



## The Clothes Make the Women: Skirts, Pants, and Railway Labor during World War II

Albert Churella

Fashion—in the form of a seemingly insignificant distinction between wearing skirts or pants—was critical to women railway workers' efforts to attain union representation. Prior to World War II, "fashion," in the form of deeply entrenched gender norms, excluded women from railway operations. On the Pennsylvania Railroad, wartime labor shortages provided women access to the masculine world of railroad work. Although men and women shared comparable occupations, they did not share comparable clothes. The women trainmen's uniforms reflected the fashion standards of the age, reinforcing femininity at the expense of safety. The debate between women workers who preferred skirts and those who sought to wear pants concerned far more than a minor wardrobe choice. Rather, it symbolized working-class women's desire for more remunerative employment and their middle-class counterparts who favored gender equality. That conflict proved crucial to women's success in obtaining membership in heretofore all-male railway labor unions.

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The railroads have to be free to get men wherever they can; and particularly women, if they are going to train them to replace men." That

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was the conclusion, breathtaking in its implications, contained in a February 1943 report to Martin W. Clement, the president of the largest privately owned transportation enterprise in the world.<sup>1</sup> Railroading has always been considered a quintessentially masculine occupation, and that was certainly true on the Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR). Wars change societies, however, often in ways that are entirely unexpected. Such was the case with World War II, as thousands of female, African American, and Hispanic workers filled jobs that managerial policies, union regulations, and legal codes had always reserved for white men. Although it was not fashionable for women in the 1940s to work on the railroad—much less secure union representation—a different type of fashion proved critical to their success in the workplace and in the union hall.

Some women had worked for the PRR during World War I, and—despite management’s efforts to remove them from the payroll, following the Armistice—a few remained, even in highly skilled occupations. In September 1938, the number of women employed by the PRR reached its nadir, with only 240 out of a total workforce of nearly 96,000; nearly a third of them were in the Accounting Department.

Female employment soared after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. By mid-February 1943, the PRR employed 14,645 women, representing 8.7 percent of the 167,703-strong workforce.<sup>2</sup> By May 1944, the number of female employees had risen to 23,000, some 4,500 of whom were African American.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> PRR memorandum to the president, 25 Feb. 1943, Penn Central Collection, Pennsylvania State Archives/Pennsylvania Historical Museum and Commission (hereafter, PHMC), Clement Papers, box 23 (9-1619), folder 011.

<sup>2</sup> By the summer of 1943, nearly 18,000 women worked for the PRR; the company acknowledged that the number represented fewer than half of the 40,577 positions that could be filled by temporary female employees.

<sup>3</sup> On 15 April 1945, the 21,250 female employees who were on the payroll represented 12.6 percent of the total workforce. The highest ratio of women to men was in the system offices (38% of the general office force, 25% of the operations office force), followed by 16% in the New York Zone (but only 8% on the Long Island Railroad), 12% in the Eastern Region, 10% in the Central Region, 8% in the Western Region, and 9% at the Altoona Works. T. H. C. to J. I. P., 13 May 1944, Record Group (RG) 1810, Pennsylvania Railroad Collection, Hagley Museum and Library (hereafter, HML), box 863, folder 14; “Number of Female Employes [sic] on the Pennsylvania Railroad System in 1938”; E. J. Vogel memo, 20 Feb. 1943; both in HML, box 863, folder 9; “Training of Women Workers on the Pennsylvania Railroad,” 15 Feb. 1943, HML, box 863, folder 16; “Statement of Number of Women that could be Employed and Number Employed in all Departments of the Pennsylvania Railroad System and Percent of Actual Force as of April 15, 1945,” HML, box 863, folder 17; C. E. Musser to G. LeBoutillier et al., 30 Aug. 1943; PRR draft press release, Nov. 1942; both in HML, box 394, folder 5; Washington *Times-Herald*, 4 Oct. 1942; Michael Nash, “Women and the

