



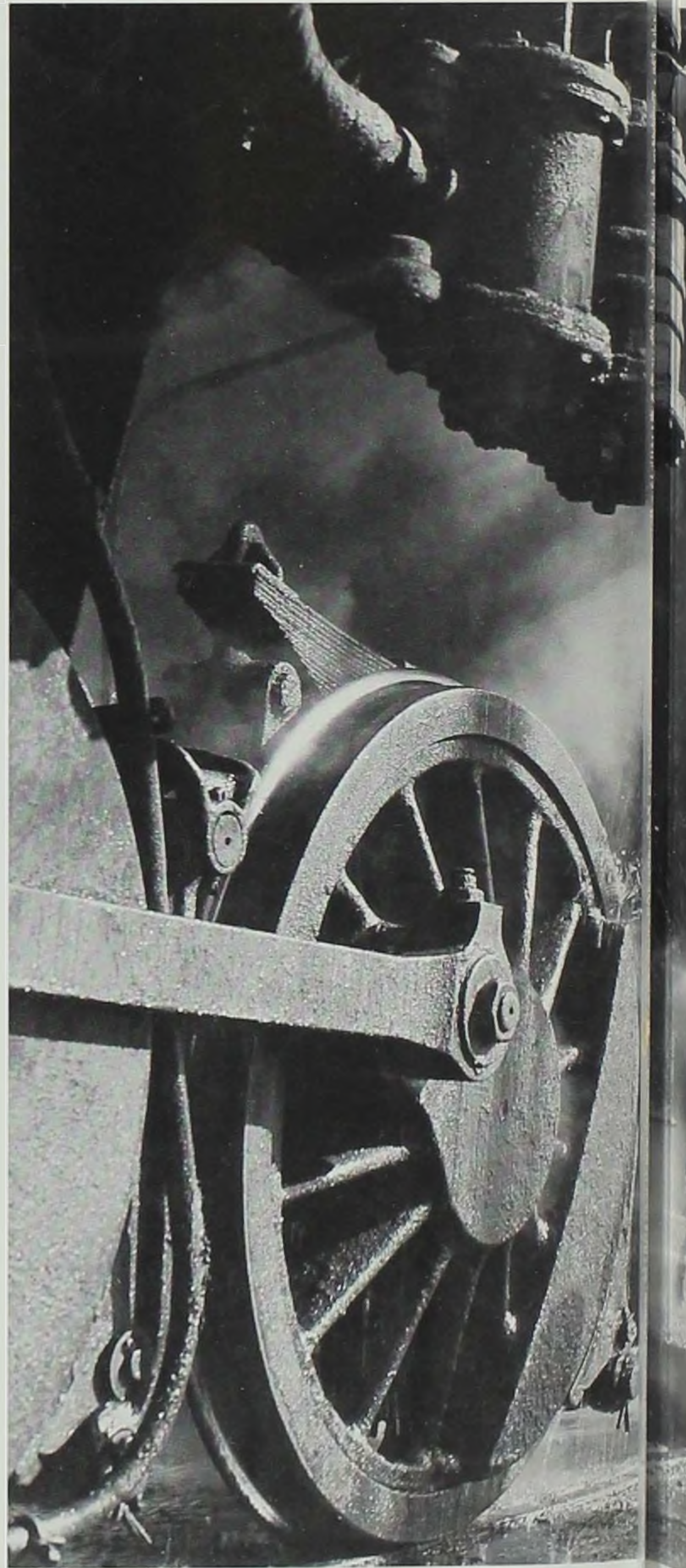
Women on the Home Front: The Iowa WIPes

by Jacqueline Smetak

Rosie the Riveter," the glamorous factory girl introduced in 1942 as a part of a federal campaign to encourage women to apply for defense jobs and to encourage employers to hire them, has long been a familiar icon of the Second World War [see above]. Less familiar, however, are the real life "Rosies," the women who overcame prejudice and their own doubts to contribute to the war effort, an effort that required both a massive increase in industrial production and radical changes in how things were produced and who produced them.

In Iowa, some of the real life "Rosies" were the women shown in the following images taken by Allison-Lighthall Photographers of Chicago, Illinois, for the Chicago and North Western Railway. Eight of the seventeen photos were published in the *Clinton Herald* May 18, 1943; all seventeen are now in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

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Marcella Kees, one of the Clinton WIPes, gives a locomotive a bath—a job, according to the *Clinton Herald*, “far different from the chore of washing out a few things at home.” In order to make women doing such heavy work seem “natural,” traditionally male jobs held by women were often described in feminized terms.



