

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Sobell's TV and Radio, Rhigos Industrial estate

Interviewee: VSE016 Phyllis Powell
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of
Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

PP says she had no brothers and sisters. Her father was a miner and her mother didn't work. She had an aunt who was good to her and looked after her. She talks about her family.

01:54

Both her parents were born in Aberdare, but her mother's family came from all over the place. So her mother's family weren't Welsh, but her father's family the Batemans were. She was raised in Cromer Street Abercwmboi.

02:36

PP went to primary school in Abercwmboi. She didn't enjoy school at all. She was there until she was 10 or 11 and then she went to Ynyslwyd in Aberaman. She says that was a marvellous school and she really enjoyed going there. She became a prefect and she worked hard. When asked if it was a grammar school PP says it was a comprehensive. IT became a Welsh school afterwards. She says it was beautiful school.

04:23

PP says she finished school when she was 16 years old. She says she didn't want to finish "but of course I had to then see, cos that's what they did - we didn't go any further." She says all her friends when they finished but she stayed on to do shorthand and book

keeping because she was good at it. She says she learnt that in school. She says again that it was a lovely school and the the teachers were outstanding.

05:12

PP says that she was with her aunty and that she didn't want her to go to work. Her aunt had money and they were friends. But her aunt had a stroke and died so she had to go to work in Sobells. When asked why her aunt didn't want her to work, she says that many of the family didn't work. She thinks that they thought it was beneath them. PP says that she went to work when she was 18 because all her friends were working and she wanted money. She didn't have a lot of money and they had more than her and could go dancing 2-3 times a week. She says that her mother wasn't happy that she was going to a factory. In those days some factories workers had a bad reputation. It wasn't what her mother wanted for her. She says she didn't become a shorthand typist because she didn't have money to finish the course.

07:43

When asked what Sobells was like on the first day she went there PP says it was frightening. It was very noisy with lots of women and men and she didn't know what to do with herself. She says that she didn't know many people there, but there was one woman from the same street as her, and she took her under her wing. She says she didn't like the job she was put on at the beginning. She was on a line. They were making old fashioned wirelesses and they had a tray that was called a frame and they had holes in it. She had to put grommets into the holes. She explains the job. She didn't like it but persisted because she had to. Then she was made an inspector and she liked doing that job. It meant she could walk around the factory and it made her feel important. It gave her confidence.

10:00

When asked what they were doing PP said they were making coils. She explains how the coils were made and how she inspected and checked the work. She says she enjoyed the work.

11:00

PP says that she had an interview with a Mrs Dow before she started at Sobells. They asked what experience she had. When she became an inspector she was trained by another inspector to do the work. She had many other inspectors who were above her. When asked how many people worked in Sobells PP says that there were quite a lot of people working there and that it was a big place. She thinks there were more women there than men.

12:27

When asked was there a choice or did she pick Sobells especially as a place of work PP says yes she did but she doesn't know why and it was up in Rhigos. They used to catch a bus up to Rhigos but there were trains as well, but it was quite a way. It wasn't a company bus. She used to catch a bus to Aberdare station and then a train to Rhigos and she thinks it went on to Swansea after that. She doesn't remember how much it cost.

13:45

PP says they started work at 8am and they finished at 5pm. She clocked in and off. There was a break of an hour for lunch between 1 and 2. She doesn't think they had tea breaks in the morning and afternoon. There was a canteen there and it was very good. She used to eat there sometimes if there was something she liked but she used to take sandwiches usually, because it was extra money to eat in the canteen.

14:58

PP says she it was about £2.46 (?) in the beginning and when she became an inspector, the girls on production were having a bonus, but the inspectors didn't have a penny. They talked to the union about it and the union man said "What about your bonuses?" They said they didn't get anything like that. The union man said he'd sort that out and then they were given a 10/- bonus every week then as well as their wages and it was called an 'ability award' not a bonus. So whatever they had to do they had 10/- anyway. "We didn't have to have say 10 one week and 20 or whatever as much as came to us we had 10/-, which was a fortune." She thought her basic pay was nearly £4 then. When asked whether that was much more than on the line she says that they were having a bonus, but they had to work for it. PP says that Marjorie (Marg Evans) was marvellous on the machine. One of PP's officers said "Why don't you try on the production because you'd have a lot more money?" So she had a try, because she said she could do with the extra money, but she says she didn't like it. She says she could do it but she didn't like it at all. She had to sit down all the time when she was doing that job, and as an inspector she could wander around and that's what she liked.

