

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Freemans Cigars, Cardiff

Interviewee: VSE049 Mrs Sandra Cox

Date: 16/10/2012

Interviewer: Rosemary Scadden on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

0.16 My name Sandra, Sandra Cox. I was born on 29 Aug 1951. I was born in Cardiff. I married a soldier and moved all over the world basically. My father was a marine engineer. He was Canadian and he was in the Paras during the War. He was at Arnhem; he was there when the battle went on. He actually was quite famous. He got milk for the babies, for cator hearst during the battle.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

I have one sister and one brother.

What sort of education did you have? What sort of secondary school did you go to?

I just when to Lady Mary's High School for young ladies.

OK. How old were you when you left ?

I was fourteen.

Oh goodness. You didn't stay to take any exams?

No.

1.45

So why did you decided to leave then?

I just wanted to get into the world and worked basically.

And so how did you feel about leaving school?

Do you know it is that long ago that I can't really remember; I can remember my first job. I worked in a warehouse. Rapports. I was in Churchill Way at that time. We had to learn a code, for the prices and I think the code was 'Can you scype it? So 'C' was 1. 'A' was 2 and the letter followed the price of it so the customer didn't know the price of it, so you could say, 'Oh that's £10.' Because it was all by code.

So how did you get that job?

I don't know to be honest.

When did you go to the factory?

I think it was 1973.

So how old would you have been then?

I was born '51 so I would have been 22.

So did you do lots of jobs between Rapports and going to the cigar factory?

Yes. I worked in a pub and then I worked in Seccombes. It was in town. I think it's closed down now years ago. I worked there and I just went down to the cigar factory.

So why did you decide to go there?

I didn't have a job and they were recruiting and it was good money, so I thought, 'Why not.'
3.15

You said you worked in Freemans, so what is it they actually made?

Cigars. We used to get free ones as well.

You didn't have to roll them on your thighs, did you?

No. We had a really big machine, whoops, sorry. I'm knocking my fridge magnets over. You had a piece of tobacco which was about that big (bigger than an A4 piece of paper) and you had to push it over the machine and then a clamp came over and then you done it again, and the clamp came over and it went through like a conveyer belt, which made the cigars.

Did you smell when you came out?

Oh yes.

And your hands, were they brown with nicotine?

No they obviously smelt of nicotine, but I smoked at the time. I don't no more.

Did you need any qualifications to work there?

They gave you a lot of training. You know 'cos the one you had to make so many cigars out of the one leaf of tobacco and if you didn't you were in trouble.

And were any other relatives or friends of yours working there?

No. Not at the time when I was there

So can you remember your first day at all?

No to be honest. I can remember one day, it was absolutely dreadful. One of the girls put her hand in. You had to be careful that your hands, when you were rolling the cigar and she took the top of her finger off.

Right. Did you enjoy your work?

Yes it was good fun in there. It really was a good laugh, because I can still remember one Christmas and we were singing Christmas carols. And it was 'Come all ye faithful.. and Freemans would come into it. You know.

Yes

That would come into the carol. So it was really, really good fun there. Everybody seemed to muck in with everybody. It was. It was a good laugh.

Yes well you hear good stories about Freemans. I'm just going to adjust this, just in case it's not picking up.(me moving the mike!) I don't want to turn the machine off. It should be alright.

How many other women worked there?

There were loads and loads, I can't remember how many. There were literally hundreds.
6.27

Were there any men in the factory?

Do you know I don't know. To be honest I can't really remember. There've got to have been; there had to have been. I know one of the managers were. There were a couple of male managers, because I remember having a talking to on my birthday.

Why what had you done wrong?

I didn't get enough produce out of my leaf, so they sent me for more training.

Did the factory get bigger or smaller when you were there?

I think it got bigger. Like we went out on strike at one stage because it was too hot in there, so they had like fans of water that used to spray every six – every minute or so the spray of water used to. I remember we sat outside on the grass for ages and they decided to give us a nice mist of water.

Were all the jobs skilled or were some of the jobs unskilled there?

No I think most of them were skilled, but I don't know about the cleaners or things like that. I'm not putting cleaners down, but you had different training like there was one part where after they mix the leaves to roll the cigars, there were other places where they packed them and put them. There was quality control and once you finished your tray it went into another little room where you had to take it off to.

