

Wendy the Welder

She walks slowly, leaning on her cane. It's my knees, she explains, they hurt when I walk. But it's very apparent that her knee problems haven't affected her zest for life. And she is full of stories of today and memories of yesterday. Floradelle Frimodig was just a teenager in the mining town of Kellogg, Idaho when her father heard over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed by the Japanese. "We were thunderstruck," she remembers. At first they didn't believe it; they thought it was something out of Orson Wells.

The United States immediately declared war on Japan, and men by the millions left their civilian jobs to join the military. To fill the gap, women left their homes not only to teach and work in offices, but to work in factories building ships and airplanes for the war effort. Floradelle and her mother Margaret were two of those women. In January 1943, lured by the promise of a then-rich salary of \$200 a month, Floradelle's mother moved the family to San Francisco, California, to work in the Kaiser Shipyards in nearby Richmond.

The shipyard needed welders and burners, they were told when they applied. There were already plenty of secretaries. Floradelle was asked if she wanted to be a welder. "What's that?" she remembers asking. They explained, and she accepted. Margaret became a burner, and they both worked at Kaiser Shipyard #1 for the duration of the war. Following six weeks of training, Floradelle became a journeyman welder.

Work was hard, but she enjoyed welding, and felt she was good at it. She wore three-ply leather overalls, flannel shirt, heavy leather jacket and ankle high leather boots. It was topped off with leather gloves and a welding hood – a far cry from the tight jeans, light bandanas and makeup "Rosie the Riveters" were pictured as wearing. The entire outfit weighed 5-10 pounds and was hot, especially in summer. She recalls joking with her mother that Margaret cut the steel into plates, and she turned around and welded them back together again to form the hulls of the ships being built there. "I was lucky," she says, "to get assigned to the assembly section that was outdoors. I didn't get sick like a lot of the welders who worked in cramped quarters on the insides of the ships."

All told, over 700 Victory ships were launched from the Kaiser Shipyards during the war. The last of these was the SS Red Oak in November 1944, a ship on which Floradelle had worked. It now floats in the Richmond harbor as a museum.

At war's end, the shipyards closed. Floradelle tried to pursue a career as a welder, but "most shops would not hire a female in that type of work," she says. She worked a couple of other jobs, was married and later widowed. Then she returned to college. She became a nurse and settled into a 27-year career with the VA hospital in Palo Alto, California, before retiring in 1988. She is proud of her time as a journeyman welder – so proud she has kept her union membership current.

(Note: Floradelle became interested in genealogy after she retired and spent delightful hours pouring over family history information on ancestry.com. She even found enough family history to join several historical societies. She passed away in the summer of 2012.)