

# WWII SHIPBUILDING

More than 21,000 IBEW Local 48 electricians worked 24/7 in the six Portland-area shipyards during World War II, wiring landing ships at Swan Island, Liberty Ships in St. Johns, and baby aircraft escort carriers in Vancouver. They built ships fast. Swan Island set the record: the LST, Joseph N. Teal in ten days.

In 1943, Henry J. Kaiser's Vancouver Shipyards recruited nationally:

## ELECTRICIAN HELPER

Duties consist of installing cables and fittings on board the ship . . . according to plans and drawings. Should be good at working with small tools such as pliers, wire cutters . . . Considerable work is done vertically and overhead . . . Must have capable hands . . . Exactness and a flair for detail are necessary . . . Color blindness would be a handicap.

Fresh from her first year of college, Pat Koehler, 18, applied. "To hire on we spent a day going from one building to the next: finger prints taken here, ID photos taken there, forms and more forms to fill out. Then back downtown to Vancouver to join the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local #48. We paid our initiation fee and first month's dues before we had earned a penny."

Vancouver Shipyards bustled like a big city of indifferent strangers in too big a hurry to step aside for Koehler. Starting wage: \$.85 an hour.

"The day came, by dint of study, when we graduated to journeyman electrician at \$1.20 per hour . . . I was assigned to fire control. That meant guns!"

Her favorite tool: wire strippers. A year on the job, wearing steel-toed boots and a hardhat striped yellow as a sign of her craft, Koehler climbed into the round, starboard-side pillbox suspended over the water for her first solo assignment: hooking up the forty-millimeter gun directors.

"Occasionally I looked down into the swift current of the Columbia River and noticed small boats dragging for a worker who had fallen in . . . I connected the electricity to the five-inch gun, the largest weapon on the ship . . . What was a nineteen-year-old girl doing up there in such a job, anyway?"



Quotes from "Reminiscence: Pat Koehler on the Women Shipbuilders of World War II," Oregon Historical Quarterly, Vol. 91, No. 3 (Fall, 1990), pp. 285-291



AFTER THE WAR, WOMEN WHO COMPRISED A THIRD OF THE ELECTRICAL WORKERS IN THE SHIPYARDS WERE GENERALLY NOT ENCOURAGED BY THE WARTIME COMPANIES TO CONTINUE. BUT THE DIE WAS CAST. THE WORKPLACE WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME.



GIANT CRANES LIFTED AND SWUNG IN PLACE A PRE-ASSEMBLED 50-TON STERN UNIT IN A PORTLAND SHIPYARD, CUTTING TWO DAYS FROM LAUNCHING THE LIBERTY SHIP FOR WAR IN THE PACIFIC IN 1943:

"I saw one accident take place inside a crane. We were eating lunch, seated on the steps of the office facing the dock, with a crane between us and the ship. A flash of light inside the cabin of the crane was followed by a scream. The crane operator came out holding up his hands. His arms were black up to the elbows. He screamed again and fainted. Rescuers had to lower him in a harness since they could not manage him on a ladder."

Patricia Cain Koehler  
Journeyman  
IBEW Local 48

NECA IBEW  
OREGON - COLUMBIA LOCAL 48

100 YEARS

of a  
POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP