"Sew for Victory!" How Women During World War II Used Their Domesticity to Aid the Cause

Aisha Manus
Independent Historian

Abstract

At the beginning of WWII, roughly 50 percent of American women knew how to sew. By 1944, that number jumped to 82 percent. This jump was in large part due to a major push by the government and the media for American women to support the efforts on the Homefront through the domesticity already expected of them. From articles in women's magazines to posters released by the U.S. Government, women were told to "Sew for Victory." Supported, in large part by the American Red Cross allocated millions in funds, these women, in turn, produced tens of millions of bandages, quilts, and articles of clothing for the service members both at home and abroad, demonstrating that the domestic work of women is an essential part in the success of the war.

Keywords: Homefront, WWII, Sewing, Knitting, Quilting, Volunteerism, Red Cross, Women's History, Propaganda

"¡Coser para la victoria!" Cómo las mujeres durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial utilizaron su vida doméstica para ayudar a la causa

Resumen

Al comienzo de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, aproximadamente el 50 por ciento de las mujeres estadounidenses sabían coser. En 1944, esa cifra saltó al 82 por ciento. Este salto se debió en gran parte a un importante impulso por parte del gobierno y los medios de comunicación para que las mujeres estadounidenses apoyaran los esfuerzos en el frente interno a través de la domesticidad que ya se esperaba de ellas. Desde artículos en revistas femeninas hasta carteles publicados por el gobierno de Estados Unidos, a las mujeres se les decía "coser para la victoria". Con el apoyo, en gran parte, de fondos millonarios de la Cruz Roja Americana, estas mujeres, a su vez, produjeron decenas de millones de vendas, colchas y prendas

 doi: 10.18278/mhc.1.2.3

de vestir para los miembros del servicio tanto en el país como en el extranjero, demostrando que el trabajo doméstico de Las mujeres son una parte esencial en el éxito de la guerra.

Palabras clave: Frente doméstico, Segunda Guerra Mundial, Costura, Tejido, Acolchado, Voluntariado, Cruz Roja, Historia de la Mujer, Propaganda

“为胜利而缝纫！”第二次世界大战期间妇女如何利用家庭生活来援助这一事业

摘要

二战初期，大约50%的美国妇女懂得缝纫。到1944年，这一数字跃升至82%。该数字跃升在很大程度上归因于政府和媒体大力推动美国妇女通过其已被期望的家庭生活来支持国土安全。从妇女杂志文章到美国政府发布的海报，妇女都被告知要“为胜利而缝纫”。在美国红十字会拨出数百万资金的支持下，美国妇女反过来为国内外的美国军人生产了数千万条绷带、被子和衣物，这表明妇女的家庭工作是战争成功的重要组成部分。

关键词：国土防线，二战，缝纫，针织、绗缝，志愿主义，红十字会，妇女历史，宣传

Pulitzer Prize winning historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich once wrote, “Well-behaved women seldom make history.”[1] While the phrase has gone on to inspire women everywhere to voice their opinions and smash the patriarchy, when I hear that phrase, I think of its original intention. All the untold stories of everyday women and the change they affected. When historians focus on the few who broke the mold, we are left with a history that is greatly lacking in the grand scheme of things. While those exceptional women are extremely important to history, the everyday heroes who made an impact by continuing to go about their lives are just as important. Their actions may have been small, but they created something great as a whole.

From the Revolutionary War until the present conflicts, American women have always been called upon to show their patriotism and support. From taking their husband’s positions at work to free them for service, raising money to buy bonds, and even going to combat themselves, women have served

their country in various ways. During World War II it was no different. Some women worked in bomb plants or other arms manufacturing or flew to distant places overseas to serve as nurses or members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corp (WAAC) or United States Naval Reserves (Women's Reserve) (WAVES), but there were many who aided the cause from the Homefront, using the domestic skills they had honed for generations to make a difference without ever needing to step out of the gender roles they were expected to play at the time. Those are the women that this article will focus on in particular, on the work of women who sewed and knitted for the Red Cross between 1942 and 1945, with specific emphasis on items that were intended for the war front, rather than the Red Cross general fund.

