

## BAYTOWN'S "ROSIE THE RIVETERS"

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World War II brought both permanent and temporary changes in American society. The war sent many of America's men overseas and left a shortage of male workers in the labor force at home, thus encouraging women into the factories to replace those men who had left to serve their country. "The predominant media portrayal of women war workers, the image called "Rosie the Riveter," was that they were young, white, and middle-class; furthermore, that they entered the labor force out of patriotic motives and eagerly left to start families and resume full-time homemaking" (*Honey 19*). Like many communities which experienced a shortage of workers, Baytown, Texas, met this shortage by hiring women at its Humble Oil and Refining Company Plant, one of the largest oil refineries in the nation (*Larson and Porter 9*). The experiences of women working at the Humble Refinery during World War II disproves the national myth of "Rosie the Riveter."

On December 7, 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the United States officially entered World War II, and more and more men were drafted or volunteered, depleting the available labor force. The solution to the shortage gave rise to the myth. Despite the fact that the Federal Government Manpower Commission drafted bills designed to alleviate the shortage of workers, Manpower Commissioner McNutt said, "that he did not believe that the law should be adopted by Congress until all indirect means available for mobilizing manpower are exhausted." He suggested "womanpower will be required to solve the manpower problem, because 5,000,000 workers must enter the labor force by the end of 1943" ("*Manpower*"). At first, some theorists would disagree with Mr. McNutt because they felt the manpower shortage was caused by poor distribution rather than by a shortage of workers ("*Poor Distribution*"); to further complicate matters some factories, although faced with a shortage of workers, still refused to hire Blacks, women, older people, and the handicapped ("*Poor Distribution*"). "But as men went into military service, new sources of workers were needed and old prejudices had to be overcome, as President Roosevelt made clear in his Columbus Day speech in 1942: 'In some communities employers dislike to hire women. In others they are reluctant to hire Negroes. We can no longer afford to indulge such prejudice'" (*Gluck 10*).

McNutt's statement became more and more the national position. As the war progressed and the need for workers increased, patriotic appeals made to women stressed that women could help win the war by working in war industries (*Rupp 155*). To persuade women into war work, industry started a national campaign. For example, "Lockheed Aircraft invented 'Rosie the Riveter' as part of their general campaign to recruit women workers" (*Nimitz Museum*). "Lockheed Aircraft went so far as to hold Victory Fashion Shows during lunch hour, where shop workers modeled coordinated two piece work outfits" (*Gluck 11*). To glamorize the appeal, national magazines showed women in overalls, carrying lunch pails to work (*Rupp 145*) or welding and riveting in a war related industry. Magazines as diverse as *Real Confessions* and the *Saturday Evening Post* published stories about the war effort to let women know they were doing their part for the war (*Rupp 144-146*). In keeping with the national campaign, the movie industry also had great influence in promoting this image; Hollywood produced films like *Swing Shift Maisie* and *Rosie the*

*Riveter*, and popularized a song titled "The Lady at Lockheed," all of which glorified women's war efforts (*Rupp* 144). The focus of the media appeal concentrated on women who were homemakers and who would be willing to give up their jobs when the war ended.

The myth of "Rosie the Riveter" grew with such campaigns, most of which were directed towards young housewives with little or no experience of employment. However, employers, fearful of the consequences of so many new people entering the work force, presented mixed messages. The women were needed "now" but must know that after the war they should return to "their place" (*Rupp* 138). Moreover, the War Production Board's Labor Division stated, "There's little doubt that women will be required to leave their jobs at the end of the war to permit the return of men to their jobs as they are released from the armed forces" (*Honey* 26). Women were allowed to leave the "kitchen" when their services were needed in the male dominated work force, but when the war ended, they were sent back to do "women's work."

