

1 ☆ “WORKING WOMEN WIN WARS”

The Shipbuilding Boom in Portland and Vancouver

In 1940 the Portland-Vancouver area was a commercial center for the surrounding lumber and ranching area. Of the 318,788 people living in the two towns only one-sixth (53,131) were industrially employed.¹ To a great extent, it was the actions of Henry Kaiser and his son Edgar that were responsible for the creation of the war boom that transformed the life of the two cities. Henry Kaiser, described by one contemporary as a “rolling mountain of a man just full of ideas,” had been involved in a variety of building projects.² His reputation as the “fabulous Kaiser” resulted from the construction of the San Francisco Bay Bridge and the Grand Coulee, Hoover and Bonneville Dams. Edgar Kaiser was one of six young men working with Henry Kaiser and had been the general manager of the Grand Coulee Dam. The Kaisers were new to shipbuilding, but by the end of the war they had built seven shipyards on the Pacific Coast, acquired interests in seven others, and played a central role in shaping the wartime shipbuilding program, which brought them enormous profits.³

Between January 1941 and March 1942, the Kaiser Corporation built two large shipyards in Portland and one in Vancouver and negotiated lucrative contracts with the U.S. Maritime Commission. Three smaller shipyards—Willamette Iron and Steel (WISCO), Commerical Iron Works, and Albina Engine and Machine Works—had been in operation before the war and were also awarded government contracts.⁴ By December 1, 1942, the six shipyards in the Portland area employed 92,273 men and women and the city had become a shipyard boom town.⁵

Changes in the shipbuilding process allowed the wartime shipyards to produce ships with unprecedented speed. The use of welding rather than riveting to assemble the ships saved labor, time, and repair costs. Welded ships were put together in large subassemblies, which allowed much of the work to be done in fabricating shops at the shipyards.⁶ The subassemblies (such as bottoms, deck, bulkheads)

were then welded together on the ways (the structures on which the ship is built and launched).⁷ As Deborah Hirschfield has shown, these changes allowed the shipyards to hire workers who were specifically trained as welders rather than skilled craftsmen. With the cooperation of the shipbuilding unions, the lengthy apprenticeship system by which a worker had become a journeyman was replaced by training for specific skills. While the term journeyman was retained, it no longer carried its prewar meaning, which implied the mastery of several different skills.⁸ As a result the shipyards were able to hire thousands of unskilled workers and train them quickly to become journeymen welders. While the shipyard unions had agreed to change the training system, there was some distress among workers at Oregon Ship that workers who were new to shipbuilding were put to work as welders and “rapidly advanced to leaders” while the “older men are forced to work under kids whom they have taught the little they know.”⁹

The local labor supply quickly became inadequate for the needs of the shipyards and was further depleted by the increasing numbers of men who were drafted in late 1942 and early 1943. Some of the Portland-Vancouver plants involved in war production threatened to shut down if more labor did not become available, and some of the shipyard managements began to actively recruit workers outside the Pacific Northwest.¹⁰

The Kaiser shipyards sent recruiters all over the country and chartered trains to transport workers. Workers poured into the area.¹¹ By 1942, 120,000 people were working in Portland’s war plants and more were needed. The swollen population strained the area’s resources, causing the most acute housing shortage in the country. Vanport, the largest war housing project in the world, was under construction but would not be completed until September 1943.¹² Organized labor criticized Kaiser’s continued recruitment of workers in the face of the housing shortage. Overcrowded schools and inadequate public transportation increased the tension in the community, and pressure mounted on the shipbuilding industry to hire people who had already migrated to the area but were not employed.¹³

Can Women Build Ships?

Because prewar shipbuilding was an almost entirely male industry, neither management nor government considered hiring women to work in the shipyards until there was no other alternative.¹⁴ Throughout 1941 and early 1942 articles in local newspapers speculating about

the possible recruitment of women for war work were often written in a sarcastic and incredulous vein and frequently presented the female production worker as an improbable and ridiculous notion. Bonnie Wiley, for example, a staff writer for *The Oregonian*, began a series in the fall of 1941 in which she described her visits to various industrial sites in a self-consciously feminine style. "Electricity to me has always been something that happened when I turned on the switch. I'd much rather leave it at that. If war comes I think I'll stick to reporting."¹⁵ *The Bo's'n's Whistle*, the house organ of the Kaiser shipyards, was also dubious. In March, 1942, it published a full-page cartoon, depicting what might happen if women were hired in the plate shop. It featured women in high heels teetering precariously over heavy machinery and performing a variety of inappropriate, inept and "feminine" acts.¹⁶

