



"DANGEROUS" WOMAN

**Three Entrepreneurs Who Paved the Road
of Women's Business Leadership**

Edith Sparks



On 8 August 1959,

the *Saturday Evening Post* published a sensationalized article about the female chief executive of Beech Aircraft titled “Danger: Boss Lady at Work.” In it, the “Boss Lady,” Olive Ann Beech, was caricatured as autocratic and austere, insecure yet self-righteous, and the author warned readers—as the title suggested—to beware. Reportedly, more than one businessman had declared, “I’m scared of that woman!” But according to the article, Beech herself was undaunted. “I never concerned myself with what people thought of me,” she stated. “If I had, I’d have been pretty mousy.”¹

The idea that a “boss lady” at work was dangerous tells us a great deal about the historical context in which female business executives led and the obstacles they faced in the mid-twentieth century. Alarms about a crisis in American masculinity were de rigueur in popular magazines in the 1950s, and social commentators were quick to connect the problem to women. One result was a pronounced current in American popular culture of the 1950s that endeavored to prop up men at the expense of women and to demonize women who in their success appeared to embody an assault on men.² From this viewpoint, women leaders who played a dominant role in American business were dangerous.

To become a “boss lady” in the middle of the twentieth century was to fly in the face of a popular set of ideas about the proper roles for men and women in the business world. The commonly used term “office girl” infantilized women at precisely the moment when a small but impactful group of female executives, including Olive Ann Beech, rose to the upper echelons of the business world. In contrast to the legions of female clerical workers who supported the business world—nearly one in three working women in the United States were employed in clerical jobs by 1960—the women who led businesses in the middle of the twentieth century were transgressors whose very presence seemed a threat to those anxious to preserve men’s power.³



The notion that mid-twentieth-century female business leaders were dangerous helps us to imagine what the path to the top of corporate America looked like for women—that is, how women such as Olive Ann Beech experienced it. Clearly, they could not afford to worry about such negative labels, for, as the *Saturday Evening Post* quote from Beech suggests, criticism was commonplace for women business leaders at this time and would have proved a formidable deterrent if they had not dismissed it. But even with such resolve, female executives faced the inherent challenge of figuring out how to navigate a business world that viewed them as fundamentally different simply because they were women. They were outsiders. To succeed, they needed to find a path into a professional world deeply ingrained with male privilege and steeped in rigid gender conventions that shaped both obstacles and opportunities. They needed to become the “boss lady,” to inhabit both parts of that label and all that it implied.

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My book, *Boss Lady*, takes up their stories—in particular, the history of three women entrepreneurs who traveled to the top of the corporate world by building successful big businesses in the mid-twentieth century. Tillie Lewis, who founded Flotill Products, Inc. in Stockton, California in 1934 as a tomato canning company, ultimately canned several fruits and vegetables and other foods (including Hormel chili) as well as C-rations for the military, and created one of the nation’s first saccharine-based diet-food lines. By 1966, Tillie Lewis Foods, as it was renamed, had grown into a multimillion-dollar, publicly traded company and was purchased by the Ogden Corporation. Olive Ann Beech cofounded Beech Aircraft in Wichita, Kansas, with her aviator husband Walter Beech in 1932 but from the start took charge of the administrative side of the business. The company built training aircraft and eventually target missiles and cryogenic space equipment for the government and developed popular personal and commercial aircraft, pioneering instructional and purchasing programs that helped to expand private airplane ownership in the United States. When her husband was seriously impaired by an illness in 1940, Olive Ann stepped in to oversee company leadership, and when he died in 1950, she took over the company presidency, moving eventually to board chair, a position she held even after the sale of the company to Raytheon in 1979. Margaret Rudkin founded Pepperidge Farm in Southport, Connecticut, in 1937 when demand for the health-oriented bread she made with stone-ground whole-wheat flour expanded from her doctor and his patients to local retailers and customers, eventually reaching national distribution. The company extended its product line to include a variety of “high-end” bakery products including rolls, white sandwich bread, stuffing, European-style cookies, and frozen pastries as well as the ever-popular fish-shaped snack crackers called “Goldfish,” drawing consumer loyalty as well as the attention of the Campbell Soup Company, which purchased Pepperidge Farm in 1961. All three women were elected and celebrated as the first female corporate board members of the corporations to which they sold their companies. And all three achieved national recognition for their business leadership and remarkable success, embodying the moniker “boss lady” in the press and in their day-to-day lives as business leaders.

