“We were nothing but rust”

Beatrice Green Marshall’s Wartime Experience

by Melissa Cornelius Lang

Beatrice Marshall graduated high school in 1941, the year the United States entered World War II. Two years later, Marshall left her home at the University of Southern Illinois in Carbondale for South Bend, Indiana, to join the war effort through the National Youth Administration (NYA), a New Deal program that had shifted its focus from work and education to defense industry training. After completing eight weeks of preparation in the unsegregated facility, Marshall was excited to start a career and to serve her country: “We thought it would be patriotic to get into the act. I wanted to work.” With her sister Ida and friends Leona and Myrtle, Marshall was offered the choice to relocate to the shipyards of Richmond, California, or Portland, Oregon. Having little knowledge of the West Coast, they decided on Portland and departed the Midwest. Marshall was proud of the skills she had learned under the NYA and believed that she and her friends would be provided with convenient housing and fair pay for the jobs they were trained for; yet, she would come to find that was far from the case.

By the end of World War II, at least 20,000 African Americans uprooted from home and migrated to the Portland area, where the majority sought employment in one of several shipyards along the Willamette and Columbia rivers. Historian Richard White described the event as “if someone had tilted the country . . . people, money, and soldiers all spilled west.” At the outset of war, millions of Americans went through what historian William Robbins terms “an heady experience,” resulting from the surge of jobs after a decade of unemployment and stagnation. They “suddenly found themselves in a seller’s market,” and in the West, “an atmosphere of expectancy and faith in the future” amassed. This excitement was especially true for women, who

From 1935 to 1943, the National Youth Administration provided education and work to youths from ages sixteen to twenty-five. Beatrice Marshall and her sister Ida signed up for wartime work through the Illinois branch of the NYA, which advertised educational opportunities with this 1937 poster.
Across the country, women were trained in industrial skills such as welding, riveting, and drill press operation. Operating a hand drill, this woman works on a dive bomber at the Vultee Aircraft plant in Nashville, Tennessee.

as never before had opportunities to assimilate into America’s workforce, where their presence increased by 57 percent during the war. The shipyards of Portland, St. Johns, Swan Island, and Vancouver employed the highest number of women nationwide.4

Despite such unprecedented opportunity, African Americans were greeted by a culture in Oregon that had been entrenched in racial exclusionary practices since its founding as a territory. Like many African Americans before and after her, Marshall was excited for the new prospects she believed Oregon had to offer, yet her hopes were dashed when she came face to face with the racial biases that excluded her from opportunities reserved for whites only. Throughout her time working in the Kaiser shipyards, she was denied the skilled labor position for which she had been trained: "when we got to Portland . . . they told us that they didn't have any openings as steel lathe or drill press operators and that we would have to accept work as either a painter’s helper or as a sweeper." Marshall would later come to discover that there were positions available in the fields in which she was certified, but that they would not be offered to African Americans.

Historian Quintard Taylor argues that white communities in the Pacific Northwest who sought to hold onto racial exclusions grew more aggressive during the war in order to protect the existing color line against the tide of newcomers.5 Their efforts manifested in increased visible displays of segregation in public accommodations such as hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, and public parks as well as a 15 percent surcharge on automobile insurance and increased exclusionary controls in real estate opportunities. The war industry in the Portland area mimicked this exclusion. Despite extensive recruitment campaigns by Henry J. Kaiser and the Oregon Shipbuilding Company promising equal work and equal training for African Americans to build "Liberty Ships," Oregon Shipbuilding and the International Brotherhood of Boilermaker Local 72 limited opportunities for African Americans by segregating them to a chapter, the Auxiliary 32, which demanded dues yet carried no teeth in collective bargaining. Kaiser’s Oregon Shipbuilding Company, therefore, acted alongside the union in defiance of Executive Order 8802 and the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), which banned racial discrimination in the national defense industry. Such resistance to integration was not limited to Portland. As Taylor points out, one Seattle union official complained: “We resent that the war situation has been used to alter an old established custom . . . and do not feel it would be helpful to war production.”6

While Kaiser did employ some African Americans — including women — in skilled positions, the company also allowed many to be denied that work because of race.7 Ultimately, some of Portland’s black leaders — including Julius Rodriguez, president of the Shipyard Negro Organization for Victory, and Rev. J. James Clow, president of the Portland National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) — fought shipyard discrimination in Washington, D.C. After a two-year battle that ended just before the war did and that spurred the dismissal of Clow from the NAACP as well as intra-racial conflict between those who preferred jobs over justice, and vice versa, the FEPC ruled in favor of black workers.8

Nearly forty years later, during an interview in 1981 conducted by Madeline Moore and Christine Poole of the Northwest Women’s History Project (NWHP), Marshall did not refer to that battle, and it is unknown whether she was aware of it at the time. What is clear is that her experience was overwhelmingly shadowed by the enflamed racial tensions in Oregon between 1943 and 1945.

