

Tending the Homefront: The Many Roles of California Women in WWII

By Donna Graves, for the National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.05.17

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A woman aircraft worker checks aircraft assemblies during World War II for Vega Aircraft Corporation, Burbank, California, 1942.

As growing numbers of men left to fight in World War II, women were recruited to the domestic war effort. Woman power was the critical weapon in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Arsenal of Democracy." This was a plan to defeat the enemy through superior industrial output. Approximately 12 million women worked in defense industries and support services across the nation. They worked in shipyards, steel mills, warehouses, offices, hospitals and daycare centers. These women came from all backgrounds and all over the country. They took on jobs like welding, riveting and operating cranes while maintaining their traditional duties as mothers and homemakers.

No region demonstrated these social changes more than the West Coast and the Bay Area. Women's contributions to the war effort here were critical. The western United States had the highest percentage of female industrial workers in the country. Women outnumbered men in the flood of migrants from the South and West who sought Bay Area defense jobs.

The Bay Area's shipyards hired the greatest number of women defense workers. Yet like most industries, the shipyards were reluctant to hire women at first. They only began to hire them once the falling supply of male workers made it absolutely necessary. While doors ultimately opened wide to women in many defense factories, not all were recruited as eagerly. African-Americans were usually stuck in lower-wage work if they were lucky enough to land a shipyard job. They were more likely to find employment in canneries, railroads and military supply facilities, which paid half of shipyard wages. Still, the war moved many black women out of domestic service. As one woman put it, "Hitler was the one that got us out of the kitchen."

Women worked around the clock

Most women, regardless of race, also labored under the "double burden" of responsibilities on the job and at home. This was made all the more difficult by wartime shortages of goods, transportation and housing. Women defense workers in the Bay Area were more often married than single. The largest shipyards estimated that up to half of their female workforce had children at home. Most defense plants ran around the clock, and many women worked a six-day week. This left them little time to manage the many duties of home and family in their "off" hours. A woman's patriotic role came to include much of her waking activity.

The popular icon of the feminine homefront became "Rosie the Riveter." She was dressed in overalls and carrying tools, a symbol of the women working in factories and shipyards during the war. But women's contributions to the war effort went far beyond building ships and planes. Women drove cabs and delivered mail, repaired railroad cars and tracked the positions of enemy planes. Bay Area women also supported the war effort through a variety of activities and organizations. They promoted community health programs through the Red Cross and entertained troops. Hollywood stars like Lena Horne sang for Richmond shipyard workers. The Andrews Sisters entertained soldiers recovering at Oak Knoll Hospital. Female

staff at the Berkeley Public Library collected and mailed 11,000 books to soldiers as part of the "Victory Book Campaign."



Struggle and conflict on the homefront

Popular accounts emphasize the common bonds holding together those who fought the "good war." But the homefront was also a place of struggle and conflict. Women faced and fought discrimination even as new opportunities were presented to them. Women of color were met with added discrimination. They faced the incongruity of supporting a war "in defense of freedom" when their own freedoms were limited on a daily basis. Japanese-American women suffered the wrenching experience of being uprooted from their homes and forced into internment camps. Sympathetic women in Berkeley and San Francisco founded efforts to support those placed in internment camps and raise awareness about their situation. Their work was labeled "unpatriotic" by some, as were women activists in Bay Area antiwar organizations.

As the war came to an end, public support for working women reversed. Women, especially women of color, were the first to be let go by defense plants as government contracts ended. Arguments against female employment increased as government and businesses worked to secure jobs for soldiers returning home. There was a great push to return women's roles to their prewar "norm." But many women were not so eager to return to their domestic responsibilities. A survey by the U.S. Department of Labor found that 70 percent of Bay Area women wanted to keep their jobs when the war ended. Although one-fifth of working women were their family breadwinners, most found themselves unemployed. The greater independence and opportunities women found during wartime, and increased civil rights envisioned by people of color, meant that the social landscape of the West would never be the same. Women did not just "live through" this transformative period. They helped to shape the events and the dramatic changes that left a permanent imprint on the West Coast.

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Quiz

- 1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3]. Which selection BEST explains why mostly women were hired for work in the Bay Area shipyards?
- (A) As growing numbers of men left to fight in World War II, women were recruited to the domestic war effort.
 - (B) Woman power was the critical weapon in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Arsenal of Democracy."
 - (C) No region demonstrated these social changes more than the West Coast and the Bay Area.
 - (D) Women outnumbered men in the flood of migrants from the South and West who sought Bay Area defense jobs.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "Struggle and conflict on the homefront" BEST supports the idea that women were criticized for their strong viewpoints?
- (A) Popular accounts emphasize the common bonds holding together those who fought the "good war."
 - (B) Women faced and fought discrimination even as new opportunities were presented to them.
 - (C) Their work was labeled "unpatriotic" by some, as were women activists in Bay Area antiwar organizations.
 - (D) Although one-fifth of working women were their family breadwinners, most found themselves unemployed.
- 3 The author MAINLY explains the experience of women of color by:
- (A) showing how they found work not related to domestic help
 - (B) highlighting their employment in military supply facilities
 - (C) describing the contradictions and limitations they faced
 - (D) providing details about their six-day work week

- 4 What is MOST likely the reason why the author included information about "Rosie the Riveter" in the article?
- (A) to emphasize how she became a prominent symbol of women's contributions during the war
 - (B) to counter the misconception that women's contributions were limited to factory work
 - (C) to illustrate how women were not afraid to work hard in jobs usually done by men
 - (D) to explain how essential women were to the war effort across the country