

## VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

### Freemans Cigars, Cardiff

**INTERVIEWEE:** VSE023 Frances Francis

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**INTERVIEWER:** Mandi O'Neill on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

My name is Frances Ellen Alice by birth – I was born in 56 Hewell Street in Grangetown and I went to St Paul's School. Also I was christened and married in St Paul's Church and my father and mother were married in St Paul's Church. My mother worked in the cigar factory, in the old cigar factory, which was in North Clive Street and I also went to work in Freeman's but Freeman's then had moved to Penarth Road.

My first job was in Cardiff Market in a butcher's shop – no, prior to that was Mr - Mr Griffiths. He used to sell cooked meats and cakes and come Christmas it would be pheasants and turkeys and all that. Then I was poached to work for a butchers in Cardiff Market called T J Morgan's which I worked there 'til I was – oh – sixteen? And then I got engaged and I wanted to earn more money so I decided that I would move then to Freeman's, which I did. And I worked there for two years until I got married and because of the travelling – I used to have to travel – I'd catch a bus from where I lived into Newport. Then I used to catch another bus then from Newport into Cardiff Central and then from Cardiff Central out to Freeman's. Well, I had to be in work by half-past seven so it was quite a long time, you know, travelling and then it was reversed to come home. So I said to my husband, I'll stay here 'til Easter so I can get my bonus and then I finish work then.

And how did you get the job through Freeman's?

Well, my friend was working at Freeman's and she said, oh why don't you work – she'd asked me prior to that years ago and I said, no, I don't want to work in a factory but because the money was so good, I decided then because I'd got engaged, that I needed to – you know – because we wanted to buy a house – which we did and that's how I came to go there. But my mother, she also worked in Freeman's but she - as I say - she worked in the old factory and she made it by hand whereas I was working on machinery. So it was totally different. It was harder then for them.

Going back to Freeman's now, when I first started – and I went in – oh, the smell hit me. It was, oh, sickly, really sickly. Because when you get into that environment you get used to it. So I was placed in what they call the making part where you had a press, the shape of a cigar which you had these big leaves which you had to get x amount out and you know, sort of, swish the leaf around. Anyway, six weeks training. Well I did my six weeks training and when I came out of training – I hadn't long come out of training – and there was a press on this machine which used to get blocked so you would squeeze it, pull it down and clean the press and it was brass, very heavy, then you'd put it back in; 'cause there was a box underneath which would do the cutting either end of the cigar so the bits would go in. So – anyway, apparently – this, this press had fallen into my bits of tobacco. So it was in a glass case when I was going past to go for my lunch and someone said, "oh yes, that's fallen out of the machine" see. So, anyway, I was called in – to the office with the manager – and he said, you know this, this is what's happened. How, you know, what did you do with the – what did you do with the press? I said, well, I took it out to clean and put it back as I thought and it's – obviously must have fallen in. So he said, well, he said, as you've just come out of training, he said, we'll give you a second chance. So, he said, now in future in you must call the engineer to come and sort it out which I did. And that press was on show for months and it was so embarrassing 'cause every time I used to have to pass and someone would say "oh look at that press" and I thought oh yes, that's me. But the canteen, we had lovely food in the canteen...

And did you have to pay for that, or..?

Yes, we had to pay for our meals. And the wash-hand basin where you went when you went to the cloakroom and come out, was huge – it was a big round one – I've never seen it before and I've never seen one since – and to get the water you press – there was a round bar went round and you just press on it and the water would come out to wash. Oh, it was all modern - you see it was a new factory so everything was modern then. And I say, that's the only story I can say about that.

How many women do you think worked there then?

Oh, there was hundreds. Oh, hundreds of people. Yes,

And from all over?

Oh, most – a lot of them – came from the valleys. Oh, and the valley girls always wore curlers – hair curlers – you never seen a valley girl without hair curlers – and apparently they used to hide the cigars in the curlers and some had been caught because we used to be searched – not every day but spot-checked, you know, you'd have a lady that would search you. So... why they bothered - whether they – ah - 'cause they would have been taking the ones that were finished. I mean where I worked – they had to be dried – you couldn't just, you know, put them in your curlers and take them because they weren't finished so obviously people must have been taking them when they were in the finishing end. You know, so, that's the little – that's the story of that.

