

World War II's Welding Women: The Surrency Sisters



CITY OF BRUNSWICK/EMIL KRATT FAMILY/J.A. JONES CONSTRUCTION CO.

When the Allies desperately needed cargo ships, women did their part to supply them by working at shipyards across the country, including at the J.A. Jones Shipyard in Brunswick. Between 1942 and 1945, the Brunswick yard launched 85 Liberty ships. Nanelle, Carobeth, and Lauree Surrency were just three of the 1,000 women who worked at the shipyard and played a small part in the big business of winning World War II. All three of the Surrency sisters, Jesup natives, became welders at the Brunswick yard. The population of Brunswick nearly tripled during the war years due almost entirely to people moving to the city to join the shipyard workforce.

Though lacking experience, new employees were often put to work after only a few days of training.

Carobeth explained: "First I went to school for a week. Soon as I learned to tack they put me out to tacking, and in a month I was doing flat welding, vertical welding, overhead welding. I weighed about 110 pounds. I was 20 years old, loved life, wasn't afraid of anything. I would go to the bottom of the ship and weld, or I'd go to the top of the mast pole and weld."

Even though these intrepid young women downplayed the hazards, they acknowledged that welding was dangerous and physically demanding. Lauree remembered: "It was a challenge - to think about hanging on with one hand on a scaffold and your torch in the other hand and welding that way. I'm sure we took some risks, but I never did get injured, except once in a while I'd get an eye burn from the welding."

The women approached their work with the knowledge that lives might be lost or saved depending on how fast a ship was built. As Nanelle said: "Give it all you've got and then some, and one day you'll say, 'I was a small part in that.'" The work done at the Brunswick yard undoubtedly helped ensure an Allied victory.

This month's images show two of the Surrency sisters in their roles at the shipyard. Carobeth Surrency Highsmith (top) holds onto a mast pole wearing her leather gloves



and mask, standard protective gear for welders. Nanelle Surrency Bacon (far right, above) stands with the ship's sponsors at the launching of Liberty ship SS Richard Randall in November 1944. Interviews given by the sisters and quoted here are featured in the World War II Home Front Museum on St. Simons Island.