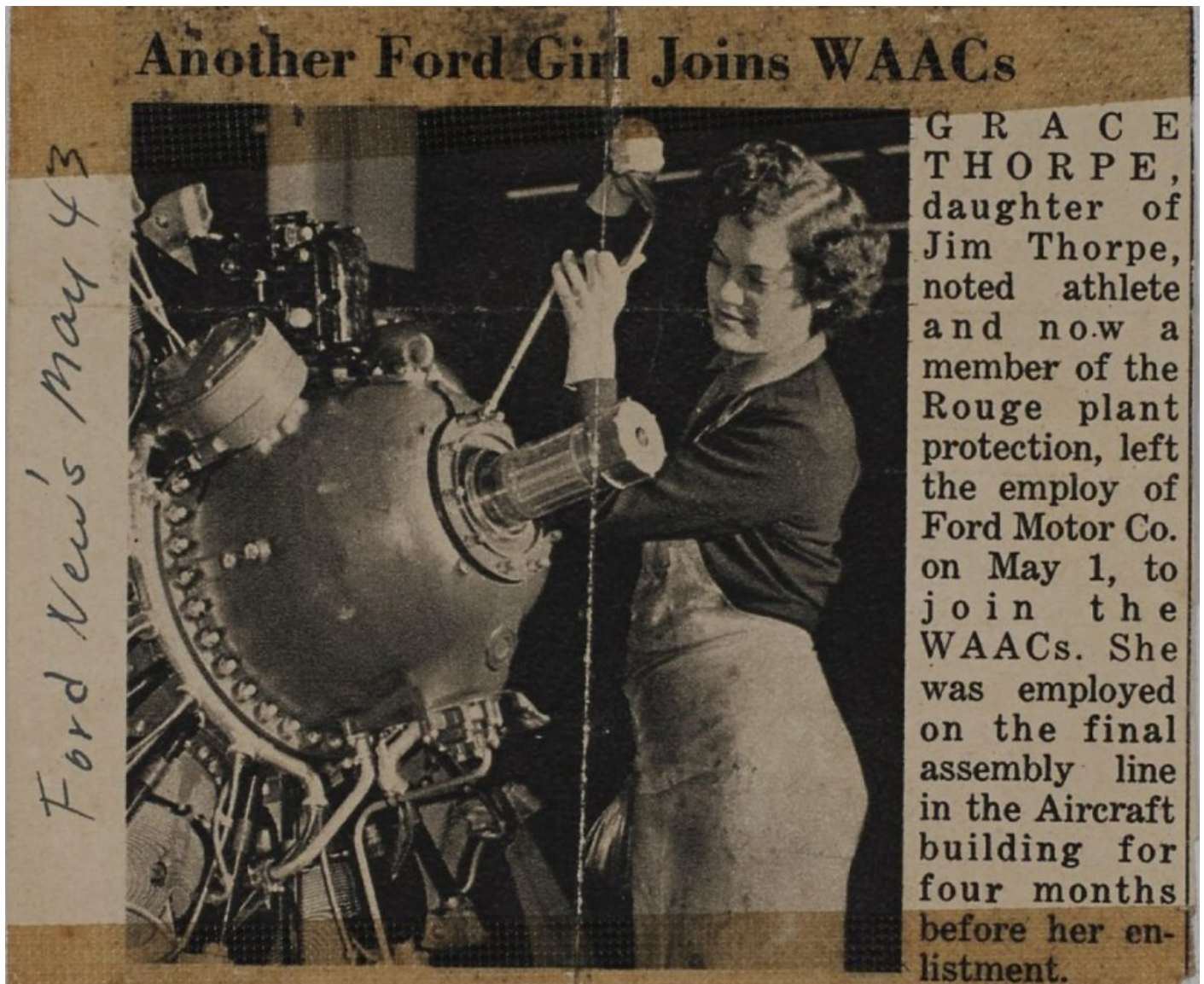


Resource:

Life Story: Grace Thorpe (1921-2008)



Another Ford Girl joins WAACS

"Another Ford Girl Joins WAACS." *Military Career and Life in Japan, 1943-1946*, Grace F. Thorpe Collection, National Museum of the American Indian.



Grace Thorpe joins WAACS

"Grace Thorpe Joins WAACS." *Military Career and Life in Japan, 1943-1946*, Grace F. Thorpe Collection, National Museum of the American Indian.



