

LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

B. S. Bacon Toys, Llanrwst (1954-57)

Interviewee: VN019 Nancy Denton

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Interviewer: Kate Sullivan on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Nancy confirmed her name, address and date of birth, namely 11/04/1939. Vanda MacMillan and Nancy's sister, Dorothy, were also present, and they contributed throughout to Nancy's story.

Nancy was born in the street she lives in now, of a Welsh father and English mother. She was one of nine children, most of her brothers were Welsh Guardsmen, Royal Artillery and RAF. She has three siblings still living. She went to the National School in Llanrwst and at the Central School, also in Llanrwst. She left at 15 and went into the Toy Factory, though she did work at the Swallow Falls Hotel, helping her mother wash up, between the ages of 11 and 14. She was paid for this but not much.

She went down to the Toy Factory to ask for a job and had an interview with a Mr Freshwater, though everyone knew Mr Bacon as he lived in the town and was 'a nice' and 'a good-looking' man. She doesn't really remember the interview but says she was 'chuffed, so excited' about starting work. **“It's work, isn't it, you've got to have wages, you know. But I didn't know, you know, how to knock a nail in.”**

She didn't work there long she says, but can't remember exactly how long. She knew everyone when she started, friends and cousins. Her first wage was one pound and ten shillings. **“Oh, it was lovely taking it home and giving my mother the pound note. I can't remember what I did with the ten shillings, I think I used to buy sweets.”**

They gave her some training. She ended up doing the blackboards and easels because she was tall. She says you had to learn, to build up “if you wanted to do a doll's house and that, you know.” They did beautiful dolls houses, boards and easels, garages, farms. There were three different types of houses **“all wood, not plastic, and painted to perfection.”** All the toys were wood and they used to do the wood from scratch downstairs.

They were quite a few workers, upstairs and down, men and women, about 30 Nancy thinks. The carpenters worked downstairs, with the machines, and the wood went upstairs then. At the back was a big warehouse. The toys went all over the country apparently. They were boxed up at the factory,

“There were more girls who had more training than we had to do that bit. We were just the ones doing the bits, you know.’

Nancy's job was knocking in nails by hand to make the blackboards and easels. They also had to sand the wood down and use staple guns, which they thought were scary and dangerous. The wood wasn't all that thick but the staple guns used to 'jump.' Sometimes they got staples in their hands. She doesn't remember any rules regarding health and safety but there were guards on the ends of the machines. If anyone got a staple in their thumb, they got it out and put a plaster on it from the first aid box.

Nancy worked from nine till five, though she can't remember the hours exactly, with an hour off for lunch. She came home for dinner or she took sandwiches. There was no canteen **“flipping heck, no, there was nothing like that.”** The factory was quite basic but they had fun, it was an old building and there was one toilet only for everyone. The bosses office was upstairs, apart. Mr Bacon was the 'top man' who owned it but Mr Freshwater was there all the time; he was the manager :

“And he was good, you know, he was stern. You moved when you saw him coming. I liked him very much but you still had to watch your ps and qs.”

9.55 Nancy was living at home with her parents. Her other siblings had all moved out. Her mother was working at a 'washer upper' and her father in the lead mines, after being a coal miner in Wrexham. Nancy's wages helped the family finances:

“My mother and father used to smoke, you see, in them days. And they were Woodbines, I can always remember, and there used to a blue bag on the door, in the back, and she used to keep her pegs in it, so when I used to take my wages to my mother, the pound, and she used to give me ten shillings, and I used to buy twenty Woodbines, and I used to put one in the peg bag for her.”

Nancy lived at home the whole time she was there, about three years.

They didn't have to clock in - **“We'd sneak in in case we were late.”** They weren't often late though. They weren't that strict on time keeping as Mr Freshwater wasn't there in the mornings so it didn't matter, but her mother made sure she went to work on time. If she was late, the girls used to let her in. One girl was a supervisor, Rita Monks, and she was stern, and she supervised upstairs and downstairs too.

Nancy never did houses. They didn't have a choice about what type of toys they did. Everyone was paid the same, she thinks, but she doesn't know about the men downstairs.

