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# Finding Rosie: Documenting the World War II Home Front Experience of the American West through Oral History

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Figure 1. "This Chinese Girl is Learning Burning Technique at a Shipyard Training School," ca. 1941–1946, Henry J. Kaiser Pictorial Collection, Richmond Shipyard—Workers—Women—Women employees performing various jobs, BANC PIC 1983.018. Photo courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

# FINDING ROSIE: DOCUMENTING THE WORLD WAR II HOME FRONT EXPERIENCE OF THE AMERICAN WEST THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

SAMUEL J. REDMAN

*This article describes an ongoing oral history project with the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. It explains how the team frames its research, understands the audience for oral histories, details how individuals are selected for interviews, and outlines the project's various new initiatives.*

*En este artículo, el autor narra un proyecto en transcurso que se lleva a cabo con la Oficina de Historia Oral y Regional (ROHO, por sus siglas en inglés) en la Biblioteca Bancroft de la Universidad de California, Berkeley. El artículo explica cómo el equipo define su investigación, entiende su público en el campo de la historia oral, selecciona candidatos a ser entrevistados, y además resume varias nuevas iniciativas que el proyecto abarca.*

IN 1945, AT THE conclusion of the Second World War, Edythe “Edie” Esser’s boss at the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond, California, handed her a pink slip. Although Esser knew this day would come, nevertheless she broke down and cried. The shipyards first laid off the night shift, then moved to swing shift workers. Esser’s relief at seeing the war end tempered her sadness at the thought of leaving the shipyards where she found steady work and new friends from around the country. Her emotional experience, shared by many of the country’s wartime defense workers, runs counter to the iconic images of women exuberantly kissing sailors in the confetti-decorated streets on V-J Day. Gaps in our historical memory include not only the

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emotional landscape of the war but complex factors of race, work, gender and sexuality, urban geography, and unions as well as a thorough examination of incidents like the Port Chicago disaster in 1944 and the Oakland General Strike of 1946. Marginalized from the still dominant memories of the war are the challenges to democracy presented by the unjust relocation of Japanese to internment camps. A growing body of oral histories documenting social and cultural change in the middle of the twentieth century addresses these gaps, and others, and adds to our existing source-base. A task of special importance involves reframing our knowledge of the history of the American West around World War II—understanding that the event had a truly massive, transformative impact on cities and rural areas across California and the western United States. Large and diverse migrations, wartime mass production, and rapidly changing racial and gender dynamics provide a rich tapestry of experiences that, by recording them for future study, can help us better understand various aspects of the second half of the twentieth century to the present.

In 2001 the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley partnered with the National Park Service (NPS) and the City of Richmond, California, to create the Rosie the Riveter/WWII American Homefront Oral History Project. ROHO, a research arm of The Bancroft, specializes in conducting, analyzing, and teaching about oral history. Because existing holdings at ROHO include interviews documenting the community history of Richmond—conducted by Judith Dunning in the late 1980s and early 1990s—ROHO was a natural partner for the proposed collection of oral histories regarding the home front experience. Since 2001 the NPS and the city have been instrumental in providing ROHO with possible interviewees or *narrators*. Working with outside groups allows for greater clarification of the project's goals and pushes us to engage with the public in new and meaningful ways. ROHO also remains attentive to existing scholarship on the Second World War home front and, symbiotically, many of these sources have leveraged oral history as a major source.

Soon after this partnership began, ROHO encouraged student interviewers to approach the Rosie project in a way that reflected their own interests. David Washburn focused on a modestly sized yet vibrant Mexican American community in Richmond. In a series of interviews he documented the changing Chicano community and exposed the pitfall of portraying the area as a strictly biracial region during the home front years. Working closely with Mexican Americans in the Bay Area, Washburn found narrators with varied experiences, complicating existing narrative structures. Sal Chavez, for instance, explained to Washburn that the Mexican community largely stayed separate from European Americans immediately before the war: "At that time, you didn't see—no offence—you didn't see no mixing with American[s]. You didn't see them. It was always Mexican-Mexican. Not that the—It was because you felt that they didn't like you. A lot of guys didn't give a damn." Just a moment later, however, Chavez complicates this segregation narrative by explaining how dating and courtship patterns changed



Figure 2. Crowds gather after the Port Chicago munitions explosion, 1944, San Francisco News-Call Bulletin Newspaper Photograph Archive, Port Chicago Explosion—Munitions Ships, BANC PIC 1959.010—NEG, Part 2, Box 2 [00065.01:14]. Photo courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

over time: “Well, you dated them if they liked you. If you liked them, you dated them, you know. But most of the time—I don’t know why you’d stick to your nationality. But after a while everyone was going out with Italians, Portuguese and all that kind of stuff. After a while . . . they’re all mixed.”<sup>1</sup> These subtleties of memory can help historians clarify change over time.