And, so in terms of breaks and actually working in the factory – you know – did you have regular breaks?

Oh yes, if you – if you wanted to go to the toilet, you would have to call someone to take – to sit – while you know, to keep it going –

Oh, auto... of course...

Yeah, you had to keep it going, you know and - and you were timed mind, you were timed, you had to hurry up and back, and get back on there.

And so, would it have been quite noisy then?

Yeah, oh the machinery was very noisy. You could talk but you're shouting – it's not like you could talk, you know, like we are but you'd be shouting.

You couldn't have music playing or anything, there was nothing...

I think, if I remember correctly, there was music in the background, you know, but no, the making machinery, it was really noisy in there. But where the bits of tobacco go into this to go into another room was very quiet. Very, very quiet so you can imagine when that metal piece was going through to be - everything was being cut – horrendous noise. He said, it frightened the girls out of their wits, you know, 'cause they couldn't make out what it was. Course it's this blast piece...

So, was it dangerous then, I mean...

No, it wouldn't be dangerous – I suppose – no 'cause you had pedals that can – can control the presses coming down to press out the cigars and cut the leaf, no...

So if you moved away and took your foot of the pedal then that would stop the machine...

Yes, automatically – you didn't have to move away – you could just lift your foot up – you had control all the time.

And were they, sort of, quite hot on like health and safety or not particularly...

No, no – I don't think so. I think - I can't remember anyone having an accident...

That's good...

You know, no, no, I never seen anyone with an accident.

And also, there was nothing sort of bad for your health in the work? Nothing that affected you?

No, unless, oh I should imagine – dust, there was dust – you know, the tobacco dust – there would be that. Not that it, you know, it never bothered me and I've never known anyone to be ill through it. You know so... Yes, that's all I can say about Freeman's.

Well, did you have any like Christmas parties or social do's?

Yes, they did actually, yes. Because before I went to Freeman's, my friend's sister worked there as well and so when it was parties we were invited. We'd have to pay but we were invited to go to the parties. Don't ask me where they are now 'cause I can't remember where we went. But, oh, I think it was actually in – oh, was it in the factory – I can't remember.

Did they have a social club or...?

I really can't remember, no. My friend's – my best friend, she's passed away now – but her sister's still alive but she lives in Cogan. Now she would be able to tell you a lot more 'cause she worked in the old factory originally... Yes...

Do you mind if I ask her name, Frances?

Well you'd have to look in the directories because I know it's in Cogan and the name is Hunt...

Okay, I wonder if Catrin made contact with her?

Carol Hunt her name is – she'd be near to 80 now I should imagine.

And so when you say your mum worked in the old factory – when did they move to the new one then?

Oh gosh, I really can't remember – it wasn't long – I really can't remember. Well, you would have when they moved.

Yeah, we could probably find that anyway, couldn't we?

You'd definitely have the records on that.

And so do you keep in contact with any of the women that you met there?

No, no. The only person I was friendly – was my friend, we grew up together from school. No never kept in contact with anyone. Apart from Cynthia, which we were in school together and she wouldn't talk.

Fair enough.

'Cause I phoned her on Sunday and she said no she didn't want to do it. And she would have been ideal because she was there for a long, long time. I mean, she even had a pension from them – well, I didn't because I was only there two years. She said no – Freeman's had made her comfortable.

Good

With her pension.

And so, your mum, did she sort of recommend, when you said you were going to get a job there...

No, no, no, I was married – no, it was before I got married wasn't it, 'cause my mother never wanted me to work in a factory

That's what I was going to ask you...

No, she never wanted me to...

Is that because she herself had worked in it?

Yes, and course Mum, she would have remembered it the hard way – making it by hand – she wouldn't have known the machinery that there was there and how much easier it would have been made.

So what did she want you to do?

