

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Kenfig Carbide Factory, British Industrial Solvents

Interviewee: VSE056 Betty Gwendoline Metcalfe

Date: 7/5/14

Interviewer: Catrin Edwards ar ran Archif Menywod Cymru/ on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Betty confirmed that her date of birth was November 1, 1931.

Her mother was Winifred and her father Evan Lloyd. When she was small her parents lived in Ferndale and her father was a conductor on the Red and White buses between Aberdare and Porthcawl. **'Mum was just a housewife. She never worked until later years.'** When she was just three months old in 1931 (2?) they moved to Porthcawl. Her mother asked her father that when he was next in Porthcawl - could he get them some lodgings – even if it was just two rooms, because by then they had three children. She had an older sister – six years older than her, and a brother three years older. She's lived in Porthcawl ever since.

She went to New Road School, which was a fabulous school. She tried the scholarship and she was nearly twelve when she went to grammar school. Because of the date of her birthday she was a year late starting school. Nearly everybody in the class passed the scholarship in her year. The five or six that didn't pass went to Cowbridge. She went to Bridgend Grammar School which again was a fabulous school. She stayed there and passed 13 O Levels including two distinctions for History and Geography. She wanted to go to Training College to be a teacher, but again she had to stay on another year. She took History, Geography and English. But the English teacher, an elderly lad and an excellent teacher, didn't take to her, although she always did well, never less than B+ in an essay, and of course in the sixth form she was seeing a lot of this teacher and she just decided to leave. She didn't tell her parents, but left after the Christmas term.

By then her father was a postman. The head man was called Mr Turner. He had two sons and the younger son, Jimmy was a big friend of her brother's. He used to come down to the house a lot, - he loved coming there because his father was very strict! By then too her sister was

married and living with them – her husband was a really staunch Conservative. Her brother at the time was training to be a teacher, but he joined the Communist Party – **‘so it was mayhem in here between my sister and my brother and Jimmy used to sit back and love it.’**

6.00

Her father asked Mr Turner whether he had an opening for Betty because she had left school. So she went down for an interview with him and he gave her this envelope, to give to Mr Willsden, the Manager (of the factory). She came home, **‘I cried all the way home because he was quite a stern man’** After she went home she asked her father where Mr Turner worked! He didn’t know, he thought it might be the steelworks! He told Betty to ask Jimmy where his father worked. So she went down to the interview (in the factory). **‘And that was hilarious, ‘cos I’d just left school, and in those days, all you had was your school uniform and your had your Sunday Best sort of clothes, and sort of Saturday. But I didn’t have a mac of any description, except my navy school Burberry. And the day – I can remember, it was the second of January 1950 and it was tipping down with rain, thunder and lightning – so I had to wear my navy school Burberry and the only hat I had – I had a guide tam and I took the badge off.’** She got the job.

Her job was in the Kenfig Carbide Factory on Water Street (the old Roman Road) – not far from Kenfig Hill but more towards the sea. The only thing the factory made was carbide – which is calcium carbide used in rubber manufacturing, but the main thing was that it makes acetylene gas, which they used in the old days for ship building, (and) for acetylene torches. This factory was put together in 1941- they were desperate for carbide, so that was when the factory was built. It was Canadians that came over and chose the site because of the Kenfig river running behind – with water and quite a flat area before you went on to the dunes. It was further along from where the Nature Reserve is today. The only buildings remaining after (demolition) were the huge stone office block and the canteen, because Borg Warner, the car people went there.

11.35

She worked right down in front of the furnaces.

Going back to the interview – she can remember the man who did it (long dead now) – Mr Willsden – he asked generally how she had done at school?, how old?, where she lived?, and would she be able to do the job? She was (able to do it), and **‘I loved it’**. When she went for the interview she didn’t know what she would be doing! **‘I just went for a job! but as it turned out to be it was in a Laboratory.’**

She didn’t have any training for the job. **‘You started off very slowly, you were explained exactly what you had to do. Every week there were about five different analyses to do. .. You were given the sheet and told what to do with the instructions – and we had this right up to the end – it wasn’t just for beginners, ... you just gradually got into doing it much quicker... We were analysing, most importantly – calcium carbide is made of**

calcium, (which) you see is limestone, and the carbide is coal. ... the most important thing was to analyse the limestone, which was never used in the furnaces 'til we'd analysed it. Because, with the limestone it can form what they call silica, which you make glass out of it – with sand and something else. If there was a high silica content in it, it would form heavy .. and it could break through the furnace and cause injury. Then we analysed the coal, and when I'm saying the limestone, there was limestone coming from about five different quarries in the area. There was one big quarry at Tythegston, there was - South Cornelly was quarries and Sandville? so there were five different limestones which all had to be analysed before they could use them in the furnace.'

