



Workroom at the L. L. May Company greenhouse and warehouse, St. Paul (MHS COLLECTIONS)

Seed Packers



WOMEN WORKERS paused briefly for this photograph in the Como Avenue workshop of L. L. May Company, giving us an intimate view of St. Paul's industrial landscape in about 1910. On the left are wooden crates of seed packets being filled by the two work groups at the rear of the room. In the right foreground sit boxes awaiting various seeds. In 1913 the May company boasted that dealers nationwide were yearly buying 25,000 of their "celebrated" combination boxes of seeds at 1½ cents per packet. Women did most of the work, packaging hundreds of varieties of seeds for this thriving year-round catalog business, which also offered poultry supplies, birdseed, insecticides, weed exterminator, fertilizer, plant food, and garden tools.

The workroom appears bright and warm, and the women are dressed in the comfortable work attire of the time: light-colored shirtwaists and ankle-length black skirts. There must have been other days when the weather left the workroom dark and cold. The wooden chairs put the women's arms at a proper height for the work, but hours at the machines probably left them with aching backs and strained eyes. The presence of the young

male supervisor indicates that their work was tightly controlled; still, the women must have had some say over the pace of work and the arrangement of the work space. Small workrooms such as this probably allowed for slack times when the pace could be comfortably adjusted, but women would have worked long hours during periods of heavy seasonal demand.

This successful family business with its nursery, greenhouses, and warehouse at 289–295 Como Avenue was one of the many ventures that undergirded the thriving St. Paul economy in the early-twentieth century. And women workers such as these would soon attract the attention of Minnesota reformers who mandated workplace regulations for them: reasonable hours of work and work breaks, lunchrooms away from machines and working areas, a minimum wage standard, and bathrooms that were clean and separate from those for men.

—JOAN M. JENSEN

Joan M. Jensen, professor emerita at New Mexico State University, is the author of many articles and a dozen books on U.S. and women's history, including Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850–1925 (2006).



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