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Many thanks to all of our wonderful donors from 12/1/2016 to 11/20/2017. We could not do this work without you, and we thank everyone who has helped us build this museum.

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Kaiser Shipyards Served on the PR Front

In a recent blog post, Kaiser Permanent Director of Heritage Resources Lincol Cushioing noted that throughout World War II the massive workforce at the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond played both a national and global public relations role as prime examples of the nation’s ethnic and religious diversity. Images of workers of all cultural backgrounds were presented as though they were all part of a cohesive home front dedicated to a common purpose and common universal ideals of equality — in sharp contrast to the exclusiveness and racism of our enemies.” The Office of War Information,” he wrote, “promoted every instance in which our military and home front work force reflected the rich mosaic that is America, and the Kaiser shipyards offered fertile ground for content.”

As examples, he cites the little-known fact that several of the first ships ever named after African-Americans came out of Kaiser shipyards, while other Kaiser-built ships honored Native Americans, Jewish labor leaders, and prominent immigrants with names that celebrated the diverse workforce.

The Shipyard’s PR and propaganda role was indeed massive, even if many of the images it presented had little relationship to the actual workers or, in some cases, gave a distorted picture of the actual social conditions in the yards. It has been estimated, for example, that the iconic Rosie the Riveter posters (there were several versions), originally part of a corporate ad campaign to motivate wartime female industrial workers, eventually appeared in some 125 million print advertisements. While most actual Rosies, and especially people of color and poor immigrants, continued to work under often onerous conditions and second-class status, the Rosie PR campaigns represented them as examples of what could be achieved when all individuals are treated with dignity and respect.

Barely a month passed without at least one major article or photo essay appearing in Life, Look, or the Saturday Evening Post about the pride, social unity, and the remarkable diversity of the home-front workforce. Hollywood also got into the act with numerous news shorts filmed in the shipyards, even producing a widely panned feature film based on Henry Kaiser’s industrial innovations in Richmond. Rarely, if ever mentioned, were the real-world conditions of that diversity represented in print or film.

For our liberty we give thanks! Courtesy of the NPS, Rosie the RiveterWWII Home Front NHP, NOHI 724

The images were intended to promote the sale of war bonds and to recruit more workers, not to portray the social complexities of an unprecedentedly diverse work environment. As the Office of War Information said in a report on its PR efforts: “These jobs will have to be glorified as a patriotic war service if American women are to be persuaded to take them and stick to them. Their importance to a nation engaged in total war must be presented.”

Today, it’s possible for us to have a more realistic view of the often trying social and democratic advances that began to emerge in the WWII shipyards, even if it took another generation before the Civil Rights Act of 1968 codified them and opened a new chapter in the ongoing struggle for American social solidarity.

Government employees and military can support our unique national park through the 2017 Norcal Combined FNEWeral Campaign. Support the Trust’s programs for youth, public education, and historic preservation! Please use Rosie the Riveter’s CFC #23839 and donate at https://cfcvging.opm.gov/
One of the things that makes Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front NHP such an amazing resource for history is our museum collection. With 20,571 items and growing, you can imagine the wealth of information we preserve from which current and future generations can learn and gain inspiration. One of the more noteworthy accessions from this last year (KRON-0207) includes over 1,000 photographic negatives and prints taken at the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond during WWII. The photographer was Hugo Nadaner of Nadaner Studios and the collection was donated by his son, Dan Nadaner. We are excited to be working with Lincoln Cushing, archivist at Kaiser Permanente Heritage Resources, to scan and digitize this collection.

We are also hosting a temporary exhibit through Summer 2018, which will feature reproductions of watercolors painted by the German-born San Francisco artist Werner Philipp. Philipp worked in the Richmond Shipyard no. 3 Progress Department illustrating progress reports, where he met and befriended shipyard secretary Lillian Tandy. The two families remained close after the war and the Tandy family supported Werner’s illustrious art career.

It is great to see our museum collections being used to help everyone make better connections to the past. One reason I mention the collection is to acknowledge and thank the Rosie the Riveter Trust for their donation of the Von der Porten collection in 2014. They are still paying for the collection and we are continuing to get all of the items catalogued and properly stored so we can make them available for exhibits and other uses. To that end, this year we are hosting an intern who will be developing a web-based exhibit on the Google Arts & Culture website (formerly known as the Google Cultural Institute) featuring about 60 objects from the Von der Porten collection, Instagram photos, and 360-degree tours. We thank the Trust, and people like you, in our efforts to preserve our past. We look forward to finding ways to bring them alive in the years to come.

—Tom Leatherman

Kaiser Shipyards Watercolor by Werner Philipp. Courtesy of Scott Tandy

Rosie the Riveter Trust P.O. Box 7116 Richmond, CA 94807-1126

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The Rosie the Riveter Trust Board of Directors is the governing membership organization dedicated to building a community to preserve and promote Rosie Riveter sites and to honor the roles and contributions of all Americans — men and women — who continued to work during the World War II era.

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