

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Sobell's, Welsh Trust – Rhigos Estate

Interviewee: VSE052 Marjorie Evans,
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards on behalf of the Women's Archive of
Wales / Archif Menywod Cymru

DOB: 7/3/33

ME says her mother didn't work but had worked as a girl in a hospital in Cardiff. Her father was a miner. They were only married three years when he lost his leg in an accident. They had ME after 5 years. She says her mother died when she was 59 and her father died when he was 90. She says her father was in hospital until everything healed and he had an artificial limb but didn't lose a day's work after he returned to the colliery as a pumps man. She talks about her father's injury and his working life after injury. She says her mother was from Abercwmboi and her father was from Merthyr. She talks about their married life, the family and where they lived. She was brought up in Abercwmboi.

06:17

ME says she went to Ynyslwyd School. It turned into a Welsh schooll. ME says she left when she was 14. She went to Abercwmboi school first and was 2 when she started school. When asked how she felt about leaving school so young, ME says she didn't mind. She says she didn't want to go any further with her education. She was 14 on March 7th and left school on March 20th and started in the factory on April 6th, in Sobell's.

07:32

When asked if she knew anybody in Sobell when she went there to work ME says that one of the girls living in the same street as her, Jean, was working there. Jean said it was ok. Jean's sister Evelyn Hodges, wanted to start working there as well, so the two of them went together to work there. She says that she had to go up and have an interview. They had to go to the factory first, and ask if they could have a job, and they started the following week. When asked about the interview ME says all she can remember is going into an office and speaking to Mrs Dow, who was the manager, and she asked questions and they started work. She says that Mrs Dow was very strict. They had to wear turbans because they were on the big machines, but they didn't like wearing them. So they used to make a turban the shape of their heads and put it to one side. When Mrs Dow came round, they'd put the turbans on top of their heads. She says they were very strict there, but it was a good life. She says the best years of her life were spent working in the factory. She says there's good and bad talk about factories, but she says she met some of her best friends in the factory and their still friends today.

09:18

ME says she had to train to do her job. She had to go to another person who was working on the machines so she could train. When they shown how to use them, they were small machines, but she'd never seen a machine like it before. But they got on well. She thinks that they trained for a month. She says there was a lot to take in and the machines were a bit dangerous because everything was spinning around. She says she went from there to go on to the 'Westminster' the big machines, from making one coil at a time to making 10 at a time. She though she was capable of working the 'Westminster because she'd been on the one coil machine.

11:12

When asked what exactly they were making and how she says

"We were doing coils... you would put a strip of like copper, you'd have a solder iron and a reel of solder, and you'd take a piece of one of the reels of wire down.. you'd pull it down and then you'd solder it to this piece of copper, and you'd do that to 10. Then you'd turn the machine gently to start, and then you'd have a big pedal down on the floor and you'd have to gently do it so that it would start up and then you'd speed up. And then paper... big roll of paper at the bottom would come up or.. I don't know how wide it would be.. very wide.. to cover that, and each one would go such a speed, would come up

and cut on its own size and wrap around this and the another roll of coil.. wire.. and then another strip of paper, until it came to about 6 inches. Then we'd stop it when it would wind to say.. the clock would go to 2000 I'd say... and then we would solder each one of those again and cut them and then have a cutting knife then, put it up top speed, and cut each of those into 10 coils and then after it would stop we would take them off and then pile them up the side of your machine. And those would go into wirelesses and then eventually televisions you know."

She says it was a pretty dangerous thing to use but once you were trained you could do it.

13:07

When asked if they assembled the whole TV set in the factory she says yes they used to assemble everything. There were about 5 bays. She says that they would make the coils in one bay. Then they would go into a waxing pot which was she says the length of her living room. In the next bay there would be people soldering little charts on to bakelite. They would build the TVs and build the cabinets and the whole TVs would go out to where they were being assembled.

14:06

They weren't making TVs when ME went to work there but they were making wireless and gramophones. They started making TVs quite a few years afterward and eventually it was all TVs. There were no wirelesses. When asked whether she felt excited about starting to make the TVs and whether it was cutting edge, she says yes it was really. That's when she moved on to the big 'Westminster' machine.

"Everything was multiplying - they wanted more of this, more.. you know, and there was a lot of people working there, you know."

She says however one good thing in those days when they felt that the factory weren't paying them enough bonus etc., they would go to Murphy's (another electrical factory 'down the road' on the Rhigos estate) and ask them for a job. They would have been able to finish in Sobells one day and start in Murphy's the following day. But when asked whether she did that she said "No." She says that they went back to Sobells and told them that Murphy's would take them on. She said that they had them (Sobells) over a barrel because nobody was trained for the big machines - "...only us girls." Even then they knew they were 'put upon' in part. They did things that weren't fair like trying to cut their bonuses etc. or raise the targets. So their defence was to tell them that they were

finishing in the factory and going to work in Murphys. Sobells would sort out their bonuses and they'd stay.

16:50

ME says that her first wage packet was £1/6d after stoppages. That was for working from 8am until 5pm. She said that they didn't have 4(?) breaks but a 1 hour dinner break. She says that she'd have to leave the house in the morning at 6.50 am to get from Aberwmbol to Aberdare (on the bus). In aberdare she would run over to the train station to catch the train to Rhigos and then walk over half a mile to the factory. She would get to the factory for 8 am. Then it would be the same journey and length of journey back in the evening. The £1/6d was the basic pay before they brought the bonus scheme in. She says that she thinks they worked for quite a while before they brought the bonus scheme in. However she says it was a lot of money then really. But by the time her mother had paid her bus and train fares, and she had pocket money and lunch to go to work, really her mother paid her to go to work, because she didn't get a lot of money out of it. She says that she gave her mother her money up until she got married. And her husband did the same with his mother.

19:30

When asked how much difference the bonus made to her pay, she says that sometimes she'd have £2 and sometimes £2.20 (?) going home. She says it wasn't a vast difference until the wages started climbing. She talks about when she was married and not working that her family used to live on £9. She doesn't remember how her wages increased over the years and how much she was paid when she finished. She says that she only remembers having £1/6. She says that she can't really believe it that she worked all those hours 5 days a week (and laughs.)

21:09

ME says that they introduced work on a Saturday morning, but that was overtime. They could also work on in the evening. She worked on one evening and she working on the machine and she always used to pull her chair up with her leg and there was a big piece of glass sticking out of the box so she had an accident and had nine stitches in it. She says that she was off work for a fortnight and she wasn't paid for it. She says that she didn't claim anything either. She says imagine what she could have claimed today since she still has the scar on her leg. She says that they didn't think about compensation. She says

that she was going to be a ballerina but couldn't do it afterwards with her leg like that!
(She laughs)

22:41

When asked how she felt about working in the factory, ME says that she 'loved it.' She says that her father didn't want her to go to the factory, but she wanted to go because her friend was going as well. After about a month she didn't know whether she liked it there and she went home and said that. Her father's attitude was "You wanted to go so you stick it out!" She did and she was glad. "It was the best years of my life as far as being single was.. was working in the factory there."

23:28

When asked how factory work was perceived, she says factories always had a bad name. "You're not going to a factory to work..." - they'd rather you go to a shop.. or in for nursing or whatever you know, - a different profession. But I'd never knock the factory." She says she doesn't know why factories had a bad name but she supposes it was "during the war..." There was a lot of talk about it you know and there was a lot of things going on which goes on today like isn't it with people having affairs and things, more so during the war that went on as well. But I can honestly say it was the best years of my life as a single person was in the factory."

She also met her husband at the factory. She talks about her husband's work.

