

12-1-1996

Working Women in Florida: A Photographic Essay

Laura F. Edwards
University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory>

Recommended Citation

Edwards, Laura F. (1996) "Working Women in Florida: A Photographic Essay," *Tampa Bay History*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/tampabayhistory/vol18/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tampa Bay History by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

WORKING WOMEN IN FLORIDA: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

by Laura F. Edwards

The distance between popular conceptions and the actual history of women and work could not be wider. Most people assume that women entered the workforce only recently. Until then, their lives supposedly centered around their duties as wives and mothers. Reinforced in a barrage of media images, news reports, and statements by government officials and political candidates, these assumptions cohere in a story that goes something like this: Women first took up paid employment in large numbers during World War II, temporarily stepping out of their traditional role to help with the war effort. They became Rosie the Riveter, the robust, patriotic, young woman who appeared in so many wartime advertisements, cheerfully manufacturing war material for the men overseas. After the war, however, Rosie went back home. She married her sweetheart, traded in her factory uniform for an apron, and bent her considerable will to maintaining her suburban home and raising a family of young boomers. In short, she became June Cleaver. But the transformation was never complete, according to this widely accepted story. During the 1950s, married women slowly drifted back into paid employment to supplement their families' incomes for luxuries like larger homes, another car, a vacation, or new living room furniture. During the 1960s, the trend intensified, women's work gradually became acceptable, and some women began to move into jobs previously reserved for men. Then, in the economic uncertainty of recent decades, women's employment became the rule, not the exception. Of course, people draw dramatically different conclusions from this story. But while some people insist that the changes in women's work lie at the heart of our society's problems and others identify them as the most positive developments in recent history, they do share one the underlying assumption that women's current work patterns represent a complete break with the past.

The historical record, however, does not bear out this assumption. Working women are not new at all. The notion that they are is a product of our own recent past, rooted in our familiarity with forms of family life specific to the postwar period and enduring popular images that idealize men's and women's roles. But the years following World War II do not represent all history, just as June Cleaver cannot stand in for all women in the past. In fact, June Cleaver did not even represent all the women of her own time.

The number of women in the workforce had begun to rise rapidly long before "Leave It To Beaver" aired. In fact, the increase predates World War II, beginning as far back as the late nineteenth century. By 1910, women already comprised 20 percent of the work force, a figure representing nearly 25 percent of all women. By 1950, women were nearly 18 percent of the work force. That rose to 32 percent in 1960, 37 percent in 1970, and 50 percent in 1990. In that year, nearly 58 percent of all women participated in the labor force.¹

At first glance, these statistics still seem to support the idea that widespread women's employment is relatively new. But the statistics obscure as much as they reveal. Workforce participation rates among certain groups of women – such as unmarried women, African-American women, Mexican women in the southwest, Latin women in Tampa, and

working-class women as a whole – were always much higher than the average. Statistics on workforce participation also hide women’s paid labor by counting only the number of people employed as identifiable fulltime paid laborers. Most working women, however, did not fit into this category until recently. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many women, particularly married women, performed paid labor outside the home for short stints, working a few months every year or a few days here and there as their families needed income. Because their work was irregular, it disappeared through the bureaucratic cracks and left little trace. Other women worked in their homes, sewing, taking in boarders, making hats, washing, and ironing. Many put in longer hours than they would have in a factory, but were not always counted as laborers because of the location of their work. Adding to the problem, the statistics tend to underestimate women’s experience with paid labor because of the common assumption that workforce participation rates taken at a particular moment in time represent people’s working patterns over a lifetime. If only 6 percent of women were in the workforce in 1820, it would follow by this logic that 94 percent of women never had and never would work for wages. Such a reading of the figures applies more to men than to women, who regularly moved in and out of the work force. Finally, the statistics on workforce participation do not acknowledge the value of unpaid housework in the same way as paid labor. Childcare, cooking, shopping, cleaning, washing, and running errands not only involved labor, but also had value as services that would otherwise have to be purchased. Women’s labor thus enhanced their families’ economic standing even when they were not working for wages.

Not only did more women work than commonly assumed, but they performed jobs that June Cleaver would not have acknowledged as “women’s work.” The nation’s first factories – textile factories in the early nineteenth century – recruited only women because the owners thought that men would never submit to the close supervision and subordination required of factory hands. As this example suggests, cultural notions of what constituted appropriate “male” and “female” work changed over time. They were also shaped by race, class, and ethnicity. Later in the nineteenth century, for instance, southern textile factories were lily white, while lower-paying domestic service jobs were exclusively black. Segregation even took place within factories, where men and women as well as women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds often worked at distinct jobs in separate areas. Job typing did not come only from employers. People from different racial, class, and ethnic backgrounds had their own ideas about what constituted appropriate work for women and men. As a result, women can be found doing an array of jobs, often in unexpected places. Of course, women’s roles were not completely elastic. Even when women worked outside the home, they were still held responsible for basic domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. But people in the past did not always define a woman’s “domestic responsibilities” in the same way as June Cleaver. Depending on the time and their economic position, women might have to do fieldwork, take in laundry for pay, work in a factory, or even foment a strike to put food on the table and clothes on their families’ backs.

The following photos recapture the rich history of women’s work in the Tampa Bay area. Drawn from state and local archival collections, they show both the wide variety of jobs that women did and the wide variety of women who did them. Together these photos reacquaint us with working women in the past – women whose presence and importance has been erased from our historical memory. They also complicate our view of women’s work in the past and, in so doing, recast our understanding of this issue now.



Gertie Rhines, pictured here in 1922, took in laundry at her Clearwater home. After emancipation, domestic service was one of the few occupations open to African-American women in the South. Although the hours were long, the wages low, and the working conditions demeaning, these women did manage to establish some boundaries to the work. White employers, for instance, preferred that domestics “live in,” where they would be on call 24 hours a day. But many African-American women insisted on going home at night. Or, like Gertie Rhines, they took laundry home where they could combine wage work with their own domestic chores and free themselves from the watchful eyes of their white employers.

Photograph courtesy of Heritage Park/ Pinellas County Historical Museum.



Employees of Bradenton Laundry in the 1920s. The racial categorization of work did change over time, despite the insistence that certain jobs were “naturally” suited to people of certain races. In the South mechanized, steam laundries hired white women and thus transformed the racial composition of work previously considered appropriate only for black women.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.



Women, like these workers, sorting gladiolas for shipment in Ft. Myers, have traditionally performed seasonal, agricultural labor for short periods. Although not reflected in statistics on workforce participation, such work allowed women to earn wages without completely abandoning their other domestic responsibilities.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



