

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWР Y FFATRI

Royal Sovereign Pencil Factory (Staedtler) in Pontyclun

Interviewee: VSE013 Jaqueline Susan Jenkins

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

00:29

SJ was born in Llwynypia hospital in the Rhondda and brought up in Cwm Parc. Her parents are both Rhondda people. Her mother (Margaret Chislett VSE012) was a housewife until they were teenagers and her father was a miner. She has two sisters, Pauline and Marylin. SJ went to Grammar School in Pentre Sec and did her 'O' levels. She always knew that she wanted to be a nurse so didn't stay on to do 'A' levels. She wanted to do the SRN certificate so she left school when she was 17 and got a job in a local factory for 6 months, until she started her nursing course. She went to Parc Primary School in Cwm Parc. She started nursery when she was 3 - her mother always told her that she started on her 3rd birthday. She talks a little about that. She says she loved school.

02:54

SJ says that when she left school she went to look for a summer job. It was in the Royal Sovereign Pencil Factory in Pontyclun. She stayed there until she went on her nursing course in December. She went round all the local factories to see if there was work. SJ says that her first job within the pencil factory was putting white caps on diary pencils. She has blisters on her fingers. It was called the finishing department in the factory - sharpening pencils, red and black Staedtler pencils. They took over whilst she was working there.

"And another job I had was to check that the black and red paint on the pencils weren't smudged in any way. So you were sort of on a conveyor belt til you'd see red and black pencils in your sleep!"

She was also on the pencil sharpening machine and that was on a conveyor belt as well. She was working with an older woman there who she'd call 'fag ash Lil". She's always have a rollers in her hair with scarf tied up in a bow in the front. She was an amazing person. SJ says that they'd have to pickup a big bucket of pencils in a wide strap - about 6 - 8" wide and put them in the container on the side. Then they'd be shipped off. She says. "I was only tiny, a light girl at that time and she said to me 'Are you going to be able to pick that up?' and I said 'Yes yes I can do it....'. 'OK.' she said and I went tp pick it up and all the pencils went over the floor.... and all the girls had to stop their machines to pick up all the pencils off the floor. So that was a very embarrassing induction into the pencil factory!"

She says she was 'as green as grass' since she was coming from school. They'd moved from the Rhondda to Pontyclun and she went to Cowbridge High School for Girls, and she was very naive. Working in a factory was an absolute eye opener for her.

06:30

When asked when she went to work there, SJ that it was 1968. She went around a few factories like L'Oreal and Fram Filters, to see if anyone would give her a job. It happened that the pencil factory were taking on people. "They gave me an interview there and then and said 'Can you start Monday?'" She says she didn't really have time to think about it. She says they only lived about a mile away so she could walk to work every morning and walk home. She says her first wage was about £7 pw which she says was a lot of money for her. She says that she bought herself a leather coat. "I thought I was the bees knees cos leather jackets in the late 60s was the thing for girls to wear."

08:02

When asked what she about her first day SJ says 'It was all greasy and you could smell paint everywhere." She says "...there was a large room and there were different sections to the factory like huge halls really and in our section there were about 6 or 7 machines all doing different things. It was noisy and the girls just had like overalls on and they were all age groups." When asked how many of the worked there, she says she has no idea but it was mainly women. They employed men to maintain the machines and her first husband worked in the labs as an industrial chemist. That's where they met.

She remembers walking to lunch on her first day and meeting this really scruffy man in a grey coat. He turned out to be her boyfriend and then her husband.

10:48

When asked how the girls treated the men in the factory, SJ says there was a lot of teasing. She says that because she was straight out of school and a bit naive, one man in particular used to take advantage of her naivety. He used to pull her pigtails and try to kiss the back of her neck. She didn't like that. She says that she didn't see any harassment the other way round but the men used to 'take advantage' of the women.

11:48

When asked how she felt about going to work in a factory, being between grammar school and training to be a nurse, she said that she just wanted the money. A few people in the factory asked her 'what are you doing here?' and she told them that she was there for the money. "They were just amazed that I went out and did that. The foreman knew I wasn't going to be there long... that was it - people were incredulous that I would go and do that. Why didn't I go into the office for example?" She says office wasn't offered - the job was on the factory floor and she was happy to do that. She says she got on with the other girls, they were from all backgrounds and she didn't have any problem. She didn't know anybody from the factory when she went there because of them came from the valleys - Talbot Green area. She says that she could walk to work from where she lived and it would take her 10 - 15 mins but the other women came by bus and a lot of the men had cars and drove to work. The buses were public transport.