Although these campaigns were directed to women without previous work experience, and despite the myth of Rosie the Riveter, the facts support that the majority of women working in war industries had previously held jobs outside the home (*Honey* 19). Although many women went to work in war jobs for patriotic reasons, more of the women did so for the increased wages they could earn. As higher paying jobs became available, women who worked in low-status and low-paying jobs seized the opportunity. The war began to change the belief that women could not handle a man's job, and employment of women increased in male-dominated industries ("Women War Workers"). However, the women in war industries had to prove to their employers that they were competent to do a man's job. They had to learn quickly and efficiently new trades including welding, mechanics, soldering, laboratory testing, and riveting on airplanes ("Work Women Do"). In addition, women also encountered obstacles built by angry men who did not want them on the job site. One man who worked at the Rock Island Shop dubbed "the women laborers 'rails' and complained that the foreman's office [was] always littered up with lipstick, rouge, powder, and the like these days" ("Women Invade").

Despite the "all white" image of Rosie the Riveter, for the first time, many plants hired Black women, although the major defense plants still would not hire Black women for semi-skilled or skilled occupations ("Employment"). In one of its displays, the Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg, Texas, shows a Black woman welding. Next to the picture a caption reads, "two female factory welders in Connecticut were part of the 11.3 percent increase in the number of Black women in industry." Black women also held jobs as sheet workers, press operators, jewelers, sign writers, and electrical goods assemblers ("Employment"). Black women made some small gains during World War II, but if the prejudiced attitudes of the white society had been different, they might have made more gains.

The problems to be overcome involved more than just those that workers shared; the factories hiring the women also had some adjusting to do. Many of the factories lacked facilities for so many women entering the market so rapidly. Factories had to provide washrooms and toilet facilities for their new women workers (*Wolfson* 53); in addition, the companies now had to pay attention to the problems of living conditions to maintain the health and morale of women employees. Employers knew that women who were tired and not eating properly would be unable to do a good job (*Life and Labor Feb. 1942*). The new plants had lunch rooms built where the women could eat a hot meal and constructed adequate washrooms and

toilet facilities for them (*Wolfson 53*). Industries and women had to learn to work together. Some of these benefits have remained to the advantage of all workers, regardless of sex.

The national picture is reflected in the Baytown experience. The Baytown, Texas Rosies went to work at the Humble Oil and Refining Company. The Humble Refinery, a young company when the war broke out, had been in operation for only twenty-one years. Humble became a war plant in November of 1940 (*Henson 124*) to help supply the Allies with fuel. At first Humble felt no need to hire women to take over the men's jobs. However, because male employees either left for war or went into civilian war activities, and "more than 4000 employees – about 29 percent of those employed August 31, 1939 – entered military service" (*Larson and Porter 570*), Humble had to hire replacements. As the major supplier of aviation gasoline, toluene, fuel oils, lubricants, asphalt for airplane runways, and synthetic rubber (*Larson and Porter 589*), Humble, to meet a growing labor shortage and to keep production to its maximum output, announced in the *Daily Sun* (now *Baytown Sun*) in November of 1942 that "girls and women will be employed at once in the instrument department at the Baytown Refinery." The ad stated that starting pay for women hiring into the instrument shop would be 89.5 cents per hour, and after a training period of three to six months, women would receive the regular instrument rate of 98.5 cents per hour ("*Instrument Shop*"). The pay at Humble and other war industries averaged forty-eight dollars a week or more for a forty-eight hour week. In contrast industries such as textiles, food, and paper goods had weekly averages of around thirty dollars (*Life and Labor May 1944*). Although hired for less skilled jobs, women by September 28, 1942, had already started working as testers in the Baytown Laboratory (*Stevenson 15*). The number of women working in the laboratories increased once Humble finished the new plants they were constructing.

The opportunities increased as the responsibility of the plant grew. On May 18, 1942, Humble contracted with the Defense Plant Corporation to build and operate a Butyl rubber plant, a plant which had become necessary because of Japan's capture of the Far East's rubber supplies in early 1942. The United States had to produce its own synthetic rubber (*Larson and Porter 597*), and in September of 1944, the Baytown Butyl Plant completed its first satisfactory production of synthetic rubber (*Larson and Porter 598*). The demand for synthetic rubber increased the need to recruit women to work in the Butyl laboratories. Humble started going to colleges in Texas and Louisiana (*Easley*) to recruit new workers; the plant had to keep on schedule.

