

Cassidy White

August 30th, 2020

Rosie the Riveter and the History of Women in the Workforce During WWII

Bombs, bonds, blood and brotherhood! With Britain declaring war on Germany after the invasion of Poland in September of 1939, the allied forces would end up sending millions of men over six years to defeat the axis powers. With all eligible men leaving by the thousands almost everyday, what was left behind included wives, families and a “gaping hole in the industrial labor force and defense industry.”¹ So while the mass amount of propaganda for men to go overseas was working, there was a desperate need for propaganda that would motivate women to leave too, leave the house, and to start working in positions that were so widely seen as a man's job to support the family and to keep things afloat while the men remained overseas, returning or not. With the unfortunate birth of the second world war came the inspiring birth of Rosie the Riveter, “one of the most successful recruitment tools in American history.”²

One may not know who Rosie the Riveter is just by going off the name, but when one does see her, they recognize her. From her red bandana to her perfectly applied makeup, to her masculine pose showing off toned arms as she yells “we can do it!” She was and is a cultural

¹ History.com Editors. “American Women in World War II.” *History*. March 5, 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/american-women-in-world-war-ii-1>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

² Ibid.

icon and symbol of the working women. While “primarily a fictitious character”³ there is debate over who inspired the external details of Rosie, but her enthusiasm and perseverance was shaped from all the real life women who worked in the factories and shipyards during WWII. These women were just as vital to the war efforts as the men were, which was something so unheard of during those times; a women's importance in the workplace being equal to that of the male gender. Thanks to the Rosie campaign “More than 310,000 women worked in the U.S. aircraft industry in 1943, representing 65% of the industry’s total workforce (compared to just 1% in the pre-war years)” and “the female percentage of the U.S. workforce increased from 27 percent to nearly 37 percent with nearly one out of every four married women working outside the home”⁴ by 1945. While the importance of the work women were doing in the workforce was recognized, their worth was not. It was rare that these women's pay would ever be over 50% of that of their male counterparts wages. So women in the workforce began to demand for equal pay and better working conditions from their unions.

In their book “*A Mouthful of Rivets*” Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise cover the working conditions and safety issues brought up by many women who had been employed at some of these factories. Working conditions in the factories and shipyards were more often less than ideal and with safety regulation not being standardized and rarely enforced, many recount accidents happening daily. Wise and Wise write “another woman recalled a co-worker losing part of her scalp to a machine. In some factories it was not uncommon for the women to swallow the rivets they were working with because they held them in their mouths”⁵ which could have been

³ Ibid.

⁴ History.com Editors, “Rosie the Riveter,” *History*. April 23, 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/rosie-the-riveter>. (accessed August 29, 2020).

⁵ Nancy Baker Wise and Christy Wise, *A Mouthful of Rivets* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994)

the result of exhaustion due to the lack of breaks some employees were receiving. Aside from lesser pay and bad working conditions, many women did not feel as though the unions truly supported them as women and “at many times felt that their membership in the unions were futile”⁶ for them because it be “no matter if we did have a union, because it didn’t stand for us because we were women”⁷ one woman states to Wise and Wise.

Lots of women lost trust with their unions when the war had ended and men were starting to return home and take back the jobs the women had taken over when they had left. When some would ask to stay or ask to come back they “were basically told that the jobs were the men’s and that there was nothing the union could, or would, do”⁸ slipping back into the idea that women were not needed in the workforce and were better off finding work in more fitting roles, such as secretaries, school teachers, or end up jobless. Women being kicked out of their jobs when the men returned greatly affected them as many did not have returning husbands or sons to pick up the slack, and even those that were fortunate enough to have loved ones return ended up needing a second income anyways to keep up with growing families. Once again, the women were confined to jobs that were lower in pay and could not keep up with their needs.

Today, Rosie the Riveter’s legacy, symbolism and perseverance still lives on and not just in the history books. In 1997, the Rosie the Riveter Fund was created to honour the women who had worked on the home fronts during the war. Their mission is “to inspire current and future generations with the "We Can Do It" spirit and values that energized the World War II Home Front”⁹ and continues to work to “designate important historical sites, preserve and restore sites

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “About, Mission” *Rosie the Riveter Trust*. <http://www.rosietheriveter.org/about>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

and artifacts, and create many more opportunities for visitor access and education about this catalytic and vitally important era to history”¹⁰ opening up school and youth programs to help carry on all the “Rosie’s” legacies.

What had started out as a propaganda campaign has turned into a forever inspirational message and reminder to women across the world to continue to strive for what is right. Rosie may have been one person but she symbolized thousands of women then, and now and will forever continue to inspire, motivate, and persevere.

“You must do the thing you think you cannot do” -Eleanor Roosevelt

¹⁰ Ibid.

Bibliography:

History.com Editors. "Germans Invade Poland." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, March 4, 2010.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/germans-invade-poland#:~:text=A%204%3A45%20a.m.%2C%20some,forccs%20in%20the%20Baltic%20Sea..> (accessed August 30, 2020).

History.com Editors. "Rosie the Riveter." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, April 23, 2010. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/rosie-the-riveter>. (accessed August 29, 2020).

History.com Editors. "World War II." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, October 29, 2009. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/world-war-ii-history>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

Mcdermott, Annette. "How World War II Empowered Women." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, July 2, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/how-world-war-ii-empowered-women>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

Rosie the Riveter Trust Editors. "About Us." *Rositheriveter.org*. Rosie the Riveter Trust. <http://www.rositheriveter.org/about>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

Royde-Smith, John Graham and Hughes, Thomas A. "World War II." *Britannica.com*. London, *Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc.* August 27, 2020.

<https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

Veterans Affairs Canada Editors. "Second World War (1939-1945)." *Veterans.gc.ca*. Veterans Affairs Canada, July 15, 2020.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/second-world-war>. (accessed August 30, 2020).

Wise, Nancy Baker and Wise, Christy. "A Mouthful of Rivets: Women at Work in World War II." San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, October 11, 1994. (accessed August 29, 2020).