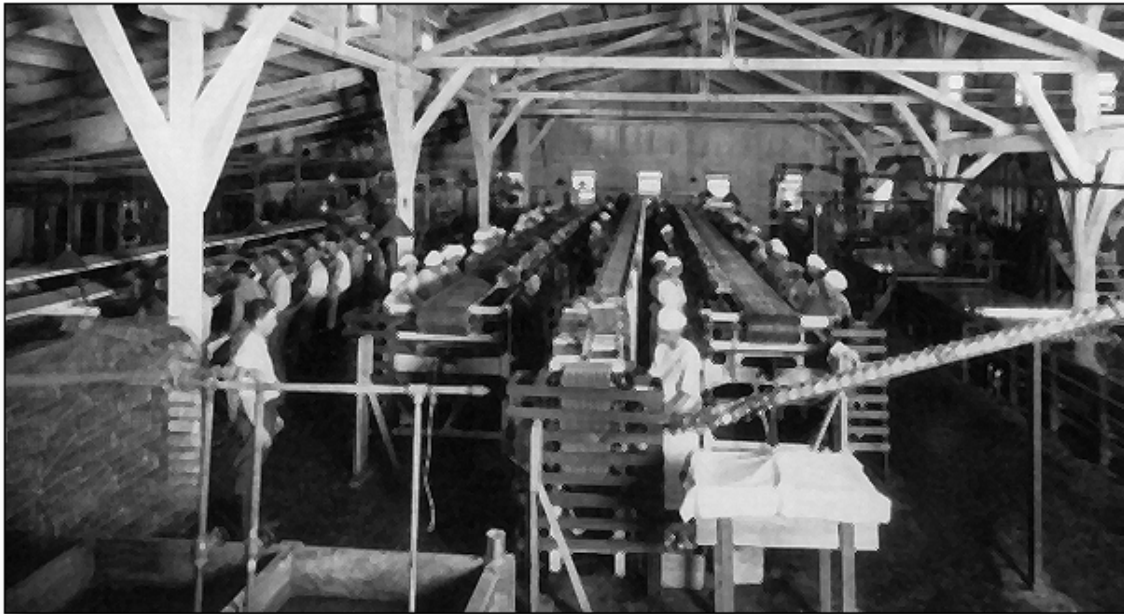
From the late nineteenth century until very recently, southern textile factories hired white operatives. Within the industry and within factories themselves, jobs and wage levels were determined by sex. In a given factory, men would work at tasks deemed more “skilled” with higher wages, while women worked “unskilled” positions at lower wages – although it is often difficult to determine whether “unskilled” referred to the intrinsic difficulty and value of the job or the fact that women did it. In Tampa, clothing manufacturers employed not just native-born whites, but some of the area’s Spanish, Cuban, and Italian population as well. But as these photos of seamstresses at the Southern Manufacturing Company in 1937 and Sunstate Slacks workers in 1958 suggest, Tampa’s factories still segregated by sex and followed the characteristically southern practice of excluding all people classified as “black,” whether African American or Afro-Cuban.

Photographs courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System and USF Special Collections.



Local employers practiced sex and racial segregation. In this grapefruit canning plant in 1932, African-American women worked in one area of the plant. When black women did work in factories, they were usually assigned the messiest tasks like these workers, who are peeling and sectioning the acidic fruit by hand. There are no whites here, although there is at least one man, with his back turned toward the camera in the second row. This may seem a violation of the rule, but employers were never as concerned about mixing black women and men.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



In this grapefruit canning plant, white men and women are working on the same floor during the 1930s. But unlike the workers in the previous photo, the men and women are performing different jobs and are carefully divided by sex. They are also working directly with machines that canned the prepared fruit. Using racial justifications, southern factory owners usually reserved such mechanized labor for whites.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



Unlike the textile industry, southern tobacco factories were not lily white. Tampa's cigar industry was no exception, hiring experienced Latin workers, including Afro-Cubans. Many Latin women worked in the cigar industry, as revealed by these two photographs of Ybor City employees in 1892 and a much later period. These women worked because their families needed their paychecks. But it was not just poverty that pushed these women out of their homes and into the factories. They also came from a culture familiar and comfortable with women's wage work in cigar factories.

Photographs courtesy of USF Special Collections.



Latin workers brought their own unique work culture into the factories. Dependent on skilled, experienced labor because so much of the work involved in cigarmaking was unmechanized, owners at first acceded to many of these traditional practices. There was a gender hierarchy among cigarworkers, with the most skilled, highest paid jobs going to men. But Tampa's cigar factories did not always segregate male and female workers or assign them different tasks. Here women are handrolling cigars, one of the most respected crafts within the industry.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



Beginning in the 1930s, the composition of the workforce in Tampa's cigar factories began to change. Owners hoped to create a more docile workforce and began to hire more women and, specifically, more native white women who lacked a strong union tradition. After World War II, as this photograph shows, Anglo women producing cheap, machine-made cigars replaced the skilled Latin men and women who made luxury cigars by hand.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.