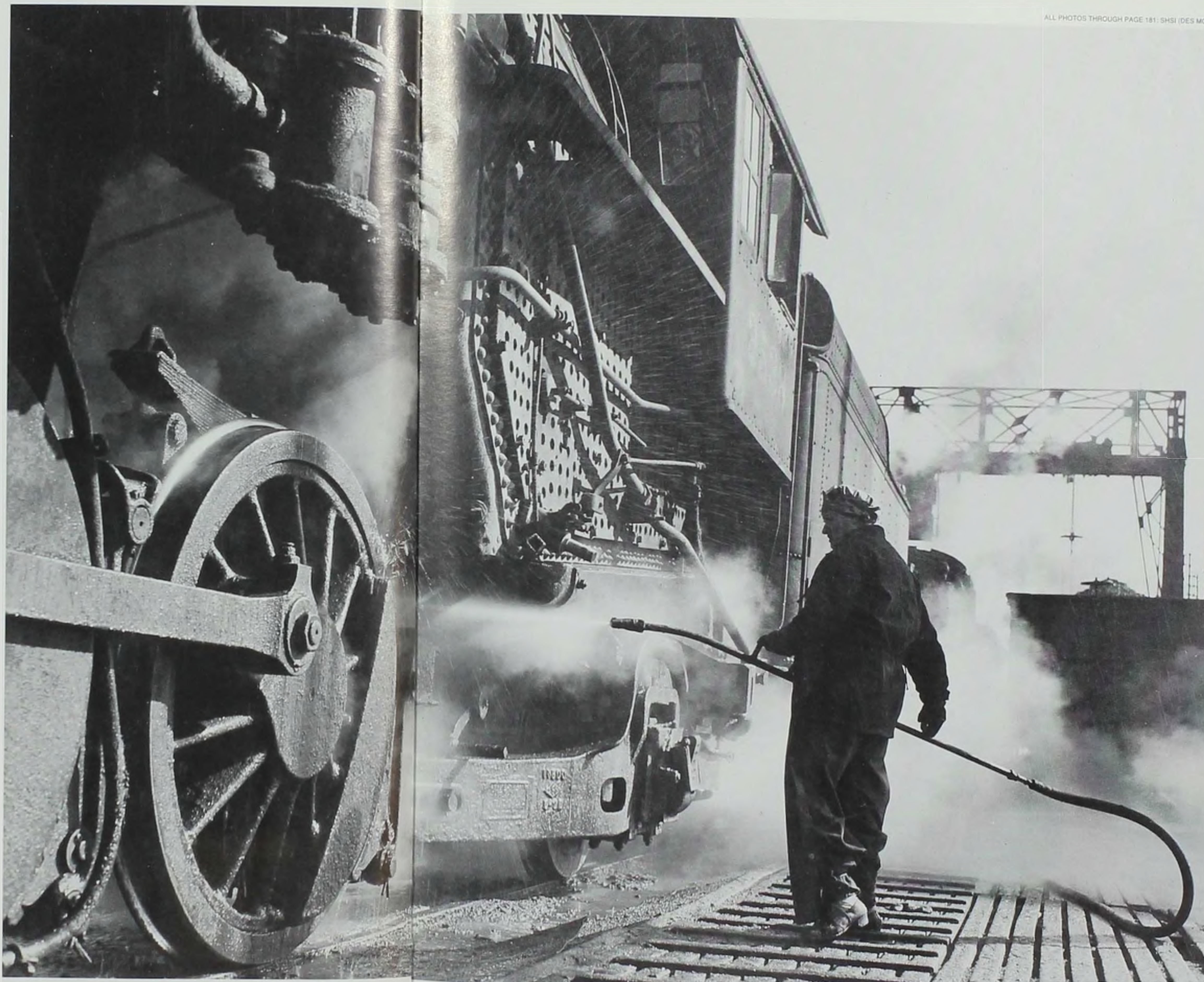
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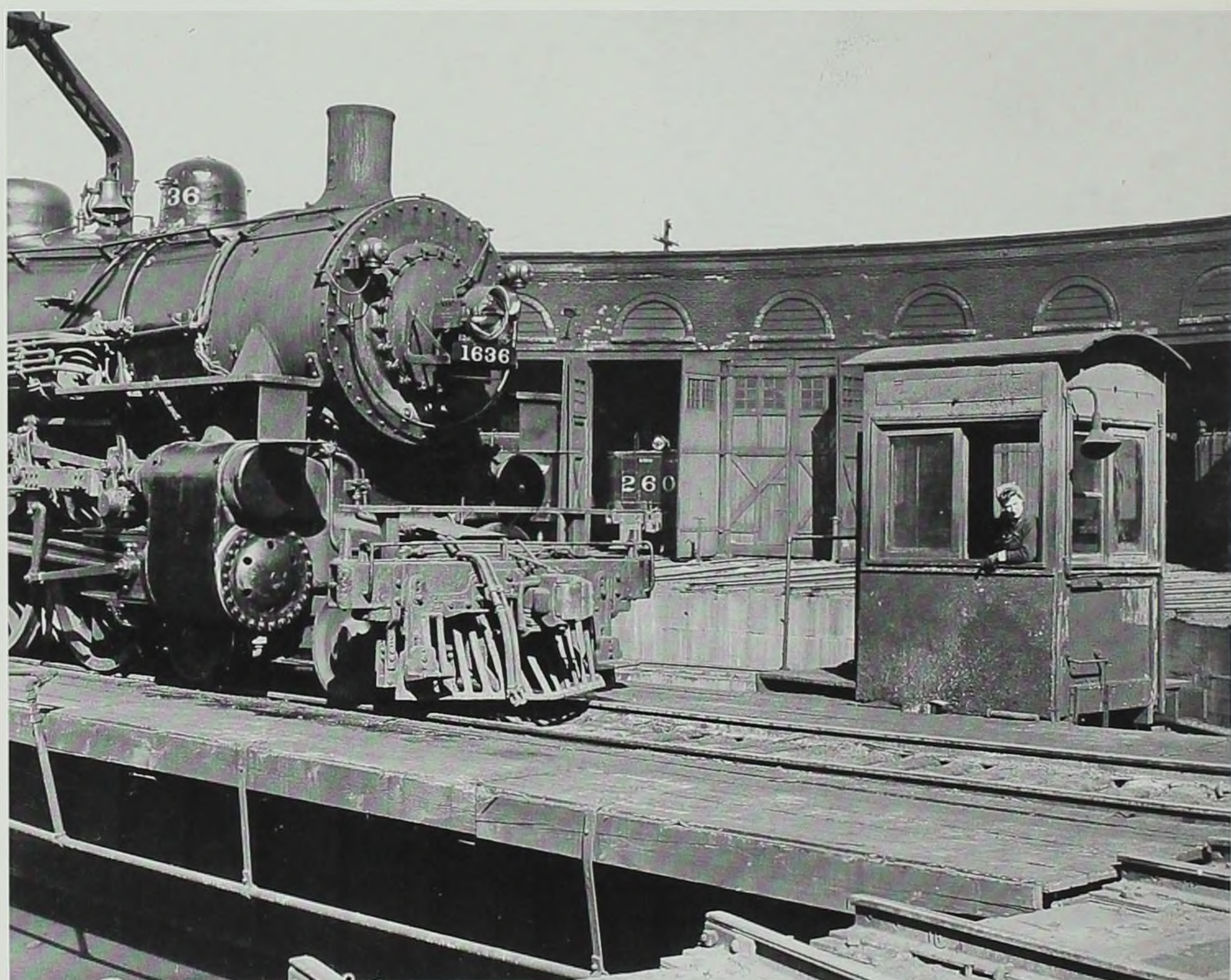
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ALL PHOTOS THROUGH PAGE 181: SHS (DES MOINES)