17:23

When asked what they made on the line PP says they were all called coil workers. Some made small coils which they made on their tables.

"Now Marge (Evans) and the gang, she had a big machine and they had to put what we used to say a coil, big coil into it, like a sewing machine then, put the wires around it and it would go all around. And the number that you had to have - say they said 200 or whichever, it would stop then. Marge then would have to cut it and solder it and put it tidy. It was like sewing more than anything. And then put it in the box then to go to another part to put other things on to it."

18:18

PP said they made wireless (radio) sets and then they started to make televisions. They started making televisions when PP worked there. When asked if that was very exciting, PP said "Lovely." When asked if people in Sobells had televisions at home, PP says she thinks so but then says that they didn't have one in their house. That they couldn't afford it. She says again it was lovely. PP says that she was called in one day and the boss told her that there was a job for her in a separate room with Henrik and Leon and a Mr Jones. She says that Henrik and Leon were the Polish men, and they were outstanding (at their work). They were told by the boss not to talk to anyone about it but to get on with the job. She says that it was a directive from Slough where the main office was that they wanted 'something special'. She thinks it was something to do with microchips. "They were very very teeny coils, just about the size of my nail, a little bit bigger, and we had to do that for the whole week, whatever it was we'd done.... We didn't hear anything what it was but they were using that stuff in Slough... It was for the televisions, the new televisions and something to do with a microchip." She talks about Henrik and Leon again.

21:09

PP says that the factory had quite a lot of Polish people there. She says again that Henrik and Leon were very good at their jobs and if she couldn't do anything they would help her.

21:36

PP says that the small coil also had to be wound round but by hand not on the machine. She says it was something important that was needed. When asked if it was top secret she says it was and nobody knew about it. She thinks it was for the televisions but when asked if it might have been for the government, she says there was a rumour about that but nobody would say anything. They would say "'you don't want to know' - that sort of thing." She thinks that Leon and Henrik knew. When asked what the story/rumour was she said that people would ask if they were creating a bomb "and all that nonsense..". She says she didn't really know what she was doing only what she was told. But she thinks the 'others' knew what it was. The work didn't come to Rhigos, it stayed up in Slough.

23:11

When asked how she felt about working in Sobells, PP says she loved it and that her daughter says that she's the only person who ever said that they were happy going to work on Monday morning. She says she loved everything about Sobells. When asked if her mother came round to her working there she says "Not really." When asked how people viewed her working in a factory, she says that her family that knew her 'had a fit' when she told them she was working in a factory. They said "why is your mother letting you do that?" PP says that a lot of factory workers had a bad reputation years ago, because of the factories during the war. She says her mother thought it was beneath her. " I told you she was a snob!"

24:37

When asked what the conditions were like in Sobells, PP said they were "Great. Really good." She says the building was huge, there were windows in the roof so there was plenty of light and she says there was music playing. She thinks the work was 'done in five bays.' She says that everyone was making a different part. She says that she was in the coil bay which was at the top end of the factory. "Down the bottom was a huge place full of the wax drums and things." She says that the bosses were 'great, wonderful!'. The transformers had to be dipped in the wax and put to dry and she would have to inspect those again at the end. She says that was hard work "for the little girl that was mind and she was good' - presumably the one who did that work.

25:45

She says that they always had music. When asked if that was on a 'wireless', she says yes. She says people would sing with the radio.

"I remember one day of that... I like jigging cos I always loved dancing and Mrs Dow and Mrs Gardner, she was the head forewoman she was - Mrs Dow was the boss - and they were coming down the bay and of course you had to put a... well it was supposed to be a bearing... but I didn't know they were coming and I was doing my job and doing a little jig... and Mrs Gardner came on to me and she gave me a row cos I shouldn't be doing that and I could see Mrs Dow, a little short piece she was - 'Leave her alone Mrs Gardner!' she said. 'The girl is not harming and she is working with the music!' And she was the boss and she was a funny old stick. But she was good. Mrs Gardner didn't like that mind, because she was in charge of course - she was the top forewoman. But I was allowed to have a little jig and do my work at the same time. I can see me doing that now. Yeah - it was lovely." When asked whether the music helped everyone to work, PP says yes and they used to sing-a-long. She says the songs were all the fashionable ones - Vera Lee (Lyn?) etc. She says again that she really loved going to work.

