

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Interviewee: VSE047 Mrs Hilary Adams

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Interviewer: Rosemary Scadden on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

00.12 My name is Hilary Irene Adams. My date of birth is the 7th of the 9th 1938.

So tell me a little bit about your background. Where you were born, your mother and father. What your father did, that kind of thing.

Well I was born in Ynyshir, in a street called Heath Terrace. I was the second child of, my father's name was Arthur Davies and my mother was Kathleen. But my father went as Archie and my mother went as Cassie. I was the second child, a second daughter. I had three other brothers after me and I went to school at the local school in Ynyshir, girls' school. My father was a miner and my mother was a stay at home Mam then. She'd been to service when she was younger; she was a cook and she was a very good cook, but she was a stay at home Mam.

01.23 *So the school you went to was the local council school. How old were you when you left?*

I was fifteen when I left. I was fifteen in the September, I couldn't leave school in the September so I went back just two or three days before my birthday and had to stay until Christmas. I started work, I actually started work, my sister had gone to the factory that I was working in which was Burlington Gloves, and my sister had gone there a couple of months earlier and got me a job. I know I started when I finished school. I started straightaway because the boss had said that if I came in before Christmas I could have the chance of a better machine. So I actually had only the two days off for the Christmas that year.

Was it something that you wanted to do?

Well, there were a lot of the girls which lived on our street, you know friends, worked there already. My sister had worked in the factory because she had gone to grammar school and came out, well they were earning more money in this glove factory than she was having in the office, so she decided that as we were the eldest of the family, money was a bit tight. She decided she wanted to earn more money, she went to the glove factory to work and obviously I just followed then.

How did you feel about leaving school?

I didn't mind at all really, you know. We just knew once we became fifteen. We were only in the ordinary school like, the secondary modern. We knew that when we were fifteen we would leave and just get a job and go to work.

03.03 *So you said you were fifteen and that it was the glove factory, so what kind of gloves did they make?*

We made ladies' gloves. I was on the fabric section. We did do some leather but the other leather machines were there and they made nylon gloves there. They did heavy duty gloves as well, industrial gloves in another department. The boys that worked there, there wasn't an awful of men, but they were the cutters. They cut all the gloves out and the women sewed them and we were on piece work.

Were you trained?

When we went in we were taught how to do them and once we were trained up the more you done in a day the more pay you had.

How long did it take you to get skilled?

Oh I suppose probably a month or so, a little while. I can't quite remember, it was quite a long time ago. You know you pick up your speed and as you got better you earned more money.

Did you need any qualifications to get this job?

No, none at all.

Did you have any aptitude tests or anything?

No.

You might have been a hopeless sewer or machinist!

Well they took you in and tried you out, whether you got used to it or not. Some people didn't, they didn't stay. They went, but I stayed there not quite ten years in all.

Can you remember your first day at work?

Yes vaguely. You know you feel a bit strange and as I said it was leading up to Christmas. I don't think I done a lot really the first two days. I vaguely remember it.

What were your first impressions going into the factory?

I think it was strange. Noisy because obviously it was all the machines going.

Was it a big room, altogether?

It was a fairly biggish room. There were sections off. The middle section was where we worked. There were probably twenty or thirty machines there. Then there was a smaller section behind us on leather and there was a separate room for the industrial gloves and then the nylon was over a bit further. It was like one big room and they boys' cutting room was attached, but it was sectioned off a little bit.

Can you describe a worked day?

Well we went in, in the morning, clocked in and

05.50 *What time?*

I think, did we start at eight? Yes I think we started at eight there. I know we worked until about quarter to six in the night. It was a long, we had long days. We had a morning break and we had a ten minute breakfast break. I mean we had a half an hour dinner break. Did we have an afternoon break? I'm not quite sure. We probably had ten minutes and then it was time to come home. It was on the top of Treforest Estate, over where the bus station used to be. It was quite close to that. Of course there were thousands working on the Estate then. There were loads of factories.

How did you get there in the morning?

We went down by bus. The Rhondda buses were running then and we used to go down by bus.

Did they have special factory buses?

