

[Page 9 - Women in the Steel Plant, World War 2](#)ISSUE : [Issue 37](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1984/8/1

Georgia Cambridge position. (You wouldn't take the weight of it.) Oh no, no. But we'd have to go down with the crane, follow the crane down, and give him the directions to lower it--and we'd place it. Use your hands, signal. Then another job we had was the reels, they came right from the furnace, from what they call the hot end. It's wire in reels. So, there'd have to be two girls there. You tie three wires on. We'd have to tie one on each side and one in the cen? tre, and put the tag on. See, and we used to have to lift our foot up and kick them together, to tighten them, before we'd put the wire on. A girl on one side and one on the other. Oh, it was fun. And then I worked on what they call a straightening machine. Now, that's bars that come up--some of them are a little bit off, or whatever. We'd just put them through the straighteners. Then, you'd have to look for rejects, you know, some of them that you'd have to throw away. There'd be slivers in it, or some of them wouldn't be as wide as the others--similar to that. It wasn't just a job of just tie something up. No, no. There was a little responsibility in all of it. Georgia Cambridge: (Do you remember how you first heard that a job would be avail? able for women at the plant?) Yes. They had hired women iii the upper plant, as they called it, just marking plates at the plate mill. Well, you know, putting some numbers on some plates. So two friends of mine, Dorothy Armstrong and her sister Eth? el Jones, we said, well, we're going to ap? ply for jobs. So we marched over to the em? ployment office, put our names down. And they called Dorothy, and they called me this day. They didn't call her sister. They never did call her, 'cause I'll tell you, she was very, very tiny. We weren't too big, but we had a little bit more weight. But we couldn't get those jobs (in the plate mill). That's one of the reasons I didn't stay. So, time to go to work, I had to report to the coke oven batteries. First place and only place. And Dorothy's husband worked in the plant, John Armstrong. He said, "They're going to send you women down in the batteries! We men don't want to be sent to the batteries." He said, "That's awful." So anj? rway, we said we were going to try it. We went. So, I didn't stay, but Dorothy stayed. But we asked, "How come we can't get a job down in the plate mill or in the upper plant?" And they said, "Oh well, that's filled up." Later, one of the foremen or something was talking to John, and he was saying, "Why are they sending all the black women down at the coke ovens batter? ies?" "Oh," he says, "it's not our fault, but the white girls up here said they're not going to work with black women." Well, at that time we were called Negroes. "They're not going to work with the Ne? groes because they're not going to use the same bathrooms." So, that'll tell you we've come a long way. (So that may have been the reason?) There was no other reason. What other reason could it have been? There was never a black woman got on up in the upper plant. Everyone that got hired on the plant dur? ing the war that was black--they went to the batteries. (There were never any white women at the coke ovens?) Oh yes, a couple. A couple foreign girls. (But not Scotch women?) No, not to my knowledge, no. (You were told by one person there that it was because the white women wouldn't work with the blacks. But I wonder if it wasn't plant policy or the male workers, rather than the



women workers. Because I was under the impression that there was a time when black men could only get certain jobs at the steel plant.) That's true. I've been here a long time, and I know what went on. There were black men in the steel plant, qualified bricklayers--some of them had come from Barbados and they were real bricklayers. And at that time, and even after the war, there was no black man down in the steel plant with a bricklayer's job or collecting bricklayer's pay. They worked under the white men who were bricklayers. They were bricklayers, and the black men were helpers. (Had you ever had any job before you went to the steel plant?) No, no, I was married when I was 17. My husband was a watchmaker. But I'll tell you what: he wasn't in agreement with me putting my name down at the steel plant. He thought I had flipped. But I said, I'm going to go get a job, and we'll be able to buy a house for our kids. 'Cause we were paying rent then. He said the work was too hard for a woman. (But did he object to your working other places?) No. Well, there was no work for black women around at that time, except going and cleaning someone's house. At the coke ovens, you didn't work 8 hours. You had an hour on and an hour off. It was on the same shift, but one bunch did one hour and the next bunch did the next hour. And of course, they had a little shed for the women. You could go down there, you know, rest, your hour off. (Was the work that difficult that you needed an hour on and an hour off?) Oh, yes. Even the men had the hour off. There wasn't only the women doing that, men too--everyone got their hour off. But you were paid for 8 hours. (And they figured you did enough (9)