Frequently engaging, these interviews reflect histories of race, music, and urban geographies. Jess Rigelhaupt, now an assistant professor at the University of Mary Washington, came to the project with a particular interest in labor, urban politics, and comparative ethnic studies. Rigelhaupt strove to add to the available resources for historians of progressive and social movements in the Bay Area, shedding light on labor practices, migration, urban transformation, and racism. Despite the growth of unions during the war, the project’s union-related accounts are strikingly diverse and

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<sup>1</sup> Sal Chavez, interview by David Washburn, 2002, pp. 20–1, *Rosie the Riveter/World War II American Homefront Oral History Project*, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2007 (hereafter ROHO, date).

uneven. According to one female narrator, "Well, women were just ignored. We didn't exist, really. Those flangers that worked with me just—I'm sure they wish[ed] I was on another planet."<sup>2</sup> Nadine Wilmot, a specialist in African American history, soon joined the team to manage the project. One of Wilmot's many contributions involved successfully forging strong relationships with the black business community in the Bay Area; she interviewed a number of men and women with significant wartime experiences. Elizabeth Castle, a scholar of American Indian studies, recorded oral histories with Native Americans who resided in the Bay Area during the war. Castle's collection of interviews is particularly significant as it provides historians with an important resource for understanding the array of efforts to relocate American Indians to urban areas by encouraging them to work in industry. The interviews not only describe significant political movement, they also detail race relations through the eyes of American Indian children growing up during the war. Irvin Shiosee, who moved to Richmond from Laguna Pueblo, details the division of different racial and ethnic groups before commenting on his racially mixed youth baseball team: "[W]e had maybe two or three Anglos on our team. I guess we sort of converted them. [laughs] Our baseball team name was Warriors, and we had Warrior jackets, and so proud of it. We played with all different races then."<sup>3</sup>

Current project manager David Dunham provides video, Internet, and editing expertise. Although Dunham has conducted a wide array of interviews for this series, his special interests include the Port Chicago disaster and Asian American communities in California.

Clearly, the core of the project rests in the interviews. In seeking narrators, one of the main goals of ROHO is to thoughtfully consider the needs of our many constituents. We emphasize a historiographical approach, with the aim of both complicating and adding to existing archival and oral history collections. In terms of educational outreach, as well, the project seeks both unique and articulate narrators. Although the needs of future generations of scholars and students cannot be anticipated, we aspire to consider the potential needs of future researchers. As is the case with many oral history projects, we intend for this collection of interviews to reach multiple audiences that are divided into three main categories: the public, students, and scholars.

ROHO's work with the public vis-à-vis this project takes place through four major outlets. The first, and most significant, is the ongoing relationship with the NPS. This organization desires interpretive materials for exhibits as it prepares to open both a main visitor center for the Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park and a smaller interpretive center focusing on the Kaiser Shipyards' progressive educational and childcare programs. ROHO collections include the valuable interviews with former shipyard employees as well as an assortment of related interviews, such as those with former educators and students at the childcare centers; all provide a central resource

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<sup>2</sup> Denise Fleig, interview by Jess Rigelhaupt, 2008, p. 33, ROHO, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Irvin Shiosee, interview by Elizabeth Castle, 2005, p. 15, ROHO, 2007.

for the NPS in the ongoing development of the park. In one of our early interviews, a teacher described coping with the changes brought on by the influx of people arriving in California seeking wartime jobs: “[I]t was a complete[ly] different situation, but I coped. And the children, as I said, were good, and they wanted to learn. They were anxious to learn, but I don’t think they got the education they should have. . . . It was certainly not an ideal situation.”<sup>4</sup>

