

Behind the Mask



Thousands of Women Who Never Worked Before Are Toiling in Akron Factory Making Gas Masks for Sammies.

By T. N. T.

"I AM here to see how the gas masks for the American army are being made," I said to the doorman as I entered The B. F. Goodrich Rubber Co. factory, at Akron, Ohio. "But—" he began, and before he had gone further, I had supplied him with my credentials and in a few moments a guide appeared.

The doorman was evidently accustomed to greeting people who wanted to see what I had come to see, for, as we disappeared down the long corridor I could feel him looking doubtfully after me, even though the "big chiefs" upstairs had O. K.'d my presence.

I soon learned that my guide knew little or nothing about gas masks, except that he did know where they were made. As we entered one of the long rooms on a high floor of one of the factory buildings, the foreman accepted my "passport" with a hearty hand-clasp and a smile.

"It is good to be able to talk to someone about what we are doing here," he said, "for it is very seldom that visitors are admitted. You see, we are kept very busy, and shall have to hurry through," he continued in an apologetic tone.

The moment I had entered the room I detected the clean, fresh odor of the khaki-colored rubberized fabric and the hundreds of cement pots which stood at attention before the workers. The hum of the big stitching machines reminded me of a huge clock that was ticking at the rate of a thousand seconds a minute.

"Here is one that has just passed the final inspection," the foreman advised, holding up one of the finished masks. "It is the very latest model."

Masks Change Often Just Like Fashions

"But aren't they all alike?" I inquired.

"No, these are quite different from the first ones which we made," he continued.

I soon learned that General Pershing, on the outskirts of Paris, is the real dictator of the type of the Sammie's gas headgear. The one I was holding



Set for a Hun onslaught. French and American forces in Picardy waiting for a gas wave to pass, the Hun announcement of attack.—(International News Photo.)

has been modeled after a sample mask which had been received from Pershing's headquarters two days before. It was designed to successfully combat the newest gas the Huns are using.

I should tell you first of all that a gas mask is not easy to make, but that I found the system of building them in this one factory to have reached a state of speed and efficiency that would outrival the so-called German efficiency. Our American girls are better and more thorough workers. These are, at least.

The woven fabric, from which the masks are made, passes through three distinct and important operations before it reaches the big machines which perfectly cut it into the 15 different designs and pieces.

But perhaps, thus far, the most important operation was the rubberizing of the fabric. This fortifies the fabric so that

it will resist the Hun's gas. You would readily think so if you saw the huge steel rolls forcing the almost liquid rubber into the pores of the fabric.

Many Operations Needed for Safety

From the cutting or stamping machines, thousands of each individual piece are loaded upon small electric driven trucks and their trailers and these pass down the aisles among the girl workers, distributing great quantities of each piece to the groups which use them in assembling the masks.

For instance, in the very beginning, the girls who begin the assembly of the masks are given two pieces which have been cut and marked so that errors are almost impossible. These are assembled with rubber cement. The mask then passes rapidly to the next group where another part is added. Inspection between operations safeguard against the possibility of any defective masks reaching the Sammies in France.

After seeing all this, the remaining operations (for there are 20 in all, in making a gas mask) appeared to be nothing unusual for I had become accustomed to seeing each detail carefully and quickly carried out.

Society Girls Are Working for U. S.

But I was more interested in the workers than I was in the mask, for I had now seen the masks being made, had actually held one in my own hands; yes, I had even slipped it over my head and wished for a mirror to see whether my "boss" would have recognized me if I had walked up to the city desk at that moment.

"But where did you get all of these young women?" I asked the foreman, as I gazed down row after row, now and then hesitating to study a face that did not seem to be one of an accustomed worker.

"They come from all walks of life," said the foreman. "That one," he continued, pointing to a young woman, "had her name in society col-

umns of our local newspapers almost every day until she came here. She's only 20 and, since I see that you wonder what brought her here, I'll tell you, and the same story applies to hundreds of others. Less than two months ago she marched down to the train with him, for he was going to the cantonment.

"What could she do to help bring him back? She had been a busy Red Cross worker making bandages and other hospital needs. She had the vision of that work. But there were hundreds of other girls and women who could do that. Why couldn't she do something that would reach 'him' before he needed the Red Cross bandage?"

"Why couldn't she work in a factory and help make some of the real sinews of war?"