At the start of the Revolutionary War, 1,644 women from across New England had already come together to engage in 46 spinning bees,[2] along with 192 women participating in the southern portion of the colonies,[3] to create homespun fabric and clothes as part of the economic protests that proceeded the war. When the Civil War broke out, women in both the Union and the Confederacy once again used their sewing skills to make quilts, uniforms, and kits to comfort soldiers fighting and to raise funds to support the troops. The United States Sanitary Commission even provided a pattern for the Union Soldiers' uniform.[4] This type of support and patriotism by women continued into the Spanish-American and First World Wars, and by the time the United States had entered into WWII, American women had plenty of experience in using needlework for the cause. One woman, Mrs. Laura S. Litchfield of Milwaukee, WI, first began knitting for soldiers around the age of 13 during the Civil War and continued to do so with the Red Cross through the Spanish-American and First World War, knitting over 300 sweaters alone. In the first six months of 1942, at the age of 92, she had knitted another 71 sweaters and begun working on mufflers for the soldiers overseas.[5]

While most women were not as skilled as Mrs. Litchfield, that didn't stop women who wanted to serve from increasing their skills and trying. Prior to the war, 50 percent of American women knew how to sew. By 1944, that number jumped to 82 percent.[6] This uptick in skills was largely due to the classes that formed at sewing centers across the country, such as the class at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where 400 women eagerly signed up for their class on reusing clothing remnants just three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor.[7] Because no new sewing machines were being made during the war, in an effort to free up factories for war goods,[8] to meet the demands of all the women looking to sew for the cause but who didn't have machines of their own, the Red Cross opened sewing rooms in office buildings, libraries, and churches across the country. The Red Cross also allocated funds to provide the fabric and materials to these rooms, with a budget of $2.1 million dollars in 1944 alone,[9] and they also established quotas and goals to motivate and inspire the women who joined.

Page 115 of the March 1944 issue of *McCall's* magazine. This advertisement for Singer sewing products was purposeful in its mention of their engagement in war work. During the war Singer stopped production of their sewing machines so that their factories could be used for the production of war-related items instead. The War Production Board made sure parts were still available to fix machines previously made so homemakers could continue sewing without disruption from the lack of new machines. (Photographed by Aisha Manus from her personal collection)

For example, in the Camden, South Carolina, Red Cross sewing room between September 1, 1942, and June 1, 1943, the Red Cross set a quota of 711 garments. With the 1,907 yards of material that the Red Cross headquarters sent them to accomplish this goal in that time frame, not only did they make that quota, but they also produced an additional 100 garments, plus used scraps left over to make patchwork quilts. On top of this, the women also made 150 kit-bags, also known as duffle bags, and 10 chair cushion covers for Fort Jackson and a Red Cross banner for Columbia Airbase. To achieve this, it took the work of "16 different groups of County Women sewing for us, 11 ladies in the Liberty Hill group, a group at Westville, groups at the two factories, 13 workers in the Boykin group, the Jewish Sisterhood and the Baptist Circle and a group

in the Browning home," plus 27 individual sewers who lived in Camden.[10] Between January 1st and June 1st of 1944, the Camden chapter reported another 327 articles made, which they shipped to Fort Jackson, SC, for the Camp and Hospital Service Council.[11]

In Butts County, GA the women were sewing for the Red Cross even before the United States entered the war, with the items going to foreign relief. From January 1940 until May 1942, the women made 3619 articles, including 176 sweaters, 81 bedspreads, and 47 beanies, among other things.[12] From October 1942 until January 1943 they shipped out another 465 garments and four quilts. They also were finishing up four more quilts, all made from the scrap fabric from the garments.[13] In January of 1945, they had already sent 15 Navy sweaters, 21 Army sweaters, 101 stump socks, and 50 pairs of pajamas, and had cut 50 bed jackets and Army kits bags that just needed to be sewn, indicating another very productive year ahead of them.[14]

In nearby Jackson County, GA, in 1942, the Red Cross sewing rooms women sewed 2,199 garments and knitted 297 garments.[15] In the city of Jefferson, GA, the Red Cross sewing room, which was located in the City Hall, had to shut down production in late February 1942 because they had already run out of material and had to wait for a new shipment, according to the chapter director Mrs. H.I. Mobley.[16] However, three weeks later, they were back at it again, having already cut garments that needed sewing from 193 yards of recently arrived fabric.[17] The following year, the Jackson County chapter only sewed 670 garments; however, they increased their production of military-specific items such as Army mufflers, helmets, wristlets, and Navy sweaters, helmets, and caps.[18]