PRR managers emphasized that “Extreme care must be exercised in the employment of women to guard against establishing precedents, with relation to their employment in certain occupations, that may become embarrassing in the future.”<sup>4</sup> It was hardly surprising, therefore, that in February 1943 some 40 percent of female workers filled such traditional occupations as clerks, stenographers, and switchboard operators. Nearly 2,000 women, mainly African American, served as coach cleaners, and virtually the same number worked as laborers.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their concern “against establishing precedents,” PRR managers were so desperate for workers that they were willing to consider female employees in a surprisingly wide variety of occupations. Nearly 700 women served as trackmen, more than 500 as car repairmen helpers, and nearly 250 as watchmen, gatemen, and flagmen. Women could not operate locomotives, but they worked as stationary firemen, stoker operators, turntable operators, and locomotive preparers. In a few instances, women even made incursions into such bastions of masculine labor as boilermakers, electricians, painters, welders, and machinists. Ten women served as forewomen of coach cleaners, two as draftswomen, and one as an upholsterer.<sup>6</sup> The railroad employed eight women as machinists’ helpers, two as electricians’ helpers, and, in the Legal Department, the first woman claim agent to work for an American railroad.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the women who worked for the PRR were unmarried, in their late teens and early twenties. They had often grown up in railroad towns such as Altoona, and they were thus acculturated to the world of railroading. They perceived railroad employment as an opportunity to earn money, not to challenge traditional gender norms, and they were willing to tolerate both heavy physical labor and a masculine culture replete with lewd behavior and sexual innuendo. During World War I, these female attitudes had contrasted markedly with those of Pauline Goldmark, the head of the Women’s Service Section of the U.S. Railroad Administration. Goldmark, who was a graduate of Bryn Mawr, considered herself very

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Pennsylvania Railroad: The World War II Years,” *Labor History* 30 ([Fall 1989] 1985): 608-22.

<sup>4</sup> “Women Employes” [sic] memo, 25 Jan. 1943 (quote), HML, box 863, folder 16.

<sup>5</sup> Chief of Personnel, “Occupations, Suggested by Regions and Altoona Works, in which Women could be Employed,” 23 July 1942, HML, box 863, folder 11.

<sup>6</sup> With three exceptions—draftswomen, janitresses, and dining car waitresses—PRR personnel managers retained the existing masculine job nomenclature, probably to avoid giving any impression that it considered women to be permanent employees.

<sup>7</sup> “Number of Female Employees on the Pennsylvania Railroad System as of Feb. 15, 1943,” HML, box 863, folder 16; “Number of Female Employes [sic] in all Departments of the Pennsylvania Railroad System as of October 15, 1944”; C. E. Musser to J. F. Deasy, 7 Oct. 1943, HML, box 309, folder 13.

much a “lady,” and she was aghast at the willingness of PRR women to accept working conditions that imperiled their virtue and endangered their ability to produce children. The same tensions between “ladies” and “women” would reappear in the World War II workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Some women, particularly those who had come of age in the urban environments of New York or Philadelphia, sought out the less tangible qualities associated with railroad employment. In 1944, Jocelyn Knowles quit her job as a receptionist at 20th Century Fox and accepted the considerably higher PRR wage of \$7.11 per day. Knowles valued more than the income, however. Having majored in literature at Columbia University, she lived in a very different world than most other PRR employees, male or female. She acknowledged that she “was motivated by a romantic conception of railroads acquired from movies and novels,” and she thought that “the notion of doing ‘a man’s’ job was in those days thrilling.” She judged, probably correctly, that PRR Personnel Department officials would have little sympathy for those motives, and so she instead emphasized that her brother was in the military and that she wanted to contribute to the war effort in order to bring him home.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to coping with the physical demands associated with railroad work, women experienced difficulty in securing the respect of their male co-workers. “Information about the way things worked on the railroad was hard to come by,” Knowles recalled. “It wasn’t merely that the men were so curiously hostile and reticent but that the running of the road was such a complex affair that even old-timers didn’t always comprehend why things happened the way they did and couldn’t explain a lot of it even if they were willing.” Most male employees, even those who hired on during the war as a result of a 4-F classification that exempted them from the draft, considered themselves to be physically stronger, less emotional, and generally better suited for railroad work than their female counterparts. They were also proud of their working-class status, as individuals who worked solely in order to maximize their income.

Knowles recalled that male PRR workers showed respect for only one woman, Claire Fredericks, nicknamed “Little Smokey.” Before the war, Fredericks had demonstrated cosmetics at a Woolworth’s store. “She did not care for the adventure or the fun of the railroad, nor was she there out

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<sup>8</sup> Pauline Goldmark, “Women in the Railroad World,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 86 (Nov. 1919): 214-21; Janet F. Davidson, “Women and the Railroad: The Gendering of Work during the First World War Era, 1917–1920” (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1999); Janet F. Davidson, “The Goosing of Violet Nye and Other Tales: White Women and Sexual Respectability on the Pennsylvania Railroad,” *Labor History* 41 (Nov. 2000): 437-52.