Despite such skepticism, the recruitment and training of women shipbuilders was underway by early 1942. In February the City of Portland and the War Manpower Commission organized a house-to-house survey to assess the availability of female labor and asked Saidie Dunbar, former president of General Federation of Women's Clubs and member of the Women's Advisory Committee of the War Manpower Commission to direct it.¹⁷ In April the first women were enrolled in the state-run welding training program.¹⁸

Federally funded state-run training operated at Benson High School in Portland from 3:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. each day, and, by July 1942, 14 percent of its students were women.¹⁹ Women were also being trained at private welding schools such as one run by Mr. and Mrs. McPherson, who trained ten women welders in the basement of their home in May, 1942.²⁰ Training to be a journeyman welder involved learning to weld in three different positions—flat, vertical and horizontal—and took from ten days to four weeks. Some welding courses also included overhead welding, which was more difficult and was not included in the standard test that students took at the completion of training.²¹ As the labor shortage intensified, workers were sometimes hired at the shipyards as soon as they had learned how to tack weld, the most basic welding skill.²²

In April 1942, the first two women welders were hired by the Kaiser Corporation. Most women were hired as helpers at first, but as the demand for journeyman welders increased, so did the number of women welders. As the female production worker became a reality, people began to challenge the assumption, expressed in the *Bo's'n's Whistle* cartoon, that women were unsuited for heavy industrial work. In May 1942, for example, William Witherow of the National Association of Manufacturers, assured representatives of 500 com-

URING THE PAST FEW WEEKS THE FAIR SEX HAVE BEEN INTERVIEWED AND CLASSIFIED FOR DEFENSE WORK — THE SCENES BELOW ARE WHAT MIGHT TAKE PLACE IF THE FAIR SEX WERE TO REPLACE MEN IN THE PLATE SHOP.

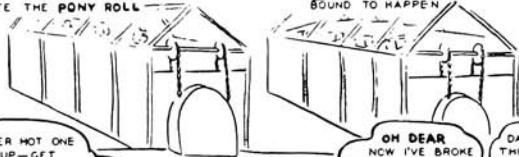


OH BOY!
I'VE CUT MY FINGER
—NOW I CAN REPORT TO THE
FIRST AID STATION — HOPE
I GET TO SIT ON
THAT HANDSOME
MALE NURSE'S
KNEE

FASHION DESIGNERS MIGHT OPERATE THE PONY ROLL —

IF COURSE ACCIDENTS ARE BOUND TO HAPPEN

M—M—M—M!
FOUR LWC-5 3-92-0-10
TEN LWC-7 3-92-0-10
FOUR LSDM 3-92-0-10
THAT MAKES EIGHTEEN
PIECES PER HULL



ANOTHER HOT ONE
COMIN' UP—GET
YOUR HAMMERS AN'
LETS GO TO IT

OH DEAR
NOW I'VE BROKE
MY HIGH HEEL OFF

DARN
THOSE
MOLES



THE LADIES WHO HAVE BEEN BALANCING HOUSE—HOLD BUDGETS WOULD PROBABLY BECOME JR ENGINEERS



THESE
LITTLE HAMMERS
SURE TIRE
ME OUT

WISH I
WAS BACK IN
MITCHELL'S OFFICE

OH
MY BACKS
BUSTED

SAY GERTIE WILL A
QUARTER INCH DRILL
MAKE A HALF INCH
HOLE?