14:12

When asked what other people thought about her working in a factory, she says that nobody really passed comment but her mother was pleased that she had got herself a job. She hadn't discussed it with her family beforehand. When asked if she enjoyed the work she says that she did. She enjoyed the camaraderie with the other girls and the banter at work. She says they were all different types of people. She says that one episode stuck in her mind:-

"I could see the different girls shutting down the machines and going to the toilet every so often and they were taking it in turns, so I thought 'Oh - right OK' And.. Lil did it on this particular occasion. She said 'We're going to the toilet.' And I naively said, 'Oh I don't need to go - I don't want to go'. 'You're coming anyway!' What it was, they'd have a cigarette break , a fag break, and I didn't smoke so I'd be listening to the gossip - that's what they were doing. And the foreman knew what was going on and couldn't do anything about it."

15:43

When asked if they were allowed to smoke in the toilets, she said they did whether they were allowed or not. She said they weren't allowed to smoke on the factory floor. She says that she thought Lil came from Tonypandy and had a heart of gold. She was really kind to her. She says that she made many friends when she was there. She also met her husband there. But she hasn't got any friends from those days that she keeps in touch with now. Her life went in a different direction when she left to do her nurses training and she moved on. She says that she doesn't see anyone from that period either.

17:04

When asked if she was offered any training when she went to work at the factory, she says that it was unskilled work.. She says that you were shown how the machine worked and you just got on with it. When asked if she could have done something more skilled had she stayed she says no - that was it. She says that everyone did the same kind of job on different machines and every so often they would rotate around the department. She says that there were married women working there but can't

remember if there were any mothers on the staff - it wasn't something she thought of when she was 17. She doesn't know what the other women were paid but thought that people who'd been there longer would be paid a bit more. When asked if she shared her money with her mother she says she did and that's the way she brought up. It wasn't something she had to think about. She gave her mother £3 pw for her board and lodge. She says she was grateful to do it for her because she always used to say as a child that she would look after her mother when she grew up. She says they were a poor family but all the families in the valleys were poor in those days. She says her father was a miner bringing up three children, but they didn't see themselves as being poor, because everyone was the same. When asked what she spent her money on, SJ says clothes.

20:08

When asked whether there were unions in the factory, SJ says that she didn't get involved. She says there were no perks for working there. When asked what they wore for work, she says it was a nylon overall. She can't remember if she got it herself or if they were given them by the factory. It was down to your elbow, shirt sleeves and button through. She thinks they were all the same - a dirty brown colour. But she says they wouldn't have wanted to wear anything light, working with lead and in the factory. She thinks that the factory must have provided the overall.

21:41

When asked if the work was dangerous, she says that she caught her finger once but managed to pull her finger out just in time, otherwise she thinks it would have broken her finger. When asked if she was aware of any accidents with other people she says no, there were no accidents in their department that she was aware of. When asked about rules and regs and health and safety SJ says laughing "There was no health and safety then, that I was aware of anyway!"

22:44

When asked about the heating and lighting SJ says the lighting was very good. She doesn't remember many windows although there must have been. She says that she certainly wasn't cold in the factory with the machines running. They'd put the radio on mid morning so you could listen to it. She found it quite a pleasant environment to work in. She didn't find it dusty, just a bit dirty. She thinks things might have been different in the paint shop, because the smell in there was really strong in certain parts. But where she was working was OK.

23:40

She says a lot of the music played was 60s music - the Beatles era - Mary Hopkin, that type of thing, Radio 1 not Radio 2. She said that they sang along with it, the Beatles' songs. She says they got used to the noise on the factory floor and 'you don't hear it then.' But they weren't given any ear defenders. She says that they were too busy to talk while they were working. They were 'too busy concentrating on the job'. The machines were spaced out in a big room and you weren't able to chat above the noise of the machines.