Three of these early Rosies recruited to work at the Butyl laboratory, Marjorie Walker Eastwood and Mary Carlson Easley, who started in July of 1943, and Mary Barron Bonds, who started in July of 1944, share fond memories of working for the Humble Refinery (*Eastwood, Easley, and Bonds*). After training for two weeks at Humble's main laboratory, the women transferred to the Butyl Plant. Following a one month training period, they earned 95.5 cents per hour, and after completing six months employment, their pay rate increased to \$1.13 per hour (*Easley*). The women shared the same responsibilities as the men and their pay equaled the men's pay. Ironically the equality was not based on shared responsibility. The men, during one of their union meetings, decided that to keep women from getting more of their jobs, the pay would have to be equal for men and women (*Eastwood*).

The memories of the women support the fact the myth was nothing like the reality. Bonds remembered that the Butyl lab staffed 125 women between the ages eighteen to twenty-one years; the myth shows Rosie as a married woman supporting

her husband's war sacrifices; the majority at Humble were single women. Only three or four were married. Bonds, twenty-one years old and single when she came to work for Humble, found working in a laboratory a new experience and a very enjoyable one. She does remember having to adjust to shift work; learning to sleep the next day after working the night shift, particularly difficult during the hot summer days; wearing pants which she hated; and getting dirty from the chemicals. For a time Bonds worked in the SHB finishing building where the synthetic rubber was dried out. She had to test the rubber at a certain stage of the process. Just being in the building was onerous because it had no windows, and the inside temperature rose to 130 degrees. At the time she went to work for Humble, Bonds did not perceive herself as helping the war effort; in reality, she just wanted a good paying job (*Bonds*).

Unlike the myth, and much like Bonds, Easley did not see herself at the time as aiding the war effort. Eighteen when Humble hired her, Easley felt that the war was the last thing on her mind: she too took the job with Humble for the high pay. Her memories involve her living arrangements rather than sacrifices for a war. She recalls calling the local priest to ask him if he could locate a place for her to rent, for at the time it was difficult to find decent places to live. She recalls that the priest found her a room with a respectable Baytown family. Even though Easley had to work shift work and meet a work schedule of 48 hours a week, these duties presented no problems for the family she was living with. Her duties at the Butyl Lab included analyzing samples, touring certain units, drawing samples, and then writing reports on them. Easley recalls her distaste for the heavy rubber apron she had to wear when testing chemicals, even though it protected her from chemical burns. Although employees had a long work week, she remembers getting off work for the day and taking the bus into Houston to shop, eat, and see a movie. Easley still feels that this experience helped to shape her whole life because if it were not for her going to work at the Humble Oil and Refining Company, she would not be living in Baytown nor would she have met the man she married (*Easley*).

Disproving the myth like her co-workers, Eastwood commented that she took the job at Humble because it paid better than most jobs at the time. Although Eastwood was only twenty when she started working for Humble, she was given many responsibilities. Her responsibilities in the Butyl Lab included running samples, conducting tests, going to control to set up procedures, and catching samples at the lab. Eastwood remarked that no matter how qualified the women were, they could not become supervisors; only the men were allowed that privilege.

Although each woman has fond memories of working at Humble, some of the memories are more vivid than others. Bonds remembers that they were not taught too much safety until after a fatal accident took place in the Butyl Lab sometime in 1945. Three deaths resulted from an explosion caused when a five gallon drum of chemical that was leaking was sparked by an instrument in the lab. Margaret Martin, Lena Fore, and Norris Hollaway died in the accident; the two women were the first women to be killed in a plant accident at Humble. Like others who died in the war, it could be argued that they gave their lives for their country. Bonds also remembers Clifford M. Bond, the public relations director for the Federation (employees union), who commented: "When a woman is hired for this type of work, the company has no assurance that she will prove capable or adapt herself readily to the duties" (*"Instrument Shop"*). When Bonds and the other women were asked in 1987 to respond to his statement, all three women laughed and thought the statement was ridiculous because they believed that some of the women at the plant,

themselves included, proved more capable and qualified than the men (*Bonds, Easley, and Eastwood*).