NO USE A
THREE-EIGHTS
DRILL

WOMEN WORKING ON THE SLAB WOULD POSSIBLY BE EX-STENOGRAPHERS WHO HAVE BEAT THE LIFE OUT OF TYPEWRITERS (SMALL HAMMERS WOULD BE USED)



GANG WAY! — GOTTA GET
OUT OF HERE — CAN'T BE
LATE FOR MY BRIDGE DATE-

Bo's'n's Whistle

WHEN THE WHISTLE BLOWS THERE WOULD ALWAYS BE A MAD DASH TO CHECK OUT

Bo's'n's Whistle, March 26, 1942. *Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.*

panies that "there is little difference between men and women as regards their satisfactory performance in industry."²³

Women and the Unions

Women had been working in shipyard production jobs for several months before they were admitted to the major shipyard unions. In May 1941, a week before ship construction began, Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation, the first yard built by Kaiser in the area, signed a closed shop agreement with the AFL Metal Trades Council.²⁴ As soon as the other yards were built, they entered into similar agreements with the Metal Trades council. Since thousands of workers were subsequently hired by the shipyards, and only sixty-six people were working in the shipyards when the contract was signed, the CIO's Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America (IUMSWA) filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board in November 1941, claiming that the majority of workers did not elect the AFL Metal Trades Unions as their bargaining agent. The National Labor Relations Board decided favorably on the IUMSWA grievance and filed a complaint against the Kaiser yards. The case dragged on throughout the war until it was rendered moot by an amendment to an appropriations bill passed by Congress in June, 1943 that barred the National Labor Relations Board from considering complaints about labor agreements that were over three months old.²⁵

The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Shipbuilders, Blacksmiths, Forgers and Helpers (the Boilermakers), one of the metal trades unions, controlled two thirds of the industrial jobs in the shipyard. The Boilermakers Union, which had never admitted women members, was suddenly confronted by an influx of women workers into industrial trades in shipyards all over the country. In July 1942, after a group of women welders demonstrated at the headquarters of the San Francisco Local, the Boilermakers International submitted a resolution to its membership to amend the constitution to "remove the restriction on female membership and permit acceptance of their applications."²⁶ The resolution was framed as a wartime measure, asserting that the union was compelled to "depart from many long established practices" since it was in "honor and duty bound to support the war effort." Since the war crisis had necessitated the introduction of female labor in the shipbuilding industry and the union shop agreement required all workers to belong to the Boilermakers, many locals had appealed for a change.²⁷

In Local 72, the Portland branch of the Boilermakers' union, the resolution sparked controversy. The day before members were to vote on the question, the editor of the local Boilermakers newspaper, *The Shipbuilder*, commented, "There's going to be a 'Hot Time in the Old Town' this weekend when members of Local 72 traipse down to the Boilermakers building to cast their votes on a 'yes' or 'no' decision as to whether women are to be allowed equal membership to their union." A letter in the same issue of *The Shipbuilder* suggests that this issue was very much on the minds of the male workers who were being asked to vote on the measure. The author of the letter, Marion Easterly, commented that "the boys who think it's O.K. to let women into the Boilermakers aren't going to vote," while those "who don't want competition from us gals are going to stomp righteously down to the Boilermakers Building on Saturday August 22 ESPECIALLY to vote NO! Those boys seem mostly to figure like this: 'Gosh if we let women into the union now, they'll take our jobs away from us after war.'"²⁸

Easterly's response is interesting because of both what she said and what she omitted. She did not argue that women had a right to belong to the union and should have equal opportunity to enter skilled industrial work. But she also avoided promises that would support the expectation that women would happily leave the industrial work force after the war. She argued instead that those who opposed the admission of women to the union were obstructing the war effort, and if women were not admitted to the union they would work as nonunion workers. Lastly she warned, "If you are afraid of a large UNION supply of skilled labor after the war just WHAT do you think a large NON UNION supply is going to do to your jobs? Give us a break," Easterly concluded. "WE'D RATHER BE SISTERS THAN SCABS!"²⁹

Evidently most members of the International Brotherhood did not, in Easterly's words, "bother to vote." While most of the locals that participated in the election approved the resolution, the number of votes cast fell below the number required to change the union's constitution. Many factors may have contributed to the low level of participation in the International election, but it is clear that there was no great enthusiasm for admitting women to union membership even as an emergency measure.³⁰ The Executive Council decided to take action on its own, and in September the International president directed the "gentlemen and brothers" of the member locals to admit women. Women's applications were to be sent to the International headquarters, where they would be kept segregated, and locals were instructed to "be sure to mark on the margin . . . FEMALE."³¹ The issue of the *Shipbuilder* that followed the referendum was silent on the results of

the vote, but its regular Swan Island column reported, "For the first time in history we have ladies for boilermakers' helpers hired and put on the job by the Boilermakers union and they are doing a good job too."³²