No, she just left it to me, you know, what I wanted to do. And the thing was when I was in school and I'd got myself a little job in the market and then course once you've got a job you feel you want to stay there, do you know what I mean? And there was – today there's so many things that the children can go into whereas it wasn't highlighted, you know. It's like now I'm working at Mitel, just down the road, and the only reason I went there was purely because I had my son then ('cause there's nine years between them) and my husband – I said, he said no, you must be here for the child to come home and when, before he goes to school. (And the school's just by there.) Of course, when I went down – my neighbor next door was a hairdresser and she said oh, how would you like to work in the village, in the shop. I said I couldn't do that. She said they want two people and she said I'm sure you'd be able to, you know, organize between you, and we did and then I worked there then 'til I had my daughter which was nine years later and when she was five, same as Richard, when she was five, I thought, oh, I think I'll look for another job. And I went down the Job Centre and I said are there any jobs? She said what do you want to do and I said I don't mind anything as long as I can do hours where my daughter is in school and I've got to be home. And then I got a job then from eleven 'til two, down there and I've been there thirty years.

Blimey!

And it's just down the road and I can walk there.

Perfect.

You know, so that's...

And when – you were saying before we turned the machine on that after, was it after Freeman's that you worked at Woolworths?

Yes, that was in the butchers. I was – what it was – I was married in the March and I had to have an ear operation in the October. And, in between then, I'd had this job in Woolworths and of course when I went and had the ear operation, that was it then, they just give me my cards.

Outrageous, isn't it.

You can't believe it, can you?

No. I mean, actually, going back to Freeman's, do you know, were there unions there? Did you have to be a member of a union?

Would it come on these – would it show you on there? No? I don't know, I can't remember. I'm sure there would have been a union. Yes, I would have said there was a union. But I can't remember being in it.

But obviously it wouldn't - didn't help with Woolworths, did it?

Oh no, no – oh gosh, no – that's totally different to now. I probably would've left, wouldn't have carried on paying my subs, you know my, whatever.

And in terms of – it's probably – maternity leave at Freeman's, would they have had anything like that?

Oh I don't know, I wouldn't know. I wouldn't have known anybody...

And any women – were there working mums there, do you think or..?

I don't know, I really don't know.

Maybe we'll find that out!

Yes, yes, I wouldn't have – I didn't know anybody with children 'cause we were all young, you know, I mean I was what, 16 when I went there, no, how old - I think I was about 16, 17 and I was engaged at 18. No, I met my husband when I was 18, 'cause I was married at 21. Engaged and married and courting within 3 years.

And Roger was fine about you working at Freeman's?

Oh yes, yes...

Getting the money for the house?

Yes, as I say we were wanting to buy this house in Newport and it was something I wanted to contribute. I mean 'cause he was a painter and decorator, by trade, and there wasn't a lot of money then. Then - I always remember when we were living in Newport, he came home and he said – (my friend's mother passed away, her husband, they were friends) – he said, John and I now, are going down to the steelworks to look, to see if we can get a job tomorrow. You can't do that. He said, what do you mean you can't do... I said you can't do that, you've just come out of your apprenticeship. He said, well we're going down tomorrow. He said, John said let's go down so... Rog got the job and John didn't! (Laughing) And it was John's idea. Yeah, but he did well, he did well, John, in the end. So, what we up to?

Okay, so we were talking about – was there a uniform at Freeman's?

Yes, there was a dark green overall. What it was, it was like a pinny-type of thing where you crossed over and put the tie round you and it was dark green. Quite thick, actually. And they

would do the cleaning – they would do the laundering, so if you wanted a clean one you would hand it in.

And you...

We didn't have to pay for that, it was all done.

One other question, were there – how many men do you think worked there?

I... the only men I would've seen would've been managers and the ones that attended the machinery.

Really, so all the rest...

Yes, I didn't see any men working – no, it was all women.

So, it was piece-work you did?

Yes, we did piece-work and as I say, if we wanted to go to the toilet then somebody would have to take over so we could keep our, you know, the amount of cigars that we were making.

And so, and did you clock in and out?

Yes, yes, we had to clock in and out. I think I was late once but I cheated – I think I got someone to do it for me, to clock me in, which was an offence, really, but apart from that I was never late. And my number in the works was 344.

Do you think that's possibly– you're one of 300 odd workers?

Oh, I don't know, I wouldn't know.

I wonder what it is?

It's got M344 on it...

And what happened then, Frances, if you - say, if you had to, you know, go to a funeral, or something like that, would you...?

That never occurred to me so I never...

No, but if you'd had to have had something like that would they, did they pay you or did they...?

Oh, that – I see, I wouldn't know that, you know, no, I never had any days off.

