Connie Field was a lot of other things before she became a film maker. In the Vietnam years she was involved in anti-war work, travelling with a theatre group, showing Felix Greene’s famous documentary, *Inside North Vietnam* and, at one time, helping out Chris Tillam, an Australian, when he made a film about her group (*Narodiks*). In Boston she worked on film distribution, joined the women’s movement, worked in the socialist feminist group, *Bread and Roses*, among other things. In time she became a mature age student in Women’s History. She says that her study and research kept turning her towards moving movies. Everything she studied seemed a good topic for a movie.

She sought jobs to give her technical knowledge and experience. In New York she worked as assistant and later as editor on various documentaries and dramas including *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. In California she joined a collective which aimed to make dramatic and political films. The group, mainly men, worked in the industry, pooled their money, paid the collective members according to need and worked well until funding was available for their projects. At that point everyone wanted to direct.

It was while Connie was in this collective that she learnt of a Rosie the Riveter Reunion. The conference of 300 women was sponsored by “Jobs for Older Women”, later, “Displaced Homemakers”, organisations seeking retraining for women who had worked in industry in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s plus jobs for younger women in skilled trades. The existence of such organisations says a lot to Connie about how economic problems keep coming and going.

Connie Field’s film, *Rosie the Riveter*, is the second such film with that name. In 1943 a ‘B’ grade movie was produced. Connie learnt of the existence of the title song, featured in her film, only in 1976. She discovered many things in her painstaking and lengthy research. Having decided that in the story of Rosie there was an untapped source of information, which needed to be told for its own sake, and to illuminate present day problems, Connie Field went out to find her subject.

Through press releases in local newspapers she received more than 700 responses. With her associates she contacted them all by phone, made tapes of 250, videos of 40 and finally selected the five who appear on film.

The search for the Rosies centred on Los Angeles, Detroit, the San Francisco Bay Area and New York. Connie Field was looking for women who had worked in the aircraft industry, in the converted auto industry where tanks were produced, in the shipyards and munitions factories.

Popular mythology has it that women who worked in industry in wartime had not worked before. As patriots they took heavy and dirty jobs in wartime and gladly returned home when the war was over.

Connie Field believed that most women were already working well before the war. They worked because they had to, in unskilled, low paid jobs. They worked in the war industries because of the good pay and opportunities. Many became unionised. At war’s end they were less than happy when employment opportunities dried up and they were returned to traditional areas of female employment. Her research proved these points. She interweaves the stories of her five characters with official propaganda films of the period and with Time/Life Newsreels to make her points. The audience responds with laughter and derision as the points are...
the life and times of *ROSIE THE RIVETER*
hammered home. It's all fair enough, even better than that, but it leaves unanswered the fact that the men of the armed forces did return home to the jobs they had left. It certainly wasn't fair to push the women out but no one at that time had an answer for orderly, sensible, post war work. The nearest we come to this in the film is a wistful comment from one woman who wishes that all the effort and elan of the times could be mobilised for peace and not war. Connie Field understood that she should choose characters with whom the audience would feel empathy but she was also conscious that they should construct the film, not impose propaganda on an audience. She chose her characters so that they could express many facets of women at work. One was a poor white Southern farm worker who crossed the country to find a job, others who are black had many experiences in seeking work and finding racism, long before World War II. They tell stories which are relevant today of the need for self esteem, of problems in finding dignity at work as well as decent pay. They talk of safety measures, union organising, action against racism, inadequate or nonexistent child care, the problem of the “double day” and the need to achieve some sharing of domestic work. Even while saying “I’m not a women’s libber” all the women reflect a consciousness of the modern women’s movement. Some recognise that they now think of their past experiences in a different and new way.

Meantime the film of the period expresses the myths. Connie Field says she wanted her film to be both political and entertaining. She also wanted to make a feminist film which does not attack women who feel threatened by what they understand of the women’s movement. And underlining everything is the idea that circumstances change but ruling ideology prevails. The fact that women did work in heavy industry and learnt skills quickly should have laid to rest the idea that some jobs are inappropriate for any women or that skills can only be acquired after a long apprenticeship. Yet the situation changed quite rapidly at the end of the war. Perhaps the most telling part of the official films of the time is the contrast between fostered attitudes to child care during the war and then in the early post war years. In the former period, children are depicted as well cared for in kindergarten, in the latter, children without a full time mum are depicted as deprived. Connie Field believes that you can only understand why so little changed if you understand that women were called to work in industry as part of the homefront, to back their men in the front line. Women, who have always been responsible for the homefront simply had that front enlarged, temporarily, during the war.

Of course the individual experiences of women changed them, as the conversations of the characters testify, but to change yourself is not to change society. These five women now go to some screenings of the film and speak with it. In many cases members of the audience testify. Contemporary issues are often discussed, not least the relationship between war and war preparations and the economy.

The years between the idea of Rosie and the film, which was completed in January 1981, were long and difficult, years of research and fund raising before a year of production and editing.

Connie Field wanted to shed some light on the hidden history of women and to communicate with people, especially working people. She says that there are many issues she was tempted to include but she decided to stick to her main point because she was not writing a political pamphlet.

The modern women’s movement has encouraged women to act, think, write, read, create and inspire. Connie Field’s movie is not the first feminist documentary and it won’t be the last but it is surely one of the most successful. It stands as a strong statement for equality and as such should have an important influence on the trade union movement. _Rosie the Riveter_ will be released in Australia in August-September by LeClezio Films, 33 Riley St., Woolloomooloo.