For these women, the path to entrepreneurship reflected the narrow set of choices facing them at this time. None of the women attended college (a choice only the most elite women had), and just one of the three obtained a high school diploma, which was still uncommon in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ Like many women of their generation, all three opted instead for “business training” (secretarial school) in order to access clerical jobs. This was one of the most reliable points of entry into the business world for unmarried women at the beginning of the twentieth century. Clerical jobs did not launch many women into higher level positions, however. Most stayed in low-level positions, supporting and serving the business needs of male professionals. Lewis, Beech, and Rudkin were unusual in that their secretarial jobs turned into launching pads for business ownership at the highest level. Yet while the business exposure they gained in clerical positions had something to do with this career trajectory, it was not the most important reason for their success. In fact, it was the relationships they formed with men while in those jobs that were the key to their entrepreneurial pathways. Two of the three married their bosses, and the third worked for her husband and other male family members. And, in each case, it was these familial connections and the network of relationships into which they gained admission that opened up entrepreneurial possibilities. This is a long-standing theme in women’s history. Connections to successful men provided opportunities and facilitated access to the business world. It was true generally for anyone trying to enter or rise in a professional business environment but was especially important for women trying to enter a corporate world that provided few choices for them and was overwhelmingly male and male-oriented.⁵

Each of the women operated a business in a sector of the manufacturing industry dominated by male business owners and executives and had to navigate a culture steeped in masculine bravado. Though Olive Ann Beech is the only one who was actually described as “dangerous” in the press, the term’s implication—that she was a transgressor in an almost all-male executive business world—describes the experiences of all three women. For while it won’t be surprising

to learn that the aircraft industry was trenchantly male-dominated when Beech entered it as a business leader, it may come as a surprise to learn that the food canning and commercial baking industries that Lewis and Rudkin entered were also overwhelmingly filled with male business owners. Though both involved food production, which was a traditionally female form of labor in the home, on a mass scale and in an industrial setting, even these forms of production were masculinized commercial sectors. And for the most part, the men with whom they competed in these industries operated large, established companies. For example, Lewis's canning business operated in an industry where she competed with the likes of food giant Del Monte, a well-established company with nearly two hundred times the volume of sales in the same food category. To succeed in these industrial sectors was to succeed in a man's world on a big scale.

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Most women business owners shied away from manufacturing sectors like these during the mid-twentieth century because they presented so many challenges. Constituting only 3.3 percent of all woman-owned businesses in one 1954 survey by the Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (BPWC), female entrepreneurs in manufacturing were scarce.⁶ Manufacturing was a capital-intensive, high-risk, complex sector. This discouraged women entrepreneurs who had a more difficult time accessing capital and for whom lower-risk investments had a particular appeal. In addition, this was a dynamic period in business history when all entrepreneurs, male and female, faced many ups and downs. For example, all three of the women highlighted in *Boss Lady* were plagued by the economic dislocations of the depression in the 1930s, when each of the businesses was launched. And each was simultaneously bolstered and hindered by wartime and postwar production, consumption, and economic recovery.

Yet success in the manufacturing sector brought distinct advantages that distinguished the careers of all three women. Whether they produced and distributed canned foods, fresh bread, or aircraft, manufacturing businesses attracted the interest of large corporations looking to acquire or expand areas of production by purchasing smaller established companies. This was in fact a common trend during the 1960s merger spike, in which conglomerate mergers joining previously independent companies were especially high among manufacturing companies.⁷ The stories of Lewis, Beech, and Rudkin add a new dimension to that history, revealing that the sale of a smaller company to a conglomerate was a strategy that brought all three women wealth as well as seats of power as the first female corporate board members of Ogden, Ratheon, and Campbell Soup—the companies that purchased their businesses. Thus, women could be, and were, agents and actors in the process of conversion to big business.