27:37

When asked whether Michael Sobell came to the factory, she says that she thinks they did a few times but they didn't see them. She says they didn't come to the bays. She says Mr Baroner (the under boss) used to visit but didn't do very much but walk around looking important. She says he was a nice man. He didn't talk to anyone but he had 2/3 of the big managers with him.

28:19

When asked if workers were allowed to talk PP says they were. She says it was very noisy but they got used to that. She says they wore a green uniform or overall and everybody wore them except the foremen/women who wore white coats. She says the

toilets were 'lovely' and you were allowed to go to the toilets when you wanted to. They didn't say 5 mins and that's all. She says some of the workers used to live there.

"We had a wicked lot, from Glyn Neath they were, and there used to be about 4 of them going in there, standing on top of the toilet seats and throwing water at each other. They were only youngsters mind, bless them. And they'd done their work anyway."

29:32

She says they used to smoke but she can't remember what they used to do. She didn't think they were allowed to smoke by the bays. She says that Marge had a photo of all the gang and she (PP) had a cigarette in her hand, but she says that she never smoked in her life. She thinks that one of the other girls did and she told PP to hold the cigarette as the photo was being taken.

30:14

PP says that all the women were friends, but they all had their own gangs. She says Marjorie (ME) had a younger gang because she was younger than PP and she had an older gang of friends. She says that they were all fantastic. All of them are dead now. She says "Well at 87+, well they would be like wouldn't they?" She says the one who mentored her to be an inspector, Meg, she was outstanding. She says they used to have days out but not a lot because some of them were married and they didn't have money to go out a lot. She says that she and her friend Connie from Rhondda used to go to Cardiff every other week, then sometimes they'd go to Aberafon, because she had two small brothers and it was cheap. She says they all 'stuck together' and her gang of older women went their way and the younger women went together with Marge (ME). She says that ME still has a lot of friends but she says that her lot are dead.

31:38

PP says that she gave money to her mother and her mother would give her £10 (she means 10/-) pocket money. She says she had to have money for the bus and that money all went. She then says she had no more than 10/-. She used to spend her pocket money on the bus and when she went dancing. She says apparently they (her parents?) used to give her extra money but she doesn't know where the money came from. She wasn't short of money but didn't have as much as some of the other girls. When she had her clothes it was on a voucher. She says her parents went without for her to have and she wasn't short of anything.

32:36

She says that they went dancing in Aberaman Welfare hall. She thinks it's a billiard hall now. She says she used to go to the Catholic on a Sunday in Mount (Mountain Ash?) and a couple of nights to Aberdare. She says that she loved her dancing. She used to go 4 times a week regularly. There would be a live band playing - Billy Butler. She says "He's dead and all!" (and laughs.) She talks about the dancing and says it was mainly

ballroom dancing usually on a Monday, Friday and Saturdays. She says she knew other dances. She says she could dance. "Not marvellous, but I could get on anyone of them.

33:47

They used to have a Christmas party every Christmas. They also did carol singing in the canteen and would have a Christmas part there as well. The Christmas part would be held in one of the halls in Hirwaun. A lot of people didn't go because they were from Glyn Neath and Rhondda and other places. The factory would arrange the parties and they were free. She said that she and Marge used to go there together. The party would consist of a buffet not a sit down meal and dancing and "man chasing."

35:17

PP says that she did have a pay rise while she was at the factory. She thinks that she was paid about £6 when she finished. Then she says that maybe it was £10. She says it wasn't a lot. She says that she had one rise that was £6 something, which was a fortune. (She's very unclear about these monies.)

36:00

PP says there was a mix of single and married men and women at the factory. She says some had children but not as many as you see now (I think she means in the workplace). When asked if there were any childcare facilities she says not. She says that if you had children you had to make your own arrangements.

36:43

PP says there was a union in the factory. She thinks the inspectors were members of a different union to the factory floor workers. She had a union rep called Bryn Davies who was 'marvellous.' She then says that she thinks it was the same union. She can't remember what the union was called. She says that she had her dockets until about two years ago.