They analysed the coal – it wasn't very complicated. You weighed a gram or two and put it in little furnaces or ovens at very, very high temperatures and it would burn to ash and you weighed it then. It wasn't complicated if you were careful.

15.45

A working day: in the morning you would be given your sheet of what you had to do, and you just got on with it. The boss had a little glassed-in office in the middle of the Lab. They were right by the furnaces and there was always lime and carbide dust - **all our windows were sealed up.** 'And we had a beautiful bench, shining like that, ... and by the time - dinner, with all the windows, you could write your name in carbide dust, so we'd have to clean it again.' And if you went out for any reason, ?? ? – the office block was ... quite far back – they didn't get anything like that.'

She explains how to analyse the limestone – by weighing up a gram of limestone, then you weighed an empty crucible – which was like an egg cup – a porcelain one, - then noted it down. Then you take the gram and put it in a beaker, you'd add so many mls of hydrochloric acid, to dissolve the lime, apart from a little residue. Then you'd set up a filter, - a conical flask with filter paper in it – then pour the acid and the dissolved things through, but the silica would be left in the little paper thing. Then you'd keep on washing it with water, from little water bottles, until it was all clear. Then you'd take out the little paper – put it in the crucible, put it in the oven for so many hours and then take it out and all that was left was the silica. Then you'd weigh it again and you'd know the percentage of silica within the limestone. This did not take a week to do, so they'd put you on to something else.

They also analysed the actual carbide that was produced and that was much more complicated. They used porcelain crucibles, but with the carbide analysis, **they had to use hydrofluoric acid and that was so strong it would eat through the porcelain,** 'and if you had it on your finger, heaven help you. I mean I've had concentrated nitric, hydrochloric, even concentrated sulphuric on my hands, but as long as you went straight to wash them, mind you the nitric acid used to leave your hands –you looked as if you were a heavy smoker. On the day I got married my fingers were almost yellow! I was ashamed to put my hand out to put the ring on. And once I was using nitric acid in a burette and the tap came out and it went all over my feet, ... it was very yellowy, just like a heavy smoker. But because it was so powerful you couldn't use porcelain, we had

three pure platinum crucibles, which were kept locked in the cupboard ... like an egg cup ... and quite thick platinum, and one day, I'll never forget, ... -so every time we'd used them they had to go back in the cupboard, and the Boss would lock it all up. But this night, the Boss went home early, locked the cupboard – I'll never forget him – Bryan, he took the platinum crucible home in his pocket, and had to sneak it back in before the Boss got in. _

20.40

The other analysis they had to do – next door to them was the drum shop, **'Oh there were some tough girls in there! where they made the big drums for holding the carbide.'** They had to analyse the steel from the drums. We used to analyse the water from the river, (not sure why).

Did you need any qualifications for the job?

She'd done Chemistry and got a credit for it in O Levels - she thinks this might have been a qualification they looked for. But there were a few staff in the Laboratory that didn't have any qualifications – but they used to just analyse the carbide in bulk. They were at the bottom of the Lab (where there) were three huge bells (as they called them). And they used to weigh up a pound of carbide in the form of little rocks, and they used to put it in to a part of the bell, pour water on it, and it would form acetylene gas. Then they would lift the bell up and take measurements. There were always men coming back with samples that was carbide that had already been made. **'All of us working in the Lab were either grammar school or ... you know.'**

23.08

She believes her O levels were a help. She only did Chemistry and Biology – no Physics. **'But mind you, I did it in a way, like making cake. I followed the instructions – didn't always know why I was doing it, but ...'**

She loved working there – from the beginning until she left.

How many women?

There were two girls always down the bottom end analysing the carbide from when it had been made; there were four men samplers – bringing the samples over to them; but in the main Lab where Betty was there were about 14 – 7 girls and 7 boys / young men. In the factory as a whole – difficult to answer. There were about 60-70 in the office block alone, about 10-12 in the canteen, and in the actual factory a few hundred. At one time there were three furnaces going. There were definitely more men because there were quite a few men in the office block and only men on the factory floor.

There was a smell there – **carbide has a very strong smell. .. I can smell it now but I can't ... it wasn't very pleasant, I mean if you went outside – I was often at the ambulance room having my eyes washed out because of lime in your eye, ... as I say we only**

crossed the road, and there was the furnaces.' The Lab was a two storey flat roofed building. All the spare apparatus was kept upstairs.