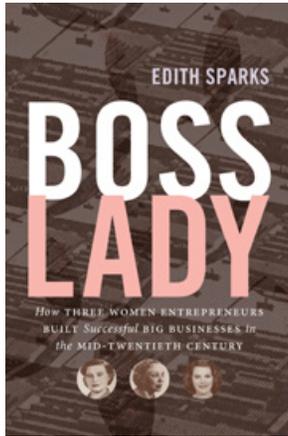
Although Lewis, Beech, and Rudkin all operated in an overwhelmingly male business world, they resisted the notion that their stories were remarkable because they were women. Instead, they viewed themselves as remarkable manufacturers whose story was worth telling because they were successful business leaders. By seizing strategic opportunities such as federal government loans and contracts and tax recovery programs—which played a critical role in their business success—these women eked out a place for themselves at the upper echelons of the corporate world. And it was for this business acumen, and not because they were “boss ladies,” that they viewed their status as high-profile corporate leaders appropriate. Thus, these women teach us not just about women’s outsider status in the business world but also how they got inside, revealing strategies of entrepreneurship about which we have known little before now.

Understanding the stories of Lewis, Beech, and Rudkin is important partly because they help to explain the emergence of the leaders who are the face of female business success today. Working at the helm of large-scale businesses which operated in a national spotlight and national markets, these mid-twentieth-century female executives helped lay the groundwork for the businesswomen of the 1960s, 1970s, and thereafter whom we celebrate today as the forerunners of women’s business leadership. If Lewis, Beech, and Rudkin had not *leaned in* during the middle of the twentieth century, then the Sheryl Sandbergs of today would not be gracing the covers of *Fortune* and *Businessweek* in the early twenty-first century. Even though they constituted a very small percentage of women business owners, they helped to groom the path toward leadership for subsequent generations. As they earned industry awards and honors for their success, served their nation on important government advisory committees as “leading women industrialists,” garnered national media attention, and built wealth for their shareholders, they helped to chip away at the resistance to women’s participation in the business world as leaders. In so doing, they contributed to incremental changes and helped to lay the foundation for later workplace triumphs for women.⁸ **It was a long road to pave.** 📖

1. Peter Wyden, "Danger: Boss Lady at Work," *Saturday Evening Post*, 8 August 1959, 26–27, 85–86. Full issue of magazine in author's possession.
2. Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 221. Gilbert complicates the assertion found in so many previous accounts that a crisis in masculinity characterized the 1950s. He argues that this was neither universal nor uniform. Yet whether or not American middle-class men perceived a crisis in their own masculinity, social critics did. David Reisman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) epitomized this perspective.
3. England and Boyer, "Women's Work," 309.
4. Though all three came of age during a period when American high school graduation rates increased rapidly, in 1910 just 9 percent of seventeen-year-olds completed their secondary education. A college education was also uncommon, opening doors for only a wealthy few, and typically was a choice women made in place of marriage (Goldin, "America's Graduation from High School," 347; Goldin, "The Meaning of College." Figures are for the cohort born between 1895 and 1900, per Figure 1 in "America's Graduation from High School," and show that 10 percent of men and women attended college). Lewis was born in 1896, Rudkin in 1897, and Beech in 1904.
5. For the importance of networks and social capital in business success see Laird, *Pull*.
6. For the BPWC study, see Kwolek-Folland, *Incorporating Women*, 159.
7. Blackford, *History of Small Business in America*, 138.
8. Stanley Buder characterizes this role as both "generator and reflector of American values"; see *Capitalizing on Change*. For quote, see http://www.uncpress.unc.edu/browse/book_detail?title_id=1572 (accessed 11 October 2015).



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