And what about – like holidays, did you have like annual holiday?

Oh yes, yes, you could have your holidays.

Can you remember how much, how much time they gave you?

No, no, we'd have to go through my pay-slips because, you know, to see if we could sort it out. I mean I wouldn't even know when I had them off. But as I say, that is the collection there from the day I started to the day I finished.

Fantastic. Thank you very much. And the other thing Catrin mentioned to me was the Miss Manikin competition.

Yes, there was a Miss Manikin competition but I never seen that at all.

And that was for all the women working there – sort of entered?

Yes, I should imagine that would – no - that would probably be making cigars, Manikin, would it be, I don't know, it could be the one – unless it was from the whole factory.

Oh I see what you mean...

I shouldn't think that they would separate people from "making" and "packing" it was probably all one.

And so, when you left, Frances, you, sort of looking back, did you – you know, it served a purpose 'cause you got the money for your house but...

Yeah, I had no regrets

No, you were quite happy to leave?

Yes, as I always did shop work and I quite enjoy meeting people, you know, and having a banter with people and like the job I've got now is so easy and it's lovely. The people are young and I think it keeps you young then, to keep up with them.

Good.

Yes. But - I think times were hard years ago mind, 'specially when my mother – I can always remember my dad was in hospital, and he was in Llandough Hospital and he always repaired our shoes. I always – I never forget it – my mother wanted to repair her shoes, oh love her, she – course she had nails sticking in the shoes and well, you know, she was trying to walk with them and in the end she had to walk without them 'cause they were poor, my parents were poor, they didn't have money and my father was always in hospital... so she had it hard. But we never went without. The food – my mother was a brilliant cook, absolutely fantastic. She worked for the Great Western Railway...

Oh really...

A cook there, on the...

And this was after Freeman's, so this was when you were growing up?

Yes, yes. No, this was prior, oh I don't know, I don't know whether it was before or after but I've got photographs of her on the train there, standing on the train.

So she was actually working on the train?

No, no, but I suppose, you know, oh I don't - no, she worked

So she cooked the food that went onto the trains?

Maybe - yes, probably that's what it would be.

Great Western – and what was your mum's Christian name?

My mother was Frances...

Oh, she was Frances, that's right you said, yeah...

But she would have been Frances Allen before she was married, look, so she would have done that before she was married 'cause my mother got married quite late in life and yes, as I say...

And so she always worked really, when you were young?

Oh yes, well, I mean, she did work. I mean she never worked in Freeman's when I was little so that was prior to having us. She used to – oh, she worked in Littlewoods. She did cleaning in Littlewoods, the shop there, you know, I don't know if you remember in Queen Street?

I think I've seen it on an old photograph?

Yes, and I'll always remember it when she retired from there, they sent her home in a Rolls Royce. In a Rolls Royce and flowers, and yeah, it was in The Echo actually.

Oh right, fantastic.

She was a hard-worker. She worked very hard.

Did they send you home in a Rolls Royce from Freeman's when you left or...?!

(Laughing) Oh no. This is when she was in Littlewoods, mind, they sent her home in that... no

No, good company to work for obviously?

Yes, yes, sorry, I think that's all I can say.

Yeah no, that's fine, brilliant. 'Cause I like this, so this – this is like a cigarette order that you've given me...

Yes, so once a month this used to be – you could have that once a month and then I used to order some for my mother and my brother, Harry, and I'm looking at the prices and I think it was twenty-one shillings and two and a half pence for a hundred Silk Cut and then there's another one here. Seventy-six pence and a penny for Manikin. There's fifty there, look – thirty-eight shillings and a half pence. We're talking about ha'pennies now not half-pence today. And then seven shillings and seven and a half pence for ten Hamlet...

And I like this one for your mum – her Old...

Old Holborn – four ounces for mam but I haven't got a price on there, I'm afraid. There was tipped cigarettes there as well, look. Fifty, twenty, twenty shillings and we got to remember now, shillings used to be twelve and a half pennies which is five pence to a shilling today, so it was twelve and a half to five p. So there's twenty-one shillings and two and a half pence.

And you never smoked?!

No, I never smoked. Never, never. Yes. Yes, so there we are. And you can have that.

That's fantastic. Thank you very much.

Okay.