27.27

During the time she was there she did the same type of work. They used to go to Bridgend Technical School for one afternoon and one evening - ? one day for which you were paid and one evening. And they used to sit S1, S2 and S3 (she doesn't know what this stands for) - for Chemistry. She started in the January, and the exam was in the May, **'I passed my S1 with flying colours, ... a written one (exam) and a practical one ... it was one that was accepted as a qualification for Chemistry. ... But the time I was doing S2 I'd met my husband – I tried that three times and failed each time. I didn't go on to S3. I left because I was expecting my daughter.'**

How did she feel now about not going on to train as a teacher?

When she had been in the factory for about two years – she had a friend who was brilliant at Maths, and like Betty, she went back to the sixth form, and left at the same time as Betty. Jean went to work in the Post Office. Then one day she knocked on the door and said she'd decided to try for Barry Training College, and asked Betty whether she would like to come with her. She didn't tell them in work, but they both went down, had their all-day interviews, and they were told that they had passed and that they could start. But, at the time, her brother had just come out of National Service, and he was in Caerleon Training College training to be a teacher, and in those days, even with the grants, they weren't all that good, her Mum and Dad were struggling to – and she'd really enjoyed it at – and earning a little bit of money, and she didn't want to stop that, so she decided not to go. Jean did go and did well as a teacher. She's written a bit of an analysis of her life and that story is in there.

32.40

Wages: For the first month she thinks it was 17/6 or 27/6 (the latter she thinks) – she was 18 and it was 1950. She thinks it went up by about 10/0 after a month. It felt good **'because it was good in those days. Actually, when I met my husband – (he spent most of his life at sea – and he joined, believe it or not, in 1940, he joined the Navy at fourteen. When he was 14 and a half, all he ever wanted to do was go to sea, so his mother and father sent him to the Training Ship, the Arethusa on the Medway, so he was in training to be a seaman – and when the war started (he was born in 1925) he went straight into the Navy at 15. He was hardly ever back in this country. For the last eighteen months of the war he was transferred to the Royal Australian Navy – the war didn't finish in Japan until after Britain won, and then he stayed out in Australia working. Then he joined a sailing ship, the last sailing ship to go Round the Horn, bringing grain from Port Lincoln to Dublin) – when he worked in the Forestry ... I used pay for him to go to the cinema because I was earning more than him.'**

Were you all paid about the same in the Lab, do you think?

No. The boys were always paid more than the girls.

How did you feel about that?

Well, we didn't really like it, but on the other hand, we were so well paid, it was such a wonderful firm to work for, they really were. I mean if you .. no problem if you were ill. I remember one lady working in the Lab (she was a lot older than me) her father died and they gave her three months fully paid just to get over it, sort of thing.

35.45

The men weren't paid a lot more **'and the other good thing about it – every Christmas and every June you were paid out a bonus. ... £30-£40 and I can remember the first time they were in white fivers that I had. ... Never seen one before.'** She spent the Christmas bonus on family presents.

Her usual wage packet – she used to give some to her mother (not a lot) and then **'I started a club .. it was a dress shop for clothes and I bought all my clothes. (The money was spent on) anything like soap or some make-up (they didn't dabble a lot in make-up in those days), and going to the cinema.'** She loved the cinema. She went about twice a week. She never went out a lot, because from 14 to 42 ... she had severe acne on her face (nowhere else) and those days there wasn't much make-up – Miners' was a liquidy one in a bottle – that never really covered it. She also had boils and abscesses .. and she was 42 before they went. The doctor teased her she was a late developer! In those days they didn't take much notice of acne. Her father took her around to every doctor in Porthcawl, then, when she was in her thirties a doctor advised using an ultra violet lamp (it did seem to clear in the summer). **'Sometimes I wouldn't even go to work, if it was really bad. I'd pretend I was ill. I never ever went to dances.'** Her husband was gorgeous looking, he was the first man she'd ever gone out with. He teased her that she arranged for them to get married.

39.35

Trade Unionism: She vaguely remembers that she had been there about three years, and they started talking and she went to a meeting, **'I don't think I joined, though.'** Perhaps because she was getting married at the time? She wasn't sure whether she would be leaving. **'But I'm definitely all for Unions.'**

She remembers one dispute in the factory – it was only the men and she can't remember what it was about – possibly it was a wages issue? She definitely thinks that they were fairly treated.

In the Lab they had to wear a very stiff cotton white Lab coat (shows a picture). They provided it. Every week the dirty ones were sent back and – they just used to hang up – one lot for the boys and one for the girls. It was her job to take the pile of overalls – full of carbide or lime - up to the laundry van by the office block.

'Was the work dangerous in any way?

