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HNRS 317: Lure of the Sea

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**Paper 1:** Unveiling the Hidden Builders: Women's Crucial Contributions to Shipbuilding in Oregon

The prevailing narrative of World War II tends to focus on men's contributions, particularly in combat. While their efforts were instrumental to the war's success, this narrative overlooks the significant and often unacknowledged experiences of women, particularly their participation in traditionally male-dominated occupations such as shipbuilding. Despite women's substantial contributions to WWII efforts, their role has been largely marginalized and downplayed in historical discourse. However, the digital exhibit "Go into the yard as a worker, not as a woman" on the Oregon History Project, curated by Amy E. Platt for the Oregon Historical Society, aims to rectify this oversight. Through meticulous research and analysis, the exhibit unveils the crucial contributions and experiences of women in Oregon, particularly their contributions to the Oregon Shipyards. Platt's work enriches our understanding of maritime history and disrupts established gender norms and narratives of the WWII era. The remainder of this paper will examine the crucial role played by women in shipbuilding in Oregon during this time period. Their participation was instrumental in the success of the war effort, challenging traditional gender roles and making a distinctive and vital contribution to maritime history.

In her curation of the digital exhibit, Platt demonstrates an impressive command of feminist theory, social history, and other analytical frameworks to illuminate the overlooked contributions of women. Through analysis of primary sources, Platt emphasizes the exceptional accomplishments of women in shipbuilding, with a notable focus on Hermina Strmiska, a highly skilled welder at the Oregon Shipyards. Hermina Strmiska, also known as "Bille," was a highly skilled welder from Texas who secured a prominent position as a welder for the Oregon Shipyard when she emerged victorious in the Oregon Shipbuilding Welderette contest in March 1943, surpassing a hundred other women welders by acing the standard American Bureau of Shipping

Test. Furthermore, Strmiska's talent was exemplified by her impressive second-place ranking in the esteemed national Ingalls Shipbuilding Company Contest held in Mississippi. Her achievements not only dispel the erroneous notion that women cannot excel as welders but also shatter stereotypes that suggest women cannot be successful in industrial jobs.

During the pre-World War II era, the prevailing belief was that welding was a job exclusively suited for men. This bias is evident in the 1943 article titled “Women Welders OK, U.S. Survey Shows” published in the CIO news. The strong bias favoring men is evident not only in the title of the article but also in its opening sentence, which reads, "Woman welders have invaded all types of war industry, where they are tackling even the heavier and harder jobs..." The deliberate choice of the term "invaded" carries a derogatory connotation, suggesting that women are unwelcome intruders or disruptions within this industry. Furthermore, the phrase "tackling even the heavier and harder jobs" perpetuates the unfounded belief that women lack the capability to effectively handle arduous tasks. Nevertheless, the narrative of Hermina Strmiska's remarkable journey, notably her mastery of flat, vertical, and overhead welding techniques, unequivocally dismantles this baseless and preposterous notion.

Throughout maritime history, women's contributions have consistently been overlooked and erased, and this trend is particularly evident in the context of women's involvement in Oregon Shipbuilding. Despite comprising 65 percent of new hires in Oregon shipyards by 1943, women's significant contributions to the industry have often been downplayed or even ignored. This marginalization is exemplified in a news article published by Laurel Outlook, a prominent newspaper in Yellowstone County, in 1944. The article, titled "Six Thousand Montanas Attend

Kaiser Shipyard Picnic," serves as a poignant example of the prevailing tendency to undermine women's participation in shipyards. Rather than acknowledging and celebrating women's crucial role in shipbuilding, the article fails to mention their involvement altogether, effectively erasing their contributions from the narrative. Furthermore, the article objectifies and diminishes women by reducing them to mere objects of beauty, as the focus of the Kaiser Shipyard Picnic was erroneously placed on a beauty contest, which was incorrectly deemed as, "...the highlight of the event." This selective emphasis on beauty further reinforces the historical neglect and undervaluation of women's achievements in shipbuilding, perpetuating a skewed and incomplete understanding of maritime history.

