

“Rosie the Riveter”¹



*Source: Virginia Historical Society
J. Howard Miller, employed by Westinghouse during World War II,
produced this image for the War Production Coordinating Committee.*

Nearly 19,000,000 women, more than at any previous time in American history, worked for wages at one time or another during World War II. Thus, they played a significant role on the home front by assisting in the war effort. As the Revolutionary War left the indelible image of “Molly Pitcher” in American memory, World War II ushered in the mythical character of “Rosie the Riveter”. Rosie, like “Wendy the Welder,” another wartime cultural icon, owed her name to the War Manpower Commission’s propaganda campaign to entice women to work in industrial plants. “Rosie’s got a boyfriend, Charlie; Charlie, he’s a marine,” ran a wartime jingle:

Rosie is protecting Charlie
Working overtime on the riveting machine.

Prior to the war, 12,000,000 women were employed in traditional occupations segregated along gender and racial lines. Black and Hispanic women were most likely to be domestic servants whereas white women were likely to hold jobs in teaching, nursing, social work, and the civil service. A majority of these women were single. In 1940, half of all single women in the United States were employed, while only 15 percent of those employed were married. But in early 1942, it became apparent that new workers had to be found as men left their jobs to join the armed forces. Eager to persuade women to fill these vacant posts, industrial leaders orchestrated an advertising campaign that

portrayed Rosie as strapping but stylish. This campaign proved effective as nearly 6,000,000 women responded to the call as they willingly left their kitchens and sewing tables for the factory floor.

Out of the 19,000,000 women employed during the war years, only 2,000,000 labored in defense plants. Despite the surge of women into heavy industry, large numbers of these new workers took up clerical and service jobs. Some of these women were known as “Sally the Secretary.” Those who did labor in heavy industry did so in poor working conditions and usually earned almost half of what an average man’s weekly wages. When the war ended, production fell sharply forcing employers to lay off hundreds of thousands of women. In addition, the arrival of servicemen meant that not only women, but also blacks were replaced with the returning GI’s. Some women were determined to keep their jobs and did so; however, many were fired, pressured by their employers or unions to cede their place at the workbench to returning veterans. Indeed, a large number quit voluntarily, indicating the striking contrast between the nation’s wartime and postwar mood. A federal Census Bureau survey undertaken in 1951 revealed that most of the women who quit cited family responsibilities as their principal motive for leaving the work force. A sample of women who gave birth in 1946 indicates that 8% considered it a sacrifice to give up their wartime jobs while 16% expressed mixed feelings. The remaining 76% welcomed their transition from wartime employment to motherhood.

But Rosie’s strong, capable, tool-toting image lingered in the nation’s collective memory, inspiring a future generation of women to challenge sexual stereotypes and demand economic freedom as well as family security. Thus, even after Rosie laid down her rivet gun, her image provides one example how the echoes of World War II would continue to reverberate long after the war had ended.

¹ David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York, 1999).