



1942 PROFILE

Twenty-seven-year-old April Holiday has moved to Huntsville, Alabama, to help the war effort and support herself making ammunition after her husband left their 49-acre Tennessee farm to fight against the Germans and the Japanese. Her annual salary is \$792.00.

Life at Home

- Born in Lincoln, Tennessee, April Holiday was named for the month she was conceived by her newly married parents in a honeymoon suite in Memphis.
- Her parents, both 14 at the time, had run away to get married against the advice of nearly everyone.
- Shy and beautiful, April always thought her name was special and grew up believing she was destined to do great things.
- After her father ran off with a neighbor woman, April dropped out of school in the sixth grade, even though she was the best reader in her class.
- April really didn't like the book work of school much, anyway, but she loved being with her friends and talking about who liked whom.
- She also loved listening to country music on the radio, drinking lemonade, but most of all, dancing, which was strictly prohibited in her mother's house unless you were alone.
- When April married at 16, she and Hal Holiday just knew that their love was greater than that of all the couples mentioned in the Bible and even Shakespeare.
- Since then they have struggled for nearly 11 years to make a financial success of their 49-acre farm, struggled to have a baby and struggled to get along.



April Holiday joined the war effort.

“I am interested in carrying on here while the boys do the fighting over there. It is not a question with me as to what I do, nor how hard I work. The harder I work for them here, the sooner they will come home.”

—Marie Owens,
a 31-year-old
employee of
Huntsville Arsenal
whose husband was
in the army

- Most of their spending money comes from an illegal still Hal and his daddy run; the consumption of the white lightning they make is also the source of many of the couple’s arguments.
- Like thousands of men across the South, Hal volunteered for the war immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor; he was ready to fight and eager to be out of Tennessee.
- Before he left for training camp 60 days later, Hal spent hours talking about what he planned to do personally to the first Jap or German he met; it helped keep his courage up.
- After Hal’s military bus pulled out in February 1942, leaving nothing but dust in its wake, April knew she was really alone and on her own—maybe forever.
- Hal left behind a failed tobacco crop, an aging mule, two plows and lots of farm debts.
- Winter had arrived in Tennessee, and their three-room, shotgun-style house on the edge of the farm needed a new roof.
- April knew one thing: if she was going to survive, she had to work, and working in the dress factory for a dollar a day wasn’t going to cut it.
- All she needed was an opportunity that did not resemble the swaying back end of a plowing mule or a noisy spinning machine.
- She read a story in the local newspaper about a new ammunitions plant hiring workers in Huntsville, Alabama.
- At the same time, U.S. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson announced plans to double the number of women hired in war jobs.
- April packed up and caught a bus to Alabama three days later; the farm could wait—opportunity was knocking.

I remember when I came to work here last April. I wanted to win the war, naturally. Who didn’t? . . . I thought of it in kind of an abstract way. Something that had to be done, but mostly by the boys at the front. You see, I hadn’t learned then about the battles of production and assembly lines as I have now. I hadn’t learned of the vital necessity of every able-bodied person doing their share no matter how small, and working! working! working! . . .