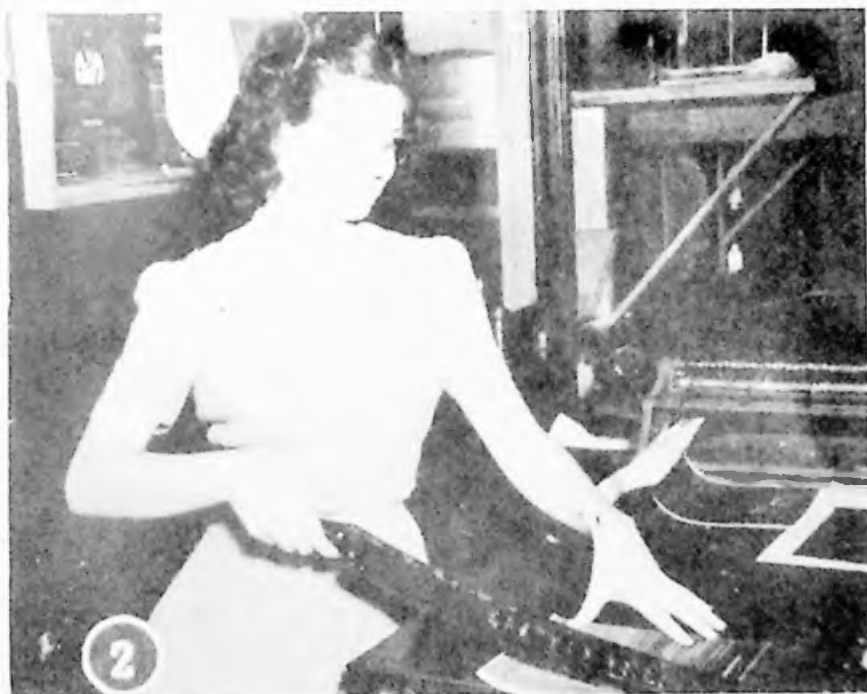
However, some differences exist between the Humble Refinery and the national experiences. No records could be found that Black women were hired to work at the Humble Oil and Refining Company; it just was not done at this southern plant as it was elsewhere. The women at Humble did not hold welding positions, nor can one find a great deal of information in the *Daily Sun* or the *Humble Bee*, the plant publication, on what the women were doing during the war years. As in the myth or "Rosie the Riveter," Humble's women were young, white, and middle class (*Eastwood, Easley, Bonds*), whereas in reality on a national scale these wartime workers were more diversified in age, race, and socioeconomic class (*Honey 19*).

Just as there were differences in the experiences, there were also similarities. The Humble Refinery, like other war plants, had to make accommodations for women's washrooms and toilet facilities. The Humble Refinery even had a requirement that a couch had to be placed in the women's restroom for the women to lie down on if they needed to when they were menstruating (*Easley*). The jobs women held at Humble were similar to the jobs held nationally. At Humble women operated radical drills, tested and repaired gauges and other instruments, worked in the carpenter shop and laboratories ("*Humble Women*"). In other parts of the country, women did identical tasks (*Life and Labor Mar. 1941*). All women, both in Baytown and nationally, encountered employers and men who were less than ecstatic that a woman was working a man's job (*Life and Labor July 1942; Shaver*). Women who worked at Humble, like women throughout the nation, were told that these jobs would last only for the duration of the war (*Rupp 138; Humble Bee April 1944*). The women war workers proved capable of handling the work set before them.

In 1991 Americans will be celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of World War II. In Baytown, Texas, the old Humble Oil and Refining Company, today's Exxon U.S.A., will be remembered for its part in the war. The Baytown refinery may even display the Navy Certificate awarded to the plant in January 1946 for its exceptional accomplishment and contribution to the National War effort ("*Navy Certificate*"). During the celebration, men who fought and those who died in the war protecting this country will be remembered for their heroic deeds. The women too, contributed to the victory. Despite the fact that the women's memories deny the myth, you can not refute the fact that their achievements did indeed help the war effort. So perhaps this occasion can be a time to remember those women who readily took up the slack in the labor force when they were needed; women need to know that America has not forgotten their part in the war.