8.00

Would you say there were married women or single girls there mostly?

To be honest I didn't really take that much notice. I was only in my early twenties. I think there was a bit of a mixture, a bit of all of it really.

So you didn't know if there were any working mothers

No to be honest, I was really quite young and just wanted to party.

Were you encouraged to go to night school or any further training?

No

Can you remember how much you were paid each week?

To be honest, no. I know it was fairly good money.

Did you have a pay rise at all?

Yes

Why was it productivity or just length of service?

I think it was just length of service

And did you keep your money to yourself or did you have to share it with your mother?

I always gave my mum, like housekeeping, don't you? You give so much

Did your sister mind you earning good money? Did she resent it?

No, no, no.

Or your father?

No.

So you talked a bit about a strike so, so there were unions.

Oh yes.

Which one? Do you remember?

No, to be honest. I think, I could be wrong but I think that lady was the union rep. I'm sure she was, but I could be wrong. I wouldn't like to say she was, but I think she was the union rep

9.45

Did you join the union?

Yes

Were you forced to?

No. They just asked you if you wanted to join it. We had regular meetings and different things like that I can remember that. That was my first union.

So you've already told me that you went out on strike and that was because it was too hot?

Yes.

That was for working conditions. Do you remember any other strikes.

No. To be honest it was just that one.

So would you generally say that the workers were treated fairly?

Oh yes. Well I think so

And how do you think they got on with the management and the supervisors?

Fine

Did you admire or look up to your supervisors?

I don't honestly know. It is such a long, long time ago.

Now, did you wear a uniform?

No I don't think we did

Didn't you have any protective clothing, an overall?

I don't remember to be honest.

You don't remember changing or having a cloakroom?

I know we had to go through security to get in. No I don't think we did to be honest.

Would you say the work was dangerous in any way?

Yes it could be at times, because if you put your hand in the machine at the wrong place you could lose a finger. But you were really warned because sometimes like the cigar would not make properly and you just had to leave it. And it would fall out but you were told not to put your hand into the machinery. But people did because they thought they would be quicker.

11.32

So the machinery never stopped, it was continuous?

Yes

You said there were accidents. Do you think that person got any compensation?

I honestly don't know. I really, really don't know.

Do you remember any of the rules and regulations, about behaviour or what you could and couldn't wear or anything like that?

No to be honest.

Did they play music while you were working?

Yes I think they did. There was something and we used to have a blackboard at the end, and you used to have your targets on the blackboard at the end.

Were there any childcare facilities?

I think there was. I think they had a room at the end, but I couldn't be one hundred per cent. I wouldn't like to say.

No because it didn't affect you, did it?

No.

How many days a week did you work?

Five,

And do you remember how many hours? What time did you get there and what time did you leave?

I think it was about seven, seven thirty in the morning. I know it was quite early because I used to go, I had a Vespa at this particular time and I used to go on my scooter to work. I'm sure it was about seven 'til shall we say four.

And was it shift work?

No I worked

Just those hours, there was no night shift?

No, No. Sometimes, they'd asked you, if they had a thing, round about Christmas, they were making more; you could do overtime if you wanted to. You had security coming in, searching you, security going out just in case people were stealing the cigarettes.

13.35

Did they make cigarettes as well as cigars?

No sorry, cigars, not cigarettes. We used to have cigarettes that came in and I think we used to have ten a week free. We used to have free cigarettes and that particular time. You could have say five cigars and so many cigarettes and at Christmas you had a bonus. You had extra cigarettes or

Not a monetary bonus?

No I don't think so.

How many breaks did you have during the day?

I think we just had one in the morning and one in the afternoon, and your lunch break.

Was there a canteen?

Yes there was.

Was it good?

I think it was.

And you had to pay for your meals?

Yes.

Were they subsidised do you think?

I think they were.

You don't remember what sort of food they provided?

No to be honest.

Was it sandwiches or proper dinners?

I think they had proper lunch and dinners.

And you had holidays. How many weeks did you get?

I think it was the four. I think it was.

Did you go away then, with your pals?

I used to go away with my mum and dad.

