

She was Part of "Rosie the Riveters"

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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During the summer of 1944, a Custer County farm girl traded milking cows with working in a bomber factory in Omaha.

A bomber plant that played a big part in ending World War II.

After graduating from Broken Bow High School, Lucille Rickertsen caught a bus for Omaha where she took a room in a boarding house where her uncle also lived.

“He was a special guy with money and a nice car,” she said. “He’d come up to the farm each summer and help with projects.”

Uncle Earl also helped his niece land a job at the Martin Bomber Plant in Ft. Crook which is now Offutt Air Base.

That was where World War II bombers were manufactured.

By November of 1944, more than 40% of the Martin Bomber Plant’s nearly 12,000 employees were women, which made it Nebraska’s largest recruiter of women war workers, according to the Nebraskastories.org website.

“B-17s, B-29s,” Rickertsen rattled off. “It was a huge building full of airplanes and with the men gone, women had to go and take their jobs.”

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Although she didn't actually rivet, or use metal pins to fasten pieces of metal together, Rickertsen took different-sized rivets to riveter stands and placed them in the correct containers.

As the war wound down, Rickertsen was transferred to a warehouse in Omaha where she took inventory of airplane parts as the bomber plant got ready to close.

Before that happened, Rickertsen and others sensed they were part of something momentous.

"We knew something big was coming but it was a mystery," she said. "I think we were working on a plane to drop the bomb."

Rickertsen was right, although plant employees didn't know for certain they were building the Enola Gay.

The B-29 Superfortress bomber, World War II's most famous airplane, carried the world's first atomic bomb and dropped it on Hiroshima, Japan, on Aug. 6, 1945.

During that time, Rickertsen said war was on everyone's mind.

"Kids in my high school class left to go enlist. They wanted to," she said.

She said she and others didn't really know the terrible things Hitler and the Nazis were doing to Jews and others but they knew about the fighting.

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"Soldiers were in grueling situations on the front lines," Rickertsen said.

The plant was noisy and interesting, she said, and much different than the chores on the family farm near the South Loup River.

At home, Rickertsen milked a lot of cows, collected cobs from the pig pen, hoed the garden, carried in wood for cooking on the stove and more.

"I had to wash the cream separator twice a day which was awful because of all of the disks," Rickertsen said. "I hated it."

Going to military-equipment manufacturing plants and other jobs during the war started the movement of women working away from the home, she said.

"Because it was hard to go back to household jobs."

Rickertsen returned to Omaha the next summer and worked in a Swanson's Chicken cannery.

One Saturday, she walked to a golf course and watched famous United Service Organizations (USO) entertainers Bob Hope and Bing Crosby play golf.

"When Bob Hope walked by, I touched his arm," Rickertsen said.

Later, she taught at country schools in Custer and Dawson counties. In Lexington, she met Bill Rickertsen and married him.

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The couple have four children: Alan and Archie of Gothenburg and J.D. Rickertsen and Lori Cox of Sargent.

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