

“Rosie the Riveter”

American icon (1941-)

“Rosie the Riveter” is a recognizable image for generations of Americans, symbolizing the capability and tenacity of an entire nation of women. Though the image of “Rosie” is based on one particular woman, Rose Will Monroe, she represents all of the women who left their homes during World War II to take positions in the workforce that were vacated by men sent overseas.

Rose Will Monroe, who died on May 31, 1997, became famous as “Rosie the Riveter.” Norman Rockwell depicted her for the Saturday Evening Post and she became famous as a war bond promoter, as well as a poster girl flexing her muscles while wearing a Women Ordnance Worker (WOW) bandanna.

But Rosie was not just another poster girl. She was the real thing. Rose Will Monroe was working as a riveter building B-29 and B-24 airplanes at the Willow Run Aircraft

Factory in Ypsilanti, Mich., when she was “discovered” by actor Walter Pidgeon. Because she fit the image of the Kay Kyser hit song, “Rosie the Riveter,” she was selected to appear in a short film that promoted war bonds throughout the nation's theaters.

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor the young men of America poured out of the factories and offices to line up at the recruiting stations. The young women of America lined up at the factories and arsenals to fill the traditional male jobs left vacant by those who went off to fight.

Those who were involved in the production of military hardware became known as WOWs, which stood for Women Ordnance Workers. These women, symbolized by Rosie the Riveter, wore hardhats and coveralls, and pulled the same load as many of the men they replaced. They operated heavy cranes, milling machines, and countless other heavy tools that most women had never heard of before the war. The WOWs also

bagged gunpowder, made weapons, crated ammunition and did whatever else was asked of them so that their fathers, husbands, sons, and sweethearts could win the war and come back home again.

The “Rosie the Riveter” movement is credited with helping push the number of working women to 20,000,000 during four years of war, a 57 percent jump from 1940. About 300,000 women were employed in War Department activities in November 1943.

The role of women in World War II did not end with temporarily replacing the men in civilian jobs. In 1942, Congress established the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, or WAAC as it was known. Several hundred thousand women volunteered to “free a man to fight.” They were issued uniforms, and replaced soldiers in clerical and other non-combat related jobs. The WAACs had no official military status until it was granted by Congress in 1943. When the WAACs officially became part of the Armed Forces, their name was

changed to the Women's Army Corps (WAC). The WACs not only served as clerks, they drove trucks, tested weapons, and ferried bombers and other aircraft across country and overseas. The more mechanically inclined repaired and maintained tanks and other tracked and wheeled vehicles.

While it cannot be said that the jobs held by the WOWs and WACs were as dangerous as those of the combat soldiers, the simple fact is that many of their jobs were more dangerous than the ones held by the men overseas. While many of the men were behind the lines serving the war effort as clerks, cooks, bakers, supply and maintenance personnel, and staff officers of all types, many of the women were working in shifts around the clock bagging gun-powder and manufacturing artillery shells and other high explosives. They suffered the effects of spray painting, welding, and hanging from single suspension scaffolds

With their husbands away, women often pooled their efforts in raising their families. They formed into

groups and shared such chores as cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. Many who had young children shared apartments and houses so they could save time, money, utilities, and food. If both worked, they worked different shifts so they could take turns babysitting. For many, this sharing and cooperation that was born out of the demands placed on the women of World War II created life-long bonds among them.

For more information on working women during World War II, check out:

Rosie the Riveter, Revisited: Women, the War, and Social Change, by Sherna Berger Gluck

“Rosie the Riveter,” a film

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