Well, it could be, I've had a few of accidents ... I was boiling up – we had what was called a fume cupboard – a little hotplate and then there was a glass top which you could pull down, - but I was boiling for some experiment, bromine, which is like a brown liquid, but it must have got overheated. I was going to fetch it out, most of the time if it wasn't too hot you could use your ... but you had a proper thing like a - ... like a thing you get for picking up things, you could put that around and then close it around the beaker. .. I don't know what (happened), and I poked my head into the fume cupboard, and this pile of bromine fumes came up into my eyes. I thought I was going to go blind for a minute, but I shouted and somebody came and took me and splashed water into it.

43.50

And then when I was telling you about the other girls, the ones who were doing with the big bells ... – there was two of them in there – one of them was one of the ladies who normally worked in the Lab with me, ... (she'd done that work before she came into the Lab – and I can remember her name now - Nada) – and the man in there with her was one of the men who was bringing the (samples) ... (and if he made four foot six I'd be surprised and he was quite elderly). They were both in there, when she must have accidentally put more carbide in than she should have, and the bell blew! And she lost her eyebrows and her eyelashes.'

Having lime in the eye wasn't dangerous – just unpleasant. But if they went straight to the ambulance room, the nurse there would wash your eye out.

She had an accident with the hydrofluoric acid. Her friend and her had been up to London for a weekend, (she was only about nineteen then) and they came back on the midnight train from Paddington, and she came home and went straight to work. 'And you were always told – the acid was in jars about that size – but you had a proper basket that you were supposed to always use. Well, this morning, for some reason, I couldn't find the basket, so I went to the cupboards, picked out a full bottle of concentrated hydrofluoric acid, and it slipped out of my hand and I had nylons on and for some reason it turned the nylon red, and my Boss came, it was just where his office was, he came out and of course he thought it was blood! 'Oh my God!' he said.' When he found out she had hell of a row for not using the basket.

47.00

She didn't wear any other protective clothing. It wasn't dust in the air – it was just dust would lay (on things). She doesn't think this affected her skin. 'I'll tell you what it did affect .. I was told "Don't wear your rings into work. ... the acid – my engagement ring ... the back of it is only a hair's breadth of gold.'" Though it didn't seem to affect the wedding ring. It ate the gold away on her engagement ring.

She doesn't think working in the factory has affected her health long term and she doesn't know of any others (who have suffered) either.

She was made aware of health and safety when she worked there. And another thing - at Christmas time, especially when Distillers took over, because they made drink, they were never allowed to bring – because they had pure alcohol to use – they weren't allowed to bring any (drink in) ... but they used to sneak in little miniatures.

‘Often, and I’m not exaggerating, often I’d have concentrated hydrochloric over me – you were told wash and of course at each end of the bench was a little wash basin .. and a big one over – so there was always one close at hand.

The heating and lighting were good. She thinks it was strip lighting. The canteen was lovely. In the Lab the girls had a toilet, **‘it was really small, nothing in it except a toilet and a wash basin. That was our only little restroom’**. One toilet between seven. **‘that was very poor, very poor. That was our only recreation room’**. If they wanted coffee or tea, they just stayed in – in the balance room at the top end where they weighed all the stuff, and there was a secretary that worked in there – typing out all the analysis sheets, and they just sat in there. And in the main Lab they only had two seats – high stools, **‘you stood all the time when you were working’**. She started on the Monday and had to hand her sheet in on Friday, and as long as you got on with it, you did the work in your own time and nobody bothered you.

52.42

Her hours: she thinks she caught the bus at 8.20 (later when she was married she went on the bus at 8.30 after checking on her parents); they started at 9 on the dot, and finished at 5; they had an hour for dinner, and two little breaks – one about 11 and one about 3. For a long time they used to work Saturday mornings but after a couple of years it was just Mondays to Fridays.

All the buses were company buses – going to Port Talbot, Pyle, Kenfig Hill, - there were staff buses and buses for the workforce. The bus was free - Evans Motors and they're still running now.

For the breaks it wasn't worth going to the canteen – they were only about quarter of an hour. They made their own coffee and tea, and they brought sandwiches. You just sat out in the Lab or the weighing room.

‘There was a staff canteen and a workers’ canteen on the other side. The kitchen divided us off. ... It was nearly all men in the working part – they could swear if they wanted to without upsetting ..’ The staff canteen was for office staff and them. She can't remember the Management being there at the same time as them. They didn't have their own canteen.

You had a little green ticket for your lunch and a red or pink ticket for your sweet. They paid for them but it was very subsidised – it was very, very cheap. The food was off and on. **‘Of course, it was still rationing ... so there wasn't a lot of choice. But you know, it was edible.’** Sometimes she brought food from home but more often than not she went to the canteen.