<sup>9</sup> Jocelyn W. Knowles, “The Lady Brakeman,” *American Heritage* 46 (July-Aug. 1995): 62-74.

of any patriotic motive,” Knowles reminisced. “She just wanted money.” Fredericks earned that money by signing on for one run after another, frequently violating the 16-hour limit imposed by the federal Hours of Service Act. Like her namesake, a PRR New York Division engineman nicknamed “Big Smokey,” Fredericks catnapped whenever she could, and she “was chipper, always freshly made up and ready to go.”<sup>10</sup> Male railroad workers apparently found Little Smokey’s ability to be both cute and mercenary irresistible.

Jocelyn Knowles and Claire Fredericks were part of a small group of PRR employees who penetrated the ultimate bastion of masculinity in the railroad industry: train service. In addition to working in railroad yards, female train service employees acted as brakemen and ticket collectors on local passenger and commuter trains, particularly in the vicinity of New York and Philadelphia. Many of these trips were “garbage runs,” at odd hours and with low rates of pay, routinely avoided by male trainmen with even a modicum of seniority. They were nevertheless jobs that allowed women considerable freedom, exposed them to the dangers of railroading, and—for the first time in the history of the PRR—placed them within eyesight of the traveling public.

At first, PRR managers were not even certain what to call female train service employees. Executives solicited suggestions from male PRR personnel, as well as the general public, and the results were about what could be expected, given the gender norms of the era. Suggestions ranged from the unimaginative but eminently logical (trainettes, railettes, Pennsyettes, and ticketresses) to the demeaning (trainmaids, trainmisses, girl guards, tabbies, tixies, carrolls, railbirds, servettes and public’s assistants for train travel [PATTs]) to the truly bizarre (brake-coeds, warriorettes, cruets, Spartans, corpees, brakema’ams, Pennies, and punchettes). Railroad managers initially seemed to prefer the appellation “rails” but ultimately settled for the rather contradictory “women trainmen.”<sup>11</sup>

With women employees now in the public eye, the railroad issued publicity materials that selectively emphasized their female workers. Perhaps the most famous, the “Molly Pitcher, 1944” ad campaign, depicted women in suitably heroic poses, performing jobs that they were only occasionally able to do in reality. The poster depicted African American women as manual laborers. The more common female occupations, such as clerks, it should be noted, were not represented. All of the women, particularly the central figure, were dressed in none-too-revealing masculine clothing and work boots. They were not muscularly feminine à la Rosie the Riveter; instead, they appeared androgynous, almost asexual.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Suggested Names for P.R.R. Trainwomen and Brakewomen,” 22 Jan. 1943; A. P. L. to E. E. Ernest; both in HML, box 394, folder 6.

Railroad management devoted considerable attention to the question of uniforms for female trainmen. After considering several variants, and after holding a photo shoot with models, president Martin Clement and vice-president John Deasy exchanged lengthy correspondence regarding uniform design, ultimately indicating their recommended changes by drawing on the photographs with a grease pencil. That the senior management of the nation's largest railroad would be so thoroughly involved in this issue in the midst of the greatest war in human history doubtless reflected their concern about presenting a suitable image for the first female PRR employees to interact with the public.<sup>12</sup>

The uniforms that senior management finally selected, Knowles noted, were designed "to disguise the female anatomy and de-flatter what could not be concealed." They included a man's shirt with starched collar, a black necktie, and a peaked cap bearing the legend "Trainman" in gold braid – a cap that "sat deep on the forehead, covered the ears, and made a mess of any woman's hair." Low-heeled shoes were a necessity, given the safety hazards associated with high heels. There was a notable departure from the men's uniforms, however. We "did, in fact, look like men in skirts," Knowles recalled, "for although the uniform was meant to make us as un-provocative as possible, we had to wear skirts because they were ladylike." The skirts blew up in windy conditions and did little to protect female employees from the cold, while rainy weather caused the pleats to come undone. The skirts provided to female employees represented far more than an issue of fashion or safety, however; they became a critical element in the efforts of women workers to attain union representation.<sup>13</sup>

Independent labor unions, particularly those representing clerical workers, strenuously opposed the railroad's efforts to open additional positions to women. The Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen (BRT) and the other operating unions were willing to tolerate the presence of female employees (although not accept them as union members) for the duration of the war, provided that the company first recall all available pensioners and agree to suspend the maximum age limit of 45 at the time of first employment.<sup>14</sup> Another stipulation, one that proved particularly conten-

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<sup>12</sup> Philadelphia *Inquirer*, 18 April 1943; M. W. Clement to John F. Deasey, 26 May 1943; Clement to Deasy, 1 June 1943; HML, box 394, folder 6; photos of women trainmen uniform in pictorial, removed from box 394, folder 6.