Contrary to the Rosie the Riveter myth, many of the women who worked in the nation's industries during World War II already had experience with factory work. For these women, the war provided an opportunity to move into better paying manufacturing jobs that had previously been reserved for men. Prior to the war, industries such as clothing and food processing, relied heavily on women workers, as shown in these photographs in Manatee County (c.1930) and Tampa (1937). Employers hired women because they were inexpensive, earning wages half or less than half of those earned by men for comparable work.

Photographs courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society and Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



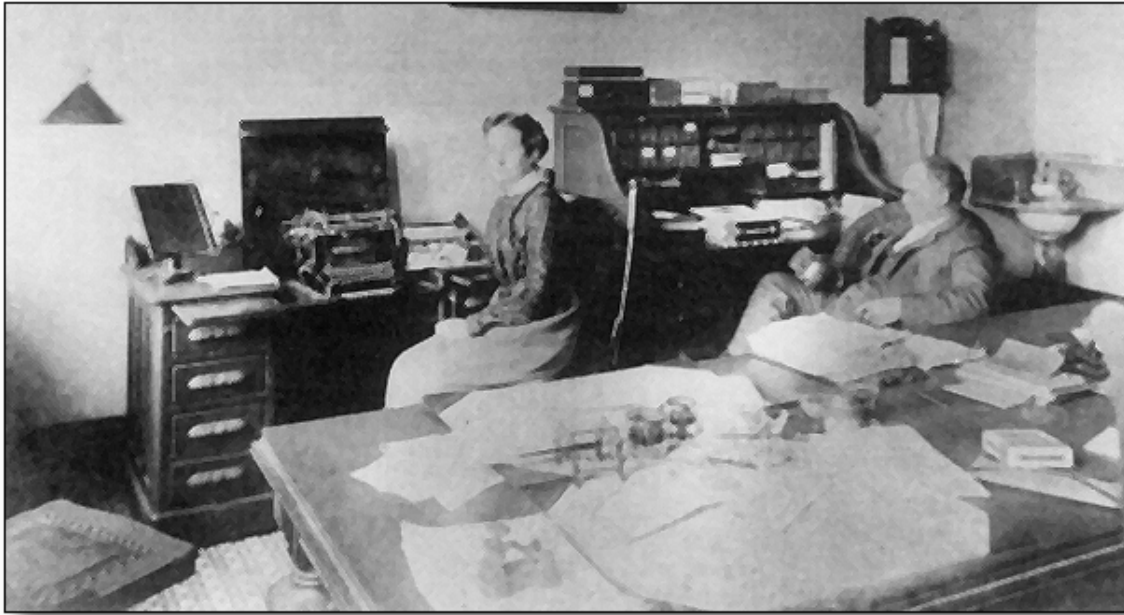
Not all women left their factory jobs after World War II. In 1952, long after Rosie the Riveter had supposedly retired to married life in the suburbs, this woman was doing skilled assembly work at the Tampa Armature Works.

Photography courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



Women's workforce participation rates continued to rise during the 1950s. But the woman assembling armatures was not the typical woman worker. Like these waitresses at the Tampa Bus Station lunchroom in 1948, women were more likely to be employed in lower paying service-related jobs.

