

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Cora Crafts, Switchgear, Golmet's, Valeo

Interviewee: VSE054 Doreen Lillian Maggie Bridges (nee Moses)
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of
Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

DB says that her father was a miner and her mother worked in a London hospital. She returned and met her father and got married. Her father was from Cefnfforest, Blackwood and mother was from Pontypool. After returning her mother worked in Weston for a while catching the boat over the channel from Penarth. She worked in a hospital in London as an auxiliary nurse.

02:10

DB has 4 sisters and 2 brothers. One sister lives in Blackwood, two live in Oakdale and one in Australia. She has a brother in Australia and another in Pontllanffraith. Her twin sisters worked in a Telephone factory and one in a carpet factory. DB went to Argoed school a primary and infants school. She enjoyed it.

04:03

She left school when she was 15 & 3/4 and went to work in the factory, in Cora Craft. She worked in the stores. She says she couldn't have stayed on in school. She then met her husband at Cora Crafts. She was out of work for a while and then she went to work in Switchgear.

05:05

When asked if she had to have an interview to go to Cora Craft, she says yes. She thinks she went to the boss and he said that it (?) would only be there for 6 months. She said

that was fine and was offered a job in the stores. She went to work with a woman called Joy. She says that she doesn't remember how she knew about the job, but knew that her cousin Marleen worked there. She also knew some of the boys after a while and Marleen married one of them. Cora Craft was between Flower and Pengam, by a pub called the Smiths. The factory moved on to London, but her father wouldn't let her go.

06:53

The factory made broaches, bracelets, rings etc. She says they were really nice. She says that she worked in the stores where they collected stones (for the jewelry). Joy trained her and she picked it up easily, because they just had to make sure that they subtracted what they took out from the number of stock. If the stock got low they re-ordered. She says that she felt OK about working there "I felt really relaxed there you know, and really enjoyed it."

08:25

She says that her first day was a bit scary but when she met Joy she put her at ease. "I'd never met a lot of men/boys or whatever you call them, but my father was very strict with things like that you know, and I felt a little bit scared because they were coming in and asking for different things.. you had to learn where they were and um... 'Come on! Hurry up...!' you know."

09:31

DB says she had to be in work by 7 or 7.30. She thinks she caught the bus down from where she was living in Aberbargoed, so she says she didn't have far to go. She lived in Argoed and stayed there until she was 11. Then she lived in Aberbargoed until she was about 16, then she moved to Blackwood and was 21 getting married and moved to Trelewis. She talks about where she's lived in Trelewis. They were going to move to Australia but her husband's mother was very upset and wouldn't eat so they decided not to go. She talks about family matters.

11:34

DB says that she had to be in work about 7,30. It took 15 mins on the bus and then a further 15 mins of walking each end so she would catch a bus at about 7 am. The buses were public transport. They clocked in and out. She thinks there was a break at 10 am and one at 12 and she can't remember if there was a break in the afternoon. She can't remember when she finished work. She says it felt like a long day.

13:14

When asked how many people worked in the factory, she says there were quite a few. She says the boys used to do the dipping. They had to dip the jewelry so that it had a gold finish to it. They had to weigh out the gold in powder form and give it to the boys

who would put it in the tanks. She says the room where the dipping took place was very smelly. She says that was gold plating. She says "It was gold powder so they made sure that you weighed it out tidy."

14:49

When asked if she enjoyed the work she says yes. She says that she enjoyed using her brain and checking the numbers tallied and that she was on top of the ordering. "It kept you writing and it kept you thinking as well." She says that she did the same job the whole time she was there. She says that she wasn't paid very much. She imagines it was about £2 which she gave to her mother and was given 2/6 back in pocket money. She was also given money for the bus fare. Most of the time she would save her pocket money or she would spend it on going dancing in the church hall. "It was jiving then." They played records, Elvis Presley Blue Suede Shoes etc. They had pop and crisps and no alcohol to drink. She says that her cousin and friends used to go 'monkey parading' but she didn't want to do that so would go over to the church. She says that her father would wipe the lipstick from her face and stop her going out with stockings with seams up the back. He said "You are not going with all that lipstick on your face!" Her mother would tell him that she was becoming "a young lady" and that he treated her badly. When asked what her father thought of her working in a factory, she says it wasn't too bad cos she worked in the stores. She says that before she left school she and her friend went to Cardiff for the 1958 Commonwealth Games. They both ran very well and they were going to train to see whether they were good enough to compete. She says it rained really heavily and her father stopped her going. She talks a bit more about it.

