

Mending Lives in the WWII Kaiser Richmond Shipyards

by Jacqueline Brown

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People from all over the country flocked to Richmond, California, in 1941 to work at the Kaiser Shipyards. Having endured the hardscrabble years of the Great Depression, migrant workers flooded Richmond by the thousands seeking employment in the suddenly booming World War II Home Front economy.

For most of these workers the yards provided a much needed stable income. More than a few arrived in frail health, without family network support, and challenged by economic necessity. They found a helping hand in the community benefit programs of Kaiser Industries.

Helen Amy Mason in "Welfare Services for Members of the Permanente Plan of Prepaid Medical Care," a graduate thesis submitted in 1946 to the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, offers a view into the circumstances that challenged many of these workers.



Henry Kaiser visits a shipyard worker at the Oakland Permanente Hospital Mason describes the hardships and the liberal assistance Henry Kaiser offered through the Department of Employee Welfare of the Richmond Shipyards and the Hospital and Medical Care Program of the Permanente Foundation.

The Department of Employee Welfare provided personal and financial services to those who fell ill or who were injured on the job, especially those without the support of family. The staff made bed-side hospital calls and offered essential meal and child care arrangements, banking, shopping, and transportation services throughout convalescence to recovery.

The Department also administered the "Help a Buddy Fund," a voluntary community service chest funded through a worker payroll deduction (about 25 cents per week) and distributed according to need for groceries, rent, child care, etc., with no restrictions attached.

The Hospital and Medical Care Program of the Permanente Foundation provided emergency financial assistance to workers who could not meet medical expenses, either because they had elected not to enroll in the health plan, or because they were confronted with circumstances not covered by the plan, long-term hospitalization (the plan provided 111 days) for mental illness or tuberculosis, for example. The ill or injured breadwinner was often the beneficiary, or his children, the comprehensive "family" plan coverage debuting late in the war effort.

One example is that of a woman who was admitted to the hospital with a heart condition that caused frequent attacks that required numerous and extended hospitalizations for two to four weeks at a time. She was the mother of two children and the sole source of income for her family. The Foundation covered the cost of her frequent and extended

hospitalizations.

The Department of Employee Welfare and The Permanente Health Plan in the Kaiser Shipyards ? today's Kaiser Foundation Health Plan ? mended more than broken bones in the Richmond shipyard community. As Dr. Clifford Kuh, a Permanente physician in the Richmond yards, put it: "The distinguishing characteristic of the Permanente Health Plan, besides prepayment, is it's focus on the community."

The tradition continues to the present day. Last year, for example, Kaiser Permanente gave a \$5.2 million gift to the UCLA School of Public Health to endow the UCLA Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Equity? a center dedicated to improving the health of underserved populations through research, community collaboration and leadership development.