

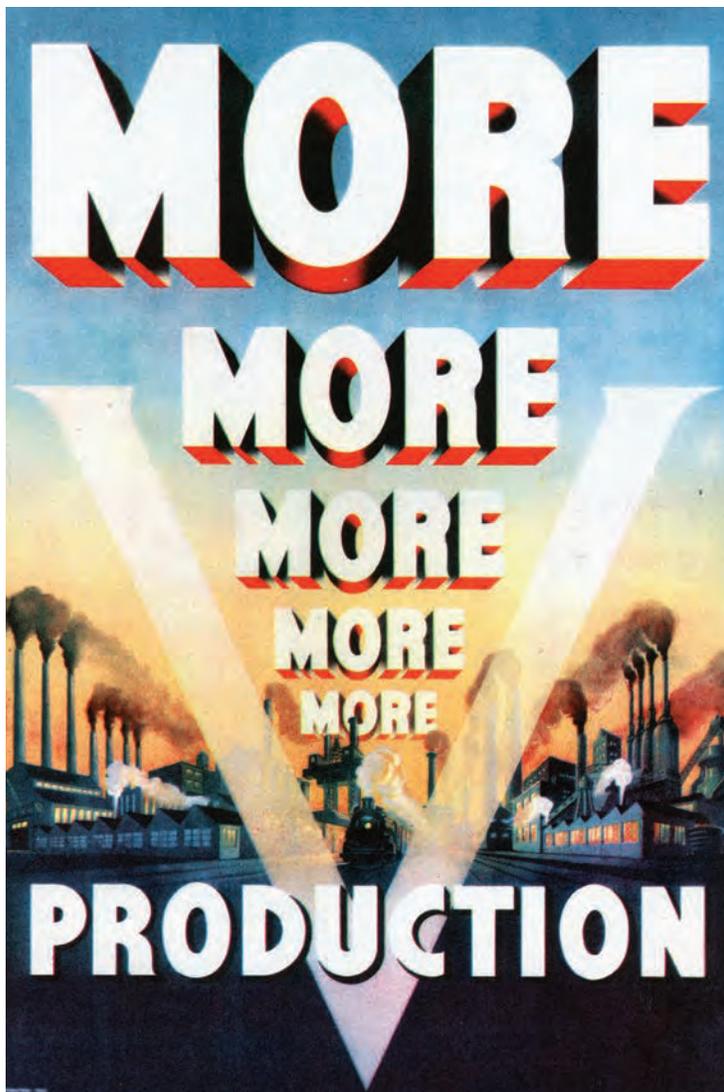
# Worker Number

# 74530

BY KATE L. GREGG



Dr. Kate Gregg as she appeared when she became a “Rosie the Riveter” on the graveyard shift. (Photo: Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)



Some historians argue that American industrial capability and production was the crucial element in defeating the Axis powers in World War II, as suggested by this poster from General Cable, which had a factory in St. Louis.

(Photo: *Fight Talk*, 1945, General Cable Corporation; Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)

Kate Gregg (1883-1954) joined the faculty at Lindenwood College to teach literature in 1924, and developed a great love for both regional history and the American West. She edited a number of documents for publications such as the *Missouri Historical Review* and books, including *Westward with Dragoons* (William Clark’s journal from his 1808 expedition to found Fort Osage) and *Road to Santa Fe: The Journal and Diaries of George Champlin Sibley*. She retired from Lindenwood College in 1949. She wrote the following about her work on the graveyard shift as a “Rosie the Riveter” at the St. Louis Ordnance Plant on Goodfellow for the *Lindenwood College Bulletin* in October 1943.

“Report for work at 11:45 tonight,” said the clerk as he handed me my time-card. I was worker No. 74530 in the St. Louis Ordnance Plant, and that pale silvery face beneath the number on my badge looked enough like me to get me past the guards at the gate and door.

“Your job at this time is probably the most important work in the world,”—words of General Somervell floodlighted on the top of Building 205—singled me out that night as with the entering shift I moved down the hill toward my place in the production line. I threw back my shoulders. I breathed the night air with pride. Whatever the job was to be, I would like it whether I liked it nor not.