Grace Thorpe with Margaret Mead

Smithsonian Folklife Festival: Grace with Margaret Mead, August 1976. Grace F. Thorpe Collection, National Museum of the American Indian.

Grace Thorpe was born in Yale, Oklahoma, on December 10, 1921. Grace's parents gave her a Native American name inspired by her great-grandmother, No Teno Quah. Later in life, Grace would explain the name refers to the power of the wind before a storm. Grace's mother, Iva Miller, was Cherokee. Her father, Jim Thorpe, was Sac and Fox and a world-famous athlete. He won two Olympic medals in 1912 in the pentathlon and decathlon, and he played both baseball and football professionally. Jim and Iva met as students at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. They had four children: Gail, James, Charlotte, and Grace.

In 1923, Grace's parents divorced. Her father moved to California to pursue a career in the movies. Her mother worked in an assortment of jobs to support her family. Grace spent time living with both parents and maintained a relationship with each of them. She attended the all-girls boarding school Saint Mary's Academy in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. She then transferred to the Haskell Institute, a boarding school for American Indian students in Lawrence, Kansas.

Like many young women at the start of World War II, Grace felt compelled to contribute to the war effort. In 1943, she briefly worked in a factory at the Ford Motor Company. She then joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) program. She felt that it was important to serve one's country and hoped she might be sent to serve abroad. Grace completed basic training in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and achieved the rank of corporal. She was assigned to recruit more WAACs in Arizona and Oregon.

In 1944, the WAAC stationed Grace in New Guinea. She was a little disappointed that her dreams of living in Paris or Athens did not come true. But she was eager to use her training to support the Army's offices overseas. Her work included travel in New Guinea, the Philippines, and Japan. Although she never saw combat, she received a Bronze Star for her service during the Battle of New Guinea.

While serving in New Guinea, Grace met Lieutenant Fred W. Seely. After the war ended, Grace and Fred stayed in Japan and contributed to the ongoing military work there. Grace worked in General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters as a recruiter and staff interviewer. In 1946, Grace and Fred married in Tokyo.

Grace gave birth to two children while living in Japan. Unfortunately, Grace and Fred's marriage started to deteriorate shortly after the birth of their second child. The couple separated in 1950, and Grace and her children returned to the United States. They eventually settled in Pearl River, New York.

Like her mother, Grace found herself a single mother to young children with bills to pay. She eventually found work as a salesperson for the phonebook company. Eager to improve her work and her sales, she took regular public speaking courses.

Although Grace was proud of the life she built for her family, she felt separated from her heritage. She occasionally took her children to powwows and other events intended to celebrate Native American culture, but such events did not provide the authentic connection she sought.

In the mid-1960s, Grace's teenage son died in a car accident. Grace was devastated. She felt she needed a drastic change to overcome her depression and chose to relocate to Arizona in 1967.

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[Joining the WACs] seemed like an exciting thing to do. I had visions of the Parthenon in Athens, the Eiffel Tower in Paris but I ended up in New Guinea.

Grace's move began a new chapter in her life. She involved herself in tribal affairs almost immediately. She served as Economic Development Conference Coordinator for the National Congress of American Indians in 1968 and 1969. She joined the Native American Activists' occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay in 1969 and 1970. In 1974, she served as a Congressional Intern for Senator James Abourezk of South Dakota. While in Washington, she also served as a legislative assistant for the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs.

Her increased responsibility within activist and government circles encouraged Grace to go back to school. She earned a paralegal degree from the Antioch School of Law in Washington, D.C. Then, she completed an undergraduate degree in liberal arts from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Grace was 58 when she graduated. In subsequent years, she completed a research fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology and took MBA-level courses at Northeastern State University.

While she was in school, Grace took on another personal pursuit. In 1913, her father Jim Thorpe was stripped of his two Olympic medals because of a technicality. Many believed that racism factored into the decision. Grace joined a growing group of activists who fought to reinstate her father's medals and his status as an Olympian. As part of this work, Grace researched her family's history and published articles about her father's career and legacy. In 1983, these efforts were successful. The International Olympic Committee reinstated Jim Thorpe and presented new medals to the Thorpe family.

Grace returned to her family's homeland in Oklahoma in 1983. She became involved in tribal affairs and taught herself traditional basket weaving and pottery as a way to maintain a connection to her heritage. She also served as a tribal district court judge.