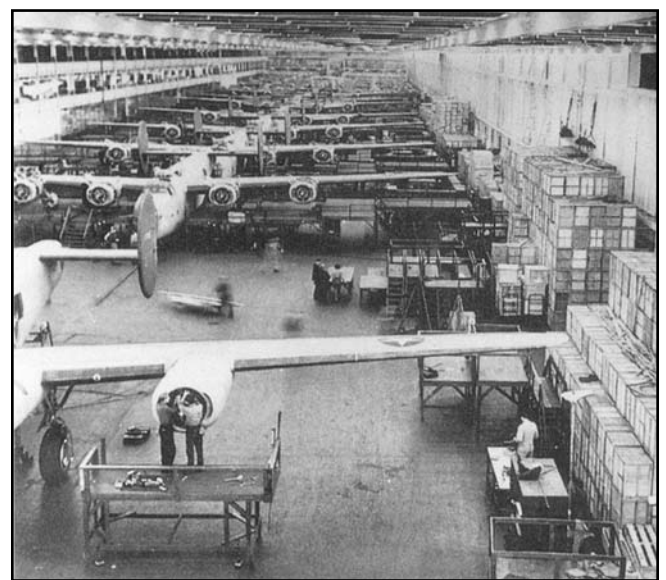
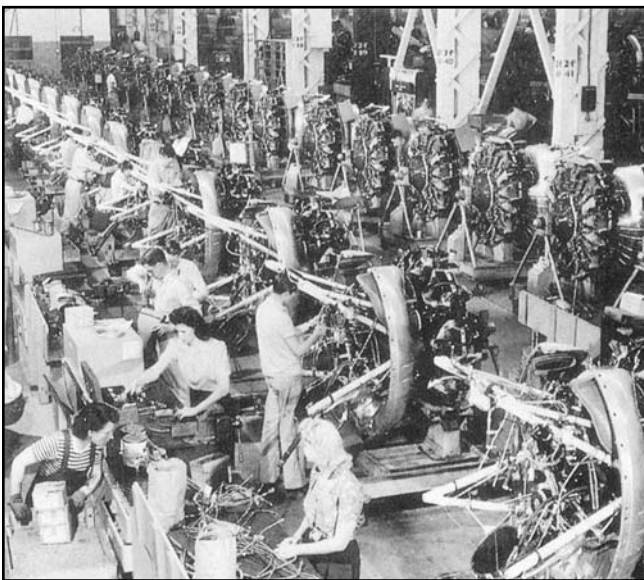
And when . . . [my husband] and my brother and my cousins and all the other boys come back home, I want to be able to look them in the eye with a clear conscience and say, “I did all I could.”

—Eugenia Holman, a Redstone Woman
Ordnance Worker (or WOW)
published in the *Redstone Eagle Post*,
May 1943

- At the last minute, her unmarried younger sister Amanda climbed aboard the bus; she, too, was ready for adventure and a steady paycheck.
- According to the newspaper, the ordnance installation in Alabama was looking for minor engineering aids, positions that involved testing and inspecting various metallic materials, mechanical parts, castings, assemblies and components for ordnance materials.
- On the bus they discussed what an ordnance factory actually makes, then laughed about their big adventure.
- They weren’t entirely sure, but the newspaper story clearly said plant workers were to be paid good wages in line with their particular jobs.
- April was pleased that her sister was going to be a part of her life in Alabama.
- April and Amanda filled out the applications, got hired and found an apartment in the upper room of a retired church secretary’s home—all within a week.
- Although reluctant to hire women at first, by the time the sisters applied, arsenal officials had discovered that jobs such as tool-crib operators, inspectors, clerks, forklift operators, guards, truck drivers, checkers and press operators could be performed satisfactorily by female employees.

Life at Work

- Before coming to Huntsville Arsenal, April Holiday had only worked at a dress plant in Tennessee, where she earned one dollar for 11 hours' work each day, out of which she paid \$0.25 daily for a ride to work.
- The army is paying female production line employees \$3.60 a day, though it is lower than the men's pay of \$4.40 a day.
- The army pays even higher wages for certain jobs deemed more hazardous, such as the production of deadly mustard gas.
- The men who work in mustard gas production are paid \$5.76 a day, while women workers are paid \$4.40 a day.
- April had no plans to work there, even at higher pay.
- The eyes and skin of the people employed in that area, April noticed, appeared yellow, and often, the workers looked "just as pitiful as could be."
- Another place to avoid, April learned quickly, was the section that makes colored smoke grenades which are dyed different colors—yellow, purple and green.
- Townspeople in Huntsville not affiliated with the arsenal make fun of the workers and do not understand why they would come to town with such odd shades of hair and skin.
- For security purposes, all workers have to wear different-colored badges to identify the area of the arsenal in which they work.
- Workers are often asked to stay only in their area and not wander through the plant, no matter how curious they might be.
- When April and Amanda began making ammunition, they were put on the production lines with minimal training, since most tasks had to be learned on the job.
- Because of the nation's demand for soldiers, many of the workers on the lines at Huntsville Arsenal are women, most of whom wear trousers to work.
- With her first paycheck, April paid her rent, and with her second, she bought work trousers.
- Even on the farm, April wore dresses most days, since pants seemed so improper.
- She loved the change and felt deliciously naughty, though she did not tell Hal in her weekly letters about her change in dress or about the men she met at the factory.



Across America, women have been hired to meet the production goals demanded by the war.



The few men assigned to the factory attract considerable attention during work breaks.

