

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

HG STONE

Interviewee: VSE083.2 Violet Skillern,

Date: 26/01/2016

Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Violet Skillern née Humphreys confirmed her date of birth as 15/11/1933.... She says that she was born in the old colttages in Rosemary Lane in Pontypool. They were part of the old squires' estate. "it was for the workers... with the Hanbury estate."

00:56

Her grandmother lived in the house first, then her father and mother who looked after her grandparents. They lived right by the river and park which was their playground.

01:28

She says her mother never worked. She stayed home to look after the children. Her father was in the army during the 1914 war. She said it was hard for him to find work afterwards and he said that it took another war for them to get back on their feet. Her father tried every thing to find work. he was good at carpentry os he used to make Welsh Dressers and bookcases and 'anything to keep the family going.'

2.44

Just before the war they started to build the Royal Ordnance Factory in Glascoed. VS father helped to build it and then went to work there. Most of her family worked there her father uncles brother etc.

3:01

She says that her sister died when she was five weeks old and she doesn't remember her but her brother has been dead for 6 years. He lived with VS and never married, so she still misses him. They bought a house together and looked after

their mother together when VS's husband had died. Her mother lived until she was about 97.

4:22

VS says that they didn't have 'too much education' in those days. 'Town school, Church school'. It was a good school and she went there when she was about 5 until she left school 'and then you just went in to work in those day - you didn't hesitate. We didn't have the money or anything to help you in education then.' She was 15 when she left and she 'didn't mind really' although she liked school. She says they were happy days although they were the war years.

It was hard because they didn't have luxuries, "but the one thing you did have when you came home - your mother was there." There was always a hot meal. She says they were taught everything. They started with prayer, they ended with prayer and at the middle of the day. She says i"t was lovely times and everyone seemed to respect each other more." "We didn't have the luxuries in the old cottages. There was one toilet between 3 cottages and one tap... The doors were never locked." and every one is an auntie and uncle. "Everyone seemed happier and got on better together."

07:40

VS says she left school at 15 and went to the toy factory. Her aunty told there were jobs going in the factory. Her mother was unwell so she was taken by her aunty. She had a medical and "then started..." Regarding an interview, she was questioned about where she lived but it wasn't like an interview you'd have today.

08:20

They didn't need to know if she could sew. 'They just took you in and gave you what jobs they thought at the time. I went into the stores first. That was a funny time. One day I was asked... they wanted glass washers. So like a fool I went down to the stores and asked for glass washers. "Oh my love they're having you on he said... they're teasing you - there's no such thing as glass washers!"

She felt it was a bit monotonous in the stores so she asked if she could work in the factory. She was initially 'put on packing the cowboy and Indian suites...' That was only a temporary job but she was soon take on and shown how to do the sewing. She had to go onto the belt to be trained. She felt that her co-workers were very old. 'They were at least in their 30s!' She was only 15 at the time and they were training

her how to sew and to embroider. When she was put on the belt she was with younger women of her own age. She felt more settled.

10:44

"They stamped the material, then it went to the cutters, then it went to the machinists, then it went to what they called the stuffers, we had it then on the finishing and we had to do the finishing job, sew the Teddy Bears and put their eyes in. That could be dangerous sometimes because they were glass eyes, and we had to put thread through the eyes to put through the Teddy Bears, and tie them at the back. Sometimes the glass would shatter and you had to be very careful - it could have gone in your eyes really you know.... But... I liked the work... and it was clean work..... then you had to embroider the noses, saw the claws on, sew the ribbons on... you had to sew up the back of the Teddy Bears..." The y also did dogs and dolls and other things.

11:50

It didn't take her too long to get on the line and it only took her about a month to train. Some of the experienced workers were lovely but some were more impatient. VS says she understood why because they married women, they were on piece work and they wanted to earn the money. She says it taught her to have more patience when it was her turn to train the youngsters who were starting. She didn't want them to experience what she did.

13:05

She says it was very enjoyable and she made 'lovely friends.' She still has some friends from those days. They were happy days.

She doesn't know how many people who worked at the factory. "It wasn't a huge factory it was more like a warehouse affair"

She says that some of the roof was glass and in the summer it would get very hot. They wore green overalls. In the beginning they were a heavy linen but then they went "all modern" and they had nylon overalls. "In the summer it was really hot with those on and you had to wear them you see."

All though she thought the linen ones were better, she thought that the nylon overalls were "more glamorous." She thought there were "a couple of hundred working there."

14:22

She says a cousin worked there but she didn't stay long. And a neighbour Eileen worked there but she didn't stay long. She says that she made friends as they went along. Good friends.

15:05

She says she liked working there on the whole. But when she got married my husband was "one of the old regime.." and he didn't want her to work. She also had elderly parents and she had to look after them as well so she had to give up work. She remembers before she gave up work that she used to do 'home work' as well, and would have to sew through the week-end.

16:04

When asked if factory work was viewed as respectable work, VS says that they viewed it so. She says " It was very clean work. We could go to work dressed up if we wanted." They just used to put their overalls over their clothes. They were pretty good people to work for really but the wages weren't very good mind..... it was £1/13/4 before stopages and £1/12/6 after.... That was for the week.. a 45 hour week. You can laugh now!... That would have been 1949 I started work."

She said she finished in 1958 and by then she was earning 'big wages then' The most she had was £5. ""For a while I was on £4 because I was a bit fussy with my work. I was too conscientious in other words - but I graduated to £5 after."

17:19

They weren't given a pay rise every year and they were on piece work. They had to mark the toys and put a number on them "...some of the ones who were earning a bit more were rushing it through too much. Then we had it back and if they wasn't marked we had to do them between us... which wasn't fair really.."

18:28

She tells a story about a giant teddy bear that had to go to one of the big stores in London. She can't remember which one. They were selling Teddy Bear stockings which was a brand of stockings at the time. VS was picked to 'finish off' the huge

teddy bear. It was to sit in the window of the shop where all these Teddy Bear (Bear Brand) stockings were sold.

"They sat it on the table for me. I had to make a nose on this with embroidery (she laughs) and put the eyes in and do the sewing. I got through it alright... and it did go on display. But... it was the most frightening time I had and I thought I'm sure to make a mess of this...!"

19:54

The bear was 3/4ft she thinks cos it had to sit in the middle of the display window. "All I know it was a great big one and I wasn't very tall but I managed it anyway." It sat on the table and had a big nose and they raffled it to raise money for a hospital afterwards. She says that the woman who used to make the display bears was such a perfect finisher. VS thought she'd never be able to finish to her standard. It made her very nervous.

21:40

A couple of the charge hands said that the women who sewed the bears were the better embroiderers. But she says that they were all good at their jobs. They made the bears for St Michael Marks and Spencer. She says they were the fussiest buyers. "Sometimes they'd come around to see you do the work and they'd stand by you..." They made VS very nervous.

23:07

" St Michaels were very good quality being fair. Mind being honest, the materials.. it was always high quality from the toy factory..."

23:50

There were a couple of male charge hands and men who serviced the machines but the factory was mainly women. One of the designers was a woman. "She had her own office.... She came out to the factory occasionally... she bring patterns out to take down and they were trying something new out...experimenting... but I didn't have a lot to do with those really." She doesn't know whether a woman designer was rare but she was the only one she knew down there.

24:55

She gave all her wages to her mother and she received "a couple of bob pocket money.." She did that until the day she left. But she says she had generous parents and never had any worries.

25:20

She says that they had a factory dance sometimes at the Angel Hotel in Abergavenny. The was also the Queen's Ballroom in Pontypool and VS can remember going there once. They had a do once a year. There was a factory connected with them who made Rosebud dolls and they were picked out and allowed to buy one sometimes. VS had one once but gave it away. She says it would have been "worth having" now. They thought it was a honour to be picked out to buy one.

26:35

They had a union in the factory and they were all members. You had to join. She says it was quite a happy workforce. Sometimes some used to complain but it was mainly OK. She says that the manager Mr Thwaites was a 'lovely man.' She says that she remembers walking with her boyfriend in Newport and he crossed the road (to say hello presumably). She thinks that this was a different way for a manager of a big factory to behave. She says they were nice people to work for. She thinks they were well treated except for the money if you compare it to today. "It's very poor.." Although a friend of hers did compare the factory to a sweat shop. "in those days, we just took it in our stride. We didn't think of it like that did we?"

28:09

After she married she was asked to go back a few times, but her husband wasn't willing for her to go and she was looking after her parents as well. She says there was a camaraderie in the factory. She got on with everyone. She 's kept in touch with people even if it's only occasionally through Christmas cards. But has one friend in Pontypool who she knew when she was 15 and they're in touch all the time. She says there are many happy memories. She talks about a birthday card that she received from a very old friend back in November.

29:49

They had a compulsory uniform at the factory but had to pay for them. She doesn't think the work was dangerous in any way except for being careful about the needles. She says she was like a pin cushion. She says you had to be careful about the toys' eyes as well because they were glass not plastic. Also a few of the women caught their fingers in the machines. She also thinks the kapok 'flying around' could have been 'a bit unhealthy'. But she wasn't aware of any bad accidents.

31:10

She can't remember any rules and regulations. They had to ask the charge hand but could go to the toilet whenever they wanted to. She says that none of her friends smoked. the women weren't allowed to smoke in the factory but had to go to the toilets or outside. It would have been dangerous to smoke inside because they used wood wool to stuff the animals. There were also chemicals for the stamps and paint for the chassis. There were chassis to put the stuffed dogs on wheels etc.

