Women on the Home Front - Rosie the Riveter

By Mary Lynn Bushong

Previous to WWII, most American women found there were only a few conventional job openings available to them. They could be secretaries, seamstresses, teachers, or nurses, but they could not work in higher paying factories where muscle was involved. WWII changed that and opened up a wide range of new employment possibilities.

When the United States entered WWII after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many men did not wait to be drafted. They went to their local recruiting offices and signed up. Manufacturing plants suddenly found themselves with a shrinking workforce just when they needed an expanding one.

The government encouraged women to step into the gap and take up the slack. Many women were thrilled to have the opportunity to prove themselves in an industrial setting. They flocked to the war production industries and the higher paying jobs.

Perhaps the greatest symbol of the female worker was "Rosie the Riveter." The poster with Rosie flexing her muscular arm said, "We can do it." Millions of women took jobs welding, building tanks, assembling bombs, and greasing machinery. Many factory managers considered them better workers then the men, but they were paid only sixty percent of what a man made doing the same job.

Women also did dangerous jobs like working in chemical war plants. The Redstone Arsenal was built in Huntsville, AL. It was built in an area devoted to agriculture and produced many different chemical weapons. During the building phase, male workers flocked to the area. As production lines opened, more and more women were hired. It was found that many of the female teams of workers out performed the men.

The unskilled female workers were trained for their specific jobs, and when they were not working at the plant, they were working at home or working on civic projects. Women sewed and crocheted for the Red Cross. They wound up rolls of bandages to be used in the field hospitals. Courses were given in basic first aid. They supervised victory garden efforts, conservation, and recycling programs. Everyone's mind was focused on the goal ahead -- winning the war.

By the end of the war, everyone knew someone who was fighting or had died. Their reasons for working for the war effort were partially economic, but also personal and patriotic. They thought that the better they were able to do their jobs, the sooner their friends and relatives could come home. There was pride in having a part in the final victory. One woman put it this way when her husband, brother, and cousins returned. She said, "I want to be able to look them in the eye with a clear conscience and say, 'I did all I could.'"

Women on the Home Front - Rosie the Riveter

Questions

1. List three jobs that a woman might expect to get prior to WWII.

2. What action caused America to join the War?
3. Choose the best reason women entered the factory workforce during the war.
   A. Better pay
   B. Need for workers
   C. Women were better workers.
   D. Women were not paid as much as men.

4. The symbol of the female worker was:
   A. Wendy the Welder
   B. Rosie the Riveter
   C. Betty the Bomb Maker
   D. Charity of Chemical Weapons

5. The Huntsville Alabama site of the Redstone Chemical weapons plant would have had certain problems just because of its location. What do you think they were?

6. What did women do when they were not at the plant or working at home?

7. Women kept their minds focused on what?
   A. The war effort
   B. Clothes
   C. Work
   D. Family

8. What phrase epitomized their attitude in working for victory?

Why do you think there has been a shift from supporting the effort in WWII to giving much less support in the most recent war?
Why do you think it was important to the women at home to have a part in winning the war?