A final obstacle to the integration of women into the shipyard workforce was the state legislation, which since the beginning of the twentieth century had reinforced the exclusion of women from skilled industrial work by regulating their wages and working conditions. The Oregon law prohibiting women from lifting over twenty-five pounds and carrying over fifteen pounds came under particular fire from war industries, and in October 1942 the Wages and Hours Commission agreed to grant waivers to plants demonstrating that compliance with the restrictions would impede the war effort.³³

Recruiting Women

Access to the major shipbuilding union and modification of restrictive legislation facilitated the recruitment of women for war work, and during the last few months of 1942 women joined the shipyard work force in increasing numbers. By the end of the year 17 percent of the shipyard workers at Kaiser, Vancouver, and 11 percent at Oregon Ship and Swan Island were women. While Oregon Shipbuilding was the first shipyard in the country to hire women to work in the yards, it employed a smaller percentage of women workers because it had been built earlier and had recruited much of its labor force before the shortage of male labor became acute.³⁴

The three non-Kaiser shipyards in the area, Willamette Iron and Steel (WISCO), Commercial Iron Works, and Albina Engine and Machine Works, expanded rapidly during 1942 and 1943, and as the labor shortage intensified, their managements overcame whatever resistance they had to recruiting women industrial workers. The management of Commercial Iron Works, for example, had explicitly opposed hiring women throughout 1942, but by March 1943 its position had softened, and five hundred women were doing production work (5 percent of the work force).³⁵

The first women industrial workers at the shipyard entered either as helpers in various crafts for which they needed little or no training or as welders, which the shipyard needed desperately. At the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943, increasing numbers of women began entering shipyard crafts other than welding. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) admitted women workers but enforced a rigid hierarchy in which journeyman status was granted to

only 5 percent of all workers. The IBEW also refused admission to women under eighteen and over thirty-five.³⁶ At first women electricians were confined to the shops, but in the fall of 1942 *The Oregonian* announced that "it has been discovered that women can replace many men on jobs in ship wiring."³⁷ In February 1943 the Machinists union agreed to train women and to accept them as members after one hundred hours of training. By April, two hundred women machinists were being sought by local shipbuilding companies.³⁸

Government and industry presented their campaign to recruit women to work in the shipyards as an effort to convince non-wage-earning women that "working women win wars," and claimed that their training programs made "welders out of housewives."³⁹ The history of the mobilization, however, tells a somewhat different story. The most dramatic growth in the female labor force in the shipyards took place during the first half of 1943, when women comprised 65 percent of the new workers in the shipyards.⁴⁰ Early in 1943 the management of most retail stores had agreed, at the urging of the War Manpower Commission, to facilitate the transfer of their workers to war industries. Most of these workers were female, since in 1940 half of the clerks in Portland stores were women, and by 1943 the proportion was substantially higher as a result of the draft.⁴¹ In February workers were being shifted from nonessential industries to war production at the rate of one thousand a week.⁴² It is clear that a substantial number of the female shipyard workers were coming not from their kitchens but from the female-dominated segment of the work force.

In contrast, the mobilization efforts of the spring and summer, which were clearly directed at housewives, were less productive. In May 1943 Sara Southall and Thelma McKelvey, who had been sent by the War Manpower Commission to investigate the utilization of women in the three Kaiser Shipyards, commended the Kaiser yards on their employment of women but suggested that more women could be effectively used. They urged the local War Manpower commission to "immediately make plans for an intensive recruiting drive for women in the Portland area."⁴³

At the end of May, radios and newspapers were filled with advertisements for women shipyard workers. "It was just times," remembered LueRayne Culbertson, "when everybody went to the shipyards. 'We need you!'—and it was on every station, you turn the radio on; it was 'we need you!'"⁴⁴ But the Kaiser management reported that the three-week radio and newspaper drive had not recruited any additional women welders. Edgar Kaiser, perhaps in an effort to justify

continued recruitment from outside the area, concluded in a letter to Admiral Vikery that the lack of response to the media campaign was “a definite indication that the Portland area now has an acute shortage of women available for war work as well as men.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, government and industry intensified their efforts to mobilize local women. In June 1943, the United States Employment Service (USES), the War Manpower Commission and local women’s organizations joined forces to organize a “Working Women Win Wars Week.” Organizers distinguished the campaign from the earlier surveys of women workers by describing it as a “definite effort to recruit for some kind of war work or service, every woman in Multnomah County who is eligible for full or part time employment.”⁴⁶ At the kickoff rally, J. N. Riley, the naval shipbuilding supervisor, announced that local plants planned to move toward a shipyard work force that was one-third women. Women, he asserted, were “not only the equal of men in working efficiency, but in manifold cases they are superior to men in turning out the weapons of war.”⁴⁷

While publicity described the campaign as an effort to recruit all women, it was clearly directed at housewives. The neighborhood was the basic unit of the campaign, block leaders canvassed women during the day, and daytime demonstrations of industrial skills were held in local department stores. Berenice Thompson, who hired on as a welder at Commercial Iron Works in 1943, recalls the neighborhood canvassers “asking all the ladies: ‘I don’t care if you have an education c. not, we’ll find a job for you.’”⁴⁹ While the rate of increase in the female labor force never equalled that of the first half of 1943, the number of women employed at the Vancouver and Portland shipyards did continue to grow through 1943 and 1944, and by the spring of 1944, women composed 27 percent of the shipyard work force in the Kaiser yards.⁴⁹

Who Were the Women War Workers?

The experience of most of the women who “flocked to war work” did not conform to the image of “housewife turned welder” that dominated the recruitment campaigns, an image whose tenacity has contributed to the distortion of the history of women wage earners during and after the war. The Moses Plan, for example, a proposal for a postwar public works project, began its narrative with an assessment of the employment needs of Portland’s population that assumed that most of the women workers would “retire from the work force” to “resume household duties.”⁵⁰ This assumption belied the realities of

many women's lives in two ways. Over half of the women who worked in the shipyards had been in the work force before the war, and many of those who had not been employed were discouraged workers who were unable to find jobs during the depression.⁵¹

Women's varied responses to surveys about their prewar occupations illustrate the complexity of the prewar experience of women war workers. In a survey of 90 percent of the workers at the three Kaiser yards in the Portland-Vancouver area, respondents were asked to report their prewar occupations and were offered the following choices: farmer, housewife, white collar, laborer, skilled labor, professional or proprietor, service, other, or no previous occupation and no response. Forty-one percent of the 21,619 women who responded to this survey described themselves as housewives.⁵² In contrast, only 20 percent of the respondents reported that they were engaged in home housework when asked, "What were you doing the week before Pearl Harbor?" in a Woman's Bureau Survey of 30,000 households in different parts of the country.⁵³ In the Kaiser survey there was no category for unemployed or students, and women who had been unemployed may have described themselves as housewives. Thus the inaccuracy of the term housewife may account for the disparity between the results of the two surveys.⁵⁴

Women who described themselves as housewives may have been employed before the war but saw their work as temporary or secondary to their family roles. This did not mean, however, that they did not work for wages or were unavailable or uninterested in waged work. Alice Kessler-Harris has pointed out that the number of women in the work force had been increasing steadily since 1900—at an average of 6 percent per decade—and suggests that the depression created a backlog of discouraged workers. The number of women who joined the work force during the war years, she argues, "reflects continuity with previous attempts by some women to break out of traditional roles."⁵⁵ In the period after World War II, Kessler-Harris suggests, an increasing number of women began to see the possibility of combining waged and household work.⁵⁶

The testimony of the women narrators supports this interpretation and reveals women attempting to combine household and waged work before, during, and after the war. The narrators did not see work inside and outside the home as incompatible, and whether or not women were employed depended to a great extent on whether jobs were available. The following examples of women's work lives before the war illuminate the factors that affected their choices about work and family and the interplay between consciousness and experience

that surveys obscure. Their stories suggest that behind the category “housewife” may lie the discouraged worker who stopped looking for work because there was little available during the Depression, the seasonal worker (particularly women who worked in canneries and on fruit farms) who may not have seen this as permanent employment, and various forms of “invisible” work such as taking in laundry, caring for children, and selling eggs.