Seeing few options, Marshall accepted a painter’s position because it seemed more skilled than sweeping. Yet, as she recalled: “To our surprise, it was something that we really wished we hadn’t taken.” Although Marshall was paid more on the shipyards than in other jobs she took after the war, it was the crushing disappointment over being denied the job she was trained for because of the color of her skin that stuck with her over time: “It was the first time that I ever experienced discrimination. . . . I really felt hurt . . . it really did something to me.”

Beatrice Marshall’s story is just one among the 20,000 African Americans who faced the shadow of war and the institutionalized redlining of the Pacific Northwest.9 Historian Michelle Doggett has written that the war’s industrial boom created an influx of African Americans into Oregon, but the rapid rise in defense-related production came with an increased visible displays of segregation, an intensifying refusal to hire blacks in skilled positions, and a growing anti-black sentiment in a labor climate that had long been hostile to African Americans.10

In Portland, African American laborers and their families were faced with the challenge of finding housing in a city that had been a stronghold of the property owners’ league since its founding as a territory.11 Since 1930, the league had been working to strengthen the city’s “racial color line.”12

During the war, however, Portland’s competitive labor market forced employers to hire African Americans, who were quickly absorbed into the labor force.13 Yet, as historian Kyle C. Verran has noted, Portland’s African Americans were left behind in the postwar economy, as the city returned to its prewar taboos against black labor.14

The Kaiser shipyards and the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union’s Oregon Shipbuilding (ILWU-O) represented the upper and lower ends of an industrial labor market that was becoming more segregated by race.15

The shipyards were the first to hire African Americans in the defense industry, but the ILWU-O’s implicit union policy of racial exclusion was more effective over the long run.16

The ILWU-O, like many other unions in the Pacific Northwest, was divided over the issue of race.17 Historian David N. North has argued that the ILWU-O’s policy of racial exclusions grew more aggressive during the war in order to protect the existing color line against the tide of newcomers.18 Their efforts manifested in increased visible displays of segregation in public accommodations such as hotels, grocery stores, restaurants, and public parks as well as a 15 percent surcharge on automobile insurance and increased exclusionary controls in real estate opportunities. The war industry in the Portland area mimicked this exclusion. Despite extensive recruitment campaigns by Henry J. Kaiser and the Oregon Shipbuilding Company promising equal work and equal training for African Americans to build “Liberty Ships,” Oregon Shipbuilding and the International Brotherhood of Boilermaker Local 72 limited opportunities for African Americans by segregating them to a chapter, the Auxiliary 32, which demanded dues yet carried no teeth in collective bargaining. Kaiser’s Oregon Shipbuilding Company, therefore, acted alongside the union in defiance of Executive Order 8802 and the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), which banned racial discrimination in the national defense industry. Such resistance to integration was not limited to Portland. As Taylor points out, one Seattle union official complained: “We resent that the war situation has been used to alter an old established custom . . . and do not feel it would be helpful to war production.”

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who arrived in Portland between 1941 and 1945. While many of the war industry laborers found success and opportunity at Oregon Shipbuilding and other shipyards, Marshall’s experience was full of frustration, disappointment, and confusion, which seem to be the most lingering impressions of her wartime experience. By painting an intimate and dynamic picture of this period in Oregon’s history, Marshall’s story offers a better understanding of the complexities of experiences along stories of triumph that will be elevated as the state celebrates the seventy-year anniversary of V-E Day through V-J Day this summer.

I WAS RAISED on a farm in Illinois. I finished high school the same year the war broke out, in 1941. I went to college at Southern Illinois University [SIU] in Carbondale, Illinois. When the war broke out and everybody was leaving and taking up wartime jobs, my sister Ida and I decided to do some work for the wartime effort. We didn’t have any training at that time because we were just out of high school. They had an organization called the NYA [National Youth Administration]. So we signed up for that. The government paid all of our expenses, including food, lodging, and the whole works. They sent us to South Bend, Indiana, for training.

