

LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI / VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Capacitors, curtains and ceramic factories, Wrexham (1972-79)

Interviewee: VN036 Anita Roberts

Date: 15: 08: 2014

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

Anita confirmed her name, address and date of birth, namely 11/08/1957.

Anita's mother, Nesta Davies (VN025), her brother Peter Davies (VN035) and her sister Julie Allen were also present.

Anita left school at 14, she liked some subjects and disliked others, and at the time all she wanted to do was get a job and earn some money, so she left early. Her parents didn't mind her leaving as they knew she didn't like school.

Her first job was at Filmcap where her mother, Nesta, worked and she got her the job, though she had to have an interview for it. She remembers going on this line where they used to have do things very quickly and but she couldn't do it. **“It was the speed they were going and I just didn't like the factory. To me it was a depressing place to be in.”** She wasn't sure what the factory made, or what her mother did, but thinks it was 'electrical things.' She was only there a week and she told her mother she couldn't go back.

She was on a different production line to Nesta, making little components, and on her line she was sitting there and everything was going past so fast that she just couldn't do it, “and it upset me so much, I said to me mum, 'I can't, I can't go back, I just don't like it,' and I thought to myself at the time, how does my mum work here? To me it seemed such a depressing place this factory even though, the girls were quite nice to me, I just didn't like it in there. I've worked at quite a few factories since but that one I just didn't like it.”

From there, Anita went to work in a pet shop in Ruabon, as she loved animals and thought it would be an ideal job. Some of the animals were exotic - monkeys, chinchillas, parrots, even a baby gorilla once - and she doesn't know much about the owner but he 'disappeared' one night, taking all the animals with him “and I went to work the next morning and there was nothing there, it was all shut up. I was devastated.”

After this, she had a friend who was working in an electronics factory making capacitors to go into machinery, and this friend told her there was a job going. She was still only 15. She had an

interview and got the job and she started off making small components; she'd have a coil of copper wire on her knees, and some different coloured wires, and she'd have a plastic casing, and she had to solder the ends of these wires to the copper wires, then 'roll some on,' put the wire through a 'groove' then solder another piece of wire onto it, and in the end you'd have what looked like a cotton bobbin she said, like a cotton reel, and you'd fill it with the copper wire and put all the wires on the side of it, and then put the last wire on and cover it in tape and then it used to go in machines. She wasn't sure what exactly these were but they called them 'capacitors.'

This factory was next door to Filmcap (which also made capacitors), where her mother still worked, in a long wooden building and Anita loved it there. **The job was so interesting she said “as you worked your way up, as you got to know the work, you'd work your way up and you'd go on these big machines,** and the capacitors were like this, really massive, and the wire was about as thick as my finger and you used to have to hold it with both hands, and you'd be pulling it, you know, you didn't put coloured wires on those, you used to have a big piece of copper wire sticking out and you'd have a big pair of pliers and they were huge, absolutely huge they were. **But when you'd worked yourself up to those machines, you were top of the class, like, in the factory and everybody wanted to work themselves up to that machine. It was a really good job.”**

They trained her at first and she worked her way up to the bigger machines. Her wage was only about £2 or £3 a week but to her it was good, because that was good money then. **She still lived at home with her parents and her mother didn't take any money off them.** “She was really good to us, she spoiled us.” Anita can't remember how much she earned when she was on the bigger capacitors but thinks that she got so much more on top of her usual wages.

While she found Filmcap depressing and dark, the new factory was nicer, lighter, with a lot of younger people working there. “Perhaps it was me, cos I was so young, but they seemed very strict in Filmcap. But I think it was, it was the first machine I went on and it was going so fast, it just put me off completely, you know. I think it spoilt it for me because I most probably would have been alright if I'd been doing a different job, it was just that I was on this line and I just couldn't do it. But when I was doing this other job, I really enjoyed it and I really went to town, you know, tried my best to do it as best I could.”

10.30 She knew some people in the factory before she went there, as it was in a different building at first, and then they needed somewhere bigger so they moved it down by Filmcap and she got to know some of the girls then. She said they had a good laugh in the factory. **She did something one day that she has been ashamed of since. “Because it was really mean, but it didn't make any difference to the lady I did it to. I mean, I was only young. It used to be quite warm in there and we were chewing chewing gum constantly and I can remember this lady, she used to be behind me on one of the machines, and she was a lot older than me, she must have been in her fifties. And she had false teeth and she used to eat the chewing gum that you can eat with false teeth, a certain type of chewing gum. And I changed it for an ordinary chewing gum, I was only a kid really, I was only fifteen, to me it was funny, but it didn't make any difference really, but it was an awful thing to do.”** The woman didn't notice, luckily, but Anita has felt guilty about it all her life.

Even though it was fun, it was hard work, as they had their targets to meet and had to get so many out by the end of the day. If they failed to reach the target, there was no penalty but that was what the company wanted them to do, meet the target set every day. **All the girls tried hard to reach this target. There was an inspection line and all the girls knew when their particular box went over to the inspection line and would be waiting on tenterhooks to see if everything was alright.** “And they'd shake their head at you and say 'this one hasn't gone through, you'll have to do it again.’” When there was so many in a box they would go over for inspection, every single box,

and they'd test every component to make sure they were working. Anita had one or two boxes that came back but on the whole her work was 'quite good.' **Not a lot of stuff came back and the girls took a lot of pride in their work, especially on the big machines. Anita said they were all good workers there.**

There were a few men, in maintenance and on the really big machines, which the girls would have found too hard to work with, but the workforce was mainly female. The workforce was about 200 but she doesn't remember it as being noisy in the factory, and they could all talk to each other. The machines had a pedal, like a sewing machine, and she'd hold the wire and make sure it was all even, and then solder it. **She had a few solder burns, she says, where it had dropped on her knees “I remember once I was sitting by one of the machines and a wasp went down the front of my top and stung me, oh, it was awful, it was really painful.”** They wore overalls, blue nylons, which wasn't really good when they were working with molten metal and they used to have a lot of blisters on their legs from burns. **But they never went to the first aid room “No, you get used to it. It's like looking after bees, I suppose, you get stung but you get used to it, don't you.”** She can't remember if the company supplied the overalls, which were blue with a darker blue stripe, but thinks they did, as the company merged with Filmcap later on and Filmcap supplied the workers with overalls.

16.50 The girls chatted while they worked, about things like boys or where they were going at the weekend. The workforce was half and half as regards age; about half were older though they started at the same time as the younger girls because it was a new building. It sort of went up in stages, the young, then the 20s, 30s, 40s, said Anita. **There used to be 'cliques' she said, that could 'cut you off' and make you feel quite uncomfortable. Anita didn't care much about them “I just wanted to go to work and get my wages. And my friends were my friends, you know, they stayed my friends. But there could be some, you know, they could make you uncomfortable if you didn't fit it, you had to stick up for yourself. They were cliquey, they could pick on people, it was worse than the school yard sometimes cos women can be nasty when they are working in a factory. I don't know what men are like when they're working together but women can be quite cliquey.”**

Anita's hours were 7.30 to 4.30. **She didn't work shifts and there was overtime on a Saturday if you wanted it. Anita often went in on Saturday morning because she wanted more money “That's what it was all about, ha, ha. Mind you, I enjoyed the company as well.”**

There was a basic canteen, no food, but they used to take their snapping. There was a tea and coffee machine but no cook. They had a ten minute break in the morning, half an hour for lunch, and ten minutes in the afternoon. Anita used to get the bus into work, though her father used to take her sometimes, with her mother, in the car.

Nobody ever stole any of the components that she can remember, as she doesn't know what they'd do with them anyway, **but she does remember that some money was stolen from somebody's bag in the locker room “and that was awful, cos everybody felt guilty.”** She can't remember the outcome.

She was in the factory for about two years. She got married then and finished and they played a joke on her. **“That's what they used to do to girls when they were getting married, they used to get them at the end of the day, and I thought I'd got away with, ha, ha, I didn't. They grabbed hold of me and they tied me with tape and they put me in this trailer, which had wheels and a handle on it and they covered me in flour and sprayed stuff all over me, like shaving foam, and I was absolutely covered, and they put me on the main road, on the pavement, and left me there. That was what they used to do you when you were leaving to get married. It was quite**

funny really, everybody was looking at me and beeping their horns as they went past. That was the norm in the factory.” They came and let her go eventually and Anita had done this to others too.

She got married in 1976 and she left the factory then. She had worked for a year in a curtain factory, cutting curtains between the pet shop and the capacitors, though she's not sure where or when. She enjoyed the curtain factory too, and that's where she took the end of her finger off with a curtain cutter. The cutters were sharp, like woodcutters in a round disk, as most of the curtains were of brushed nylon. She had to hold it down and go along it with this electric cutter and she can remember it touching her but didn't realise she'd been cut until she saw all the blood over the curtains and then she realised she'd taken the top off her finger. **“But they just bandaged me up and I carried on.” They didn't send her to a doctor or to the hospital.**

24.20. She left the curtain factory when her friend told her about the job in the electronics factory. After she got married, she got a job in the ceramics factory (Unilator Technical Ceramics?), leaving because there was a job going in the ceramics factory that was afternoons and better money. She was two years in the ceramics factory but the last five months she was there, she was ill. The factory made ceramic pots to go on the top of pylons and her job was sweeping up the dust from these ceramic pots. She had a mask but it was one of the cheap paper kind and, one night, when she was finishing work after her 2-10pm shift she was waiting in the foyer for her husband to pick her up and she couldn't breathe properly, like a bad asthma attack. She went to the doctors and he signed her off for five months, putting her on a series of antibiotics. She was so weak she couldn't even walk up the stairs.

The doctor gave her a tablet that opened her chest up and she started bringing up this stuff that was “like white elastic, like chewing gum, that's exactly what it was like, chewing gum coming off my chest, and it took me months to get it off my chest, it was awful. I was so ill.” The doctor didn't say it was due to the dust in the factory and Anita didn't think anything about it either, that it might be connected, but looking back she thinks it was this dust.

She'd gone to the ceramics factory because the money was better than the electronics factory. Her job was cleaning the entire factory, in a team of four, sweeping up the dust after the production of these ceramic pylon pots. Some of the cleaners didn't even wear masks, said Anita, though she always did. She left this job because of her illness “I knew at the back of my mind that it couldn't have been anything else but the dust.”

After this, she became pregnant with her daughter, in 1979, and she didn't return to the factory. When her daughter was two, she went to the job centre and they put her on a community care programme, looking after house-bound people. This led her to a job in an old people's home when she was 27, on relief night work in Wrexham. A permanent job came up in this home and she took it and did that for the next twenty years. **She says care work is a lot harder than anything she ever did in the factory** and she developed a degenerative spine condition due to lifting immobile people. The care home sacked her because eventually she couldn't do her job because of her back problem and Anita didn't get any compensation or redundancy at all. “The union wouldn't fight for me, and I used to be a steward. But believe me, working for the council and working in a home is a lot harder than working in a factory because you've got to fight management constantly.”

She'd never been in a union in the factories. She was glad to leave the factory as she found care work more rewarding, even though it was harder. But care work was more money. “It was easier, factory work, because it wasn't emotionally draining.” Anita could go home at the end of the factory day and forget about it, which wasn't the case in the care home work.

Duration: 35 minutes