

Rosie the Riveter: From War Work to Women's Lib?

Part A. Read the following narrative of Adele Erenberg's experiences as a woman defense worker in World War II, and answer the questions at the end.

ADELE ERENBURG: MACHINIST

When the war started, I was twenty-six, unmarried, and working as a cosmetics clerk in a drugstore in Los Angeles. I was running the whole department, handling the inventory and all that. It felt asinine, though, to be selling lipstick when the country was at war. I felt that I was capable of doing something more than that toward the war effort.

There was also a big difference between my salary and those in defense work. I was making something like twenty-two to twenty-four dollars a week in the drugstore. You could earn a much greater amount of money for your labor in defense plants. Also it interested me. I had a certain curiosity about meeting that kind of challenge, and here was an opportunity to do that, for there were more openings for women.

So I went to two or three plants and took their test. And they all told me I had absolutely no mechanical ability. I said, "I don't believe that." So I went to another plant, A.D.E.L. I was interviewed and got the job. This particular plant made the hydraulic valve system for the B-17. And where did they put women? In the burr room. You sat at a workbench, which was essentially like a picnic table with a bunch of other women, and you worked grinding and sanding machine parts to make them smooth. That's what you did all day long. It was very mechanical and it was very boring. There were about thirty women in the burr room, and it was like being in a beauty shop every day. I couldn't stand the inane talk. So when they asked me if I would like to work someplace else in the shop, I said I very much would.

They started training me. I went to a blueprint class and learned how to use a micrometer and how to draw tools out of the tool crib and everything else. Then one day they said, "Okay, how would you like to go into the machine shop?"

I said, "Terrific."

And they said, "Now, Adele, it's going to be a real challenge because you'll be the only woman in the machine shop." I thought to myself, well, that's going to be fun, all those guys and Adele in the machine shop. So the foreman took me over there. It was a big room, with a high ceiling and fluorescent lights, and it was very noisy. I walked in there, in my overalls, and suddenly all the machines stopped and every guy in the shop just turned around and looked at me. It took, I think, two weeks before anyone even talked to me. The discrimination was indescribable. They wanted to kill me.

My attitude was, "Okay, you bastards, I'm going to prove to you I can do anything you can do, and maybe better than some of you." And that's exactly the way it turned out. I used to do the rework on the pieces that the guy on the shift before me had screwed up. I finally got assigned to nothing but rework.

Later they taught me to run an automatic screwing machine. It's a big mother, and it took a lot of strength just to throw that thing into gear. They probably thought I wasn't going to be able to do it. But I was determined to succeed. As a matter of fact I developed the most fantastic biceps from throwing that machine into gear. Even today I still have a little of that muscle left.

Anyway, eventually some of the men became very friendly, particularly the older ones, the ones in their late forties or fifties. They were journeymen tool and die makers and were so skilled that they could work anywhere at very high salaries. They were sort of fatherly, protective. They weren't threatened by me. The younger men, I think, were.

Our plant was an open shop, and the International Association of Machinists was trying to unionize the workers. I joined and worked to try to get the union in the plant. I proselytized for the union during lunch hour and I had a big altercation with the management over that. The employers and my leadman and foreman called me into the office and said, "We have a right to fire you."

I said, "On what basis? I work as well or better than anybody else in the shop except the journeymen."

They said, "No, not because of that, because you're talking for the union on company property. You're not allowed to do that."

I said, "Well, that's just too bad, because I can't get off the grounds here. You won't allow us to leave the grounds during lunch hour. And you don't pay me for my lunch hour, so that time doesn't belong to you, so you can't tell me what to do." And they backed down.

I had one experience at the plant that really made me work for the union. One day while I was burring, I had an accident and ripped some cartilage out of my hand. It wasn't serious, but it looked kind of messy.

They had to take me over to the industrial hospital to get my hand sutured. I came back and couldn't work for a day or two because my hand was all bandaged. It wasn't serious, but it was awkward. When I got my paycheck, I saw that they had docked me for time that I was in the industrial hospital. When I saw that I was really mad.

It's ironic that when the union finally got into the plant, they had me transferred out. They were anxious to get rid of me because, after we got them in, I went to a few meetings and complained about it being a Jim Crow union. So they arranged for me to have a higher rating instead of a worker's rating. This allowed me to make twenty-five cents an hour more, and I got transferred to another plant. By this time I was married. When I became pregnant I worked for about three months more, then I quit.

For me defense work was the beginning of my emancipation as a woman. For the first time in my life I found out that I could do something with my hands besides bake a pie.¹

1. For what reasons did Adele Erenberg decide she wanted to do war work?
2. Why was she dissatisfied with her first defense job at A.D.E.L.?
3. What kind of reception did Adele meet when she first moved into the plant's machine shop?
4. How did Adele win her argument with management about union recruiting during her lunch hour?

5. What did Adele mean when she complained that her union was a “Jim Crow union”?
6. In what ways do you think Adele Erenberg benefited from working in a defense plant during World War II?

Part B. Adele Erenberg viewed her World War II defense work as “the beginning of my emancipation as a woman.” Another woman war worker, on the other hand, told radio listeners: “When this war is over—I’ll get a manicure, put on the frilliest dress I can find, pour a whole bottle of cologne over my head, and THEN, I’ll be GLAD to give up my Union chair in the Eagle Aerie Room to some boy who comes marching home deserving it.”² Within your designated group, write a brief scenario summarizing the kind of life that *you* believe typical women war workers experienced after 1945. Use the dates provided by your teacher as mileposts in following the experiences of “Rosie the Riveter” through postwar America to the present.

²*Aero Mechanic*, 2 July 1942. In Karen Anderson, *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 59.