Edith Bennis (in window on right) had run a beauty parlor and her father's eighty-acre farm; now in 1943 she is running the turntable at the Clinton roundhouse while her husband works on an army construction project in Alaska. Women were often depicted as temporarily "stepping in" on the home front for their husbands and sweethearts away at the battlefield. However, according to historian Shema Gluck, by 1944, although one out of three female defense workers had been a full time homemaker before the war, only one in ten was actually married to a service man.

Bluffs, and Clinton, Iowa, as well as Chicago and Proviso, Illinois, and Green Bay, Milwaukee, and Madison, Wisconsin.

There were eleven and a half million women in the U. S. work force in 1940, most of them employed in low-paid, traditionally female jobs in light industry, domestic work, or the service sector. The overwhelming majority worked only out of grinding economic necessity largely because of the widely held opinion that women, particularly married women, shouldn't be working and thus tak-

ing scarce jobs away from men. In rural Iowa where manufacturing and professional jobs were scarce, women generally worked beside their husbands, brothers, or fathers on the farm, in small businesses, or took on short-term seasonal work for a little extra money.

By 1941, the war in Europe had changed all of that. Within a matter of months the nation went from chronically high levels of unemployment—20 percent in 1938; 14.6 percent in 1940—to sudden and severe labor shortages, most alarmingly in crucial de-

Thelma Cuvage, right, screens sand that will be used to add friction to the locomotive's driver wheels. Her husband also contributed to the war effort by working in a defense plant in Savannah, Illinois, about twenty miles north of Clinton. "The WIPes," the *Clinton Herald* explained, "are the feminine engine wipers, who for the first time since World War I, have invaded the shops and roundhouses of the North Western railroad."

Anna Weseman cleans the cab of a Class H locomotive. "At first we did not know how they'd take to the job," remarked labor foreman W.J. Whalen about the WIPes. "But the women soon convinced us that they look at all those dusty locomotives in the same way they do the job at a big, dirty house." The Class H locomotives were the "largest of the Iron Horses in service on the Northwestern Line."





Marcella Kees [or Martin?] shovels wet sand into a dryer. "The sand will be used in locomotives to add friction to driver wheels," the *Herald* reported. "The job is one of many formerly held by men and now handled by women."

fense-related industries. Industry and government responded to the need for more workers by hiring massive numbers of the previously excluded. In Iowa, the number of people employed in manufacturing nearly doubled from 64,773 in 1939 to 112,490 in 1947.

In the summer of 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 forbidding racial discrimination in defense industries, perhaps the first effective civil rights order since the Fourteenth Amendment. Many states suspended child labor laws—by 1943 over three million children, aged twelve to seventeen, were employed in war work—and in some areas, vagrants were arrested and those with usable skills were offered amnesty if they'd go to work.

But the most significant addition to the de-

fense work force were the six million women who donned coveralls and bandannas to do a man's job as well as any man. Iowa women were no exception as they stepped into tough jobs, replacing, as the *Clinton [Iowa] Herald* stated it, "their male predecessors who have gone to war or into higher-paying war plants." The Chicago and North Western's railroad yard at Clinton averaged about twelve trains a day, with seventeen women employed as WIPes "greeting the grimy locomotives" as they came off the line: "They [the women] swarm over the steel giants and give them a bath of live steam and hot water under pressure," the *Herald* reported.

WIPes worked a full eight-hour shift and then went home to their second job. This from the *Clinton Herald*: "The fact that she has four children did not keep Mrs. Ralph O.



Edith Bennis, a former beauty operator, stands on top of a locomotive to service the sand dome. A year later, in anticipation of the end of the war, newspaper articles would focus on the problems of juvenile delinquency supposedly caused by women abandoning their children in order to work, and the need to find jobs for GIs who, it was assumed, would be coming home soon.

"Lunch time—and time for feminine gossip for women laborers in the North Western railroad shops where the fair sex has taken over on the labor gang," the *Herald* reported. W.J. Whalen, labor foreman in charge of the crew, spoke highly of the women: "They do the job with care and thoroughness that is difficult for a man to equal." From left to right: Marcella Kees, Bonnie Smith, Libby Seematter, Irene Brecher, Thelma Cuvage, Katherine Anderson, Emily Atzen, Viola Sievers, Dorothy Lucke, Marcella Hart, and Anna Weseman.

Weaver . . . from joining the WIPes. Two of Mrs. Weaver's children were old enough to take care of the youngsters each day until Mr. Weaver, who is employed at the Clinton Bridge Works, had time to slip on an apron and get the supper going, while his wife worked the 4 p.m., to midnight shift."

But not to fear. Mrs. Weaver's sister came to live with them, joined the WIPes, and signed up for the 8 a.m., to 4 p.m. shift, "so Mr. Weaver no longer will have to worry about the culinary end of this all-out for Victory business."

Women worked tough jobs in spite of discrimination, unequal pay, notions about what they could and could not do, the difficulties of taking care of children and a house in the days before modern household appliances were common, a lack of help and child care, and the frustrations of chronic shortages and long lines at the grocery store. In a very real sense these women—of all ages, races, creeds, and colors—helped spell the difference between victory and defeat. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources for this article included *World War II: The Home Front: U.S.A.* (Time-Life Books, 1977); Shema Gluck, *Rosie the Riveter Revisited: Women, The War, and Social Change* (1987); Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (1993); Leland Sage, *A History of Iowa* (1974); Jacob Swisher, *Iowa in Times of War* (1943); and the *Clinton Herald*, May 18, 1943, pp. 3, 14.





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