Photography courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



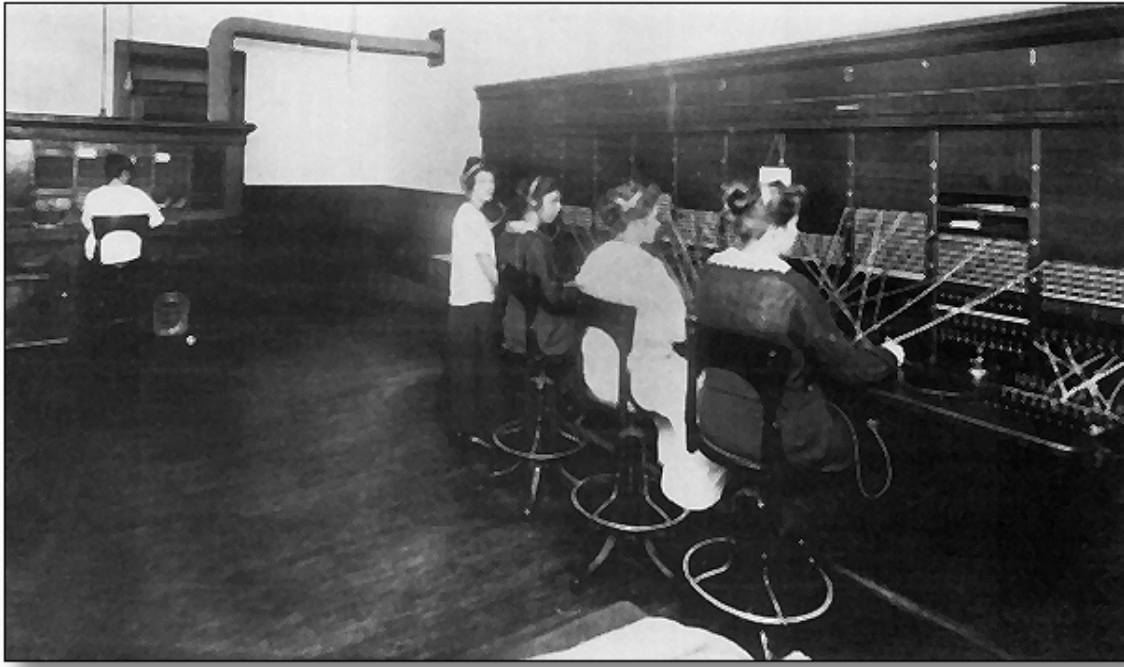
In the early nineteenth century, secretaries had been men. But women, like this secretary working in the office of an Ybor City cigar factory, moved into these expanding occupations in large numbers during the late nineteenth century, transforming service-related work into “pink collar” women’s work.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



By the twentieth century, secretarial work was reserved for young, attractive white women without foreign accents. Black secretaries usually worked at segregated companies and institutions, like these women working at Tampa’s Howard W. Blake High School in 1956.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



New technology opened up new service-related positions for women. Telephone operators were usually women, like those pictured at the switchboard of the Peninsula Telephone Company in Bradenton in the mid-1920s.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.



The first flight attendants, known as “stewardesses,” were all women, like these posing in Tampa with an executive of Pan American World Airways, probably during the 1940s.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



New fashions created employment for women. In the nineteenth century, women did not make regular trips to the beauty parlor. All that changed with the entry of “the bob,” which required regular cuts. Madame Hines Beauty Parlor was temporarily set up in the Tampa Theater to publicize the “Clara Bow haircut” in the 1920s.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



Black women training in a cosmetology class at Tampa’s Howard W. Blake High School in 1956. Beauty became a promising field for women workers because it held the possibility of becoming their own bosses. Those who could not afford the rent of a beauty parlor ran businesses out of their homes, capitalizing on community ties to build their clientele.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



An art teacher in the Tampa area. Although many women worked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, very few professional careers were open to them. Teaching and nursing were among the first. The advocates of these women's professions faced an uphill battle. Members of the middle class insisted that women's only calling was marriage and motherhood. Advocates countered that teaching and nursing capitalized on women's natural talents for nurture and were thus extensions of their proper role.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