Not all chapters were as productive. In Houston County, GA, the chairman of the Red Cross workroom reported only 125 garments and 175 bags sewn by October 1942. She stated, "This work has been done under great difficulties as only a few women have done any of the sewing," even though 150 women had registered for sewing. She hoped that women would "take more interest in the sewing room."[19] In Athens, GA, the chairman of the Red Cross committee also found herself lacking women and stated that the "Red Cross desperately needs more volunteer workers among University students in summer school" and hoped that the new Red Cross volunteer course at the University of Georgia, Athens would bring them in. One of the topics to be taught was "sewing for service men [sic]," in addition to bandage rolling and first aid.[20]

To urge women to do their part by participating in a way that played for women's domesticity, President Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI) on June 13, 1942, after enacting Executive Order 9182,[21] to provide not just war-related news to the general public but to also create the print advertisements and posters that would be used as propaganda.[22] In all, 56 posters were created that preached fru-

gality and home efforts, or 16.6 percent of all posters created during the war.[23] One such poster, entitled "Sew For Victory," which played off these themes, was created by an artist by the name of Pistchal for the Federal Arts Project in New York in 1941, as part of the Works Project Administration (WPA).[24] The WPA was an organization that began in 1935 and provided employment to over 8.5 million Americans until it was disbanded in 1943, once the expansion of war industries provided full employment to the nation.[25] The Pitstchal poster depicted a sewing machine silhouette against a yellow and green background. Inside the silhouette was an image of a soldier at war surrounded by boats, tanks, and airplanes. The words "SEW FOR VICTORY" are above and below the silhouette.[26]

Another poster that was created that specifically targeted women who sew was a poster from 1943 entitled, "Use It Up – Wear It Out – Make It Do!" This poster further reinforced the gendered household roles by depicting a woman mending her husband's pants while he is wearing them as he sharpens his lawnmower blades, showing the division among labor between men and women.[27] Another poster, "Wanted for Victory," from 1942, depicted a family doing their part by recycling and urging them to either sell the scraps to a collector or give to a charity.[28] Though not directly related to sewing, posters like this did inspire W.B. Powell, the editor of the Jackson-Argus paper in Jackson, Georgia, to write an article about "pussyfooting around out-of-the-way places and peep[ing] into people's back yards to see what iron and steel and rubber scrap is to be found" and how in his own yard he found "more than a thousand pounds, some 200 pounds of copper, brass and lead" and how he sold part of it to buy more notions for the local Red Cross sewing club.[29]

Since not everyone was using their scrap funds to buy notions for the Red Cross, in cooperation with the OPA, the Red Cross issued "Cinderella" stamps to promote their National "Sew and Save Week," which took place the last week of February. The stamps, which ran each year from 1939 to 1945, ranged in size from 2x1 inches to 3x2 inches and varied in colors as well as theme. Four of the seven stamps were patriotic in color, with the three from 1940, 1941, and 1942 advocating for participants to buy war bonds and to make 1 million home-sewn garments and the 1944 stamp having a soldier made of sewing notions. The other three used sewing notions in their images, with the 1939 stamp being blue, orange, and white, the 1943 stamp being green, white, and yellow, and the 1945 stamp being yellow and red.[30] Department stores, such as Belks in Clinton, South Carolina, hoping to capitalize off the fabric purchase for these Sew and Save weeks, would run ads in the local newspapers to remind customers of the dates and advertise the items they sold that supported this cause.[31] Other companies, such as Etheridge-Smith Company in Jackson, Georgia, ran generic "Sew and Save" ads during the week of the event that could still be used at a different point in the year.[32]

Sewing companies released booklets promoting frugality while promoting their products, such as the "Make and Mend" booklet from the Spool Cotton Company in 1942. To go along with these tactics, the Red Cross partnered with the Office of Price Administration and issued "Cinderella" stamps to promote their National "Sew and Save Week", which took place the last week of February. The stamps, which ran each year from 1939 to 1945, ranged in size from 2"x1" to 3"x2" and varied in colors as well as theme. Stores would often use that week to promote their supplies in hopes of capitalizing off this national promotion. (Photographed by Aisha Manus from her personal collection)

These three thimbles in the foreground were distributed by various businesses to show their support for the cause while simultaneously promoting themselves. The one on the left was from Gamler's Diamond Importers of Buffalo, NY. The middle thimble was from Cozy Inn in Martinton, IL. The thimble on the right is from Burke's Service Station, location unknown. The image in the background was a cheeky postcard sent from Craig Field, AL to Forest Hills, NY in December 1942. The message was two Cinderella stamps stuck to the back, one with "V for Victory" and the other "Speak up for Democracy".(Photographed by Aisha Manus from her personal collection)

Magazine and other media entities also perpetuated women's participation through domesticity, by forming the War Advertising Council, the Writers' War Board, and the Magazine Bureau of the Office of War Information and presenting their information through feature articles, short fiction, magazine advertisements, and columns.[33] This could be seen in an editorial in early 1943 in the *Evening Star*, out of Washington, D.C., which stated, "Sewing is a patriotic as well as practical pastime these days, and wise women everywhere are learning to fashion clothes for the family as well as to remodel and repair old garments."[34] Local papers also ran columns with these types of propaganda. In the March 12, 1942, issue of *The Forsyth County News* in Georgia, an article appeared that listed seven things farm women can "do as their part in Victory." The second item on the list called for the women to "do your own sewing. Make over [sic] old clothes and save all scraps as they may be used in bed quilts, quilted house coats [sic], pillows and draperies." They hoped this "patriotic yet practical appeal" would reach the "30-odd thousand FSA [Farm Service Agency] homemakers in the state."[35]

Even as the war was finally beginning to wind down, there was still a push to continue to conserve fabrics. In the 1945 book *Thread of Victory,* the author urged Americans to continue to make do with the clothing they had, saying,

> The question then arises as to how much we can cut down. To help with the war, we can wear clothes that are patched and make it popular to do so. You ladies can wear a dress many times and be proud of its long wear and forget the question of new style. You can put aside the idea that one should not be seen twice in the same dress or in the same suit. We do not need a different outfit for every occasion nor a number of outfits hanging in the closet awaiting some future use. Must we buy new clothes just because spring or fall is here, or just because we are taking a trip? When we buy, we should think about how many clothes we have in the closet or even in the attic and what we can do with them. If we are not going to use them, they should be made available for those who will.[36]

In a 1942 booklet from Lilly Mills, a sewing thread company, Gertrude Duntz, the clothing supervisor of the Home Economics Division of the Pratt Institute, also addressed the concern some had about what they could do to help the cause. She wrote,