<sup>13</sup> Knowles, "The Lady Brakeman."

<sup>14</sup> PRR managers reached similar agreements with the Brotherhood of Railroad Shop Crafts, with maintenance-of-way employees, and Signal Department employees, that women would be classified as temporary employees, and men would retain their seniority rights, even if transferred to a different job classification. Women would accrue seniority only with respect to their fellow female employees, and this seniority, along with the jobs themselves, would disappear no later than six months after the end of the war. A 1942 agreement

tious for both male and female employees, involved the issue of seniority. In an effort to avoid postwar complaints similar to those that took place after World War I, PRR officials issued instructions to all supervisory personnel that they were to emphasize that women would neither receive seniority rights nor be guaranteed a job after the end of the war.<sup>15</sup>

Union and managerial denial of seniority rights to female employees nonetheless created a protected space in which women were able to perform their jobs and even gain a measure of acceptance from men, albeit temporarily. Not only were white men relieved to discover that women would not remain in the workforce past the end of the war; they also concluded that they were better off with female workers—who would never be able to outrank them on the seniority ladder—than with black men, who could accrue seniority rights. Peggy Sigafos, a female employee rumored to be a spy for management, stated bluntly that “The men had a choice between working with Negroes and working with women, and they chose us.” Jocelyn Knowles understood the reason for those attitudes, when she concluded that women “were not being used to fill a labor shortage at all but to permit men to profit from it. If black men had been hired instead of white women, refusing them seniority and recall rights might have caused a scandal.”<sup>16</sup>

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with the Dining Car Employees’ Union, representing African-American dining-car crews, likewise required female employees to be removed within the customary 6-month period following the war. The first agreement, dated 10 Dec. 1942, indicated that all dining car personnel hired after 1 July 1942 were to be considered temporary employees who could be released from service six months after hostilities had ceased. An agreement of 2 April 1943 established a separate seniority roster for men over age 45, while an agreement of 5 Oct. 1943 did the same for women. C. E. Musser to J. F. Finnegan, 20 June 1944; J. J. R. memorandum, 18 July 1944; memorandum for meeting, 4 April 1947; all in HML, box 863, folder 13.

<sup>15</sup> “Training of Women Workers on the Pennsylvania Railroad;” “Instructions Governing Employment of Women for Railroad Service on the Pennsylvania Railroad,” n.d., but circa 1943 (quotes), HML, box 1416, folder 11.

<sup>16</sup> By March 1944, however, some of the more progressive unions, including the Shop Craft Workers and the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, had dropped their opposition to the employment of women, and their receiving at least partial seniority rights. The Railroad’s new labor agreements thus allowed women to accrue seniority, although only within the female line. Agreement between the PRR Company, the Baltimore and Eastern Railroad Company, and the employees represented by the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, 22 Dec. 1942; HML, box 394, folder 5; Agreement between the PRR and the Brotherhood of Railroad Shop Crafts of America, Pennsylvania Railroad System, 8 July 1942, HML, box 863, folder 11; Dawn Mangus interview, in Betty Wagner Loeb, *Voices of the Pennsylvania Railroad* (Altoona, Pa., 2003), 18; Nash, “Women and the Pennsylvania Railroad,” 616-17; Knowles, “The Lady Brakeman.”

Despite their willingness to compromise on the issue of seniority, the PRR's female operating employees experienced considerable difficulty in securing membership in the BRT. Given that PRR management prohibited women from serving as conductors, enginemen, or firemen, the BRT was the only one of the four operating unions that women might join. Yet, BRT officials resolutely adhered to a constitution that restricted membership to white men.