The project also seeks to inform the work of students as they learn about the various social and cultural changes occurring on the home front during the war. ROHO seeks to make oral histories available online as digital files for use by students across the country. Assigning oral histories in lectures and seminars and placing them on the Web and into multiple brick-and-mortar libraries will ensure that future generations benefit from these collections. As I write, approximately forty undergraduates in Berkeley’s large modern U.S. history survey course are using this collection as the basis for a research paper. Following a presentation at a recent women’s history event at Berkeley City College, students in both U.S. women’s history and cultural anthropology courses turned to the oral histories while researching their final projects. After working with the collection, several students reported a growing interest in the complexities of race relations during the war. Staff at ROHO welcomes collaboration with college and high school instructors, and we routinely consult with teachers hoping to use this collection in the classroom.

Finally, ROHO aspires to provide scholars of social and cultural change in the United States with a valuable resource for future research and scholarly publication. While unable to pinpoint the exact interests of future generations of historians, the team attempts to conceptualize the project as filling holes typically found in archives of the mid-twentieth century. Archival materials on topics such as gender and sexuality tend to be limited, for example, and project interviews address such themes as often as possible. Although narrators introduce topics and guide aspects of the recorded conversations, many questions remain scripted and based on subjects the ROHO team considers historically important.

Perhaps the most important conversation that constantly engages the team concerns how best to represent the complex period being documented. As suggested above, narrators determine much of the content of the interviews, which therefore leads ROHO to seek a diverse range of experiences to record. While this could be an obstacle, recent media appearances yielded narrators, and the project particularly strives to reach out to non-white communities in the Bay Area in its attempt to find narrators that represent unique perspectives

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Although the representative nature of the collection is a major concern, ROHO recognizes the impossibility of documenting a comprehensive sample of every aspect of American life. Currently, priority goes to narrators with distinct backgrounds or

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<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Reynolds, interview by Esther Ehrlich, 2003, p. 27, ROHO, 2007.



Figure 3. "Aliens at Sharp Camp following the evacuation order for persons of Japanese ancestry. This camp was set up as detention station where suspects were held before given hearings. They remained here only a short while, being sent to an internment camp or a relocation center following the hearings.—Photographer: Albers, Clem—Sharp Park, California. 3/30/42," War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement, 1942–1945, BANC PIC 1967.014 v. 59 GC-73—PIC. Photo courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

experiences. We also pursue interviews with people involved with state, federal, or wartime agencies, which would add to an existing yet modest collection. Ethnic and social groups, too, remain a priority. Examples of groups that have, as yet, been difficult to document include Koreans and Filipinos. Due to the era's restrictive immigration laws, these groups represented an extremely small percentage of the overall population of the United States during World War II. Despite small population numbers, we consider these groups' experiences to be of significant value to this project.

One last major component of ROHO's new initiatives concerns a planned series of video clips and Web updates as well as making sources increasingly accessible to students and other researchers. Whereas ROHO's website currently features video clips that serve as an introduction to the collection, new videos will be more thematic. Currently in production is a video on the subject of the American Indian migration experience during the war. Another video introduces wartime childcare development centers in Richmond.

The oral histories produced by the Rosie the Riveter/WWII American Homefront Oral History Project help us reconceptualize the history of the home front in the



American West in a myriad of ways. The project adds a variety of perspectives on both the significant and the seemingly mundane—from the deadly explosion in Port Chicago to what food workers ate for lunch each day. These oral histories complicate our existing notions of crucial historical themes to engage audiences as varied as schoolchildren and advanced scholars.

In measuring the success of a decade-long, multifaceted oral history project, we recognize the significant contributions of the many individuals involved. In reflecting on our progress we extend our sincere gratitude to our willing (and often quite eager) narrators but also to the numerous ROHO staff, our partnering organizations, and the many outside scholars who have consulted with us regarding the direction and aims of the project. Many have put their own stamps on the project, providing expertise and innovative methods the existing team may not have ever dreamed of implementing. Although not all of our interviews represent a major advance in the historiography of the Second World War home front, we continue to wrestle with the best ways to accurately represent change over time, and we strive to innovate new ways to reach our many audiences. Taken as a whole, however, this collection represents a now-critical component of the available materials on a range of topics revolving around social and cultural change during the middle of the twentieth century in the United States.



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