We had a choice of what we wanted to do to prepare ourselves for wartime work. Some of the choices were airplane riveting, working on airplanes, drill press, and steel lay. It was mostly machine shop work. We were very interested in that, so we took up several trades to make sure we could fit in to one [shop]. The requirement was about six to eight weeks training before we would even be able to go out on the job. We went to South Bend, and we stayed at a camp that was specially prepared for youth at that time. We were making tools. We would make bolts, screws, nuts, and things like that. With the drill press, we were drilling parts. For instance, if something needs a hole in it, we would be drilling the hole. We were making parts for boats, airplanes, or whatever it was we was working for. It was really skilled work. And it was something that we enjoyed.

I never thought I would be doing machine shop work like that — working with a machine, making tools with my hands, and just using that machine and to do it myself. I got to the place where I could handle more than one machine at a time. We completed our eight weeks training, at the government’s expense; they sent us to the job. They paid our way and everything. [My parents] expected me to finish college. They were old-fashioned, and they believed that if you got at least two years of college training you could teach or whatever. That’s what was open to blacks during that time — teaching. When we decided to go off and work for the government with the war, they knew it was making more money and we were satisfied with that. They were supportive, but they didn’t know about the discrimination until we got out to Portland.

I really don’t think [my parents] knew the details of what we were doing in our training. Being a farm girl working on the farm, I was around machines all the time. You know, with my father that didn’t bother him too much. The only thing that bothered them was coming so far away from home and I had never experienced being really away from home.

They were people leaving all around, going to different parts of the United States, working for the government. We thought it would be patriotic to get into the act. I wanted to work. I had not planned to come to this coast. We just wanted to work in an airplane factory or a shipyard, so we got prepared for both of them. When we completed our training, our counselor asked where we wanted to go. We had planned to stay around Illinois or Ohio, but they didn’t have any employment at the airplane factories. She told us there wasn’t any opening there at that time. Now I’m beginning to wonder if it was some kind of conspiracy because there were openings all over all the time.

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knowing where either one of those places were on the map, we decided to come to Portland. They got us prepared and put us on the train. But before we left the camp, we had to pass tests in drill press, steel lay, and airplane riveting.

Coming to Oregon, we left South Bend that evening and they put us on the train in Chicago. We didn't have any seats on the train. That wasn't because of discrimination. That was because there weren't any seats on the train. Everybody was coming to the West Coast. That train was full. It took us three days and three nights to get to Portland. When we got to Portland, that's when the trouble started.

We had our address where we were going, but we weren't on our own. There was a lady from the YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] that had charge of us when we got to our destination, because we didn't know where we were going or what we was going to do.

When we got to Portland, they were supposed to have a place for us. They didn't. We stayed at the Y[WCA]. I think that was for one night. Then we went to Eugene, Oregon, to the University of Oregon. We were there to complete the final stages of our training. I don't recall just how many weeks we were in Eugene before we came back to Portland to work in the shipyard.

We stayed at the Y until they found us a place in Vancouver. We didn't like Vanport because it was different than what we had been used to. We didn't like that. Vanport really did seem kind of rough to me, and coming from a farm, I didn't appreciate that. They would not give all four of us an apartment together. My sister and myself could have an apartment together because we were related, but the other two could not stay with us. We had to rent two apartments. The lady that was in charge found us a room, a nice room that we wanted over on SE Tibbetts Street with Mrs. McCleary. It was in a private home. This house had a large room upstairs with two double beds in it. It was just what we wanted. So we lived over on the Southeast side. Our domestic chores worked out fine. We got along real good, just like family. We would take turns in cooking. Whoever would cook that day would choose the menu they wanted to cook. We were just like sisters, all of us.

We had to get up early. I know it was dark when we got up. I think our shift was from eight until four-thirty. We had to get up in the neighborhood of five-thirty or six, because we lived over on the Southeast side. We had to catch the bus to downtown and then we would have to catch a shipyard bus going to the shipyard. That would take quite some time. So it was a long day.

