

Parr, Aprons for Overalls
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Ann Parr
926 Pheasant Run
Lindsborg, KS 67456
785 342 0545
annparr@sbcglobal.net

526 Words

Aprons for Overalls

by

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Thelma Baldock loved taking care of her home in Kansas. She liked to dust her furniture, wash the windows, and wax the floors. She put on her apron and made a cake with her electric mixer, fried chicken in her skillet, and put peaches in the canning jars in her basement.

But on December 7, 1941 the Japanese attacked the U. S. navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. "What will happen to us?" Thelma cried. She soon decided it was no longer enough for her to stay home and cook and clean. But what would she do?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war on Japan. Right away, U.S. men were called into military service. Who would do their jobs while they were gone?

"I will," Thelma answered, just as many other women like her decided they could go to work too.

At first, Thelma wasn't sure she wanted to leave Kansas and her comfortable home. She was strong enough to do laundry in a washing machine with a hand-cranked wringer. "But," she said, "I didn't know if I could lift heavy pieces of metal if I had to."

Thelma knew how to starch and iron clothes after drying them on a clothesline and make homemade meals from scratch. "But," she said again, "what if I had to know how to read factory plans or grease big machines?"

President Roosevelt said the country needed women like her to make airplanes, tanks, and ships. So Thelma decided to take a chance. "I will trade my apron for overalls," she declared.

At St John's Shipyard in Oregon, Thelma became a welder and helped build ships. Her boss asked her to weld a U-shaped piece of metal the first day after her training was done. She tugged at her leather gloves, pulled on a welding helmet, and looked out its glass shade. She put the electrode rod in its holder and drew a strong, smooth line. She said a prayer that the weld would hold.

More women like Thelma drove large cranes that moved heavy equipment. Some ran hydraulic lifts that hauled machine parts from one place to another. Still others made holes in aircraft for rivets that held the airplane pieces together. By 1944, Thelma was one of 19 million working women who did what the President asked.

Many thought Thelma and her working friends would go to their homes when the war was over in 1945. But Thelma enjoyed welding. "I've always liked learning new things and it was good to earn my own money."

Thelma returned to Kansas. Instead of getting a job she'd go to every day, she welded farm machinery and lawn chairs. She repaired milking machine parts for a dairy farmer with her welding tools. She wrote and sold a cookbook and learned to hunt deer and wild turkeys for her Thanksgiving dinners. She even took lessons to fly an airplane.

Today, at age 90, Thelma is glad she was a welder. "I liked doing a new job that no one thought I could do. But most of all, I am proud that I helped my country win World War II."