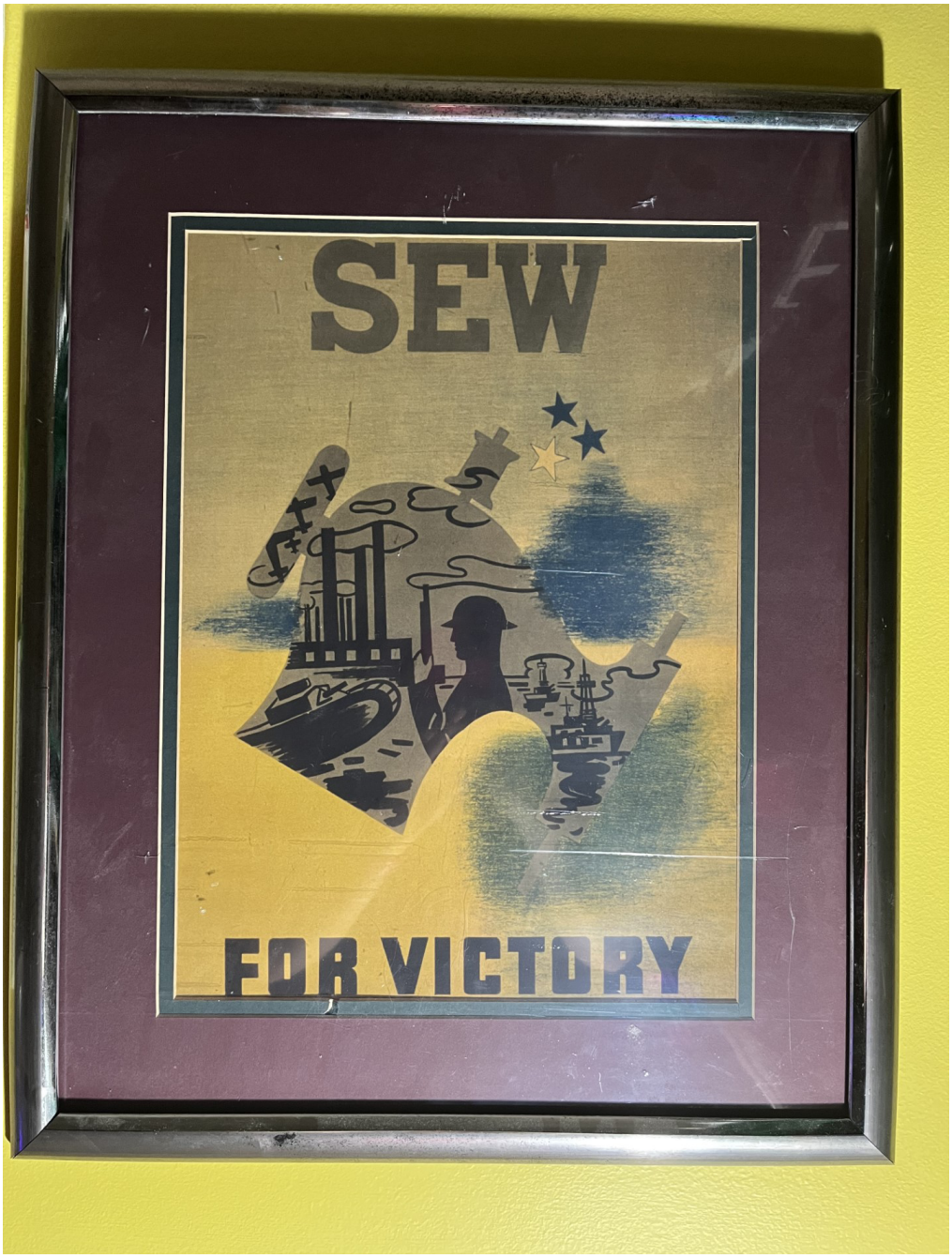
> The old question of 'what can I do about it' must be solved for patriotism, as well as for budget comfort. This may seem irrelevant, but in the past the bees impressed our forefathers to such an extent that common tasks were so ved [sic] by sewing bees, and husking bees, and maybe you know of some other

> bees. Anyway, these gatherings, were high-tension parties where work was play. It is a good idea in this second horse and buggy age, to invite friends and have remodelling [sic] bees.[37]

Many women took this suggestion to heart, and sewing clubs and bees were formed all over the U.S. In Weston, MA, an affluent suburb of Boston, Louise Erickson, Beryl Fields, Frannie Thomas, and several other women started a group that continued to gather well into the 1990s. While it originally started as a mending and sewing group, according to Fields, it also served as a source of support for the women during a time when the men of the town were either working in the factories or serving overseas.[38]

There were also already established women's organizations that took up sewing during WWII to help the cause. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, who previously supported the Red Cross during WWI by forming units across the South and in doing so had made 3.5 million hospital garments and knitted another 100,000 regular garments,[39] once again had chapters working in the Red Cross Sewing rooms across the South to sew for the cause. In Clinton, South Carolina, in February 1943, the Stephen D. Lee chapter of the UDC sponsored work for the local Red Cross sewing room. One member, Mrs. Jessie Sparks, had already knitted ninety sweaters for "boys in the service in the past two years" even though her "health does not permit her to be active in many things ... seldom are her hands idle."[40] Then, in April 1943, 18 members of the chapter met in the local Red Cross sewing room, which was located inside the city library, to fold surgical dressings,[41] an important job that the women did not take lightly. Volunteers for the Red Cross across the country are believed to have sewn and folded 2.5 billion surgical dressings.[42]

The American Legion Auxiliary also took advantage of Red Cross meeting rooms. In Clinton, South Carolina, they used the room to hold their meetings, where they would first hold a short business session and then finish their remaining time in the room doing Red Cross work. The president of this chapter, Mrs. B.O. Whitten, even made attendance mandatory.[43] Other groups, such as 4-H, also had members who participated in Red Cross sewing to further their leadership and volunteer skills. In Jefferson, Georgia, there were 34 girls from 4-H that sewed for the Red Cross in 1942,[44] and in neighboring Cumming, Georgia, there were 25 girls from 4-H that volunteered 400 hours to sew for the Red Cross that same year.[45] In Jackson, Georgia, there were several garden clubs that had Red Cross Sewing Subcommittees. There was the Jenkinsburg Garden Club, in which club president Mrs. Frank Childs, who also happened to be on the local Red Cross production Honor Roll that week,[46] stressed the importance of sewing and knitting for the organization.[47] There was also the Hawthorn Garden club, where, in the month of February 1943 alone, the members of the club sewed 100 garments.[48]



