THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROSIE THE RIVETER

CONNIE FIELD
When the United States entered the Second World War in 1941, many women’s lives were transformed as jobs previously done by men transferred to them. This ‘hidden army’ of more than three million faced sexual and racial discrimination, and director Connie Field’s 1980 documentary *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* – originally intended simply as an educational film – counters the propaganda of the time, when a poster of the fictional Rosie, complete with bent arm and clenched fist, proclaimed, ‘We can do it!’

The image of the defiant woman building armaments – the home-front equivalent of ‘GI Joe’ – featured in a popular song, *Rosie the Riveter*, recorded by the Four Vagabonds, and as the title of a 1944 film musical that celebrated workers in an aircraft factory.

What was not part of the official story was that two-thirds of female defence workers were not simply ‘homemakers’ but previously had jobs – in traditional roles such as servants, cooks, shop assistants and waiting staff.

In *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*, Connie Field features five former ‘Rosies’ employed in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Richmond, California, and Detroit, including three African Americans. Lola Weixel, Margaret Wright, Lyn Childs, Gladys Belcher and Wanita Allen all had ‘back-breaking jobs’ before the war, in farming, factory work and domestic service.

Their interviews are interwoven with the advertising posters, jaunty songs and newsreel footage of the time. ‘We must win this war, but we can’t win this war unless you women take over the jobs men are leaving – and you’re needed right now,’ says the voiceover in one of the recruitment films.

Women are seen working as welders and riveters, with another operating a press ‘as easily as a juice extractor in her own kitchen’, while a lathe would ‘hold no more terrors than an electric washing machine’. At first, women were paid significantly less than men who had done the same jobs and black women were paid even less – but this began to change with a successful campaign to unionise the women.

When the war was over, many of the female defence workforce found themselves dumped. Post-war propaganda films – especially newsreels – prepared women for a return to their previous lives. ‘When my husband comes back, I’m going to be busy at home,’ says one. ‘This job belongs to some soldier,’ says another. ‘It was over for us,’ recalls one of Field’s interviewees.

*The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* was Field’s first film. Among several honours, it won the 1981 John Grierson Award for documentary. She went on to make *Freedom on My Mind*, a history of the Mississippi voter registration project that led to the landmark Civil Rights Act. For this, she was nominated for an Oscar. In 2010, she made *Have You Heard from Johannesburg*, a seven-part television series chronicling the struggle against apartheid, for which she won a Primetime Emmy.

Anthony Hayward
Journalist and author