The young lady from the personnel office had eight or ten of us workers to deliver to our respective departments that night, and since mine was the most remote, I had a tour of the building before my job and I came together. It was well that the bracing words of the general had strengthened my resolution, for the tour, let me confess, was a bit terrifying. The place was immense. It swallowed me up. Enormous and terrible machines smiting the air with their unearthly poundings made me cower.

“These are the mills of the gods,” I reasoned to myself. “They are grinding dictators exceedingly fine.” Great furnaces spitting blue-green flames blew their hot breath upon me, and like Dante I would have retreated, but my fair guide crooked her finger at me.

“Your department,” she yelled in my ear, “is farther on!”

After what seemed a long time we came to a place of comparative coolness and quiet. My guide led me to a clock fastened to a wire stockade. “This is your time-clock, Number 257. Where is your time-card?” and right there, I learned how to insert my card in the groove and give the quick sure punch that registers. After walking another block, my guide ushered me into the packing department, where I was to be a packing operator, whatever that might be.

But not in civilian dress. “Take this woman to the Safety Store, Julie, and help her get her outfit,” ordered the dapper young foreman. And gazing at the papers I had placed in his hand, he said, “Hold on. Are you married or single?”

“Single,” said I.

“That’s nice,” murmured my new boss.

And pondering that, I went with Julie to the basement of Building 204 to be equipped with brown coveralls, brown safety shoes with steel toes, safety glasses, and a villainous hairnet.

When I returned, all fitted out according to regulations, my foreman was busy. He threw an irritable glance in my direction and blurted out with considerable restraint, “Go over there and sit on one of those stools behind that table.” There, with the help of kind women on both sides of me, I set to work making cartons and inserting the divider to hold the cartridges. After awhile, the foreman came over to our table. “Girls, this is Katie. She has come to help us out around here.”

Then I made my humiliating faux pas. Remembering that the personnel man had said that my foreman would help me make arrangements for transportation, I began, “The personnel man said, Mr. Depew, that—”

“Mr. Depew!” He turned aside to laugh in sheer astonishment. “Oh, call me Harry.”

He picked up some of the cartons that I had been making, examined them with some care, and remarked, “By golly, Katie, you’re good.” I immediately decided that Harry had a discriminating mind.

At two o’clock we had a fifteen-minute rest period. The cigarette smokers trailed off to their canteen. The others sat around on skids and talked, or dozed at the tables with head resting on folded arms. At four in the morning there was a half hour for lunch and we hurried on the double-quick to the canteen with something of the enthusiasm of youngsters when school is out. When the first streaks of dawn showed in the east, the solderers began to crow like roosters. The call passed with great variety from one part of the



The double entendre of this poster—workers responding to requests for war material while also fighting back after a nation was provoked into war—was designed to keep employees in wartime factories motivated.

(Photo: *Fight Talk*, 1945, General Cable Corporation; Mary Ambler Archives, Lindenwood University)

department to another and occasioned a merriment that never grew old. At six there was another fifteen-minute rest period—more heads on the tables now—and following that, the longest two hours of the night.

When the women of the day shift came scurrying in to claim the most desirable tables and stools, we of the “graveyard shift” were glad to surrender our places and hurry out to find a place in the line forming to “clock out.”

So passed the first night. I liked my job. I liked my bosses, Harry the foreman and Clarence the straw-boss. I liked the men and women with whom I worked. Nearly all of them were fathers or mothers of men in the service, and in their passing of the ammunition there was more than patriotism involved.

At the end of two weeks, after trying my hand at various tasks, I became a packing operator. I packed the loaded cartons, as they came from the drier, into the metal-lined box or chest in which they are sealed to go to the firing lines. With infinite satisfaction, I stowed the cartons in an ordered pattern and shoved the packed chest toward the conveyor belt which carried it to the solderers. From where I worked, I could see the ammunition boxes move along to the final inspector and click the counter that registers output as they each took their plunge down the chute. They were off to American boys on many fronts.