20:23

When asked why her father differentiated between working in the stores and working on the factory floor she says she supposed that she was working in a confined space and that was ok.

21:13

When asked how many people worked there she says that she thinks 30 - 40 people worked upstairs and there was another storey above that. They set the stones in plaster or plasticine and made lovely jewelry. She says that she left everything she had from the factory in her mother's house.

22:06

She says that she wasn't sure if there was a union at the factory because she was only there for 6 months.

22:28

When asked if she had to wear an overall to work she says she doesn't think so and doesn't remember about anyone else either. When asked if the work in the factory was dangerous in any way she says that she thinks they would have had to be careful with the heated guns etc. When asked if it was too cold or too hot she says it was just nice and the lighting was pretty good. They had long fluorescent tubes over the desk. She says that it wasn't noisy. People were allowed to talk and they played music as well on the radio. They used to sing to the radio. She says that when they were in another factory - Valeo - they stopped it. They management said that they didn't need it anymore.

26:15

DB says she thinks that they were mostly young women there like her and maybe a few married women. She says her cousin was two years older and would have been in that age group. She doesn't remember if any of them had children. She says that the relationship between men and women were good and there was no harassment either way. She wasn't there long enough to get any holidays and she doesn't think there was a canteen there but they would have to eat their food by their station. She doesn't know where the smokers went for a cigarette. Outside probably.

28:07

When asked if she thought the employers were good she says yes. When asked whether she would have wanted to go to London to work if her father had left her she says she doesn't know. She says she was very sheltered and thinks she wouldn't have wanted to go that far. She says after being at the factory for 6 months her mother moved to Blackwood and she was out of work. She says she got a job in Switchgear.

29:53

She says she doesn't know how she knew about the job in Switchgear and can't remember going for the interview. She didn't know anybody there. Switchgear was in Ponllanffraith, about 1 mile from Blackwood. They used to catch the 'Switchgear' bus to work right to the factory. She thinks it was a free bus. She says that Switchgear was quite a big factory. People would come and work from all around. People from Leonard's (her husband) village Trelewis would work there and Treharris.

31:49

She talks about courting Leonard and her cousin knew boys from Switchgear in Aberbargoed. The girls went to Porthcawl in a caravan and they all met up. When she got married and went to live in Trelewis she used to catch a bus from Nelson.

32:48

When asked what she did in Switchgear she says drilling, deburring, countersinking.

"Countersinking was making a ridge so that a screw could go in. De-burring was taking the flashing off whatever you was drilling you know."

When asked what the end product was she says switches for different things. "They had a big huge machine there that would come down they had about 8 drills working down you know and they would do huge things. But we was doing nuts and things like that."

33:55

When asked whether she was trained to do the work she says they'd show you but you didn't get much training. She says she can't remember how much she was paid in Switchgear. She imagines it was better than Cora Craft. When asked whether it was basic pay or with bonus, she says that she used to give her pay packet to her mother and she used to give her money. Until she got married she was having 2/6, so it didn't matter how much she earned! Even when she worked overtime her pa packet would go to her mother because she was the eldest of 7 children and her mother needed the money. The year she was getting married she said

"I need to have some money now to get married so that I can pay for whatever, the dress and everything." She said "Fair enough I'll do the cake for you and the cars. I don't know whether Len had the cars over here and he bought the flowers and everything you know. But his mother wasn't very happy about letting him have his money!" They got married on March 23rd 1963.

36:30

DB says she didn't mind giving her mother her money because she had a lot of children. So long as she was fed and clothed. Her mother used to take her shopping for clothes. She says clothes weren't an important part of life, She was only allowed a certain amount and it didn't worry her. When asked if there were any perks from working in the factory she says they could buy jewelry cheaper and she did have quite a lot of it but she left it at her mother's house. Her sisters liked it so they took it.

38:20

When asked if there were any trade unions in Switchgear she says yes. She thinks it was the GMB. She wasn't a member at the time. She says that she had to have a medical to work in Switchgear.

"I was really annoyed.. I wasn't going to show my boobs to anybody! So I refused to do it and I was pulled over the coals for that. They said they was going to give me the sack."

40:41

She talks about looking at a poster which said how much a woman was allowed to lift, and how she had to go to see the manager with the union rep because of it. She says she was taken off the job and never had to do it again. She explains why that particular job was hard for a woman to do. 43:22 She explains what the job was and says it was really

heavy. Although there were other women doing the job as well, she thinks it then became a job that the men would do.

44:29

When asked if there were any disputes or strikes in Switchgear, DB says she doesn't think so. And when asked if she thought the workers were treated properly she says, yes she thinks so.

45:14

When asked when she joined the union, she says the only one she can remember joining was the union in Golmets, where she got more involved. She says that the workforce in Switchgear got on Ok with the management and supervisors and it was quite a good place to work.

46:08

When asked about her hours she says that they worked until 4.30 and started at 8 am. They had a break but they always stayed on their machines. She thinks they stayed on their machines for dinner as well. She can't remember a canteen in Switchgear. She thinks that they could go to a canteen outside. When asked if that was grueling, being on the machine all day, she says not really. By the time they got over to the canteen and queued up there wasn't much time.

47:30

When asked about other facilities, she says that the toilets were ok but she didn't stay there too long. The heating was ok, she didn't feel cold and the lighting was ok as well. When asked if the work was dangerous in any way she says that she can't remember any accidents. When asked if they were made aware of health and safety, she says that she doesn't think she bothered.

49:30

When asked about the music at the factory, DB says that she thinks they had Workers Hour or Playtime on the radio. They had that for an hour and then they got down to work. She says that people would sing to themselves.

50:25

When asked if they wore protective clothing, DB says overalls. They were given them by the company and they washed by the company as well. She thinks they were green cotton. They weren't given and didn't wear protective goggles. When asked if she thinks she's suffered any long term effects, she says she wears a hearing aid, because of the noise in the factory.

51:33

She says that the relationship between the men and the women was good. The men worked close by. The women would do the small drilling jobs and the men would do the bigger jobs. She says that the men had passed exams to do the jobs but they hadn't. The men were encouraged and trained and the women weren't. When asked if the men were paid more than the women she says "Yes definitely!" When asked how she felt about that she says that at the time because she was giving all her money to her mother she wasn't bothered, but later she was. "I didn't like it then, because some of the men were only brushing floors and they were getting much more than what we were getting, and we were on machines. And I didn't like that." She says she might have had a sheltered life, and talks about that. She says that when she got married she became aware of what she was earning. "Why should they have more money for just sweeping the floor and we were doing a job of work."

55:13

She says that they were aware of the Equal Pay Act when it was passed in 1970. She says that she was in her last job (Valeo?) when it came in. When asked if they got equal pay, she said not. She says again that there were some men who swept the floor and got more money than they did. Some were married with children. She says she thought it was wrong and then she says she didn't mind so much because they had children.

56:21

She says that her husband didn't mind at all that she continued to work when they got married. They needed the money to buy a house. She talks about where they lived and that they were going to go to Australia. She says that they shared the domestic work.

57:10

When asked how many hours she worked a week she says that sometimes she worked weekends to earn overtime and she could do overtime in the evening as well in Golmet's. She can't remember working on a Saturday in Switchgear. Most of the time they were asked if they wanted to do overtime in Golmet's and Valeo. When asked if she ever worked shifts she says that she worked night shift in Valeo's. That was out of choice because she had children. She did 2 years of night shifts. Sometimes she would have to walk home from the factory. Sometimes her friend would take her home, but she lived in Hengoed. She says that she sometimes walked from Ystrad, where the factory was, 'up the long stretch' to Nelson. She says that she'd be really tired when she got home. Sometimes her husband would pick her up. Getting to work was OK because she got a lift.

61:18

She says she was in Switchgear when she was about 17 years old and stayed for a year. She then went to Golmet's and stayed until she was 21(?). Then she got married and had her first child in 1965. She stayed at home with him until he was 12 and then she went to Valeo to work.

62:38

When asked what she made in Golmet's, DB says ironing boards. She says she had an interview for the job and was trained. She says she was on different jobs - spot welding, putting the sheet of the ironing board on to the edge of it and passing it down the line. When asked if it was a more skilled job, she says they were all skilled jobs as you had to learn the job. She then went on to make stools on a new machine, her and her friend. She says she and her friend had a laugh. They were kitchen stools. They made the seats and the others put the stool together. Then she says she was cutting asbestos. She was putting it on the end of the ironing board. They were cutting squares. She wasn't told to wear a mask in the first place but she says it was the white asbestos and not the blue. Later they had to wear masks. When asked if it's something that's concerned her since, she says "Yes. It did concern me. You could see it in the air you know. Cos you were just chopping it really and didn't realise it was bad for you."