When we got to the shipyard, we had to apply for work. They told us that they didn't have any openings as steel lays or drill press operators and that we would have to accept work as either a painter's helper or as a sweeper. We didn't know what a painter's helper consisted of, but we felt that a painter definitely would be a little more sophisticated than just sweeping. We chose that. To our surprise, it was something that we really wished we hadn't taken, because the job was in the bottom of the boat. I don't mean the lower deck. I mean the hull that sits on the water. We had to go through holes, the manholes, and crawl on our hands and knees and carry a light and extension cord to...
An all woman crew works at Commercial Iron Works shipyard in 1944. They are using tools to scrape rust that were similar to what Marshall describes in her recollection of the few months she spent as a painter’s helper at Kaiser’s Oregon shipyard.

Our first day at the shipyard, I really was embarrassed to get on the bus to go back home because of the condition of our clothes. When we were training in South Bend, we wore blue jeans and light blue blouses. We kept them neat and ironed. When we came out of that manhole in Portland, we were nothing but rust, with dirt in our hair. When we got home and took a bath, it was nothing but rust in the tub. But we had to keep that job until we got a payday because we only had about thirty-six dollars apiece that we were required to have to come to Portland. That was the only thing that the government didn’t furnish, those thirty-six dollars. They furnished everything else. They gave us a little money each month plus our room and board.

We asked for a job that we were trained for, and they said there wasn’t any available. So my sister Ida, and Leona and Myrtle, decided that they didn’t want to work in the shipyards anymore. My sister was the first one that left because we weren’t getting what we wanted. Leona, she lost a relative in Los Angeles, so she left and went to Los Angeles. Myrtle went with her. That left me in the shipyard by myself. There were better jobs in L.A., in the shipyard there. Leona left and got a job as an airplane riveter. If that same job had been available in Portland, I don’t know if she’d have been able to get it. One of the girls that left went to Seattle. I guess that was an aircraft place up there where she worked. She specialized in aircraft riveting. We had several specialties. We could do that or drill press. I felt that I was really a champion in the drill press.

I was really depressed with the job that I was doing. I didn’t want to continue with it, because it was hard and it was really making me sick. They finally gave me a job on top of the boat sweeping. That was much better than in the bottom. I did that for several weeks. I finally found out that they had work as drill press operators and steel lays, but they weren’t hiring blacks.

At that time, if you walked off of the job once you had a government job, you couldn’t get one no other
The only thing we knew to do was to go through. I didn’t know what to do. In fact, they were denying that there were openings, but they just wasn’t hiring blacks. So he had to give me my clearance.

But before I got my clearance to go — my sister Lida and the other three girls and myself, we tried through the Urban League to get the jobs that we were qualified for. It wasn’t too much they could do. It came out in the Observer at that time as to our plight trying to get the work that we were qualified for and couldn’t get it. But at that time there just wasn’t anything they could do about it.

In fact, they were denying that there were openings for us. But eventually they did admit that there were openings, but they wouldn’t give them to us because we were Negroes. Being at the age I was, I just really didn’t know that there were channels that I could go through. I didn’t know what to do. The only thing we knew to do was to go to somebody that we felt knew more about it than we did. That was Urban League. I know at the time we were complaining, we were the only ones that was sent by the government and were trained and didn’t get the job. [They said] that they would not hire black — Negro was the word they were using then — in the machine shop. There were just certain jobs Negroes were not allowed to hold, and the machine shop was one of them.

So, eventually, when they gave me my clearance, I left Portland and went to Los Angeles to get work there. That was around the first of ’44. It was 1943 when we came out here. I did get a little better job in Los Angeles than I did in Portland, but I decided to go back to Illinois and finish another year of college. That was the end of my shipyard experience. I worked at Oregon Shipyard.

I began in March or April of 1943, and my employment with the shipyard was until January of ’44. I was a painter’s helper maybe about two or three months. I was a sweeper for the rest of the time. There was no training necessary for what we were doing. I could have just picked up and left Illinois and come out here. No, there was no training required for the sweeping and scraping. The only black women working that I saw was either sweeping or doing what I was doing — scraping. [The white women in the more skilled positions] probably had on-the-job training because there was a lot of people [who] came to Portland and [and] didn’t have any training at all, and they were trained on the job. That’s why I couldn’t understand why we had the training and they wouldn’t give it to us. We were the only ones from South Bend in that group that came to Portland at that time.

