

For 'Rosie' and all the riveters

National Park recalls Richmond's contributions - and conflicts - in WWII

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86-year-old Betty Soskin, a park ranger at the Rosie the Riveter Memorial in Richmond, says there's more to the historical park than meets the eye. (Joel Rosenbaum/The Reporter)

The Marina Bay harbor in Richmond glitters in the afternoon sun and the sound of sailboat halyards slamming against masts carries across the water. The drone of a fog horn stretches across the bay.

Here, at the Rosie the Riveter Memorial in Richmond, on a platform over the water that resembles the bow of a ship, a plaque reads:

"You must tell your children, putting all modesty aside, that without us, without women, there would have been no spring in 1945."

The memorial is part of a new national historical park in Richmond, dedicated to honoring the contributions of home-front workers in World War II. And, as at least one park employee believes, it could identify Richmond as a leader in the civil rights movement.

The memorial is built on the site of former Kaiser Shipyard, owned by industrialist Henry J. Kaiser, where 747 ships were manufactured between 1941 and 1945. The shipyards, where women worked alongside men around the clock to build transport and cargo ships, were recognized as the most productive in the country. There were four shipyards in Richmond alone and more than 30 in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Few women worked in the shipyards before Pearl Harbor was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, but, according to the National Parks Service, an estimated 18 million were in defense industries and support services by 1945, working as shipfitters, machinists, welders, painters, riggers, pipefitters, police officers and nurses.

During the same time, 1.2 million blacks from the South migrated north and west for industrial defense jobs.

"It was an amazing period, and was heroic in ways people don't realize," said Betty Soskin, 86, a park ranger who does community outreach. "I mean it really was a

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For more on the The Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National



Park, see a multi-media report on The Reporter's Web site, www.thereporter.com

time of incredible social change. And we survived that, and won the war, despite all of what we had to go through."

Henry Kaiser recruited workers from five southern states: Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Mississippi.

"He brought people here into the Bay Area, black and white, who had never shared drinking fountains," Soskin said. "So the entire system of southern segregation was imported to the Bay Area. The groundwork was laid then, when the war ended, for the civil rights movement, which swept from Port Chicago to Richmond, from the Bay Area on to the University of California campus, into the free speech movement, on to Selma and across the country, and accelerated that social change."

The memorial itself, keystone of the park, is abstract, designed to resemble a vessel in the process of being built. The metal structures incorporate photos of Rosies and hand-written notes collected by the park service and Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. The designers wove historical facts and quotes about the experience along a walkway intended to trigger memories, which could then be collected in letters and stored in an archival museum. To date, the park service has collected more than 3,000 written testimonies by former Rosies and workers on the home front.

Formally known as The Rosie the Riveter World War II Home Front National Park, the area was dedicated in 2000. The historic sites clustered around Richmond's inner harbor include, as a potential museum, a Ford assembly plant that turned out 91,000 tanks and armored cars and the "S.S. Red Oak Victory," a ship that was built and is now docked there.

At a recent Rosie the Riveter reunion held in the Ford assembly plant, "Rosies" stood up and told stories about what it was like to enter the industrial labor force and work beside men who were often skeptical about whether they could do the job. Soskin was emcee of the event

"The thing that I keep hearing is, where have you been all this time?" Soskin said. "Why are you just getting started now? These people are pushing 90. There's a real need for people to get the word out and share their stories."

Barbara Brown-Manakoff, 84, worked on craneways in Shipyard #3, keeping track of steel. She and her friend, Ann, worked the graveyard shift.

"We damn near froze to death," Brown-Manakoff said. "But we felt like we were doing something special. Never in a thousand years did we think they would remember us after the war."

When Soskin was brought in on the project, she recalled feeling that the park wasn't relevant to the black workers on the home front. That's when the park's name was expanded to include the contributions of other members of the community.

"During the war, I found myself working in a Jim Crow union hall which was segregated because the unions weren't yet racially integrated," Soskin said. "So I filed cards. That was my great contribution. I never saw a ship."

Soskin worked as a file clerk in the Boilermaker's Auxiliary 36, a union for black workers. In order to work in the ship yards, every worker had to be part of a union.

Since blacks weren't allowed in the same unions as whites, they had to form their own. But they could not vote, so were powerless. Soskin said they simply collected dues and changed addresses on working cards.

"I have a love-hate relationship with the concept of Rosie the Riveter, because that's a white women's story," Soskin says. "That may have brought white women into nontraditional employment for the first time outside their homes. But black women had been working outside their homes since slavery."

Soskin believes the site of the union hall where she worked was on the corner of Tenth Street and Barrett Avenue in Richmond, but that building, like many other significant landmarks, no longer stands.

"It was torn down immediately after the war ended," Soskin says. "So there are no markers for me."

Soskin is one of several historians and community outreach workers who are working to identify historic landmarks, mark them, and eventually restore them as public monuments.

Some landmarks from the war period remain, and the National Park Service plans to open them to the public. Those include Atchison Village, a community built to house shipyard workers; the Maritime and Ruth Powers Child Development Center, which was one of the earliest child-care centers; and Kaiser Hospital, which provided employer-paid health care to Henry Kaiser's employees - a revolutionary concept at the time.

"The vision I have for this city is that we don't get in the habit of choosing between the realities that people live, but try to incorporate all of the conflicting stories using as many places as we need in order to do that," Soskin said.

"When you realize that some of the sites that have been designated as parks - Atchison Village, Nystrom Village, the maritime child-care center - these were all places that didn't serve African-American families. So that ... the National Park Service inadvertently was making places of reverence, places that were places of segregation. But that no one really remembered that, because the history got lost."

One strategy the park service employs to uncover significant landmarks - and the true history of the shipyards and its role in the civil rights movement - is to take groups on three-hour bus tours around Richmond. To date, 500 people have taken the tour and there are 300 more on the waiting list.

"We take people from the community out, in small buses with 22 passengers, and we reminisce together," Soskin said. "And they help to figure out what these places are. And it's amazing how it triggers memories in people, because it's not that far back."

One landmark they identified was the old International Hotel near the intersection of South Street and Carlson Boulevard, near the rail yards where trans-continental trains came to be serviced. This, Soskin says, was the hotel that black Pullman porters stayed in, because they couldn't stay in the Pullman hotel, which was for white employees. Soskin recalls 20 rooms upstairs and a large social hall downstairs, and says she believes that a lot of organizing for the first black unions undoubtedly happened in that hotel.

Other historians are trying to uncover the history of Richmond's black communities through its landmarks and oral histories. Soskin describes this as an opportunity for Richmond to redefine itself, not just as a nerve center for the war in the Pacific, but also as a birthplace of the civil rights movement.

Soskin said that sometimes her work brings to the surface old anger that she felt during the war. The recent attention brought to the war by Ken Burns' documentary on PBS rekindled feelings of humiliation that she felt when her husband, a successful athlete and senior at the University of San Francisco, enlisted in the Navy, but was sent home after just three days.

In the Navy, blacks were restricted to working as cooks. They discharged him and said, according to Soskin, that since he had leadership qualities, he should not be sent on a ship where men are easily led, or there would be mutiny.

"He died, I think, always feeling that he had failed his country, when I think his country failed him."

Minorities fared better in the Merchant Marines, which was integrated before other branches of the military. Bill Jackson, Chief Engineer of the SS Red Oak Victory, moved from the steward department into the engineering room in 1943. He studied engineering books during his spare time and rose from wiper to chief engineer during his 65 years in the service, and even survived a torpedo attack in the Atlantic.

Now, at 89, he spends several days per week leading tours and instructing the volunteers on the ship, who are working to restore its sailing capabilities.

Meanwhile, Soskin is working hard to bring more people with compelling stories into the fold, doing extensive outreach in the community.

"There are a lot of people under this hat with me," Soskin says. "When I walk onto the street in uniform, with this hat on my head, it tells every brown girl that there is a possibility of a new career that she hadn't even considered, because most of these kids have never seen an African-American park ranger. So I take this whole thing very seriously, and I don't expect to stop until I have to."

On the 'Net: In addition to the slide show about the park on The Reporter's Web site, www.thereporter.com, view a slide show about historic Richmond, narrated by Soskin, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=hc490zRLWMA.

Also On the 'Net:

Betty Reid Soskin's blog: www.cbreaux.blogspot.com

Oral Historis Online: bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/projects/rosie/

Rosie the Riveter: www.rosietheriveter.org

S.S. Red Oak Victory: www.ssredoakvictory.org

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