25:49

When asked how many people worked in Sobells when she was there, ME says that there were hundreds of people. There were more women working there than men but there were quite a lot of men working on the line as well, doing the heavy work, with the cabinets and the TVs. The men were in the stores and would see to the machinery. When asked if the lines were mixed she says yes. The women were on the lines mostly but there were men as well and they were needed for the heavier jobs.

27:00

When asked what her first day at work and the factory was like, she says she was told she would be working on the bays and she didn't know what a bay was. She says it was like an aerodrome hanger, a massive place and all she could see was rows and rows of people with a dividing line between each section. She says it was frightening when you first went in there, because she hadn't seen anything like that before. But when she got introduced to people she was working with, and she was trained and she formed her own group of friends, and she was fortunate to have a great group of friends, she thinks she was very lucky to fall in with the right people. She says you're very vulnerable at 14 as you've never been out in that world, so she was very fortunate. She says that she's now 81 and she's still friends with the people she met (at the factory) when she was 14. She says she's in touch with Barbara, her friend from Glyn Neath. There's 4 of them left now out of all the people. She says they were 10 altogether when they started, then they were 8 and now they're 4. She says one is 90, one is 86, the other one's 81 and she's 81.

29:20

When asked what it sounded like in the factory, ME says it was very noisy. The machines were noisy and there was a big stores from where they used to bring the wires and coils out to you. She says it was something she'd never seen before and was like a big aerodrome. "Every thing was hollow and lights everywhere. It wasn't working in a room like this with daylight, it was all lights on."

30:05

When asked if it smelt of anything she says yes there was a big waxing machine, cos when they finished making their coils they would be dipped into big wax pots. "massive - on big wire trays and they'd have to go into the wax, so you could smell all this wax..". When asked if they used to play music she says yes, they had music on the factory floor and in the canteen they had workers' playtime on the radio. She says people used to sing on the line. She says it was a lovely atmosphere. She says that in 'those days', there were more jobs and people were employed all the time. People left to get married and have children and there was work for others to come in. She says it's so different to today. "It's sad today for the youngsters I think."

31:46

When asked if she remembers any of the songs they used to sing she says no, but it was all the records that used to be out then like Frankie Laine, Doris Day etc., She says they

used to meet up and go to the dances on Saturday - "That was the highlight of our life wasn't it - going to the dance down the welfare in Aberaman!"

32:30

When asked whether they were allowed to talk on the line she says yes, but they didn't really want them to talk, but to concentrate on their work. The foreman, Mr Bowen would be walking around all the time. She says he was very strict. He looked at the all the time to make sure they weren't talking but they were doing their work, cos they had to get a certain amount out (their target) at the end of the day. When asked how they set the target, she says 'They would just come down and they would say to you like, we need you to do..... say 500 a day. So you'd have to keep working. But if your machine went down, like say the paper wasn't cutting, then you'd have to have the... (Tony'd?) have to come then and he'd have to repair your machine, so you'd book off. But if you were going to be booked off for more than an hour, then you couldn't just sit around, they'd put you on to another job then to do something else you know. You wouldn't just sit there an wait for your machine to be repaired."

34:11

When asked if she had her own machine, she says yes. She says it's the one in the photograph (VSE052.4, VSE052.5). She says that she had to make sure that the machine was running perfect, but there was always someone who was there to look after their 8 machines. "They must have cost a bomb those machines, you know, to go from winding one coil which we did when we started there to winding ten coils, you know.... And that's why I went up to Welsh Trust to work, because the foreman up there and John my husband - he was a foreman there - and the manager Ray Davies knew I could work those machines. So he wanted me to come up and train people up there which I did then.I worked up there for 5 years on them."

35:14

When asked if it was more difficult working the big machine, she says yes, they had to be trained and they were more dangerous. It was only certain people that went on to those machines. A lot of people were afraid of the machine because it was so big.

"In the beginning, yes it was frightening, but then we got that we used to run our hands over it when it was going full speed and things, because it was part of us then wasn't it - we'd been on it for so long like you know. Yes we enjoyed it you know."