- The few male workers and assigned military men working in the factory attract considerable attention, especially during work breaks.
- Now that April was part of the Chemical Warfare Service in Huntsville, she understood that her motivation was both economic and patriotic.
- She liked to say publicly, “With all the boys going into the service and fighting for me, surely I can support the war by providing ammunition,” but privately she loved making money that was all hers to keep or spend, and thoroughly enjoyed her financial independence.
- She and Amanda were even helping their landlord prepare a victory garden on the vacant lot near their home.
- The plan was to be able to grow enough food to help in the war effort, which was everyone’s business.
- Within six weeks of becoming employed at Huntsville Arsenal, both April and Amanda were involved in one of the installation’s worst industrial accidents.
- On the day of the accident, the two were assigned to work in Warehouse 642, where Huntsville Arsenal’s first production pilot line for the four-pound M-54 thermate incendiary bomb is located.
- The Huntsville Arsenal is well known for its vast production of gel-type incendiaries.
- That day, April was assigned a position on the filling machine in the middle of the long warehouse, temporarily replacing the woman who usually worked there.
- Amanda was working on a mixing machine at one end of the building.
- At 11:50 a.m., April heard a loud explosion.
- She looked up from her work, saw a blaze, and jumped from her stool to run.
- She fell down, but was able to regain her feet and run out of the burning building.
- By the time she reached the exit, she was on fire, but was caught by some men who extinguished the flames.
- About 30 other people also suffered burns from the accident.
- Because of the severity of her injuries, April was taken to Huntsville Hospital, where she remained for seven months.
- The army paid all the expenses associated with her stay.
- Warehouse 642 was completely destroyed by the fire spawned by the explosion.
- Her sister was the only fatality.
- Because of the highly sensitive and secret nature of the work being done at Huntsville Arsenal, no public reports of the explosion and massive fire were made.
- Security awareness is highly emphasized at every turn.

- Signs throughout the arsenal read: “What you see and what you hear, when you leave, leave it here.”
- After the explosion, the manufacture of the M-54 bomb at Huntsville Arsenal was halted.
- When April returned to work after her long convalescence, she was no longer assigned to the factory floor, but was asked to work in personnel doing timekeeping.
- Most mornings, April is still very tense about going to work, and sensitive about her burns.
- The scars on her leg and back may always be visible, she fears.
- She is especially nervous on rainy days because the “goop” or gel-type incendiary chemical is more prone to ignite in that kind of weather.
- Even though she writes Hal every week, she has not heard from him in months; she does not even know if he realizes she was injured and that her sister is dead.

A woman was placed on the job here, another there, until it was no unusual thing to see shifts on the fill-and-press lines consisting of about 50 percent women. They did their jobs well, and kept up their end of the work so that the remaining men were often hard put to it in order to keep up with them.

Then, one of the shift supervisors had the idea to form an all-girl line as an experiment. The experiment worked and today, the 10-girl crew in the fill-and-press building . . . is breaking all production records . . .

These girls are all handling a man’s job. Every one of them believes she has a personal stake in this war. Their morale is about the highest at the arsenal. They are expert press operators, ball table operators, and they handle these 124-pound to 150-pound pallets with the ease and efficiency of old-timers. . . . Each one of them is capable of substituting for the other in case of need....This spirit of knowing their assigned job well, and the job of the girl working next to them, has made every one of them valuable operators.

—Newspaper reports on the “Modern Amazons,”
Huntsville Arsenal, August 1945

Life in the Community: Huntsville, Alabama

- When the federal government announced that an ammunition factory was to be built in Huntsville, Alabama, in 1941, the city’s fire trucks raced through the town delivering an “Extra” edition of the local newspaper.
- Everyone knew that the construction of a \$40 million war plant would transform life in this quiet town in northern Alabama.
- Within a month, the army’s Chemical Warfare Service broke ground on the new chemical munitions manufacturing and storage facility named Huntsville Arsenal.
- In anticipation of war, the arsenal was designed to supplement the production of the army’s only other chemical manufacturing plant at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland.
- Huntsville Arsenal is the sole manufacturer of colored smoke munitions.
- The facility is also noted for its vast production of gel-type incendiaries and toxic agents such as mustard gas, phosgene, lewisite, white phosphorous, and tear gas.

