



Rosie

The RIVETER

*Honoring Those Women Who Toiled
In The Arsenal Of Democracy*

A History of the Richmond Shipyards



The associated story of the cooperation of government, private industry, and the unions to mobilize the work force, and the creation of innovative plants and production methods designed to rapidly supply the war effort, is also a significant story in the history of our country.

The issues of women going to work in great numbers; resettlement and immigration and the struggle to provide housing and basic services overnight; women carrying the family responsibilities; children going to day care; early health care for workers and families; integration of the work force and intervention by government to support that integration; and finally this new work force being returned to unemployment or underemployment, and the impact on these families remaining in a community like Richmond, all combine to create a supremely significant story in American history.

Something extraordinary happened in Richmond, California 60 years ago. As World War II approached, Richmond was a sleepy town of some 20,000 residents. Beginning in early 1941, however, Richmond underwent a radical and wrenching transformation. Access to the deep water of the Bay and miles of previously undeveloped shoreline made Richmond the location of choice for a wartime industrial complex dominated by the largest and most productive shipyards in the entire world. Population boomed to over 100,000 to support the war effort with work never stopping—three shifts a day, seven days a week. Hayfields were rapidly converted to the largest public housing project ever constructed in the United States. With millions of men in uniform and out of the workforce for the duration, tens of thousands of

women were recruited to do what had been previously considered "men's work." They soon became collectively known as "Rosie the Riveter." A network of schools and childcare centers was thrown up overnight to care for and educate the children of these working women.

The nation's first HMO, now Kaiser Permanente, was founded to keep the shipyard workers healthy. Needing still more workers, Henry Kaiser scoured the country for recruits, finding thousands of willing volunteers in the rural African-American population of the South. Coming to Richmond by the trainload, farm workers and sharecroppers were rapidly retrained as welders and equipment operators. In a matter of days, they were building Liberty and Victory ships. 747 ships were built in Richmond, coming off the ways at a clip of one a week toward the end of



the war. One Liberty Ship, the Robert E. Peary was built in just over four days, setting a record that has, to this day, never been surpassed.

The Richmond shipyards produced more ships, faster, and better than had ever been done in any time in the history of the world. In 1945, the shipyards shut down as fast as they had started up four years earlier. Tens of thousands of shipyard workers, many of whom had relocated permanently to California, were thrown out of work. With returning servicemen reentering the workforce, women and minorities were no longer welcome.

Richmond entered into a period of economic decline and stagnation that lasted nearly 50 years. It is only now, at the dawn of a new century, that Richmond, buoyed by the Bay Area's technology boom, is fully recovering from World War II. Because of the economic devastation following its World War II triumph, Richmond's rich history of that magnificent era was largely ignored by its residents and

seldom mentioned to newcomers. As the "Greatest Generation" starts to pass into history, a younger generation has rediscovered and has now begun to celebrate the accomplishments of their parents and grandparents in building Roosevelt's "Arsenal of Democracy" that provided the ships, planes and guns to win the war. The people of Richmond are now fully committed to saving what is left of this incredible industrial complex in a way that will preserve for future generations the rich historical tapestry of sacrifice, patriotism, technology, organization, leadership, civil rights and social interaction that made it all possible.

