

# Rosie the Riveter



**Rosie the Riveter** is a cultural icon of the United States, representing the American women who worked in factories during World War II, many of whom produced munitions and war supplies. These women sometimes took entirely new jobs replacing the male workers who were in the military. Rosie the Riveter is commonly used as a symbol of feminism and women's economic power.

## History



Cover of the published music to the 1942 song.

The term "Rosie the Riveter" was first used in 1942 in a song of the same name written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb. The song was

recorded by numerous artists, including the popular big band leader Kay Kyser, and it became a national hit. The song portrays "Rosie" as a tireless assembly line worker, doing her part to help the American war effort. The name is said to be a nickname for Rosie Bonavitas who was working for Convair in San Diego, California. The idea of Rosie resembled Veronica Foster, a real person who in 1941 was Canada's poster girl for women in the war effort in "Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl."



A woman operating a turret lathe (1942).

Although women took on male dominated trades during World War II, they were expected to return to their everyday housework once men returned from the war. Government campaigns targeting women were addressed solely at housewives, perhaps because already employed women would move to the higher-paid "essential" jobs on their own, perhaps because it was assumed that most would be housewives. One government advertisement asked women "Can you use an electric mixer? If so, you can learn to operate a drill." Propaganda was also directed at their husbands, many of whom were unwilling to support such jobs. Most women opted to do this. Later, many women returned to traditional work such as clerical or administration positions, despite their reluctance to re-enter the lower-paying fields. However, some of these women continued working in the factories.

The individual who was the inspiration for the song was Rosalind P. Walter, who "came from old money and worked on the night shift building the F4U Corsair fighter." Later in life Walter was a philanthropist, a board member of the WNET public television station

in New York and an early and long-time supporter of the Charlie Rose interview show.



Man and woman riveting team working on the cockpit shell of a C-47 aircraft at the plant of North American Aviation (1942).

Rosie the Riveter became most closely associated with another real woman, Rose Will Monroe, who was born in Pulaski County, Kentucky in 1920 and moved to Michigan during World War II. She worked as a riveter at the Willow Run Aircraft Factory in Ypsilanti, Michigan, building B-29 and B-24 bombers for the U.S. Army Air Forces. Monroe was asked to star in a promotional film about the war effort at home. The song "Rosie the Riveter" was popular at the time, and Monroe happened to best fit the description of the worker depicted in the song. "Rosie" went on to become perhaps the most widely recognized icon of that era. The films and posters she appeared in were used to encourage women to go to work in support of the war effort. At the age of 50, Monroe realized her dream of flying when she obtained a pilot's license. In 1978, she crashed in her small propeller plane when the engine stalled during takeoff. The accident resulted in the loss of one kidney and the sight in her left eye, and ended her flying career. She died from kidney failure on May 31, 1997, in Clarksville, Indiana, at the age of 77.



Brazing at the Gary Tubular Steel Plant

According to the *Encyclopedia of American Economic History*, "Rosie the Riveter" inspired a social movement that increased the number of working American women from 12 million to 20 million by 1944, a 57% increase from 1940. By 1944 only 1.7 million unmarried men between the ages of 20 and 34 worked in the defense industry, while 4.1 million unmarried women between those ages did so. Although the image of "Rosie the Riveter" reflected the industrial work of welders and riveters during World War II, the majority of working women filled non-factory positions in every sector of the economy. What unified the experiences of these women was that they proved to themselves (and the country) that they could do a "man's job" and could do it well. In 1942, just between the months of January and July, the estimates of the proportion of jobs that would be "acceptable" for women were raised by employers from 29 to 85%. African American women were some of those most affected by the need for women workers. It has been said that it was the process of whites working along blacks during the time that encouraged a breaking down of social barriers and a healthy recognition of diversity. African-Americans were able to lay the groundwork for the postwar civil rights revolution by equating segregation with Nazi white supremacist ideology.