In 1992, Grace learned that her tribe, the Sac and Fox, agreed to allow the government to use tribal lands for nuclear testing. She strongly disagreed with this decision and believed such testing was dangerous to the community. She was also frustrated that the government was taking advantage of native communities in this way. Grace started an advocacy effort to change the minds of tribal leadership and succeeded. Other tribes learned about her successful campaign and invited her to help them with their own anti-nuclear policies. Her work led to leadership roles within the National Environmental Coalition of Native Americans and the Native American Affairs Council of Greenpeace.

Grace Thorpe continued to work as an activist until her death from heart disease in 2008. She was 86 years old.

Vocabulary

- **abroad:** In a foreign country.
- **Alcatraz Island:** An island in San Francisco Bay that held a federal prison until 1963. It was the site of a 19-month-long protest by Native Americans, from 1969 to 1971.
- **Bronze Star:** A medal for heroic or special service awarded to members of the U.S. Army.
- **Carlisle Indian School:** An infamous government-run boarding school for Native American students that operated from 1879 to 1918. One of its primary goals was to assimilate Native students into white American culture.
- **decathlon:** A two-day athletic event that includes 10 events: 100-meter dash, long jump, shot put, high jump, 400-meter dash, 110-meter hurdles, discus, pole vault, javelin, and 1,500-meter run.

- **General Douglas MacArthur:** An American general who commanded the Southwest Pacific front in World War II. He oversaw the Allies' temporary occupation of Japan after the war.
- **Greenpeace:** An environmental activism organization founded in 1971.
- **MBA:** The abbreviation of masters of business administration, a graduate-level degree in the field of business.
- **National Congress of American Indians:** A Native rights activist organization that was founded in 1944.
- **overseas:** In a foreign country, across an ocean.
- **pentathlon:** An athletic event that includes five events: fencing, shooting, swimming, riding, and cross-country running.
- **powwow:** A North American Indian ceremony or festival that often includes song, dance, and food.
- **station:** Assign someone to a specific activity or place, commonly used in military work.
- **Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) / Women's Army Corps (WAC):** The women's branch of the United States Army during World War II. Changed from WAAC to WAC in 1943.

Discussion Questions

- Grace's Native name refers to the power of the wind before a storm. To what extent did she live up to this name? How did she use her various positions of power to influence change?
- How did Grace Thorpe's childhood and family heritage shape her life?
- Why do you think Grace joined the WAAC?
- How was Grace's life shaped by her service in World War II?
- Grace's life shifted significantly when she moved to Arizona and started a life of activism. What factors influenced this decision and how did it shape the second part of her life?
- Why did Grace feel it was important to honor the legacy of her father? Do you consider her work a success? Why or why not?
- What types of political issues did Grace fight for and why?
- Grace returned to school in her late 50s and completed two degrees and several advanced courses. Why do you think she did this? What does this tell you about her character?
- Both Grace and her mother were divorced mothers who essentially raised their children alone. How do you think this experience as the child of a divorced mother might have shaped Grace's approach to single motherhood?

Suggested Activities

- Learn more about the WAACs by combining Grace's life story with the **Life magazine photographs** of WAACs-in-training. Or broaden your study to include other branches of the military by including the newspaper article about the

WAVES' uniforms, the **life story of Grace Hopper**, and additional WAVES resources in the **WWII & NYC curriculum guide**.

- Many women, like Grace, lived and worked abroad during the war. Combine her life story with that of **Anne O'Hare McCormick** and the **letter from a nurse in Europe** to consider the types of roles women had while working near the European and Pacific fronts.
- Grace's parents, Jim and Iva, met at the Carlisle Indian School. Learn more about this school by reading **the letters of Theresa Greene** and **the life story of Zitkala-Sa**.
- Grace and Fred married in 1946, shortly after the war's end. Learn more about post-war marriages by studying the engagement ring advertisement in the Post-War section of this unit.
- Grace is part of a long history of native women who had to fight to preserve the heritage and legacy of their communities. Learn more about this work by reading Grace's life story in conjunction with the life stories of Weetamo, Quashawam, Queen Aliquippa, Nanyehi Ward, **Mary Kawena Pukui** and **Zitkala-Sa**. How did each woman advocate for her community?

Themes

ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE; AMERICAN CULTURE