Sixteen of the thirty-six narrators were employed before the war. Half of these women were married, and the rest were divorced or single. Half of the employed women had children, including several of the single and divorced women. The eight married wage earners illustrate a trend indicated by national and local statistics. Despite the general sentiment against married women working outside the home during the Depression (George Gallup reported that he had “never seen respondents so solidly united in opposition on any subject imaginable including sin and hay fever”), the percentage of wage-earning women who were married rose from 29 to 35 percent between 1930 and 1940.⁵⁷ Like most wage-earning women, the narrators worked in low-paid, traditionally female fields: domestic, clerical, factory, and restaurant work and child care. All of them described themselves as needing to work whether they were married, single, or divorced but remembered vividly the difficulty of finding work that would adequately support them.

Few had any formal training. “And of course,” commented Etta Harvey, who had married when she was eighteen and had a child a year later, “I hadn’t really taken any education that would have prepared me for the working world so I had to take menial labor and I went to work as a waitress.”⁵⁸ Marie Merchant, like most black wage-earning women, worked as a domestic before coming from Kentucky to Oregon to work in the shipyards. Her weekly wage of \$3.00 was typical of what Jacqueline Jones has described as the “radically depressed wages” of domestic work during the Depression.⁵⁹

Three of the narrators who were working before the war had some occupational training. Two were part of the growing number of women who were preparing themselves for secretarial work. The third had trained in a traditionally male field, landscape architecture, but finding the field closed to women had been working in the advertising department of a woolen mill.⁶⁰

The stories of the narrators who described themselves as housewives before the war reveal two hidden phenomena that expand the meaning of the term housewife. Several of them had recently experienced a change in their family situation that made it necessary for

them to support themselves and their children, and several were earning money doing the “invisible” work that historians and sociologists are recognizing played an important role in family life throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries.⁶¹

Four of the self-described “housewives” found themselves faced with the need to work for wages when the war broke out, but in only one case was this a result of the war. Like several of the women who had already found jobs before the war, they were not attached to breadwinning men and therefore needed to support themselves. Alice Erickson’s husband had died, and she was determined not to become dependent on her children. Fortunately, at the point at which Erickson needed to enter the work force, shipyard work became available to women. “I needed to work,” she commented, “and that was the best-paying work that I could get so naturally I took it.”⁶² Audrey Moore’s husband had left her with a small child when she was seventeen, so she went to work in a lumber mill in Louisiana that was hiring women as a result of the wartime labor shortage.⁶³ Pat Rowland’s marriage was breaking up, and to support herself and her children she hired on at the shipyards.⁶⁴ Nell Conley, like many other servicemen’s wives, did not receive her husband’s allotment from the Navy for three months after he left, and she found it insufficient when it came. She got a job at Meier and Frank, a local department store, but she found the pay inadequate to support herself and her child.⁶⁵ Three of these four women, while they had not been employed before the war, would have been looking for paid work even if there had not been a war.

Several of the married women with husbands at home would also have been working for wages if jobs had been available. Ree Adkins had been a teacher before she quit to have children. She wanted to return to teaching but found herself a victim of the widespread discrimination against married women teachers during the Depression. In 1941 only 13 percent of school districts in the United States would hire married women. Adkins’s perception was that she “couldn’t go back to teaching. It was only for men’s jobs.”⁶⁶

Nona Pool, Billie Strmiska, and Beatrice Hadley all had difficulty finding work but found ways to make money in various forms of “invisible work,” an essential ingredient of what Jeanne Westin has called “making do” during the Depression.⁶⁷ Like thousands of other people during the Depression, Nona Pool, Billie Strmiska, and their husbands traveled in search of work.⁶⁸ The Pools lived primarily in lumber camps. “Course there was no work for women,” commented Pool;

during the winter months I'd like to make a little extra money – I always was looking for work but never could find any. . . . But the tie hacks [railroad tie workers] always wanted to go downtown and get themselves boozed up on the weekends so I got to washing shirts. I'd wash and iron shirts with those little sad irons, chop the wood to keep the fire going, hauling water to do the laundry and get twenty-five cents a shirt. . . . I made pretty good money doing the shirts. When I got everything organized, why I could do eight to ten shirts.⁶⁹

Billie Strmiska also had difficulty finding full-time work so she and her husband traveled around picking berries and canning vegetables, fruit, and fish before she went to work at the shipyard.⁷⁰