This poster, entitled "Sew For Victory", was created by an artist by the name of Pistchal for the Federal Arts Project in New York in 1941, as part of the Works Project Administration. The WPA, created in 1935, provided employment to over 8.5 million Americans until it was disbanded in 1943, when war industries provided full employment to the nation. (Photographed by Aisha Manus from her personal collection)

Since many of the countries that Hitler invaded were the previous homes of many recently immigrated Jews, the desire to help that cause was greatly magnified at times. While the Hadassah was the largest Jewish women's organization during the war, with a membership of nearly 120,000 women by the end,[49] it was the B'nai B'rith, a different Jewish service organization, that was actively doing their part to display their American patriotism by sewing for the Red Cross. At a meeting in October of 1944, the B'nai B'rith Women of Atlanta chapter president, Mrs. Sam A. Goldberg, called for more women to assist with the sewing group to speed up production, as it was imperative that B'nai B'rith women lend the Red Cross a hand as they were the organization doing the most for the man at the front as well as the for the civilian behind the line.[50] The call to action was clearly heard because by August of 1945, B'nai B'rith Women and Girls from across the country had made 5,000,000 surgical dressings and 400,000 sewn and knitted garments for the Red Cross.[51] This was up from the 3,750,000 total items they had sewn for the Red Cross by November of 1943.[52]

It was not just middle-class women that sewed for the Red Cross either. Former First Lady, Edith Wilson, who also sewed for the Red Cross during World War I, met every Wednesday with Mrs. Jesse Jones and Mrs. D. Buchanan Merriman at the Sulgrave Club to sew before lunch. Though she was very active herself, it was said that she stared "in amazement at the activity of the First Lady of World War II."[53] This was no surprise, considering that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt carried the moniker "First Knitter of the Land" because she was often photographed carrying a large knitting bag that she took everywhere with her.[54]

Many women worked directly with the troops. At MacDill Field in Florida, the sewers for the Red Cross volunteered at the Post Enlisted Men's Service Club to patch, darn, or sew buttons on the soldiers' clothing there.[55] The soldiers stationed at Camp Gordon could have their buttons and insignia sewn on, and clothes mended at the Augusta, Georgia, USO club after the National Council of Catholic Women sponsored a Red Cross Sewing room there.[56] At the U.S. Army Air Corps barracks in Glendale, California, there was a "button brigade" made up of women who volunteered to sew on rank and mend ripped clothing.[57] In one instance, a woman indirectly boosted the morale of the soldiers with her sewing. Mrs. Archer of New Jersey sewed an apron for her daughter Jean, who was serving in the Red Cross overseas in Guam, and according to a letter from her daughter, "the sailors certainly get a kick out of my little red and white apron you made. 'Just like home,' they say."[58]

Not every woman or organization that was sewing for the troops was doing so through the Red Cross and its call for one million homespun garments. With the United Service Organizations operating approximately 3,000 USO clubs in the U.S., there were plenty of opportunities for women to sew for soldiers directly."[59] In Savannah, Georgia, the Hunter Army Airfield

On February 17, 1942, the War Production Board (WPB) enacted General Limitation Order L-85. Created to restrict the design of men's and women's fashion to save on domestic fabric production by up to 15 percent, gone were the ruffles, excessive pleats, and wide lapels, to be replaced by slim cuts and straight lines, as seen in Du Barry Perfect Pattern 5347 from 1942 or McCall Pattern 5913 from 1944. Some patterns even printed a "Bond of Guarantee" on their patterns to highlight that their patterns "conform exactly to the standard of measurements approved by the United States Department of Commerce," as seen on the back of Simplicity patterns of the era. (Photographed by Aisha Manus from her personal collection)

sewing committee of the USO-National Catholic Community Service Women's Division, also known as the Sew and Stitch Club,[60] spent every Friday from midday to as late as midnight sewing in the USO club. With more than 1000 hours of service for each member of the committee, from buttons to chevrons, they sewed so much that at one point, the base tailor complained that they were affecting his business![61]