It was the first time that I ever experienced discrimination. The movies, the cafeteria downtown, and the ones close to the railroad station, all of those were segregated. Everything was segregated. Everything in Portland. I don’t remember any discrimination on the bus. I could sit anywhere on the bus, because we rode the city bus and the shipyard bus to work. Portland has given me the only discrimination of places where I lived. I’m not saying there wasn’t any discrimination in Illinois, but I didn’t encounter any. Not even at school. Now, I went to an all-black grade school and all-black high school. I went to [integrated] SIU in Carbondale, Illinois. But I never experienced any discrimination that I noticed. None whatsoever. In Illinois, as far as the theatre was concerned, I don’t remember any segregation. I don’t know why, but I just didn’t notice it in Illinois like I did out here. It might have been because certain things are black and certain things are white. I know it was that way in Illinois as far as the school was concerned. Riding the bus, I would catch the bus from Polaska to Carbondale, and there was no discrimination on the bus. I could sit anywhere I wanted to. In Carbondale it was mostly white. But there was no discrimination to my knowledge. There were blacks and whites working together in the training camp. We worked together.

I really felt hurt, and I felt that we were sort of mistreated, because after taking the training and being prepared to do the job, we should have been able to do it. That was really my first experience with discrimination, and it really did do something to me. But I lived through it.
It did affect my life quite a bit, because at that time I was young and it was really the first job that I ever had tried to get. I worked on the farm with my family picking beans and strawberries and stuff like that, like most kids did, but that was really the first job on my own that I had ever tried to get. We were trained for the job with kids that were white and black, and there was no problem. I just couldn’t understand it when we got to Portland and couldn’t get the job. I was really so disgusted with the whole situation out here, but I didn’t have enough confidence to try to find out if there was anything that they could do.

Who knows what [doing the shipyard job I was trained for] would have led to? We were so interested and enthusiastic about the job. There was just too much of a letdown to pick up. I couldn’t understand. They were doing all of this advertisement [for war-production workers]. Here I am, spending time and getting trained and qualified for the job, and couldn’t get it. I just didn’t know what it was. I just couldn’t figure it out.

My parents didn’t want us to leave home. When we explained to them the situation, they wanted us to come back and finish school. We promised them that we would. I wanted to finish school. I wanted to be a nurse. I wanted to be a secretary. I wanted to do clerical work. I found out that I couldn’t get a job any place. So my spirit was let down.

After I left the shipyard and went back in Illinois, I finished my second year of college. At that time, with two years of training, you could teach. But we could only teach black students. I felt like I was qualified to do that, but I didn’t want to teach. My sister Ida, she stayed out here in Portland. She worked at the library for a while and then she was an elevator operator for one of those department stores downtown. I said I would never set foot in Portland again, but after I finished my second year of college, she asked if I would come stay with her. She said: “I promise I’ll get you a job and you won’t have to work in the shipyard.” So I came back, and I did get a job as a power machine operator in a bag factory. That was for Amos and Harry’s. But Amos and Harry’s, now this was discrimination, too, had two bag factories, one for black and one for white. But I felt better about the power machine operator job than I did about the shipyard job. They didn’t pay anything compared to what the shipyard [paid]. Neither did the library where Ida was working, nor any of the other jobs.

I started at the bag factory in the summer of 1945. I worked until the bag factory closed, which was about ‘46. I got married in ‘47. After I was married, I worked at the library downtown as a page girl until I got pregnant. My husband was running on the road at that time. He was a Pullman porter. And you’re talking about discrimination, they had it there, too. Real bad. I worked a few months making clotheslines. You know, these metal clotheslines that open up like an umbrella? I worked at a factory making those.

I worked at that until I got pregnant with Joyce. I worked a little as a censor taker in 1970. I worked in 1978 as a teacher’s aide for about two or three months. That’s been about the extent of my work since I left the shipyard.

All told, I worked maybe about twelve months. I think we pretty well covered everything from the time I left Indiana and came to Portland and didn’t get the job I was trained for. I was real mad.

NOTES

The author and Oregon Historical Quarterly editors are enormously grateful to Morgen Young for bringing Beatrice Green Marshall’s oral history to our attention, for drafting an earlier version of the introduction to it, and for identifying accompanying images.

5. Ibid., 7.
12. See Kesselman, Fleeting Opportunities, 41.