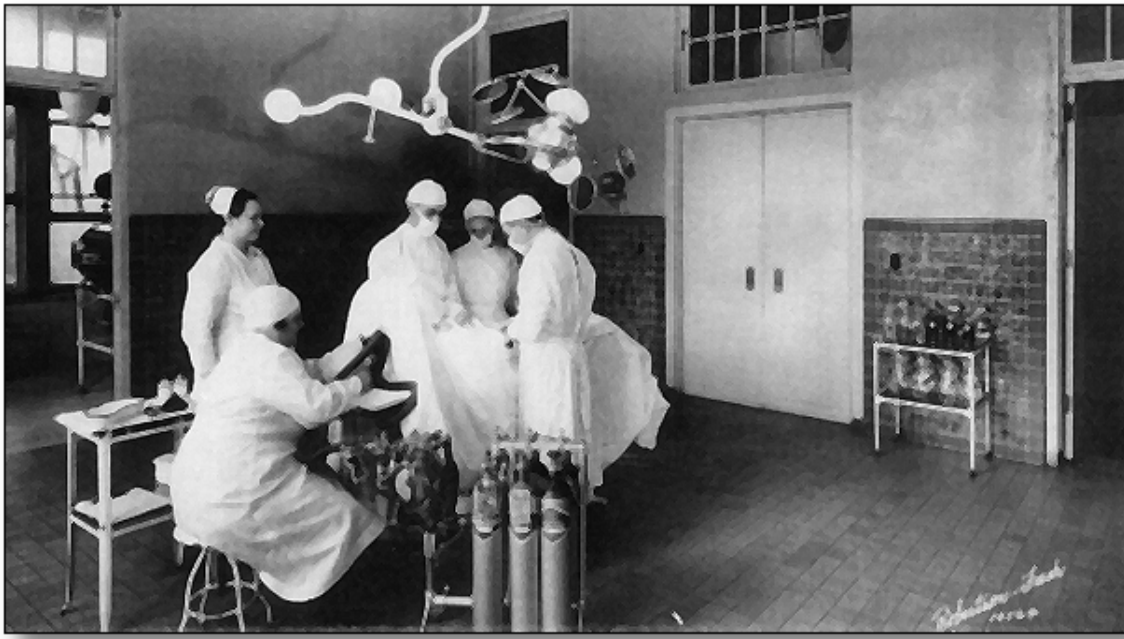
Women extended their teaching mission into library work. Helen Virginia Steele, pictured here in 1946, organized and ran the Tampa Public Library System for three decades before her death in 1947. Women like Steele made great personal sacrifices to pursue a professional career. At the turn of the century, marriage and a career were considered incompatible for women, particularly middle-class white women. Yet professional women were never alone, as they established far-flung female networks with similarly situated women. Steele helped organize the Florida Library Association and was also a member of many professional organizations.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