A small group of female employees nonetheless fought for BRT membership, overcoming the opposition of management, union leaders, and fellow workers—both male and female—in the process. A male PRR engineman, Carl Soyers, began the battle. Soyers was in the habit of allowing several female employees to “deadhead” back to their home terminal in the cab of his locomotive: a common practice, even if it was a violation of PRR rules. Overhearing the women's complaints about their working conditions, he suggested, “You girls just got to join the union. Everything here runs through the unions. You got to get them to fight for you, not against you.” This advice, Jocelyn Knowles noted, was “not so much out of friendship for us as contempt for the [male] passenger crews,” who had shown so little respect for the women trainmen.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the motive for Soyers's suggestion, the women took his advice to heart. They applied for membership in the BRT, whose officials unanimously rejected them. At the suggestion of a male trainman based in St. Louis, the women circulated a petition calling for union membership. “It was an inspired idea,” Knowles recalled. “You could give a friendly conductor the piece of paper in the morning, and by evening, when you got it back from him, it could have been all over the property from New York to St. Louis, from Jersey City to Harrisburg. Men who had never seen a lady brakeman and who didn't feel threatened by one could calmly consider the issues.”<sup>18</sup>

Bearing a petition containing hundreds of signatures, Knowles approached Michael J. Quill, the president of the Transport Workers Union of America (TWU), an organization largely confined to New York streetcar and subway personnel. Quill's nickname, “Red Mike,” was a clear reference to both his hair color and his politics.<sup>19</sup> Officially, at least, the TWU did not discriminate on the basis of race or gender. More important, Quill was looking for any tactic that he could use to gain additional members and challenge the leadership of the far more powerful BRT. After taking Knowles for a drink at a workingmen's bar, Quill expressed his

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<sup>17</sup> Knowles, “The Lady Brakeman.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> The TWU, established by New York subway workers in 1934, was a radical labor organization affiliated with the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations), and with ties to the American Communist Party.

sympathies for the women's objectives, but indicated that his larger concern would have to be the organization of male employees.<sup>20</sup>

The actions of the pro-union women, about forty in number, soon came to the attention of PRR management. The Philadelphia Terminal Division trainmaster demanded a conference, although he refused to address the female employees directly. He instead spoke to Peggy Sigafos, one of the women whom Knowles considered to be an "Uncle Tom," while Sigafos "repeated [his comments] to the audience, as though being a man, he thought his language might be different than ours." Finding that his indirect approach had perplexed and angered the assembled women, the trainmaster finally spoke directly to the agitators. If the female employees would cease their efforts to form a union, he suggested, then they might be permitted to wear pants, rather than skirts. "It was a great ploy," Knowles recalled. "Women who had been sore at the men were now sore at one another. There was a split between those who regarded themselves as 'ladies' and those who regarded themselves as 'women.'"<sup>21</sup>

The trainmaster's efforts came close to ending any possibility that women might be able to join one of the railroad unions. Knowles and "Little Smokey" Fredericks carried on nonetheless, meeting with two BRT vice-presidents, Joseph Cahill and Boyce Eidson. The two women carefully chose the location of the meeting, at the union representatives' hotel room, with Smoky sitting on one of their beds—a performance designed to make the union men feel as awkward and uncomfortable as possible. Knowles made them even more uncomfortable when she recounted her visit with Mike Quill of the TWU, rather disingenuously suggesting that the president of the upstart union was willing to accept female applicants.

Within days, the Philadelphia lodge of the BRT indicated that women could join, as "Special Members." When twenty-seven women traveled from New York to Philadelphia in order to attend their first BRT meeting, most of the male employees boycotted the proceedings. With only seventeen men still in attendance, the twenty-seven women easily sponsored and passed a resolution calling on the national BRT leadership to delete the words "white" and "male" from the membership requirements in the organization's constitution. At the next meeting, however, virtually every man who belonged to the BRT's Philadelphia lodge was in attendance, and they overturned the earlier resolution.<sup>22</sup>

That meeting might have marked the end of the women's efforts to join the BRT, had not fate played a role. A woman trainman—"one of the ladyest of the lady brakemen," Knowles observed—and a strong opponent

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966* (New York, 1989).

<sup>21</sup> Knowles, "The Lady Brakeman."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

of union membership, fell from a PRR passenger train and was paralyzed. A PRR attorney soon coerced her into a settlement, one that covered only a fraction of her medical costs. Like most railroad employees, she had no private insurance (railroading was such a dangerous occupation that no private insurer would write a policy) and, as a woman, she was not eligible for the medical benefits that the BRT provided.

Following this incident, a far larger number of female employees demanded BRT representation. BRT president Whitney, concerned that the women's demands could attract unfavorable publicity, and perhaps rebound to the advantage of the TWU, forced the BRT rules committee to delete "white" and "male" from the organization's constitution, opening the door for both female and African American members.

In March 1943, Alice G. McMennamin, a PRR employee assigned to the West Philadelphia yards, became the first female member in the sixty-year history of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. At the induction ceremony, she wore a woman's blouse, low-heeled shoes—and a pair of pants.