67:00

When asked how much she was paid in Golmet's she says she still doesn't have a clue, but she felt the money was OK. Golmet's was in Pontllanffraith, on the way to Oakdale. She got married when she was there and she remembers that she was pregnant when she was there as well. She was there from the age of 17 and a half to 23.

68:38

When asked if she had paid holidays in Golmet's she says yes. She says they had the same holidays as the miners. They had bank holidays on top of that. When asked if there was a union in Gomet's she says she hasn't got a clue. She didn't join the union until she went to Valeo and she imagines she was in the union in Switchgear. Golmet's was quite big. About 200-300 people worked there. Her brother worked there before he went to Australia. She remembers him going to hospital because he had a bit of swarf - the pieces that come off when you drill - stuck in his throat. She talks about her brother going to hospital. She thinks he left Switchgear and went straight to Golmet's, but she doesn't remember why she left. But thinks it could have been because Golmet's was nearer and she could walk to work. She says she had a friend called Tina who worked there so she might have followed her. She says that she enjoyed working in Gomet's. She doesn't remember any disputes or strikes and thinks they were fairly treated on the whole. She says that the canteen was good. She says that when she had morning sickness she was allowed to go to the canteen whenever she wanted to. She thinks they were well treated. She thinks there was a nurse and surgery there. She says that the conditions and facilities were good. She worked until a few weeks until she gave birth and the co. were ok about that.

74:05

She thinks that they had to wear a uniform there. She says that she worked night for 2 nights in Golmet's because they wanted them to. They were bending the stool legs. That was overtime. She worked nights when she went to Valeo. She says that they probably went to Porthcawl on holiday in a caravan. They also went to New Quay Cornwall and West Wales. They went on a camping holiday and met friends who were in a caravan.

77:00

She says that her son was 12 when she went to Valeo. She was a union rep with the GMB in Valeo. She says there were things happening to a friend and she thought the only way she could stop it was to become a union rep. She says that she thoroughly enjoyed it. She talks about a few things that happened. She says that they had a tank that they had to dip the armatures into. The stuff in the tank was causing cancer. DB took up the cause and told the company that they weren't using it. She talks about the dispute and that they won the battle.

81:25

Valeo made armatures - motors - for windscreen wash. She worked nights at Valeo. She talks about the armatures and how they worked. She says it was a good factory to work for and they were good employers on the whole. When asked if she was involved in any other disputes she says she had to talk to management when they wanted a pay rise. She talks about negotiating a pay rise. When she heard that one of the managers was leaving she went to see him and said I'm sorry to hear that you're leaving. "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know!" She says that she went to work there when her son was 12 and before women had to pay full stamp. She says that she advised women to pay a full stamp so that they'd get money later. They all agreed except for one.

86:00

She says that she came out of her shell when she was union rep because she could see that women were being 'done down.' Being my father's child I wouldn't have that and I thought it was terrible." She says that she enjoyed her time as union rep. When asked if she's still a member she says that they sent her a card in '96 and she hasn't heard anything since.

87:30

When asked if they used to arrange Christmas parties she says yes. She thinks all the factories had Christmas parties. In Switchgear, her brothers and sisters came to the parties but she doesn't know where they were held.

88:27

"They used to have the float that went around different valleys.... I think they'd done the float, the boys who were apprentices there... I think we got in the back lorry then.... and we were the choir who was in the back of the lorry.

They had father Christmas on his sleigh and reindeers, and the choir was in the other one and they made that look fanciful as well.... We went to Aberdare and Ponty and Blackwood and Markham.. we sang carols you know."

89:54

She talks about the boys from Scotland and courting Leonard her husband.

90:24

"Whenever we stopped people gave us things you know. We were marvellous!" When asked if they were raising money for anything she says she can't remember, because they were in the back.

"Mostly they (Switchgear) were giving presents to the smaller children."

DB says that it happened every year and was quite an event, but she doesn't think they do it now. Then she says that Switchgear 'has gone'.

"Every year they used to be out and they could be seen along the way the lights and everything... beautiful."

91:54

When asked about the camaraderie with the women in the factory, DB says it was very good in every one. She remained friends with people after she left and had quite a few friends, some of whom have died. She still sees a lot of friends. She doesn't go out so much now but they used to. She talks about some of her friends.

93:32

She says she had good times working in factories and she'd do it again. In Valeo's they saved for a dog for the blind. They had Red Nose day. They did things in their spare time. When asked if the camaraderie was the same when she retired as when she started she says yes, but she says her friend says it's completely different now. She retired in 1995.

95:32

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD