

## **From Silk Hose to Sugar: The Sacrifices and Successes of American Women During World War II**

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### **Abstract**

Before WWII, women primarily worked inside the home. With the institution of the draft, women's roles had a dramatic and lasting change. They entered the workforce, en masse, for many different reasons including patriotic duty, economic growth, or simply to prove something. This paper will explore how Betty Crocker and Rosie the Riveter, the icons which are deceptively different in appearance and message, both influenced American women entering the workforce while still maintaining traditional societal roles. Through personal letters and stories, along with government documents, this paper will look at the similarities and differences between the messages of Betty Crocker and Rosie the Riveter and how both "women" changed gender roles in America for the duration.

**Keywords:** History, Rosie, WWII

### **1. Body of Paper**

There is an adage that claims that a woman's work is never done. This was never truer than during the years of World War II. Women took on jobs that had opened due to the draft and America's need for goods and supplies, while maintaining their homes and raising their children. The United States government, along with society, demanded women to achieve perfection while doing double the work as their husbands, fathers, and sons marched into battle. The acknowledgement of the contributions of the women during World War II seems much of an afterthought or even a byproduct. It's as if we (as a culture) cannot acknowledge the role of the American woman during the war until all the achievements of men have been recognized first.<sup>1</sup>

During these years, the images and messages bombarding the American women said that if they did not contribute, whether through rationing or taking their places on the assembly line, they would be effectively helping the enemy win. The images that stood out were those of Betty Crocker and Rosie the Riveter, icons of hope and encouragement, characters of good moral fortitude with strength of mind and heart, a sprinkle of propaganda, and a pinch of patriarchy. The perfectness in which these women were crafted was complete, their message clear. *We are American. We are united. We are women, and We will win this war.*

Betty Crocker was created in 1921 because women had questions about all things kitchen and home related. They needed to be able to ask a non-judgmental and non-biased party about things in which they could not ask their friends or family because it was assumed that all women could sufficiently run a household. After all isn't that what women do? Washburn Crosby (now General Mills) created Betty to be that very person. Betty really came into her own during World War II. She was re-tooled during this time to incorporate rationing and homemaking in a time of war. In 1944, Marjorie Husted (the driving force behind Betty) created the American Home Legion Program.<sup>2</sup> It was a program that gave much overdue credit to the home economists' and home engineers' contribution to the war effort. Women could, and did, write in to Betty for a scroll that they could hang in their homes as a reminder that what they were doing was important.

Betty Crocker had been a radio star since the early thirties. Her four-month “recruitment” with the Office of War Information (OWI) explored home defense, the purchase of war bonds, Red Cross blood drives, consumer conservation, and other common home-front topics. Betty Crocker interviewed soldiers, civic leaders, nutrition experts, and government officials and their wives, and she updated listeners on worldwide food shortages and procedures for sending Christmas packages overseas. Betty became the mouth piece the American government. The government placed its faith in Betty Crocker above all others to reach, educate, and most of all influence American women and therefore the entire nation. Betty was simultaneously accessible and untouchable. In war as well as in peace, her arsenal of helpful tips and recipes was unparalleled. Betty overshadowed other home service spokespersons, real or invented. But her vast achievements did not deter the competition from vying for a piece of Betty’s pie.

If Betty Crocker spoke to women at home, Rosie the Riveter spoke to women in the workplace. Drawn by Norman Rockwell as a brawny and larger than life woman who would drive rivets to save American men, Rosie made her spectacular debut on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. The name Rosie, which appeared in Rockwell’s image, on her lunch box, originated from a song by The Four Vagabonds. They crooned ever so sweetly, “She’s making history, working for victory.” Rockwell’s image is not the icon most associated with Rosie. J. Howard Miller illustrated Rosie as she is known today.

Hired by the Westinghouse Company’s War Production Coordinating Committee, Pittsburgh artist J. Howard Miller created a series of posters to motivate employees for the war effort. One of these posters became the famous “We Can Do It!” image. In fact, at the time of the poster’s release, the name “Rosie” was in no way associated with Miller’s image. Exclusively used within the Westinghouse company and not initially seen much beyond several factories in Pennsylvania and the Midwest, this poster—one of 42 produced in Miller’s Westinghouse series—exhibited for only two weeks in February of 1943. Since there were no copyright restrictions on Miller’s illustration, unlike Rockwell’s painting, Miller’s Rosie became the icon of women defense workers during World War II. She was everything the government wanted in a war worker. She was patriotic, efficient, compliant, and don’t forget, extremely pretty. Rosie appeared everywhere, in a full face of perfect makeup touting the benefits of working in a defense plant. She claimed that “every rivet driven was a life that she helped save”.<sup>3</sup>

Before Rosie and Betty teamed up, women had not been welcome in the American workforce. During the Great Depression, society strongly encouraged working women to leave their jobs, and this same society shamed them and deemed them selfish for keeping men from earning a wage to support their families if the women refused. In the years before the war, almost 80% of Americans, both men and women, believed that women should not work if their husbands had jobs. In fact, 26 states passed Depression era laws restricting married women from employment.<sup>4</sup>

In 1939 the United States’ military ranked 17th in the world and was vastly unprepared for war; The US Army numbered only about 175,000 men. With prospects of war looming, a 1940 resumption of a military draft swelled those ranks to 1,400,000 men before the opening of hostilities.<sup>5</sup> During the Depression Era, a working woman was taking a job from a man who desperately needed it to support his family. One decade later however, a non-working woman was unpatriotically shirking her duty, thereby forcing a man to do the work he might otherwise be freed up from to fight a war. A woman doing a “man’s job” became not only acceptable, it was her patriotic duty. The War Manpower Commission, an agency of the United States government who organized and filled labor shortages caused by the draft, glamorized war work claiming that women could maintain their femininity and still be useful. Posters and magazine articles were created with a woman worker in her uniform with her husband standing behind her smiling and the background was, of course, a fluttering American Flag. This woman was Rosie the Riveter’s coworker, equally proud and equally strong. Eugenia Holoman, a munitions maker in Alabama stated to her husband, via letter, why she took a defense job, “I want to be able to look you in the eye, when you get back, and with a clear conscience be able to say that I did all I could.”<sup>6</sup>

Prior to World War II such factory work was deemed inappropriate for women and, in fact and in general, women were deemed physically, mentally and/or emotionally incapable of such work. In 1940 only 28% of American women were employed in wage-earning jobs, and most of those were mundane positions requiring little education or physical stamina. Only 11% of working women served in factories, and factory supervisors concluded that fewer than a 1/3 of factory jobs were suitable for the weaker sex. Six months after the attack on US forces at Pearl Harbor, with the need for increased production that would ultimately call for more than 300,000 aircraft alone, factory supervisors revised their estimate of woman-capable positions to entail 85% of the war production jobs. Rosie the Riveter and her compatriots launched campaigns to recruit women to build tanks, aircraft, and machineguns, as well as to produce the needed massive quantities of bullets, bombs, and other munitions. Many companies likened the work to mundane household chores hoping to entice women into defense work, convincing them that mundane could be exciting. They claimed that if a woman could use a sewing machine, she could use a drill press. This campaign was clearly contrived by someone who had never done mundane chores. If the companies creating these advertisements had done household chores, they would have used entirely different language. Even in the gritty world of ship-building, which had never

welcomed a woman, more than 10% of the World War II production of some 1,500 new warships was developed under the sweaty hand of a woman.

Patriotism was one thing, but the hope and thought of being finically independent was appealing to a lot of women. Up until this time, few women had their own bank accounts. They could have a line of credit extended to them at places like the market and their husbands would receive and pay the monthly bill. Polly Crow proudly pens in a letter to her husband, "I opened my little checking account too and it's a grand and glorious feeling to write a check all your own and not have to ask for one." She also writes claiming that she got the job she wanted and at a decent wage, "70 cents an hour to start which amounts to \$36.40 a week, \$145.60 per month." Kay Walls, who took a job making nuts and bolts at an airplane manufacturing company in Pittsburgh transcribes, "They started us out at \$1.72 an hour! That's a lot of money!" The money they earned was theirs and they could use it as they saw fit. For many wives, defense work provided the first taste of financial freedom.<sup>7</sup>