"She determined that she could, so she came to us and we put her at the job she is now working on. She doesn't want advancement. Many times I have tried to get her to accept a place as supervisor over a dozen of her fellow workers, but her reply always is, 'I would rather do this for it keeps my hands and my mind busy and I feel that I am really doing something to help win this war.' And this seems to be the feeling of most of the workers."

"Meester, look!"

A dark, glistening face was turned to me and from an up-raised hand, very coarse—the hand of a woman to whom life had given a heritage of work—the hand of a woman whom you are most apt to meet scouring the halls of an office building in the evening, or dusting off some man's desk—dangled a completed mask.

"My boy John—he fight. I make thees for heem." There was a touch of exultation in her voice—that touch of pride that goes with motherhood when she makes anything "special" for her boy.

War plays funny pranks—maybe that mask would reach John. The girl or woman who makes masks in the Goodrich plant takes particular pride in her enlistment. Applications for employment in this highly im-

portant branch of the service come from all parts of the country. Women are willing to give up the comforts of their front porch for a place in this field. Knitting needles and socks become prosaic things—

reached 15 feet high. You can see now that we have plenty of material."

All Goes Back to Uncle Sam

But these patriotic young women are doing more than working for Uncle Sam. They are saving for him and loaning their money to help win the war. Great, long Liberty Bond Honor Rolls hang



The motor has not released the horse from war service. Being indispensable, it, too, must be protected.—(Underwood & Underwood Photo.)

to touch a gas mask, to make a gas mask, to know that there is something that has the properties of life and death, to be its maker—that is infinite!

There is a psychology about gas mask manufacture. As you pick one up, imagination glimpses a khaki-clad figure "out there" with gas shell bursting and gas wave advancing and a tremor runs through you. Suppose his gas mask had a leak?

Never fear. So long as women make the gas masks there will never be a leak.

When word went leaping across the English channel, in April of 1915, that the Hun had flooded the British lines with an insidious green cloud that sent men "west" in convulsions and agony, British history wrote into its romantic pages more than a new epoch in warfare—it chronicled the age of the fighting woman. From that moment woman became a part of the "line."

All in Bloomers the Practical Dress

While I was standing in the aisle watching these busy Goodrich girls a gong sounded and they bounded to their feet simultaneously, marching just as the Sammies march, to their lunch.

The foreman and myself followed them into the company's big cafeteria and sat down to a table with several of these work girls. I almost forgot to mention that they were all dressed alike. Society girls, work girls, all of them wearing the khaki-colored bloomer suits. They told me that the suits were more comfortable than dresses and that they didn't mind the "looks."

As the girls went back to their work and the foreman and myself sat alone at the table, I thought it would be a good opportunity to learn how well Uncle Sam is equipped to furnish the raw materials for gas masks.

"See that big, new-looking building across the court," he said, pointing to a five-story structure. "The company finished that building about a year ago," he continued, "using the first floor as a modern garage for our large fleet of trucks and employees' cars. Suddenly, one morning the word came to clear out all automobiles and trucks and, before night, this same floor was crowded with huge rolls of fabric and other raw materials for war products, and these piles

about the walls telling, in their silent manner, of the sacrifices that are being made at the work tables beneath them. No, there are no slackers among these girls. At the top of each list is this inscription: "This is a 100 per cent Third Liberty Bond Department," and before many more months roll by, these will be replaced with Fourth Liberty Bond Honor Rolls of the 100 per cent kind. And the women and girls are doing it.

Before leaving the factory, I learned that the company had received orders for gas masks reaching a total of 350,000 and, in addition to this, orders for small parts in quantities from 500,000 to 2,500,000. And this is only one of the big factories making gas masks.

First Big Order Turned Out in Ten Days

A prominent Goodrich official told me he attended a conference in Washington, shortly after America entered the war, at which army and navy heads discussed gas mask manufacture on a large scale. Scarcely two weeks later, he said, a government official visited the Goodrich factory and brought with him a sample mask of which the government required 25,000 in ten days.

"And you can bet that the government had these masks within ten days, although we had never made one before," said the official. "It is gratifying to us to feel that the government believed that we were capable of this great emergency."

It is also a matter of interest to note that Goodrich made the first gas mask for Uncle Sam in the present war.



Sewing the headgear that mean life or death to Sammies. "Make them Right," is the slogan of these girls.—(B. F. Goodrich Photo.)