Were they good about letting you have days off for personal reasons, say going to a funeral or something.

To be honest, I honestly don't know, at that age, no.

You told me that you got to work on your Vespa. Where were you living at the time?

I was living in Llanrumney.

So how long did it take you?

About twenty minutes.

Yes it is the other side of Cardiff, for you to go.

Yes.

How did some of the other workers get there?

Public transport, their own cars.

15.18

Wasn't there a special bus for people going from the docks?

I don't think so. I could be wrong because I wasn't living down there I didn't really know.

You parked your scooter somewhere

In the car park, yes

So you had to leave home quite early in the morning. Were there any social activities organised?

Yes we used to have a good old ball.

What kind of things did they organise?

We had like the Christmas dos and every now and then we'd all go out and party.

But the factory itself, did it organised things other than the Christmas do. Did they have a social club?

I don't know to be honest. I think they did. I think we had a little place in the corner that we used to use. I think we did.

But you had a Christmas party

Yes and they had the beauty competition every year and we all got together. I think that was in the Top Rank Club, in town.

And did you have visitors entertaining you. People coming in to sing or concerts or shows or anything at all?

Not that I'm aware off.

You told me about the beauty competition. What was the prize? Do you remember what sort of prizes they had?

No, to be honest. I was just young and thought, 'Go for it!'

16.55

If you'd won would you have to do anything for the factory? Would you have represented the factory?

I really don't know. They treated you good. We got ready in the factory. Everyone was moving round; everybody was helping. I still remember thinking, 'This is fun!' It was really good.

They took it seriously.

Yes and they took all the photographs and you literally walked on the stage and everybody asked you different questions and what's your ambitions, what do you want to do.

Based on the Miss World competition.

Yes

But you were clothed, it wasn't a swimsuit competition.

No, you were completely clothed.

Would you say you enjoyed working there?

Yes I did. It was a good laugh

It was the social aspect of it, rather than the actual work itself.

Yes.

Why did you leave?

I was sacked!

Oh dear. I don't think I'll ask!

I wasn't sacked, but I was sacked. I found it quite difficult getting the different, the proper things out of it. My scooter broke down.

You were late.

I was late a couple of times, so it was either resign or be sacked. So I resigned.

Oh dear. So they were quite strict, were they?

Oh yes, very, very strict. I was young and I thought, 'I don't care!'

You didn't care.

No to be honest.

What about leaving all your pals?

Yes. That was upsetting

18.15

What did you do after that?

I went into the Buck Maid in town. It was the Owain Glyndwr and then it was R S J Ps. I went to work in there.

In a pub?

Yes and I ended up being the assistant manager there

Are you still in touch with any of your workmates?

No to be honest, no

So looking back how do you feel the work that you did in the factory. That particular period in your life?

It was good, it was a laugh. I was young

It suited.

Yes at that particular time. Do you remember on Newport Road when the bridge came down? I think it was a pickup truck or something that went through the bridge and pulled the bridge down and somebody was crossing the bridge. That lady got killed. That was in '74 I think, because I was on my way home from the cigar factory and the traffic throughout Cardiff was absolutely horrendous because of the accident on Newport Road affected the whole of Cardiff. That was a friend of mine and I don't know if she worked actually in the cigar factory. I could be wrong there, but it was a friend, you know. Until I read the article when you... then you think things that come into your mind. Like I haven't thought about that bridge for twenty years.

Is there anything else you want to tell me? Can you describe the factory? Was it noisy, was it smelly?

It wasn't really smelly, but it was noisy. You could hear the spray of the water and then you got that if you didn't hear it, 'Where is it?' it was so, so big and all different departments.

It covered a big site.

Yes it really, really was and to see it now, aw.

21.06 #

How do you feel about that?

Aw you look, it's sad really when you think about it, you know, because most of our jobs are going abroad

They've gone.

Yes like with the AA just closing down. My sister worked there so she's being made redundant from there. I don't think Rapports is there anymore. I used to work in David Morgan's as well and that's gone.

I'm not laughing really but everywhere you've worked has gone. They've closed.
Yes, Seccombes, that's closed.

Top Rank's not there anymore.

No

Life has become quite different. Well that's lovely Sandra.

21.55