

## Rosie the Riveter

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### Rosie the Riveter



What a cultural icon she is – hair tied up in a red polka dot bandanna, dressed in a blue work shirt, arm bent, fist clenched, and showing her muscle! “We Can Do It!” she proclaims – and, she sure could! They all could do it! More than six million female workers helped build planes, bombs, tanks and other weapons that would eventually win World War II. They gave up their domestic jobs to work for the war effort and took on jobs traditionally held by the men fighting battles in Europe and the Pacific. They became street car drivers, operated heavy construction machinery, worked in lumber and steel mills, unloaded freight, and more, so much more. They did what had always been called “men’s work,” creating a new image of women in American society and laying the foundation for generations to come. One of the many slogans of the war effort shouted, “The more women at work, the sooner we win.” They answered the call in shipyards, factories and munitions plants across America. Women increased the workforce by 50 percent. Some left lower-paying traditionally female jobs for higher-paying factory jobs; some had lost jobs due to the Depression; others joined the workforce for the first time. By 1944, 16 percent of all working women held jobs in war industries challenging traditional ideas of women’s capabilities and ensuring American productivity that helped to win the war.

The increasing numbers changed America. Child care centers emerged, many built adjacent to factories for the convenience of families. Women were urged to take up technical training and to become volunteers at the American Red Cross, to learn basic first aid techniques and to be on call as volunteers at local USOs. They were patriotic and proud to support their country and earned the epithet “production soldiers” in the defense industries.

Ironically in the 1950s, Rosie’s bicep-baring poster was replaced with images of happy homemakers and commercials for laundry detergent in an effort to get women back into the home. Mainstream society accepted temporary changes brought about by war but didn’t want them to become permanent. The public reminded women that their greatest asset was their ability to take care of their homes and family. Besides, they were told, career women would not find husbands.



[!!!]

The first mention of Rosie the Riveter was in a song written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb in 1942. It was inspired by Rosaline Walter who worked on the night shift building the F4U Corsair fighter.

“All the day long,  
Whether rain or shine,  
She’s part of the assembly line.  
She’s making history,  
Working for victory,  
Rosie the Riveter.”

Want more? Listen to the song as sung by The Four Vagabonds: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CQOM0wx00s>

It was Rose Will Monroe who brought the character to life in a government film promoting the war. She worked as a riveter at an aircraft assembly plant building B-29 and B-24 bombers for the U.S. Army Air Force.

In 1942 a photo was taken of Geraldine Hoff Doyle at a metal pressing plant southwest of Detroit. She didn’t realize until 1986 that the illustrated face of the bandanna-wearing woman with the flexed bicep beneath a rolled-up shirt sleeve was her own on the We Can Do It! government-commissioned poster. J. Howard Miller’s well-known poster was created to help recruit women to join the work force. At the time of the poster’s release, the name “Rosie” was not associated with the image. Only later, in the 1970s and 1980s was the poster rediscovered and became famous as “Rosie the Riveter” and came to represent female strength and feminism in the United States. It’s now on tee shirts, magnets, coffee mugs, boxes, and more.



The famous illustrator Norman Rockwell created a Rosie the Riveter image for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, May 29, 1943 – the Memorial Day issue. The picture depicted a brawny woman eating a sandwich and wearing overalls, goggles and shield, and displaying various pins of honor on her lapel. Her sleeves were rolled up and she wore a protective leather arm band while sitting with a large riveting gun in her lap. Ah, but she was still feminine – she wore lipstick and rouge and carried a compact that stuck out of the pocket of her dirty overalls. The name printed on her lunchbox was “Rosie.” Her patriotism was emphasized with the American flag in the background and her feet firmly planted on Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. She was the fictionalized but ideal female worker – loyal, efficient, patriotic, and

pretty. This widely-publicized image of Rosie the Riveter became an icon, and the *Post* circulation nearly doubled. Shirley Karp Dick, the original Rosie, was paid \$6 to model for that Rockwell cover.

Women responded to the call to work depending on age, race, class, marital status, and number of children. While patriotism was an influence, it was the economic incentives and nonmaterial benefits such as learning new skills, contributing to the public good, and proving themselves in what had been considered “men’s work” that brought them into the workforce. An estimated 18 million women worked during the war, but it would soon end. The need for munitions workers abruptly ceased. Some women were harassed for attempting to stay in industry. The government insisted that they were just a substitute until the war was over. Female clerical workers grew in number as the hours were shorter; there was better job security and competitive wages; the jobs were cleaner and less physically demanding. Many were forced back into lower-paying female jobs. But change happened. Never again did the number of working women fall to pre-war levels. Women were empowered. Society saw what they could do. Rosie the Riveter lived on in movies, books, and songs.

There is a Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park in Richmond, California. The Richmond Kaiser Shipyards transformed the place from small town to big city. Women of all ages and ethnicities came to Richmond to find new, better-paying jobs throughout the war working on Liberty and Victory ships. A total of 747 ships were produced there, and Richmond was home to 55 additional war-related industries. At the height of the war, women made up about 27 percent of the 100,000-strong workforce. In other industries, women made up to 80 percent of the workers.

In Long Beach, California, Rosie the Riveter High School helps prepare teenage girls for careers as welders, plumbers, carpenters, electricians, and other non-traditional trades for females.

In Vermont, an organization started Rosie’s Girls – a welding camp for young women.

Rosie is an image of strength that has passed the test of time.

### **For more information ...**

The Library of Congress. “Rosie the Riveter: Real Women Workers in World War II”:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04VNBM1PqR88NR=1>

### **And before “Rosie” was riveting, there was Gladys with a mid-air repair!**

Gladys Ingles, was a member of a barnstorming troupe called the 13 Black Cats in the 1920s. Ingles was a wing walker but, in this film, she shows her fearlessness in classic barnstorming

fashion to save an airplane that has lost one of its main wheels. She is shown with a replacement wheel being strapped to her back, then “Up She Goes,” with that song from that era as soundtrack. In the video, you’ll see her transfer herself from the rescue plane to the one missing the main landing gear tire, and then expertly work her way down to the undercarriage only a few feet from a spinning propeller. It’s a feat many mechanics wouldn’t even try on the ground with the engine running! The footage is grainy due to time and poor equipment, but what nerve she had. Here’s a woman we admire!

[Click here for the Gladys Ingles video.](#)

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