

A New Role for Women

Goal: Students will come to appreciate the significant role that American women played in supporting the war by working in home front war industries.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will examine the lyrics to the 1942 song “Rosie the Riveter” as a primary source document.
- 2) Children will become familiar with the meaning of four vocabulary words selected from the song.
- 3) Students will make observations about the song lyrics and use the information to make inferences and predictions about the general nature of women’s role as war workers.

Just as recruitment efforts and the draft resulted in an increase of soldiers in the Armed Forces, they also resulted in a shortage of workers for home front war industries. This occurred at a time when the demand for products useful in the war effort was at its height. The U.S. War Department estimated that 5,000,000 new workers would be needed in order to keep up with the necessary production schedule. The War Department also estimated that more than 2,500,000 of these new workers would have to be women. Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, commented, “The War Department must fully utilize, immediately and effectively, the largest and potentially the finest single sources of labor available today – the vast reserve of woman power.”

A character called “Rosie the Riveter” – a fictional woman who worked in a factory joining airplane parts together – came to symbolize the women war workers. Songs and posters presented this character as an example that other women should follow, for “Rosie” knew that her work in the factory played an important part in her country’s fight for victory.

Read the text of the “Rosie the Riveter” song written by Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb and published in 1942. The song says that Rosie is “making history / working for victory.” Answer the following questions about the song.

Rosie the Riveter

All the day long,
Whether rain or shine,
She’s a part of the assembly line.
She’s making history,
Working for victory,
Rosie the Riveter.
Keeps a sharp lookout for *sabotage*,
Sitting up there on the *fuselage*.
That little girl will do more than a male will do.
Rosie’s got a boyfriend, Charlie.

Charlie, he's a Marine.
Rosie is protecting Charlie,
Working overtime on the *riveting machine*.
When they gave her a *production "E,"*
She was as proud as she could be.
There's something true about,
Red, white, and blue about,
Rosie the Riveter.
Redd Evans and John Jacob Loeb,
"Rosie the Riveter,"
(New York: Paramount Music Corp., 1942)

Vocabulary

Sabotage – To purposely make a mistake in production in order to aid the enemy

Fuselage – The center part of the airplane to which the wings, tail, and engine are attached.

Riveting machine – A machine that fastens two pieces together using a metal pin called a rivet

Production "E" – An excellent rating

- 1) What kind of work is Rosie doing?
- 2) The song mentions one person in particular that Rosie's work affects. Who is this person and what is his relationship to Rosie? In what ways does Rosie's work affect this person?
- 3) One working woman wrote about her work experiences to her husband who was fighting. She said, "I must admit I'm not exactly the same girl you left. I'm twice as independent as I used [to] be. Sometimes I think I've become hard as nails. I've been living exactly as I want to." What does this comment suggest about this woman's opinion of war work? Many women war workers expected to leave their jobs at the end of the war, and most happily returned to full-time homemaking. Others found that they valued the independence they gained during the war, and liked working outside of the home. Do you think that the woman writing this letter would have been happy about returning to full-time housework or not? What evidence can you give to support your opinion?