57.12

Holidays with pay? : In the beginning she thinks it was two weeks, and eventually it went up to about three weeks. She thinks the factory closed down, but she's uncertain. She got married on July 10th but it wasn't in the holiday – it was just given to her as a special day. Bank holidays? Not many – No New Years or Mayday, only Christmas, Easter and Whitsun – a day or two at the most.

She didn't go far on holiday – definitely not abroad then. When she got married and they went the following year too – her mother was one of fifteen surviving children – one of her sisters lived in Fishponds in Bristol and they had a little summer bungalow on the cliffs between Portishead and Clevedon and her uncle would let it out at a reasonable price for family. She wrote to ask him if she could have it for her honeymoon, which he did. And they went there the following year. After that her daughter was three and they went down to Newgale. And they went up to London once.

1.00.57

She started at the factory in 1950 and she was married in 1954. Her husband was fine with her working. **'We never lived on our own, ever, 'cos the first five years I moved up to his (my daughter wasn't born until we'd been married five years, you see) – and we moved up to his family, which was obviously fully furnished. I always think the money I've saved by not having to buy furniture ...'** She lived there until 1960. Then her mother and father were renting their house and they'd been renting it for 25 years when the landlord decided to move away and he wanted to sell it. He gave them the first offer but now they were both in their sixties, both old age pensioners so they couldn't afford it. Her older sister had just moved into their own newly-built house, her brother was teaching in Birmingham, and her younger sister was only about 14. So they asked them **'and I honestly didn't want to ... because at the time I was about eight months pregnant, Bob's father ... was dying of cancer, ... and they all, where I worked, were saying "Don't do it, you'll be stuck", which is what happened'**. She even asked her doctor what to do – but he couldn't advise her. **So in the end she agreed.** Her husband went back to sea after they were married – which he loved, but neither of them knew anything about buying houses. Her husband was happy for her to do as she wished. Unfortunately – when you get married you think you're getting someone to look after you, but because he was in the navy and then in the merchant navy, then in the fishing fleet, he had everything done for him – he was like his father, he didn't know or care about money. **'And this is gospel truth, when he came home his wages were still in his wage packet.'** He would give it all to her and she would give him pocket money. He always knew if he ran out, he could have more. So she was always in charge. So they came (to live) in her home.

Her father died in 1986, her mother lived until 1999 (three days before her 98th birthday). She was at home the whole time and only went into a home when Betty's husband was also disabled and she was heading for a nervous breakdown. (Her mother's death - details) At the same time in 1986 her daughter's marriage to a sailor broke up – leaving her with young children. Then Kerry came home and stayed with her for eight years. She was working all the hours God made in child care in a children's home (details of job hours etc.) So Betty had to

look after the children and also her mother, who was 86. Just feeding them was a task! It was non-stop.

1.09.22

She decided to leave the factory because she was pregnant. She left in the beginning of February and on the 2nd of March her daughter was born. She wasn't doing much by this time – she sat in the office. So she was in the factory 1950-60. When Kerry was (5 years old) in school the company sent out letters to certain staff to ask whether they would go back for eighteen months to completely gut everything – ready for it to be knocked down. 'It was money for jam. It was nothing much to do - ... upstairs we kept all the new apparatus, ... cleared everything away. I don't know how it took so long, really.' It was more like a year and three months. **It was knocked down in 1965 or 1967.** Everything was then knocked down except the office block where Borg Warner now makes cars parts.

She didn't work in a factory after that – just in a shop round the corner. She worked there for 19 years – part-time.

Looking back now how does she feel about the time she worked in the factory?

'Loved it, I'd do it over again. 'Cos there was a lovely crowd .. we all, you know, we were like family, then. You got to know each other, working side by side every day.'

She kept in touch with the women in the Lab – with one especially – right up until 1999. She was a brilliant, brilliant girl. She did so well in her S1-S3 exams she was offered a place in Swansea University. But she, too was looking after her father, and by 1999 she'd developed dementia. Her daughter went to Cambridge University – and she had twin boys who were both brilliant too – one a doctor and one a teacher. Betty also kept in touch with the lady who had her eyebrows burnt off! – she lived in Port Talbot.

Was there good camaraderie? **'Very much so, very much so.'**

(Some more about her husband) She describes the first time they met – she had acne, and her hair was straggly – she couldn't afford perms, and she wore a nylon mac – a drab navy one which was her mother's but he still fell for her!

76:25

DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD/ END OF INTERVIEW