Beatrice Hadley said of the Depression, "You couldn't buy a job. You couldn't even steal one." Hadley's prewar life is a searing illustration of the profound costs of the economic oppression of women. She had been working for a living since she was ten. "I raised myself," she commented, and "I raised myself to work." When she was sixteen she worked as a chambermaid in a hotel in a small town in Iowa. One of the regular guests, a man twice her age, proposed marriage, promising that once married she "wouldn't have to work those long hours." She married and had three children. After years of physical abuse she left her husband, leaving her three children behind since she knew she couldn't support them. Hadley remarried and worked at various jobs throughout the twenties and early thirties. She and her second husband moved to Oregon in 1926 and worked in a pickle factory for eight years. Their response to the unemployment of the Depression was to move to Washington, where they bought a small piece of land and raised chickens and calves, which they bought young and fed with goat's milk. Their farm was very much a joint venture, and Hadley always thought of herself as a worker.⁷¹

While some people moved back to the land during the Depression, others were driven off it by the plummeting prices of farm products. Helen Berggren and her husband were running a dairy farm in Washington; unable to make enough money to support their five children, they both went to work in the shipyards. The year before they moved to Vancouver lives in Berggren's memory as one of extreme poverty. "We had so little money," she remembers,

and no relief, no Red Cross, nothing. And nothing grew because it was so late; frost came so early then. So we ate little potatoes but then we got wheat from somewhere and had that taken to the mill



Billie Strmiska, one of the narrators and winner of a welding contest. *Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society, negative #62064.*

and got some flour. So I didn't eat but I drank the milk from the cows and many a night and many a day I only drank milk.⁷²

Rosa Dickson and her husband were raising cotton in Texas when the “bottom fell out of the price of cotton. We left our farm,” she recalls. “We couldn’t make expenses, the cotton lay in the fields.” The Dicksons traveled to Arizona, where Mr. Dickson worked in the copper mines. Although the war had begun to create labor shortages, the mines did not hire women, so Rosa bought a part interest in a self-service laundry. They then heard about the shipyards in Oregon and drove out West.⁷³

None of these women’s prewar lives conformed to the image of the housewife summoned by patriotic duty to leave a home in which she had been exclusively engaged in domestic work. While they were glad to participate in the war effort, most of the narrators were looking for ways to earn money whether they were married or not.

Many women thought of themselves as “workers”—a term which to them included a variety of activities: unpaid domestic work, work on the family farm, part-time and seasonal work such as picking fruit, self-employment such as washing shirts, as well as full-time waged labor.⁷⁴ Their various forms of work were inextricably woven together in efforts to support themselves and contribute to the family resources, efforts which were constrained by the limited opportunities available to women and the prevailing expectation that women would not need vocational education or training.

The reflections of the narrators about the ways their socialization had limited them and left them without marketable skills illuminates the complex interaction between women’s choices and constraints they faced in their lives. Nona Pool grew up on a farm in Nebraska, and her father made her quit school “because he said it cost too much for a girl to go to school because they just go get married anyway. I was waiting to get married till I finished school,” she recalled, but “when my dad said quit school I decided I’d get married then. I was tired of that farm life.”⁷⁵ Lois Housman remembers that in her childhood,

I always wanted to be an engineer. That was the height of my ambition . . . and then I thought wireless telegraphy was just as close to that as I could get. And then I had a friend there in Rogersville and he was the depot agent, and I used to go down and listen to him and he’d tell me what these little clicks meant, you know. It was fascinating. . . . I wanted to learn wireless telegraphy and my dad he didn’t think that girls ought to be out like that—just was no place for a girl. And he thought cooking was my gait. He said that if you knew how to cook why that was all—just keep house and cook. So I didn’t get to go. . . . I could’ve went to Springfield and learnt but he didn’t want me to.⁷⁶

For these women and thousands like them, the recruitment of women for shipyard work meant an end to years of frustrated attempts to find satisfying work that paid decently.

Joining Up

While joining the shipyard workforce was applauded by government, media and industry as a glorious act of patriotism, it remained a difficult thing for women to do. Women were very conscious of penetrating a male bastion and sometimes sought the support of friends and relatives as they went through the hiring and training process. "With two of us together," commented Pat Koehler, "we had enough nerve to sign up as electricians."⁷⁷ Shipyard work was, like any new field of activity for women, surrounded by rumors and prejudices. "Mom wished I wouldn't," said Virginia Larson, "because it wasn't where nice girls worked." Her parents had heard the shipyard was a "terrible tough place."⁷⁸ Rosa Dickson's husband, who got a job in the shipyards himself, shared their concern. While he supported his wife's decision to look for work, he objected to her proposal that she work in the shipyards.