25:19

SJ says that they worked 5 days a week - 7.30 to 5 Monday to Thursday and it was a half day on a Friday - 7.30 to 12 or 1 pm. There was no shift work and the factory was either open or shut. They had to clock in. If they were a few minutes late, (not that she was ever late she says) they would get docked half an hour of their pay. She found that 'fascinating'. She says there was no overtime and then says there might have been for some people but she wouldn't have wanted it. She says that they worked until lunch without a break and they had half an hour for lunch. They had 15 min in the afternoon for tea break. She said it was a long morning without a break and she thinks that's why the girls had unofficial breaks to go to the loo for their fags. When asked what everyone did during the breaks she says 'Smoke' and laughs.

27:00

When asked what the canteen was like SJ says it was very basic. You could have a cup of tea or coffee. You could order a cooked meal bit she never did. She would take her own sandwiches and sit down in the canteen. She says she used to take her sandwiches and sit outside in the fresh air. She says she didn't have any paid holidays while she was there, but she thinks they did have paid holidays and they closed down for a certain period over Christmas, but that's when she finished working there. She says she wasn't aware of bank holidays bit there must have been an August bank holiday while she was there. She doesn't remember but thinks they did close down for a Monday. When asked if people were given days off for personal reasons, she says she wasn't aware of that. She wasn't there long enough to pick up on that. She says there wasn't a social club there, and doesn't remember doing anything socially with the other members of staff apart from the Christmas dance. She remembers that's when she had her first grown up dress. There was a dinner and dance somewhere in Porthcawl. She thought she was really grown up going to the dance and she wanted a long dress, because they were 'in vogue in those days.' I wanted a strapless black dress and when she took it home her father was horrified 'That's much too old for you!' (she laughs). But she wore it. There was transport laid on to take them to Porthcawl and they were out until 1 am. Her father was very strict and she had to be home by 10.30 pm so she had a row (for being late). She says that she met her future husband at the dance and spent the night dancing with him. She doesn't remember where the dinner/dance was but she says it was a big place and they had a 'lovely Christmas dinner', and there was a big dance floor and they had a live band. They played 60s music and they played (big) band music and well. They played a waltz and quickstep for the older people. She says she couldn't do those dances but did the twist etc. She says that they didn't have any trips during the time she was there - only the Christmas dinner/dance.

31:48

When asked whether she enjoyed the actual work in the factory, SJ says that it did get boring. It was a novelty for her in the beginning after going from school, and meeting all the new people and seeing how a factory worked but after six months she was glad

to go in the end and she wouldn't have stayed. She says that she didn't keep in touch with anybody except for her husband.

32:28

When asked how she felt about the time she spent working in the factory, she says "it gave me that bridge to working life, and a good bridge. Cos having to learn to communicate with people especially having to be a nurse and going into nurse training and nursing sick people, I think I must have had a sheltered upbringing - I don't know what it was - but it was an eye opener to the world of work." When asked did she think it benefitted her working with different types of people she says yes. When asked about working with a crowd of women, she says, "Oh yeah - some of them could be bitchy and they were always gossiping and I wasn't used to that either.... always had tales to tell about who was carrying on with who and that sort of thing which was totally alien to me again. But it was a good experience for my nurse training and my future nursing career to meet all different types of people, from all walks of life.

34:00

When asked why she wanted a job when she left school and only had 6 months before her training started, SJ says she wondered what she was going to do with herself during the summer holidays. She didn't tell her parents but went around knocking on doors and "I got myself a job - just like that - all in one day. I started the following Monday - that was on the Friday and I didn't really think about it, and you could do that in those days, just go round and knock on the door and ask 'have you got any jobs?'" She doesn't think that's possible today. When asked if she thought it was easy to get a job in those days she says yes. She says you didn't need skills or experience but 'you could pick up a job doing menial tasks.' She says things aren't the same today and talks about that. She thinks it was a big step for her to go and ask perfect strangers whether they had any jobs going, but she thinks that she didn't really think about it but just went ahead and did it. "I think that must have been my mother's independent streak passed on to me!" She talks about the youngsters today again and talks about her own granddaughter.

37:18

SJ: "It's sad that the less academic can't just walk in, knock the door like I did and pick up a job, because it does give you a lot more confidence. It certainly did for me anyway."

37:34

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