

WOMEN IN THE SHIPYARDS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

One of the largest areas of industrial expansion in the province took place in the shipyards of Prince Rupert and Vancouver. The workforce grew from two hundred workers in nineteen forty to fourteen thousand by nineteen forty-three. These yards were responsible for the repair and construction of warships. The labour performed in the shipyards was crucial to the success or failure of the Allied war effort.

As the war continued it became necessary to mobilize increased numbers of formerly unemployed citizens to work in war production. The entry of women into the province's shipyards came as a direct result of the integration of women into the industrial labour force, a process facilitated by the National Selective Service.¹ In nineteen forty-two there were a peak number of one thousand five hundred women in the yards. By nineteen forty-three this number had fallen to eight hundred workers as lay-offs began.²

As industry expanded so did the unions with jurisdiction over workers in these sectors. The total female union membership in British Columbia grew from two thousand in nineteen forty-one to over seven thousand in nineteen forty-four. In the shipyards, the largest influx of women was into the Boilermakers Union. Women entered the yards at a time when the older craft unions were fusing into new industrial unions encompassing workers of all job categories.

Women performed a variety of tasks in the yards. Some worked as passer girls, others as helpers in the plate shops and on the ships. Some were rivet heaters and a number trained as welders. All training took place on the job. In the Burrard Shipyards many women worked in