38:04

PP says that they had a strike but she doesn't remember what it was about and the inspectors didn't strike. All production stopped but it was only for about a day. She doesn't remember the cause but doesn't think it was much. She says they closed Sobells before she got married. Everyone was given redundancy, they weren't given money. they were just told there was no work. She thinks that lasted for about three weeks, and they used to go to union meetings in Green Street, Aberdare to one of the pubs to talk etc. Then some of them received letters to tell them they could return. She doesn't know what had happened. She says that they weren't paid during those three weeks so she had to depend on her mother and father. She thinks they might have had 'a couple of bob, say

2/6 from the unions. But it was nothing.' She says that she was 'courting' then and wasn't married. She thinks that the lay-off happened around 1956 and it came 'out of the blue'.

40:18

When asked how she felt when the lay-off happened she says " Oh I was gutted , honest I was. I can see me now, yes it was terrible. We all tried for other jobs and all you know but there wasn't any. Cos we had good factories there with Sobells, there was Murphy's, Ferguson.. in Rhigos. She went back to work and it was still going when she had her daughter so it was a good many years. She says it went all for a while.

41:08

PP says that they used to have a week's holiday and she doesn't think it was paid. She doesn't remember when the week was but she thinks that the factory used to shut for that week. When asked where she went for her holidays she says that she went to London once with her friend, and stayed with her aunt. But mostly they stayed at home and went for day trips. She says that they stayed in Ealing Broadway and went to see the tower of London. They went to many places on the tube. Her friend's aunt took them to Wandsworth Prison.

42:43

When asked about Bank holidays she says they used to have Mondays she thinks, or Monday and Tuesday she thinks. She says there were no trips arranged by management but some of the girls used to arrange trips. She went to Cardiff on a few of those trips. They went by bus and the bus would pick them up in Sobells and then drop them back in Abercwmboi. She says it was a private bus. She says it was marvellous.

43:38

PP says that the men in the factory did the same type of work to the women, more or less. But there was a warehouse where they stored everything that you needed - wires, coils etc. She says that the relationship was very good. When asked if there was a lot of teasing she said 'No - it was lovely.' When asked if they treated each other as friends, she said 'Yes we did.'

44:27

She talks about the market in Aberdare and its owners.

46:17

When asked if she thought the work on the line was dangerous PP says

'Not really if you was careful. Sometimes when girls would do soldering... sometimes it used to catch on to something, but they had plenty of stuff around to put it straight on. One of the girls there, they were on a big thing, a sliver it was called, sliver machine, huge, and she had to sort of chop proper sizes and she did caught, her her hand one day. But it was her own fault like she said cos she wasn't looking.'

47:08

When asked whether they were made aware of health and safety by the company, PP says yes they were. "if you'd done something it was your own fault for being dopey.' When asked whether they were good employers to work for PP says 'Marvellous. It was great, love.' She says the factory was neither too cold or too hot. When asked whether anyone had long term ill-effects from working in the factory she says "Oh - I don't think so. There was nothing really."

48:00

When asked if anyone worked shifts PP says that she doesn't think so, but she thinks they started doing half day (overtime) on Saturdays, and sometimes they did work an hour or 2 overtime at night if there was a big job that had to be completed, but not all that often. She did it a few times but not that often. It was necessary when they did but they weren't made to do it.

48:53

PP says she finished at Sobells when she was 29 and when she had her first child. Susan was born in 1956 and she finished three months before she was born. She says laughingly that her mother made her otherwise she'd still be there. She says that she couldn't return to work because she had a child. She however returned to work when her daughter was 11 and went to Grammar school because they needed extra money. She became a home care worker.

50:02

When asked if she missed her friends in the factory she says 'Not really, because biggest part of them had gone as well as you know... We used to keep in touch but nothing... and whenever went anywhere together..' She says she couldn't have afforded it, because now she had a child to keep. But they kept in touch and she still sees them now. She talks about the fact that her friend has a daughter (or granddaughter?) called Catrin.

51:36

When asked how she feels about the time she spent working in the factory, PP says

"Oh I loved it. Yeah - I loved it."
CE "And you'd do it all over again?"

PP "Oh God yes and I would tell anybody... course a lot of my best friends used to say "What does she want t go to a factory for? Why don't you try in a shop cos it's nicer?"... She talks about the reputation of factory girls in the war again and that her daughter couldn't quite understand that she liked the factory so much.

"It was lovely. I was happy there. Yeah - I would have stayed there for ever I think without going out at all... I did really love it. And school I loved."

53:11

END OF INTERVIEW/ DIWEDD CYFWELIAD