While the men were deployed, and fighting overseas, life at home didn't stop. Women went to work, and they took care of their families. Practical issues such as housing and soldiers' base pay and other matters that previously would not have mattered became significant. There was heartbreak. Betty and Rosie could not have prepared these women for the rollercoaster of feelings and emotions that came with this war. One brand new mother writes to her friend with a kind of hopelessness, "When I went into labor, my sister and her husband drove me to the hospital. I didn't have a reservation, so they put me in a corridor. My husband wasn't there, my family wasn't there – my sister drove me in and left me, they couldn't stay. So, I [actually] had the baby alone. When I woke up, I had the baby, and nobody was there." Being a mother is difficult enough under the best of circumstances. Under these conditions, the thought of motherhood must have been terrifying and extraordinarily lonely. An expectant mother wrote her soldier about how the normal pregnancy cravings were much harder to satisfy in the face of civilian food shortages. She says, "Last night... I dreamed that I was eating banana splits, one right after the other and they were good! When I awakened, I thought to myself, 'Boy, what I wouldn't give for a good banana.' But that is just wishful thinking. I don't think anyone in America has seen a banana for over six months." Most women have pregnancy cravings, it's part of the experience. Most people know that when a pregnant woman wants something, like a banana, only a banana will be accepted.<sup>8</sup>

While some women gave birth, others encountered other obstacles. Patricia Guinan wrote in her journal, after moving back in with her mother,

Back in the room that was yours before you were married, you're brought up short by the startling realization that you are not the same person whose room this used to be... You are not a guest, and you are no longer an intrinsic part of the family. You have an entirely new set of interests which are basically the same as your mother's and yet, strangely, their very sameness can be the cause of friction.

When someone moves home, even if they have only been gone a short while there is a sense of defeat, failure, and resentment. Patricia certainly felt that way. Natalie Mirenda got word that her husband was missing in December of 1944. The month previous, she had received a letter from him. His letter prompted her to write him again to tell him how much she missed him. She wrote, "Oh God. I think I'll go nuts. I see you everywhere, in the chair, behind me, in the shadows of the rooms. Everyplace I go you are always with me in the back of my mind. I seem to have a continuous headache because I'm so worried about you." Natalie got her letter returned to her saying that her husband had died on November 22, 1944 at the Battle of Huertgen Forrest, in Germany.<sup>9</sup>

Women during World War II forever changed the perception of the American woman. They embodied both Betty Crocker and Rosie the Riveter and embraced the American spirit wholeheartedly. They focused on building a future for themselves as well as their families. For the good of America, and their own way of life, they came together and showed remarkable courage. They were scared, lonely, tired, confused, hopeless at times, and heartbroken. They sent their husbands, brothers, sons, and fathers off to a war where nothing was certain but uncertainty itself. They were asked to give up everything from silk hose to sugar, and to leave their homes to enter a workplace that was totally foreign and extremely hostile to them. *And they liked it!*

Betty and Rosie may have been only propaganda created in someone's mind, but every day women like Eugenia, Polly, Kay, Patricia, and Natalie made these icons their own. They called upon Betty and Rosie to help them find their own inner strength. When their men came home, Rosie unfurled her fist and put down her riveting gun. She put on a dress and was told that home was where she was needed. She shouldn't worry because Betty would be her guide. Most women went home and quietly took their place, knowing all the while that *they* were the ones to win help win that great war.

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## 3. Endnotes

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2 Susan Marks, *Finding Betty Crocker: The Secret Life of America's First Lady of Food* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 90.

3 The Four Vagabonds, *Rosie the Riveter*. The Four Vagabonds. Paramount Music Corporation, 1942. Vinyl recording; Doris Weatherford, *American Women and World War II: History of Women in America* (New York: Facts on File, 1990).

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6 Holoman quoted in Judy Barrett Litoff and David C. Smith, *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.

7 Crow quoted in Litoff, *Since You went Away*, 53; Woman quoted in Litoff, *Since You went Away*, 15.

8 Brand New Mother quoted Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 46; Expectant Mother quoted in Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 46.

9 Guinan quoted in Litoff, *Since You went Away*, 15; Mirenda quoted in Yellin, *Our Mother's War*, 46.