Yes. They had lots. There were lots of buses going. They actually had one bus going from Ynyshir itself and Ynyshir is not a big village, but I mean there were enough to fill a single decker bus going down. Coming home then the buses used to come into the bus station, one after the other to come up the Valleys.

Right. How many other women were in the factory with you, do you reckon?

Let me think. I would think there were about probably fortyish, about forty maybe. Thirty-five, forty doing that. I would say seventy to eight women probably. The women did all the sewing.

Did you always do the same work in that factory, all the time? You didn't change jobs within the factory?

No. Well, we didn't really. There were people doing the ironing, you know. That was a section again. They would iron the gloves after, see if there were any faults like and then they would come back to us if there was, to each person. I would think there were eight or ten ironers, as we used to say.

Do you know where these gloves went eventually?

Well I know we used to sew for Marks and Spencer. I do remember that, because when they were coming to visit, believe me, everything was really spick and span. I'm assuming they were sold all over the country, you know, in different shops. But I know definitely Marks and Spencer's, in them days.

And you've already said the men were cutters, so there weren't so many men.

No there weren't so many men. I would say maybe fifteen at the most. Fifteen, I don't think there would be twenty.

So would you describe the jobs as being some were skilled and some unskilled? Or were they all classed as skilled jobs.

Well I think once you became a glove maker, we were all skilled at glove making

Were there mostly single girls or married women in the factory?

Well it started off as mainly single, but as the years went on they all started to get married. Some would stay after, and some would finish.

09.06 *Do you know the history of the factory? When did it open? When did it start?*

I'm not quite sure, but I've got a funny feeling it was after the War. Because they were an elderly gentleman and a younger gentleman and they always said they were Austrian Jews. I think they probably came over before the War, got out like and they opened up the factory. My personal opinion is that.

You are probably right. So the factory wasn't that old when you went there?

Not really I wouldn't have thought. I went in 1953, end of '53 in December.

Yes, so it would have possibly been about eight years old.

Probably, I never thought about that.

No, so women grew up with the factory.

Yes, yes

So eventually they were working mothers.

There were older people, they came there as well, that had families and some had grown up, like, you know.

Was there any crèche or facilities?

Oh no. I don't think there was anything like that on the Estate. Nothing.

Were you encouraged to go to night school or anything?

No

Now can you remember about how much you were paid? You said it was piece work, but there must have been a basic wage.

Yes well we didn't have a very good basic wage, I know. When I started, I said to my sister about it. My sister was a year or odd than me going in, because she had worked in an office for a while. She fetched in the region of just over two pound. Well I think mine was just under the two pound to start. But then again she only started the same year as I did, only a couple of months before me and being a bit older she probably did have a bit more money. Because I said to her, 'How much', because I got in my mind, £1.17s3d. It sounds nothing like but it was at the time, but at the time it was good wages like.

11.21 *How did the piece work rate work?*

We had so much a dozen, so the pair of dozen gloves you done, the more you get.

A dozen pairs, that's twenty-four gloves, is it? Gosh. That's a lot isn't it? You said your sister got paid more, so do you think you had a little increment with your age, as well?

I'm surmising we must have. But once we went onto piece work, you know, I do know that if for some reason there wasn't much work there, we didn't seem to have a good wage with us. We didn't have a proper set wage, you know. It was all mainly piece work.

Did you share your wages with your family?

When we went home we turned our wages up, the lot went over. My mother paid our weekly bus ticket and we had pocket money. Yes.

And how much was that? Do you remember how much she'd give you?

About five shillings, I expect, I would think at the most.

Did your father resent the fact that you were earning money or were they happy?

Oh no, no, no. We were brought up knowing that we would go to work. We were from a very good working family. All our family have worked.

Was there a union in the factory?

Of a sort. Not a very good one there.

Were you encouraged to join?

I think we did join the union. I've got a feeling that there was one in the Burlington. I don't think it was much good, you know. It didn't seem to do a lot for us.

13.07 *Were there any disputes when you were there?*

I think we used to settle them ourselves. Go in and see him, you know the boss like and have a chat over it.

So did you like the people you worked for?

Yes, you know, if we were chatting as we were working he often would walk through and he would shout like, you know. But on the whole they weren't too bad, I suppose. They did used to shout. 'Less talking!' You couldn't go to the toilet as many times as you want to. You could go but you had to come straight back type of thing.

So they were watching you all the time.

Well, yes. I think they were at that time. But it got easier as you got older because they knew you more.

So they trusted you then. Did you have a supervisor over a certain number of machines?

Yes we did. We did have a supervisor; her name was Nancy.

Did you like Nancy?

Yes. Funnily enough I often, now still talk to her, occasionally. She's quite a bit older than me.

Did you have to wear a uniform?

No. We used to, did used to wear a pinny? A pinny, we used to put on, but we took our own.

Just to keep yourselves clean. Did you get dirty?

No, not dirty really, no.

Dusty perhaps?

Sometimes we used to sew what we used to call linings. Linings for inside gloves. They were a lot more fluffier and there was on occasions we sewed fur ones. They weren't so nice at all to do. I do remember that.

Would you say the work was dangerous in any way?

No, not really.

The machines were safe were they? Just sewing machines?

Yes. Overlocking we were on.

Were there any injuries associated with the work you were doing?

Might have had a needle through your finger, or something like that, but nothing serious.

Do you remember any of the rules and regulations? You've told me about not being allowed to spend too long in the toilet.

We used to have music on. They used to put 'Housewives' Choice', in the mornings because we used to run a sweep to that, for a bit of fun like. 'Workers' Playtime' used to be on in the afternoon.

So this sweep, was it guessing which records they'd play?

Yes, whichever song you had, if it was played first then you'd win like.

15.45 *A bit of fun! So the machines weren't that loud or noisy?*

They were noisy, but the music would be turned up for us.

You've already told me that there weren't any childcare facilities.

No.

So it was mostly women without children who worked there was it?

Well, I think there were older women, because like I said, my aunt came there and she came part-time later on. The she became full time because my cousin went to school. He was a lot younger than us obviously. So my aunt worked there as well. My sister worked there as I said, you know.

These part-time jobs were they, they did ironing or did they ..?

No, no they worked on machines. My aunt worked on the machines. She used to come in, I think she used to start at about 10.0, after my cousin went to school, Then he'd go home to my mother actually. My mother's sister like, you know.

So she would earn whatever she could, in her own time.

Yes, yes. They were very good to if. When we were there, my mother had her last child. I was seventeen and my sister was eighteen. They allowed my sister to have a machine home and work in the house, because my mother wasn't well and my sister did it for a few months at home, to be somebody at home the same time. Yes, so they did do what they called home workers as well.

17.25 *How many days a week did you work?*

Oh we worked the five days. I think sometimes if they needed us, if we wanted to, there was Saturday work. I don't remember too much Saturday work in the glove factory.

Were there any nightshifts?

No. There was only the day shift and these couple that came in on the part-time shift.

Did you have a canteen? What did you do for lunch? Did you take sandwiches?

We didn't have a canteen as such, not there. No.

Holidays? What about holidays?

We had all the Bank Holidays that there was and we did have two weeks holiday in the summer.

With Pay?

Yes and the Christmas break, but of course the Christmas break was only two days.

Did you go away on holiday?

When I was single, yes. We went to family actually. You know, we used to go to family that lived not too far away really, some of them.

And you say that they were good about having time off for personal reasons, like death or your mother had a baby.

Well they allowed my sister to have a machine home. I mean if somebody had died I think they let you have the day of the funeral off. You wouldn't be paid mind!

You went on the bus. How long did the journey take from Ynyshir to Treforest?

Well if you went straight down it didn't take very long. It would take about, I suppose, twenty to twenty-five minutes.

Yes because it was a direct bus. It wasn't stopping.

No, no, it wasn't picking up then. Once it was full, it was full. But coming home in the evenings when everybody was coming out at the same time. And of course the roads in Pontypridd were not like they are now, it used to take forever and a day!

Yes because they were winding weren't they?

And there were loads and loads of buses.

Did you have any social clubs in that particular factory?

No, no.

You said they had the music, did they bring in any entertainment?

We had a Christmas dance. We did have a Christmas dance.

19.45 *Where did they hold that?*

Well I remember one being in Patsy's, the Catholic church at the bottom of Broadway, in their hall, one time. I remember that one. Can't remember any of the others, but I know we had that.

Did you enjoy working in this factory?

I enjoyed the people. You worked hard but you enjoyed everybody that was there. I'm still in touch with some.

So why did you leave?

Why did we leave, because we..? My friend and I decided that we were a bit fed up this day, so we decided, without telling anybody, to take a day off, and meet and go and look for another job. Which we did. And we went straight to KLG's in Treforest, on the Estate, lower down. We went there and they said, 'Hang on. We'll get in touch.' I said, 'Are there any vacancies?' This is what we used to do years ago. They said, 'Can you come back after lunch?' So we said, 'Yes.' So we just hung around then. We went back after lunch and we both went in together. We was interviewed together, asking where we worked, what we done and how long we'd been there. My friend had been there two years less than me. Her birthday was in September, the same as mine, about three days after me.

I remember them saying to us, they said, 'What if there is only one job? What are you going to do then?' Well we said, 'Whoever got it let the best man, person, win.' I remember them smiling, one of the foremen off the shop floor and the personnel officer. They said, 'Well there is two jobs and you can have them.'

So we went back in the next day and gave a week's notice and started the following week, on my birthday and I was twenty-four.

21.38 *So what did this other factory make?*

We were making sparking plugs.

Quite different then?

Entirely different altogether.

What did you do in the second factory?

Well I worked in the glazing department and the plugs would be made from powder in the bottom and they would come through the kiln. When they come out they'd be china then, but there was no shine on them. So I worked in the department where we put the glaze on and then they'd go through another kiln and then come out nice and shiny. And then they'd go on from there to another department in the factory and they'd put the filling in them, and that's how it went.

So putting the glaze on, that was dirty, was it?

Not really no, because it was on the machine. The first one I worked on was a hand machine, but it wasn't really dirty. Your hands got a little bit mucky, but we did have to wear full overalls and we had to wear a turban, because not to get the glaze in your hair. But then I went on the automatic machine so I wasn't in the little booth doing them by hand like, you know.

Was the pay better?

Oh yes. The flat rate was a heck of a lot better and then we were on piece work again, but we earned a lot more money. If there was no work there we still had a decent flat rate there.

Did you give your mother all the money then?

Yes.

Still? When you were twenty-four?

No, no. I'd gone on what we called board and lodgings, as they used to say years ago. No, when my sister was getting married, a year before she got married and I was still in the glove factory, my mother said, 'It's time,' and she said to me, 'you must go on lodge at the same time as Marion.' There was only a year between us. So I had been on, yes.

23.22 So she just took some money. Yes, and I suppose your brothers had grown up a bit, hadn't they? Were they working by then?

Yes some. My one brother is only two and a half years younger than me, and then my mother went eight years and we had another brother and then six years after that we had another one. Then they had.. !

23.43 In this second factory, I need to ask you a similar lot of questions. Did you have a union there?

Oh yes. That was a factory that had run all through the war and all that, because they made sparking plugs for planes and things like that. They were a lot of older people working there and a lot more people. I wouldn't like to say how many. It was Smith's Industries, it was. A good firm to work for.

24.16 And so were there any strikes or problems? How did they resolve them there?

Well, when Ford's took over... well I was there then years and then Ford's took over. Our wages mind, doubled overnight, ladies, because Ford's were already paying equal pay. I was on part-time at that time. I'd had my daughter. I think I'd been doing part-time two years and well, we was all so excited, because when our wages doubled overnight, it is unbelievable, you know. We had a good living under Ford's. We had a nice living under KLG. I won't knock them at all because they were a proper family run and it was a lovely place to work, I've got to be honest. But with Ford's, I mean the wages then, we weren't on piece work even, you know. We had a good living wage.

And were there better facilities? Did they have a crèche there or anything?