He said, "Oh, you cannot work down there in the shipyards. They're too rough and the language is bad," and all of these kind of things which I was not used to. I tried Ward's. I tried lots of other places. You know what they paid? Seventy-six cents an hour. That was about the average base pay Meier and Frank's, anybody, had at that time. And I said, well I'm not gonna take a job like that because the shipyards are paying the big money. . . . I says I been on the busses. You can't tell me a thing about the people. I know the winos on there, I know the swearing on there and it cannot be any worse down there.⁷⁹

Women's motives for joining the shipyard workforce were varied. Some, like Doris Avshalomov, saw patriotism as primary in their decisions to become shipyard workers. Avshalomov was in college during the early part of World War II, and many of her friends were drafted. When she graduated she found it difficult to have "strong personal ambitions" with the world in such crisis.

It was just a very weighty thing to be living in; almost as if the world wasn't real any more. It wasn't as if you could think about yourself. You were thinking about what a terrible state the world was in. . . . It was kind of a patriotic decision because I have a very strong bias against anything military and yet I felt that with the war on and with

everyone I knew involved in it, it would be appropriate for me to be involved too.⁸⁰

While most of the narrators needed to work and were attracted to the high wages of shipbuilding, being able to help the war effort was also important to them; it added meaning to their work. Nell Conley, who went to the shipyards with a good friend, explained their reasons for doing so: "We both had to work, we both had children, so we became welders, and if I might say so, damn good ones." When asked what was the most important thing for us to understand about women shipyards workers, however, Conley commented, "In spite of the fact that shipyard work paid better, that was the last of our concern; we felt we were doing something for the country."⁸¹ For some women, however, patriotism was eclipsed by pressing economic need. "There's no use in saying I did it for patriotism," commented Kathryn Blair. "It was pure economics. It was the one thing where I could make enough money to get along."⁸²

Shipbuilding was one of the highest paying industries in the country, and the money was a major motive for most of the narrators.⁸³ To women, whose earnings ranged from \$20 a month plus room and board to \$70 for office work, the shipyard wages, averaging \$230 a month for skilled workers, were dazzling. Even Betty Cleator, who had a relatively well-paid office job, was astonished by the shipyard wages. "It was an unbelievable amount of money, just unbelievable. I'm not sure but what I was making more than my father, and he was a professional forester—had been with the forest service all those years."⁸⁴ "The money was too good to pass up," commented Jean Clark, who quit high school in order to work in the shipyards.⁸⁵

The high shipyard wages figured in women's lives in a variety of ways, and often represented not only an economic improvement but a symbol of capability. Economic independence and self-respect are closely intertwined in women's recollection of their decision to work in the shipyards. "I had an object in mind," recalled Etta Harvey. "I had a son to raise and I also wanted to prove that women were reliable and capable. I mean, it was something I had to prove to myself and to whoever I could get the message to."⁸⁶ Berenice Thompson was married and had grown children when she joined up at the shipyards against her husband's wishes. "I had been very poor and worked very hard and it meant a lot to me, for that money, and besides it meant a lot just to prove myself. My husband was from Kentucky. He didn't think women knew anything. So I showed him." Mr. Thompson was not converted immediately. He resisted for some time before moving into the house that his wife had bought with her shipyard wages.⁸⁷

For women who had been working at other jobs, the appeal of the shipyard was often a combination of high wages and the promise of more interesting and rewarding work. The money was a definite advantage, according to Loena Ellis, “and it was an opportunity that was too good to miss. As far as the work went it was terrific because, gee, I was treated like a human being, you know, instead of part of the machinery.” Ellis had been working at a burlap bag factory and found shipyard work a great deal more exciting.

Oh, I tell you it was being let out of a cage! The job I worked on before was anchored to one spot all day long, running a machine breathing burlap, steady noise, we learned to read lips, and we only escaped through our imagination. It was so routine that you did it without thinking and so your thoughts were elsewhere. And the shipyard was all activity, moving about and different things.⁸⁸