32:55

The toilets were always clean and tidy and looked after by a woman. The canteen was just a little way from the factory itself and "it was quite good really." She says it was a really good place to work. DShe usually took her own food but would sometimes eat in the canteen. She says they had "nice cooked dinners and they used to make lovely pasties.." But she says her mother was a good cook and would pack a lunch for her.

33:55

VS says she walked to work - "there were no cars and buses in those days.... I've walked all the way to New Inn from up here and this was my mother's house originally so it was from here....We were tough in those days!" When asked how long it took she says she was usually running.

"We started work at quarter to eight you see so I'd leave the house about quarter to seven, run as far as Penygarn (?) then if I heard the town (...?) hooter... I knew it was only seven o'clock, so I could slow down a bit." In the summer she'd walk through Pontypool park, and sometimes the park workers would look at their watches and say "you're a minute late this morning". One morning she was caught climbing over the park gate. In the winter she went down Penygarn hill which was often covered in ice. She thinks it's about 1 mile to Pontypool and another mile to New Inn.

She says they started work at 7.45 and finished at 5.25 "quite a long day really..." On the way home she could catch a bus from New Inn to Pontypool. "Mrs Peake who

owned Peake's buses knew us and she would always hold the bus up at the Clarence... it was such a Godsend.." They paid pennies for their bus fare. There was a man in a wheelchair that sold the newspaper and she'd pick up a copy of the Argus for her father on the way home every night.

37:38

They were allowed to chat when they working but "not too much.. we got on with it" She says it depended how much work they had. She says that when they started - she refers to the photograph - they only got 2/6 per dozen if they were lucky. Then they had a conveyor belt and it could become hard going and the management didn't like that. VS preferred it before they had the conveyor belt. It was more relaxing. "they made more money I suppose to get them through faster...". They wouldn't be paid more when they brought work home. VS father used to complain of the 'big boxes' in the hall.

39:45

They used to listen to the radio in the factory over the Tannoy. They could listen to Music While You Work but if Mrs Dale's Diary came on the management would switch it off. They weren't allowed to listen. "You had to concentrate on the work then..."

40:21

When asked if she suffered long term effects on her health, VS says that she has arthritis in her fingers, but she says she's still sewing now, for charity. "I always said when I left I didn't want to see another Teddy Bear.. (but) I've done hundreds since...and I've started them from scratch as well... It keeps you going see"

She says that she didn't suffer any chest problems because of the stuffing, but then she said she wasn't doing the stuffing although sometimes the kapok would fly about a bit.

42:18

They used to work a 5 day week and sometimes on a Saturday morning, if you wanted to earn some extra money. She thinks that the pay was the same for a Saturday. They didn't work shifts, only days and no night shifts ever. They had to

clock in and clock out. "It was dark when I went in the winter and dark when I went home"

43:33

She thinks that they had three breaks - tea break in the morning, and hour (or less?) for dinner and then before 4 o'clock another tea break. Sometimes they didn't bother with the afternoon tea break - they thought they may as well "carry on with with the work and do the extra..." She thinks that they had paid holidays. The factory would close down during the miner's holidays for a fortnight. VS remembers they she and her friends went to Bournemouth once. She says it was a big event. About five of them went on the train. She says that she stayed with a friend who lives in Bournemouth, but the others went to a boarding house. They used to meet up in the day. She says it was "all disney" and the trees were lit up and it was very pretty. They would mainly go for walks and shopping. VS says she's "never been a great one for dancing" and they didn't do anything like that on their holidays anyway. They had a lot of fun on the train. They had a fortnight off but would only go for holiday for a week.

46:37

She says that when she was a kid they went to Barry Island. It was an annual trip and a big event. She says they made themselves sick eating everything and then going on the fair. Her mother would take sandwiches on the beach and they'd be full of sand by the time they ate them. When she was little there was a cafe on the front with a place at the back where they could take their own sandwiches.

"..then we graduated after all that and went in cafes..."

48:22

When asked if they were allowed days off for personal reasons, she says she had to have time off when her mother had an accident and went to hospital. She didn't get time off for funerals or weddings. Makes the point that women didn't go to funerals in those days.

48:59

She says that no social activities were organised by the workers when she worked for HG Stone. Then she says again that they had a Christmas dance at the Angel Hotel and Pontypool...

(Clock Chimes)

She says there were no children's Christmas parties and the factory didn't have a social club, just the canteen.

49:55

She says she was 24 when she left and got married and she'd been there since she was 15. She says she was there for nearly 10 years.

50:22

VS says they were happy times and she was happy in the factory. She says she made nice friends and the firm were good employers apart from the wages. "But then in those days the money wasn't much.... you didn't get much money. Mind you could go to town then, with a £1 in your purse and you could come back with a bag full of shopping, so times were different then"

END | Y DIWEDD 51:20