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ROSIE THE RIVETER



WWII Home Front
National Historical Park

Step back in history with Rosie the Riveter

By Diane LeBow

Photography by John Montgomery

Many people are familiar with the Rosie the Riveter song and icon but don't know the living history behind one of America's unique stories. Authentic Rosies await your visit in Richmond.

Dressed in their blue vests and feisty red polka dot scarves, the Rosies, now in their 90s, meet visitors each Friday at the Rosie the Riveter Visitor Center.

"I think the war helped us to find out how strong we really were. It taught us how to work and to grow up fast," said one of the Rosies.

Recently they were invited to the White House to meet President Obama and VP Joe Biden where they received some big hugs and had, they said, "an unbelievable experience, especially for us, just regular folks."

When Pearl Harbor Naval Base was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, and America became the "home front," suddenly the American workforce started changing to include more women and minorities. American men were called up and shipped out to fight on the various fronts, leaving the home workforce depleted.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt called on all Americans to make America "the great arsenal of democracy." The cry was "There's a war to be won!" Popular songs like "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" and "I'll Be Seeing You" echoed the nation's mood. Warships were needed quickly, and huge numbers of workers "manned" and "womened" the around-the-clock shifts. The 1940 Emergency Shipbuilding Program spawned the Henry Kaiser shipyards in Richmond which were among the first to employ women. By 1944, women made up 41 percent of welders.

Richmond, situated on San Francisco Bay, became one of the nation's wartime boom towns. More than six million women joined the workforce to assist in the war effort, in spite of traditional attitudes that women should not work outside the home, that they might be taking jobs from men, and that they were unsuited to the "men's jobs" that were required to build the large numbers of warships needed immediately.

"It was the first time in my life I had worn a pair of slacks," said one Rosie. "It took a war to liberate American women," wrote another.



Real Rosie Docents



Rosie Catherine Morrison

Not everything went smoothly: "The men played tricks on us like sending us for tools that never existed, but we all did our job, and we're proud we were able to offer models and encouragement for other women."

This inspiring story is beautifully told at Rosie the Riveter Visitor Center. Four Rosies, including Kay Morrison, now 90, and 94 year old Priscilla Elder, who worked in the shipyards 1943-45, are here to meet and chat with visitors every Friday.

Priscilla said, "WWII opened doors for us women. Welding was like creating embroidery."

They explain what life was like during the

war and how the shipyards changed the lives of women and people of color in American life. When the war was over, one Rosie reflected that she was happy because the war was over, but was sad because she had such a well paying job that she was going to miss.

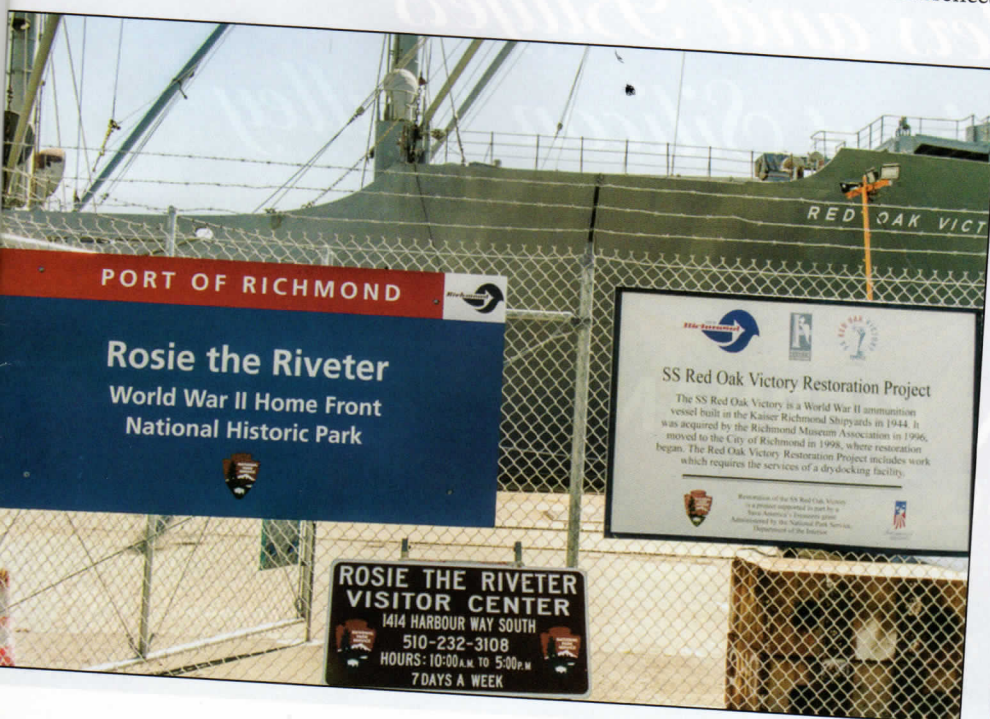
During your visit, enjoy the unique museum displays and take in one of the informative and lively films about this era.

Just next door to the Visitor Center is the enormous Craneway Pavilion, constructed in 1942 by Henry Ford for auto manufacturing—originally Model A's—and, during the war, more than 150,000 jeeps and tanks. Today the space is used for a variety of exhibitions, like alternative auto shows and conferences.

Visitors enjoy the award-winning landmark architecture as well as spectacular San Francisco skyline and bay views.

The Pavilion is also home to the architecturally impressive Assemble Restaurant which serves fresh, local, organic, sustainable cuisine.

Another Richmond must-see is the WWII cargo ship, the Red Oak Victory, the last remaining Victory Ship that was created in the Richmond Kaiser Shipyards. The ship is the largest exhibit of the Richmond Museum of History. Visitors can tour the decks, quarters and rooms and get a feel of what life was like for the crew and officers during those challenging days of war.



IF YOU GO:

Rosie the Riveter/World War II Home Front National Historical Park
Open daily 9 a.m.-5 p.m.,
www.nps.gov/rori/index.htm.

SS Red Oak Victory
www.redoakvictory.com
Open for visitors: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

Richmond Museum of History
www.richmondmuseumofhistory.org

Convenient location: 15 minutes from the San Francisco Bay Bridge, 10 minutes from Berkeley, 5 minutes from the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge.

Accommodations: Courtyard by Marriott Hotels in Richmond