She got married when she was seventeen, this was after she left the factory. Her husband was in the army and she met him when he came home on leave. She left Llanrwst then to live in Bedfordshire where her husband was from.

16.00 She used to socialize with the girls from the factory, go to the pictures or dances in the church hall. She didn't have to wear a uniform; she wore old clothes to work as it was a dirty job, dust and paint, there were no fans or anything there. She can't remember any heating. There were windows **“not a lot, like, but there was windows, and downstairs it was dark there, where they used to do the wood.”**

The relationship between the workers was good on the whole **“everybody used to have their ups and downs, like, it's only natural, but it was alright. We were all the same, really. One or two who used to think they were better than us, because, you know, but no, we were alright.”**

Lots of the workers lived in Cae Person, a popular estate in Llanrwst. When asked about any banter between the male and female workers, Nancy said : “Well, we were too busy upstairs, we couldn't go down and have a *jingle*, like, you know what I mean.” But she and Vanda went on to say they'd always have a laugh.

They weren't allowed to talk while working **“no way, no, Rita Monks would be there like a shot.”** Nancy can't remember listening to the radio either and Vanda said they wouldn't hear it anyway, because of the banging of hammers and clicking of staple guns.

They worked Monday to Friday and sometimes Saturday mornings if there was an order. There was no trade union and they don't remember anyone ever trying to start one. If there was a disagreement, they worked it out themselves with the managers but neither of them can remember any disagreements anyway.

They didn't work shifts. They had a tea break, about ten minutes, morning and afternoon, but they used to drink their tea by the machines while they were working, as there was no canteen. **“You stood by your table and drank it.”** There was a kettle and the workers took their own teabags and coffee.

They don't remember working overtime and don't know if they got bonuses. They weren't on piece work but they had a set number of items they had to do. Sometimes things got broke and it would

be put on one side but it wasn't wasted she says. They had all different kinds of wood there.

As regards holiday, they had the bank holidays of Easter and Christmas. She can't remember an annual holiday in the summer but they think they must have had them. Coming up to Christmas would be busy, i.e. October and November.

22.50 Nancy said that when she was on holiday, she'd collect wood for the fire, or collect blackberries to sell them to the lady across the road. They'd go swimming and Vanda said "Nancy was known for making a bonfire by the river." And Nancy added "**The children's mothers wouldn't let them go swimming unless I was there.**" She was later a life guard for ten years in the swimming pool at Llanrwst, she was a good swimmer. She was 43 when she got that job "best job I ever had."

She has done a variety of work but not factory work again after she left Bacon's at seventeen. She didn't really like working in the factory "**but it was a job and you had to take it. Some parts of it I liked and some I didn't.**" She did like "**doing my easels, yes, I used to like doing that.**" But she says she got bored with the routine, the same thing all the time.

There were no perks, if there was a reject they couldn't take it "**no way, could you heck, no.**" There was no bonus at Christmas "**we didn't even know what that was.**" When asked if she felt the workers were treated unfairly she said "**Oh, yes, we all did. Some were better off than others, though, like Rita and the manager. And a nicer job and an easier job, some had jobs sitting down, see.**" Nancy stood up all day but says it was alright and hasn't had any long term problems due to this.

Most of the girls there were young and single, the only older woman was the supervisor, Rita, as she was older. She thinks another girl, Helen Rowley, might also have been married. She doesn't remember if any of the men were married either.

The toys were good quality and a well-known brand, Bacon's they knew it as, but it might have been Valley Toys. They had a badge on them.

Days off for sickness were allowed, but they can't remember having sick pay; if they took a day off they lost a day's wages.

28.00 Nancy used to smoke but they couldn't smoke inside the factory; they used to sneak out for a cigarette - "**You'd go outside and a little whiff.**" She walked to work as she lived nearby. Most of the workers were from Llanrwst. The factory didn't have any social club or activities, not even a Christmas party.

Nancy was happy to leave when she got married. She is still in contact with some of her ex-factory colleagues and says they were "**all the same in them days, no-one had anything better than you,**" and there was nothing posh about them. Her sister Dorothy mentioned a fellow worker called Margaret Jones (VN024) who used to 'keep all the wooden patterns for the things that needed making.'

Duration : 30 minutes