*Mrs. Roberta West issues tools from the machine shop tool room to Mrs. Edna Dix, surface grinder operator.*  
*From a 1940's Humble Bee*



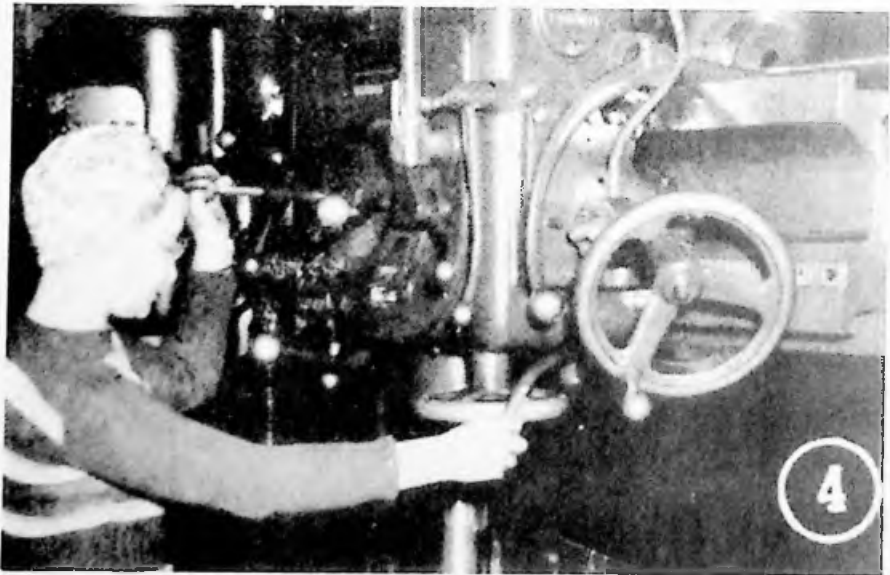
*Eva Welch operates a blueprint trimmer.*

*From a 1940's Humble Bee*



*Mrs. Iola Ros; is shown cutting packing in the machine shop.*

*From a 1940's Humble Bee*



*Mrs. Regina Fulkerson operates a six-foot radical drill at the machine shop.*

*From a 1940's Humble Bee*



*Elaine Mattingly keeps the saws sharp at the carpenter shop.  
From a 1940's Humble Bee*

*Miss Fore was one of two women killed in a Humble Refining plant accident.*



### **Lena Belle Fore**

Lena Belle Fore became a member of the Humble family in July, 1943, as a junior laboratory tester at the butyl laboratory. A month later she was made a member of the analytical group. In May, 1944, she became a laboratory tester first class.

Born July 18, 1922, at Gracord, Miss Fore entered NTAC at Arlington after graduating from Gracord high school. She graduated from Texas State College for Women at Denton where she received her bachelor of science degree, and remained at the college as assistant dietitian before joining the Humble organization. She was a member of Phi Kappa Theta, and Phi Upsilon Omicron, national honorary sororities.

Miss Fore is survived by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. W. S. Fore of Gracord.

*Miss Martin was one of two women killed in a plant accident at the Humble Refining Company in the 1940's.*



### **Margaret Jean Martin**

Margaret Jean Martin joined the Humble organization at Baytown in November, 1943, as a junior laboratory tester. She became a first class tester a year later. Practically all of her Company service was spent as a member of the butyl laboratory staff.

Born October 13, 1922, at Rochelle, Louisiana, Miss Martin graduated from Ferriday high school in her native state. She graduated from Louisiana Polytech Institute at Ruston in 1943 and received her bachelor of science degree. She was a member of Kappa Alpha Zeta sorority. She is survived by her mother, Mrs. Olivia Miller Martin of Ferriday.

## APPENDIX

1. In the first photo, a group of new women workers are shown in the *Humble Bee's* 1944 fall issue. Marjorie Walker (Eastwood), one of the women interviewed, is shown in this picture.
2. In photos two, three, four, and five women are shown in various jobs at the Humble plant. These photos were taken from the January 1943 issue of the *Humble Bee*.
3. Photos six and seven are pictures of the two women who were killed sometime in 1945 at the Humble plant in an explosion. The photos were taken from a 1945 *Humble Bee*.

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