Conditions were sometimes harsh and pay was not always equal—the average man working in a wartime plant was paid \$54.65 per week, while women were paid about \$31.50. Nonetheless, women quickly responded to Rosie the Riveter, who convinced them that they had a patriotic duty to enter the workforce. Some claim that she forever opened the work force for women, but others dispute that point, noting that many women were discharged after the war and their jobs were

given to returning servicemen. These critics claim that when peace returned, few women returned to their wartime positions and instead resumed domestic vocations or transferred into sex-typed occupations such as clerical and service work. For some, World War II represented a major turning point for women as they eagerly supported the war effort, while other historians emphasize that the changes were temporary and that immediately after the war was over, women were expected to return to traditional roles of wives and mothers, and finally, a third group has emphasized how the long-range significance of the changes brought about by the war provided the foundation for the contemporary woman's movement. Leila J. Rupp in her study of World War II wrote "For the first time, the working woman dominated the public image. Women were riveting housewives in slacks, not mother, domestic beings, or civilizers."

After the war, the "Rosies" and the generations that followed them knew that working in the factories was in fact a possibility for women, even though they did not reenter the job market in such large proportions again until the 1970s. By that time factory employment was in decline all over the country.

## Images



"We Can Do It!" by J. Howard Miller

In 1942, Pittsburgh artist J. Howard Miller was hired by the Westinghouse Company's War Production Coordinating Committee to create a series of posters for the war effort. One of these posters

became the famous "We Can Do It!" image—an image that in later years would also be called "Rosie the Riveter", though it was never given this title during the war. Miller is thought to have based his "We Can Do It!" poster on a United Press International wire service photograph taken of Ann Arbor, Michigan, factory worker Geraldine Hoff (later Doyle), who was 17 and briefly working as a metal-stamping machine operator. The intent of the poster was to keep production up by boosting morale, not to recruit more women workers. It was shown only to Westinghouse employees in the Midwest during a two-week period in February 1943 and then it disappeared for nearly four decades. During the war, the name "Rosie" was not associated with the image, and it was not about women's empowerment. It was only later, in the early 1980s, that the Miller poster was rediscovered and became famous, associated with feminism, and often mistakenly called "Rosie the Riveter".



Norman Rockwell's *Saturday Evening Post* cover featuring Rosie the Riveter

Norman Rockwell's image of "Rosie the Riveter" received mass distribution on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* on Memorial Day, May 29, 1943. Rockwell's illustration features a brawny woman taking her lunch break with a rivet gun on her lap and beneath her Penny loafer a copy of Hitler's manifesto, *Mein Kampf*. Her lunch pail reads "Rosie"; viewers quickly recognized this to be "Rosie the Riveter" from the familiar song. Rockwell, America's best-known

popular illustrator of the day, posed his model to match the Sistine Chapel ceiling image of the prophet Isaiah, painted by Michelangelo in 1509. Rockwell's model was a Vermont resident, 19-year-old Mary Doyle who was a telephone operator near where Rockwell lived, not a riveter. Rockwell painted his "Rosie" as a larger woman than his model, and he later phoned to apologize. The *Post's* cover image proved hugely popular, and the magazine loaned it to the U.S. Treasury Department for the duration of the war, for use in war bond drives.

After the war the Rockwell "Rosie" was seen less and less because of a general policy of vigorous copyright protection by the Rockwell estate. In 2002, the original painting sold at Sotheby's for nearly \$5 million. In June 2009 the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas acquired Norman Rockwell's iconic Rosie the Riveter painting for its permanent collection from a private collector.



A real-life "Rosie" working on the A-31 Vengeance bomber in Nashville, Tennessee (1943).

In late 1942, Doyle posed twice for Rockwell's photographer, Gene Pelham, as Rockwell preferred to work from still images rather than live models. The first photo was not suitable because she wore a blouse rather than a blue work shirt. In total, she was paid \$10 for her modeling work. (\$10 of 1943 dollars would be worth: \$133.33 in 2012). In 1949 she married Robert J. Keefe to become Mary Doyle Keefe. The Keefes were invited and present in 2002 when the Rockwell painting was sold at Sotheby's.