from the Miriam Usher Chrisman Collection at UMass Amherst tell a story of women and work during World War II that is in sharp contrast to the classic image of “Rosie the Riveter.” Chrisman's experience as a middle class white woman working in a professional field can effectively be presented in terms of the contrast between the idealized image of a factory worker like Rosie, the actual experience of war work for many women in the service sector, and Chrisman's privileged, though nevertheless challenging, experience as a young woman in a field dominated by men.

The National Park Service online exhibit, “Rosie the Riveter: Women Working During World War II” [link] includes a short bibliography of relevant sources. The exhibit also includes a short introductory essay on women's work during the war [link].

Background Information for Students

The image of Rosie the Riveter will be familiar to many students, however many students may find statistics about the role of women in the work force surprising. See Monys A. Hagen's [web site](#) on women in the Army for a selection of statistics drawn from Susan M. Hartman's *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*.

Discussion

Divide the class into two groups, and distribute copies of Chrisman's letters to each group of students. Have one group read letters about the Chrismans' wartime courtship, while the second group reads letters about Miriam's work experience. Give the groups fifteen minutes to scan all the letters and quickly assemble a narrative summarizing the material in the letters.

Reconvene the groups, and open the floor for discussion. Have each group report out on the letters. Ask students to discuss aspects of the letters that they found surprising or confusing. Guide the discussion to explore themes such as:

- The contrast between the image of Rosie the Riveter and Chrisman's work in a professional setting
- The values and limits of correspondence as a primary source, and the richness of the correspondence in the Chrisman collection, which provides multiple points of view to and from a variety of correspondents, on a single subject

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Discussion (continued)

- Gender discrimination in the work place with particular regard to Chrisman's shifting assessment of her own abilities

Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- Note Donald Chrisman's commentary on the outside of the letters from Miriam. When do you think he added these comments? Do they suggest something about his own awareness of the historical value of the letters?
- Compare Miriam's tone when she writes to “the Society” and when she writes to Donald. Would our view of the Chrismans' relationship be different if only one kind of letter was included in the collection?
- Re-read the excerpt from Miriam's letter where she mentions a psychological test in a woman's magazine. How seriously does she take the results of the test? What does this imply about her views of herself as a wife, woman, and worker?