This ability for women to tailor so well was an important skill during the course of the war because in 1942, after President Roosevelt created the War Production Board (WPB), he enacted Public Order 671. This order allowed for the production of things related to the armed forces to be prioritized over items of private interest. The WPB then enacted order L-85 on February 17, 1942, at a meeting attended by more than 800 fashion industry representatives, which restricted the design of men's and women's clothing to certain cuts and lengths, hoping to save 15 percent of domestic fabric production. Gone were ruffles, pleats, and wide lapels, to name a few things, and the hem of a woman's skirt had to be at least 17 inches from the ground.[62] The WPB hoped that these restrictions would prevent designers from creating new and different designs but instead keep the fashion styles similar to pre-war fashion so as not to influence women into buying the latest fashions and wasting precious resources, such as nylon, wool, or silk which were used for parachutes, uniforms, ammunition bags and other important textiles for war.[63] For every fifteen pairs of silk stockings not made, one powder bag could be made instead.[64] These silk powder bag were used in large caliber guns and because they burned away completely after use there was no need to clean the weapon between shots, saving precious time and effort on the battle field.[65]

Though the WPB restricted the use of wool from regular fashion, they still allowed women to receive wool through the Red Cross since they were knitting garments for soldiers.[66] Louise Stanely, chief of the Home Economics Bureau of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, even declared, "if the housewife doesn't know how to patch and darn, now is the time to learn."[67] The WPB also encouraged advertisers to post these restrictions, hoping to inspire patriotic women to save and sew accordingly.[68] The first women's magazine to do this was *Women's Wear Daily* in April 1942, followed by *Vogue* in May 1942.[69] In the June 1942 issue of *McCall's* magazine, they continued the trend, writing, "Right-about-face changes waste fabric, and the most patriotic thing we can do at present is to waste nothing. So your Government has asked designers not to waste materials on extreme changes, and to forego unnecessary flourishes on clothes, and to let the silhouette stay about where it is."[70]

On September 1, 1942, the WPB enacted Order L-153, which regulated home sewing patterns to fall under the guidelines of L-85.[71] On average, these new patterns would save about 1/8 yard per dress![72] However, some pattern companies were already producing patterns to meet the L-85 guidelines. In an

advertisement in the *Jackson Herald* in Jefferson, Georgia, in June 1942, it was "patriotic to Sew and Save ... with the aid of our new Summer Book of Patterns. Just TEN CENTS for this bookful of smart, practical, fabric-saving designs for work, sports, and 'dress parade.'" Or you could send sixteen cents to the Newspaper Pattern Department and buy Pattern 9985, the Basque Frock, which required just 3.25 yards of 39-inch wide fabric for the size 16 and could be ordered in misses' and women's size 14, 16, 18, 20, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, and 42.[73] The U.S. Treasury Department even encouraged women to buy patterns because "girls who make their own clothes bring us nearer to victory by putting their sewing savings into War Bonds."[74]

Taking it a step further, women were also encouraged to use the old men's suits, since they did not take their "civies" to war with them to create these new clothing designs.[75] In a 1942 sewing booklet from the Spool Cotton Company, hoping to financially benefit from the tie between winning the war and sewing at home, they showed women how to layout Vogue Patterns 9137 and 9001, a jacket and skirt, respectively, in a way that allows you to use the suit fabric effectively.[76] By reusing these fabrics, not only could one look "pretty and patriotic," but when they take "those old knockabouts and turn them into knockouts, [you] keep that glint in Uncle Sam's eye and still do your stint towards Victory!"[77] An article in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1942 advised women to use their imagination to stretch their pennies by dyeing old coats, adding ribbon to the front of their dresses, or adding flaps to their pockets in the spirit of making do with what they already owned.[78] This sentiment was further emphasized in a 1944 article in *McCall's*, saying, "Yes, there are dozens of ways to turn a tired suit into a Cinderella garment. And you'll feel a warm glow of satisfaction knowing that you've followed the patriotic dictum to 'make do, make it over, make it last.'"[79]

By following this advice and remaking old clothes, women were honoring the Office of Price Administration's three-point "victory pledge," in which they asked housewives to "make and mend" by buying carefully, wasting nothing, and taking good care of everything.[80] One woman recalled that when her nylons lost their color, she would dip them into tea water to dye them naturally back[81] since many dyes were also restricted at this time due to the needs for chemicals in them for the war effort.[82] No longer was it shameful to wear mended clothing like in the era of the Great Depression, but rather, "A Patch is a Badge of Honor," according to government propaganda of the day.[83]