It is important to recognize that women not only made up a significant part of the shipbuilding workforce in Oregon but also played a pivotal role in the industry's remarkable accomplishments. This is evident in a 1943 article published by the Wilmington Morning Star, titled "Local Shipyard 2nd in Nation." The article highlights the extraordinary achievement of the shipbuilding corporation in Portland, which delivered 12 vessels with an average construction time of 32.5 days each, positioning the corporation as a leader in national shipbuilding efforts. Despite this remarkable feat, the article disappointingly neglects to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of women to this achievement. Women, despite their undeniable involvement, are once again left unrecognized and unacknowledged. This omission perpetuates the historical tendency to overlook the significant role that women played in shaping the shipbuilding industry during this period of immense national importance.

Amy E. Platt's exhibition presents a compelling new narrative that challenges the historical erasure of women's contributions in Oregon Shipbuilding, specifically within the context of the Kaiser shipyards. Platt uncovers a more comprehensive story that encompasses the diverse experiences of women, including the significant but often overlooked presence of Black women in the Kaiser shipyards. Black women made up 31 percent of Kaiser's workforce and 20 percent of their welders and electricians. In fact, their presence was so significant that "The African American population in Portland increased dramatically during the 1940s, from around 2,000 to 15,000 people, because of the Kaiser shipyards." However, despite their substantial representation in the workforce, their opportunities for advancement were severely restricted, reflecting the systemic racial biases of the time.

Platt's exploration of the experiences of Black women is a significant departure from the traditional narrative, which has predominantly focused on white men's involvement in shipbuilding. Through her meticulous research, Platt brings to light the historical reality that Black women played a crucial role in the shipyards, challenging the prevailing notion that their contributions were minimal or nonexistent. Through critical race theory and a comprehensive examination of historical sources, Platt's work contributes to a more accurate and inclusive depiction of women's roles in Oregon Shipbuilding during World War II.

Pratt emphasizes that the massive labor recruitment campaigns for women workers induced a cultural shift, causing apprehension among the male workforce unaccustomed to competing with women in the labor market. In response to this anxiety, the War Department disseminated propaganda portraying a return to prewar employment conditions as a patriotic obligation. This

was a disappointing turn of events as it signaled a step back in the progress made toward gender equality in the workforce. Despite the evident proficiency of women in welding and shipbuilding, Pratt uncovers the disheartening reality that female workers in the Oregon shipyards bore a disproportionate burden during the post-war transition in employment dynamics, being among the first to face layoffs from their shipyard positions. This regrettable outcome stemmed from pervasive patriarchal norms prevailing at the time, which consigned women to lower-paying clerical, retail, and domestic roles.

The efforts of women in shipbuilding during World War II, particularly in Oregon, were nothing short of remarkable. They defied gender norms and made significant contributions to the war effort. Their achievements shattered stereotypes and demonstrated their capability in traditionally male-dominated fields. Yet, despite their undeniable accomplishments, women have been overlooked and marginalized in historical narratives. It is through exhibits like the one curated by Amy E. Platt that we can begin to rectify this historical oversight.

Platt's exhibit not only highlights the contributions of women but also delves into the experiences of individual women like Hermina Strmiska, whose remarkable skills as a welder challenged preconceived notions about women's abilities in industrial jobs. By showcasing the accomplishments of women like Hermina, Platt exposes the fallacy of the prevailing bias favoring men in welding and shipbuilding. These stories serve as a powerful testament to the resilience and determination of women in the face of gender-based discrimination.

Moreover, Platt's research extends beyond the contributions of white women and sheds light on the significant presence of Black women in the Kaiser shipyards. By exploring the experiences of Black women, Platt's exhibit unveils a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of the diverse workforce in the shipbuilding industry. It emphasizes that the contributions of Black women were not minimal or nonexistent but rather essential to the success of the shipyards.

Platt's exhibit not only highlights the challenges faced by women during the war but also underscores the importance of continuing the fight for gender equality. The cultural shift induced by the massive labor recruitment campaigns demonstrated that women were capable of excelling in traditionally male-dominated fields. However, the subsequent propaganda promoting a return to prewar employment conditions undermined the progress made during the war. It is crucial to recognize and value the contributions of women in the workforce, providing them with equal opportunities for growth and advancement.

## Bibliography

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