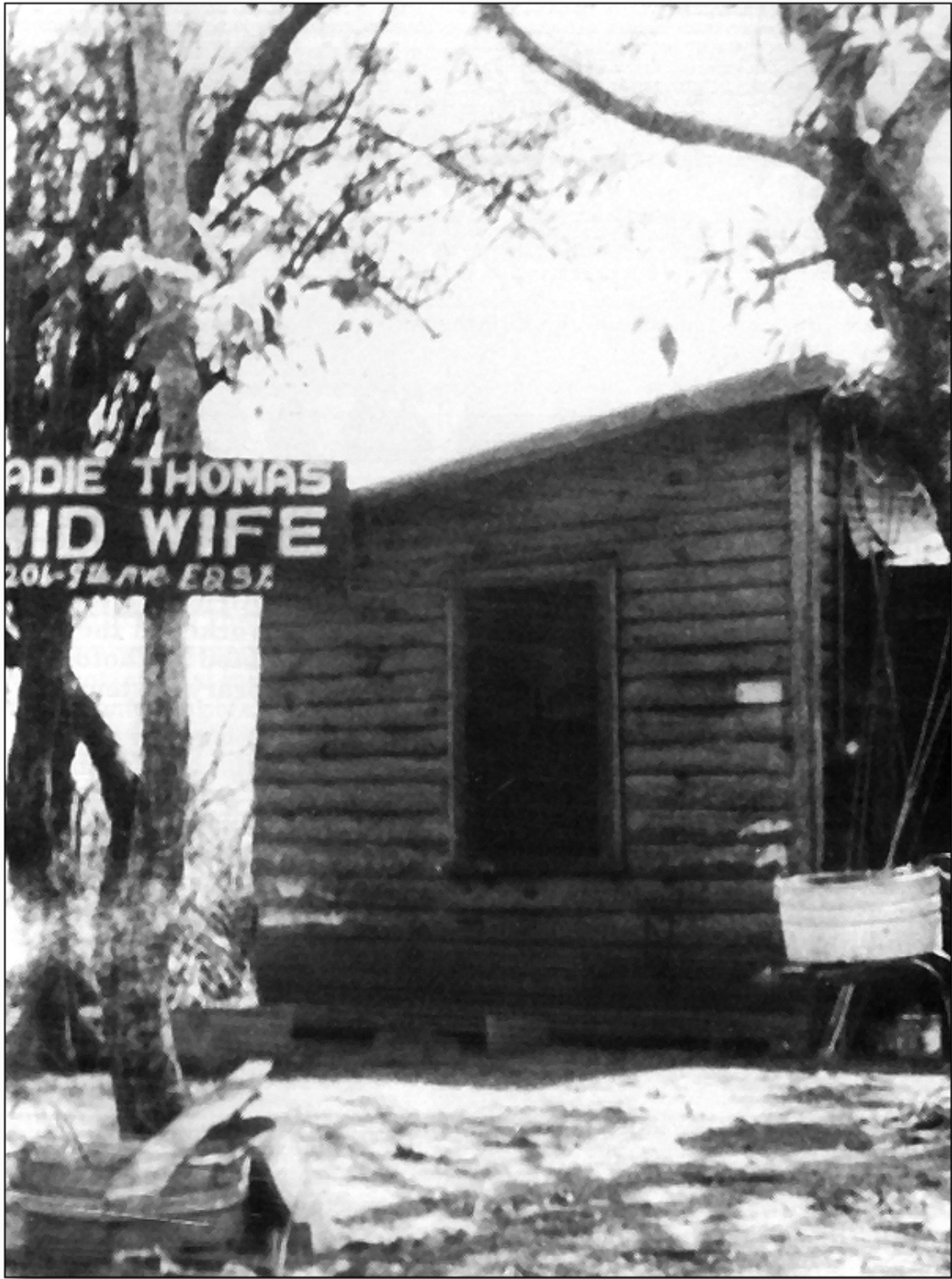
Red Cross nursing class in Palmetto, Florida, 1918. In the early nineteenth century, nursing had no professional status at all: it was a particularly degrading form of domestic service performed by untrained men as well as women. During the Civil War, however, middle-class women entered the field and began to transform it into a skilled occupation for women that required a specialized education.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.



As women, nurses struggled continually with male doctors and hospital administrators for recognition of their professional status and medical skills. Although conditions for nurses slowly changed, they remained subordinate to doctors. In this photograph, a nurse stands waiting to execute the doctors' orders in an operating room.

Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.



The effort of nurses to gain recognition of their medical skills has another sad, ironic twist. The professionalization of medicine, of which nurses were a part, meant supplanting and even criminalizing the practices of midwives. A few midwives held out. Sadie Thomas, whose house is pictured here, was still practicing in Manatee County in the 1940s.

Photograph courtesy of Manatee County Historical Society.



Although black men and women had worked as nurses throughout the nineteenth century, most hospitals hired only white women as nurses to treat white patients. Black women nursed at separate, segregated hospitals in the South. Gathered at Tampa's African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1944, these nurses probably worked at the Clara Frye Hospital, named for the black nurse who operated it.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.



Airplane stunt woman Mabel Cody and pilot Don C. McCullen in 1927. It is fitting to leave a woman who performed acrobatics on the wings of an airplane hundreds of feet above ground for last. Cody's work was unconventional, but it would be better not to set her aside as an "exceptional" woman. Flying high without a net, she captures the determined spirit of working women in the past and symbolizes the difficulties so many faced. Her name and daring deeds all but forgotten, Cody also poignantly underscores the historical neglect to which women workers generally have been subjected.

Photograph courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

¹ Figures from Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience*, 2nd edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 587.