In some cases, women were actually rewarded for their ability to be thrifty. In November 1943, seventeen-year-old 4-H member Sue Batcheldor of Columbus, Georgia, was one of six Georgia state 4-H club winners, recognized for her "superior record in the current National 4-H Clothing Achievement activity" for her part in making and mending "183 of her own and family's old garments to help save vitally needed new cloth and labor

for military uses." Her prize was a trip to Chicago for the National 4-H Club Congress, which was paid for by the Educational Bureau of the Spool Cotton Co.[84] The *Oregonian's* "Daily Home Magazine" also held a sewing contest for college girls during the war that gave out six 100-dollar war bonds to the winners,[85] while Harding College in Arkansas held a sewing contest for students during Sew and Save week, in which the first prize received material for a dress, while second and third prize was material for a blouse.[86]

Though most women did not receive much acknowledgment for their work, outside of a small blurb in the local newspapers' homemaker section, they occasionally received letters of thanks and gratitude. In February 1943, the women who sewed for the Red Cross sewing room in Clinton, South Carolina, received a letter from Pvt. Henry Young, Jr., who was serving in Africa, to thank them for a sweater and barracks bag they had made for him. They also received a letter from a Lt. Hugh Jacobs, stationed in Ireland, who was also very appreciative of a sweater he received.[87] The women of Camden, South Carolina, received a letter in June of 1943 from a Capt. S.E. Maislen, who was originally from Camden but was serving in Africa. In his letter, he wrote, "I always wondered where all those things the Red Cross women sewed went. Now I know. We have quite a batch of pajamas that our patients wear, which were made by the Red Cross."[88]

Junior enlisted and officers were not the only ones writing letters of thanks to the women for their efforts. In April 1945, the Commanding Officer of Hunter Army Airfield, Brigadier-General J. M. Fitzmaurice, wrote a letter to the sewing committee of the Nation Catholic Community Service, Women's Division, in Savannah, Georgia. In his letter he wrote,

> On behalf of the servicemen of Hunter Field, I wish to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to you and your organization for the fine services you have rendered. It is my personal belief that you have aided materially in maintaining a high level of morale, which is a most important contribution to the mission of the Army Air Forces. It is very gratifying to me and I am sure that I express the gratitude of all servicemen with whom you have dealt, in sending this letter. I would appreciate it very much if you would convey to each member of your organization this expression of gratitude, so that they, too, may know of the appreciation of your splendid effort.[89]

While these letters were a wonderful and deserving acknowledgment of these women's work, the acknowledgment was not something they were seeking. The Malvern Hill Home Demonstration Club, which had many members who participated in Red Cross sewing, wrote in an article in 1942, "The chances are, at the end of this war, there will be no medals pinned on any of the members of the Malvern Hill Home Demonstration Club, but just the same

they are out and out for the defense ... [to] do all it can to help make stronger this one link in Democracy's chain."[90] For the Committee on Civilian Defense in Newberry, South Carolina, another group whose members participated in Red Cross sewing, echoed these sentiments. In another 1942 article, they wrote, "All of us can't take part in the military defense of the Nation, but we are part of the military defense just the same. Before there can be victory, there must be toil and sacrifice. Every man, woman, and child best be ready to take his or her place."[91]

In American society during the 1940s, due to societal norms, everyone knew exactly where their place was. American women's place revolved around domesticity and the home, while men's lives revolved around work and providing for their families. While there were women who broke the mold and did war work to compensate for the men who left to go to war, the reality is most did not. Instead, when these homemakers, a term coined by Ladies Home Journal in the 1930s,[92] sewed for victory, they "still fit the guise of femininity because their actions were national fulfillment and not self-centered."[93] Without stepping outside of the gender norms and staying in their place, these women could aid the cause successfully and still receive recognition for their work. They proved that women could still be exactly what society asked of them, both pretty and patriotic.

About the Author

Aisha Manus is a part-time mermaid and a full-time cat lady who loves history. She has an MA in U.S. History, a BA in Asian and Pacific history, an AAS in Intelligence, and an AAS in Communication. Aisha is still in school, working on another degree or three. She is a disabled USAF veteran who dreams of being a professor when she grows up.

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