No, no. They never had anything like that. We had canteens and that there. We never had a crèche. But under Smiths Industry, once you'd been on the shop floor ten years, you used to go on what they used to call shop floor staff. Well I just came into that when they were taken over. But after five years with Smiths Industry as well, if you was ill you'd have so many weeks sick pay and you'd have your insurance like, you know. Then when you got ten years you had extra holidays. I think, I'm not sure, it was nine days extra holidays as well, to take now and then. Because I know I come into them and they came to me and he said I hadn't had them because I came in September, started in September and I had to take these nine days before Christmas. And then by the following year, by the May we knew that Ford's were going to take us over, so I had to have another nine days under Smith's. I seem to be on holidays full time then, it was quite nice!

26.27 Did you go to another factory after that one?

No, no. I worked there thirty-five years.

For Ford's?

Well, ten years with KLGs, then Ford's took over and the last four years I worked there Allied Signal took it over. Fours I was with them then. I wasn't ready quite to finish.

How long did you spend working in factories?

Forty-four years.

Looking back would you say that you enjoyed it?

Yes. Yes. I mean you meet a lot of friends and you know a lot of people. Like my friend rung me up today and she said about this chap and he passed away. I said, 'Can't you ring me up with nicer news?' Because it always seems, we are all getting older and people are, you know and it is all we seem to be hearing, lately!

And all your friends. you still keep in touch, you've just said. When you finished you retired then did you?

I was fifty-nine and I had the chance to go a year early and I took it. I mean I could have gone under Ford's and been a Ford's pensioner, but my daughter had just started doing her master's degree up in Sheffield, and I thought I'd better hang on a bit longer here now and put her through her schooling and uni life.

So your husband, did you meet him in the factory?

No. My husband was disabled and he worked in Remploy. But he also did forty something years in Remploy. He actually went ill and they made him redundant when he was ill, because it was better off for him.

28.22 *Did the Ford factory have more social activities?*

Oh yes. We did. We did have dances and they used to have outings. Under KLGs we had a social club as well. They did have more things.

So it was a complete way of life?

Yes.

Did they mind in the glove factory that you'd moved on?

I think they were a bit surprised because we'd been there quite a while, the two of us like. Quite a while, so they were surprised.

So the Ford factory, the spark plug factory was generally more....?

There were a lot more men there.

Not more professional, but more ..big time than the glove factory?

Oh yes, yes. They were there before the war and all through the war and I know that a lot of the women there worked all through the war. They worked long hours during the war years. You know, I mean I was young like, OK like. Yes they did work long hours on the Estate. I think they used to work twelve hour shifts, really.

Was there shift work in the spark plug factory?

We did, after Ford's, yes. Under KLGs there were the part-time shifts in the evenings, but when Ford's took over, they took over then, and after, let me see, two or three years, they went two shifts. And then before Ford's actually finished, I much regretted it, you get talked into it. They didn't talk you into it but they put a bit of pressure. They'd say they wanted three shifts like see. They wanted the women to do that and a lot of the women were doing it. I know I hung out and I worked four years three shifts and it was the worst thing I ever done. I thought nights were dreadful, but there you are.

30.15 *Do you think you were as productive at night, as you were in the day?*

Well you had to keep up with the lines, but it was hard. I hated nights, that's why I think I decided I would finish early.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Can you remember anything that we haven't covered?

I don't know really. I don't think there's a lot. It was lovely working. When I worked for the Smith's part of it, the friendship and that that was there, it was a lovely atmosphere. You made lots of friends you know, well right through. You'll always have some that will be a bit difficult, but that's life, isn't it? On the whole I can say I enjoyed my working life, I really did. This is why I get quite annoyed when I see people who don't want to work.

Yes they don't realise what they are missing out.

No they don't and they look at you then and think, 'It's alright for her, she's got a car, she's on her own.' And I do think, 'Do you know how much I've done for this?' My husband worked as well and he worked in Remploy, he had a bad leg. He didn't start work until he was twenty-two because he was having big operations like you know. And I think, he still worked forty odd years.

Well that's lovely Hilary. Thank you very much.

I hope you'll find it useful.

31.55 *I'm sure we will. Yes.*

But no I haven't got a bad word really.