



FIRST WORD

Out of the Kitchen

| BY LUCY LAWLISS |

WOMEN'S HISTORY MOVED TO THE FOREFRONT of academia in the second half of the 20th century because of one seminal event: World War II. To examine the impact of millions of women called to work to replace men—fathers, brothers, husbands, uncles, friends, and strangers—only to give up those jobs at war's end is to gain some insight into why the daughters of these pioneers grew up to challenge their traditional roles in American society. The baby boom generation birthed the modern feminist movement and it is no surprise that Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi and Senator Hillary Clinton link their images to the Rosie the Riveter icon of the wartime “We Can Do It” poster. It is a statement about where the roots of “power” lie. **MORE SURPRISING IS THAT** the real women of Roosevelt’s “arsenal of democracy,” who were often in their teens and early 20s, were more than willing to do their part in work previously unavailable to them—to assure victory in a truly perilous era. These jobs ran the gamut from blacksmiths to shipfitters, from clerks to “chaufferettes.” Every story from this remarkable group gathered at Rosie the Riveter National Historical Park is as unique as Betty Reid Soskin’s—whose voice you will hear in the interview on page 28. These stories contain conflicting truths that only now, with time and perspective, can be sorted out and understood. **IN THE SPRING OF 1941**—months before the attack on Pearl Harbor—President Franklin Delano Roosevelt campaigned Congress to support the Allied nations through a lend-lease program. Its incorporation into the Neutrality Acts released billions of government dollars to aid Great Britain, Russia, and China in an effort to stem the spread of Nazism across Europe, in a war the United States had yet to join. This infusion of money into the U. S. economy, still reeling after a decade of economic depression, invigorated industrial geniuses like Henry J. Kaiser of Richmond, California, shipyard fame who—along with the military—mobilized to take advantage of government contracts for ships, planes, and munitions. **THE TREMENDOUS NEED FOR LABOR** in parts of the nation that were not the industrial centers caused an unprecedented wave of migration. Men and women of every age, race, creed, and color responded to America’s call to work—in their own communities or in jobs on the other side of the country.

IN THE CASE OF ROSALIE PINTO—the other home front voice in the article—as a first generation, Italian American teenager with eight siblings, her South Philly neighborhood was not far from the naval shipyards. Rosalie’s close-knit home stands in stark contrast to the Richmond experience of Betty Soskin, a young married African American whose family had sought a better life in the San Francisco Bay area after New Orleans’s catastrophic 1927 floods. She watched as Richmond’s population exploded as a wartime boomtown. Streets teemed with thousands of newcomers mostly from the southern states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. Overnight, Richmond became a “city of strangers” and locals like Betty experienced firsthand the arrival of the segregated Jim Crow South to the Bay Area. Whether at home, next door, or thousands of miles

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from familiar faces and surroundings, women’s worlds were turned upside down by a world at war. **EMILY YELLIN, AUTHOR OF *Our Mothers’ War*** and the historian for our interview, grew to understand a truth as she researched her book, a truth many of these women still struggle with: their jobs on the home front were every bit as noble as the jobs on the battlefield. **IN THE END IT WAS THE UNITED POWER** of citizens, government, and military that pushed democratic freedoms forward in this country and abroad. And whether at home or far away, those who participated were part of an amazing generation of Americans. An anonymous quote at the Rosie the Riveter Memorial gives credit where it is due: “You must tell your children, putting modesty aside, that without us, without women, there would have been no spring in 1945.”

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