35:58

When asked if she was paid more when she went on the big machine she says yes she was, but she can't remember how much. It was more responsibility. She said that she trained her friend Aino (?) who came over from Norway. ME says that she couldn't understand any English and they had to explain to her how to work the big machines. She says that it was happy times there.

36:38

ME says that the machines were dangerous, because there was so much going on. A sheet of paper would be cut with a big knife, a blade at the bottom of the machine. The blade would cut the paper to a certain length so that it would go around the 10 coils without a crease. They had to make sure that it was folded with their hands, so their hands were close to it all the time it was working. She says it was the only way they could get the paper in straight. There were guards on the machine but not over the coils or the blades of the knife down the bottom.

37:44

When asked if she remembered any accidents on the machine, she says no. She says they were lucky in that way. When asked if they were made aware of Health and Safety, she says yes. They had big notices up about safety. That's why they were supposed to cover their hair, because the machine was spinning. She says that she used to have hair down to her shoulders and it was supposed to be tied back and she should have worn a turban. They used to keep the made turbans next to their machines and put them on when they saw the supervisor. "We'd take the turban off, and then when Mrs Dow was coming down the bay, we'd see her coming down and we'd pick it up and put it on like a turban, like they do in Ali Baba."

38:46

When asked about other protective clothing and whether they wore overalls, she says yes but that wasn't provided by the factory, they had to provide their own. But as for anything else, they didn't wear goggles or anything.

39:40

There was a mixture of married and single women working at Sobells and quite a few women went back to work having had children. But she said that she didn't go back to work because she wanted to stay home with her children. She didn't go back until her children were in secondary school, and then she became a dinner lady so that she could work the same hours as school hours. She says there was no child care facilities at the factory.

40:50

When asked whether there was a union at the factory, she says yes - the GMBU. She says she was a member of that union, and that they were all members of the union. She says that she remembers a strike but it didn't happen until she had moved to Welsh Trust. She says they were out on strike for a few days - a dispute about the work. But she wasn't ever out on strike for long. But she was with the GMBU, and always a member of the union. She says that when they negotiated their bonuses by threatening to leave, they did it themselves, because when they started there was no union at the factory. It arrived not long after. They used to tell the foreman Mr Bowen that they weren't happy with the situation, but after the union came they sorted any dispute about money out for them. She says that she was glad when the union started because they were always there to help them, if they needed it. "We all thought that everybody should have been in the union because that's what it was about wasn't it at the time. If there was any dispute, they would sort it out like you know."

42:36

When asked whether she thought that they were fairly treated she says she thinks so. She says that's what they thought at the time. She talks about how things are today and that they're different today, and about fairness today.

43:44

When asked whether she got on with the supervisors and managers, she said yes, they got on well. She says that she became a forewoman for a while, but she preferred being on the machine so she asked if she could stop and went back on the machine. "It wasn't my way to go, to go and tell people how to do things and be in charge. I would rather somebody telling me."

44:30

When asked about other conditions in the factory like heating and lighting she says there was no problem. She says there was plenty of lighting. She says they never worked in daylight because there were hardly any windows. It was all closed up so it was under artificial lighting. The majority of places were like that. When asked whether the canteen was good, she says "Yes.. good.. Big canteen, plenty of food, but a lot of us took our own food with us." She says that she didn't often eat in the canteen, because she had better food from her mother. "They'd call me Parry's Butterful.. There used to be a Parry's (in Abercwmboi) and they used to make their own cakes and bread and everything where I was living and the cakes were beautiful. And I used to take four of those in a box every day." She says that it wouldn't be approved of today and then goes on to say how ridiculous it is that we're told what to eat and what not to eat today. She talks about her high carb diet when she was growing up.

47:20

When asked about the other facilities she says they were good. She doesn't think that the smokers smoked when they worked, but would smoke during the lunch hour. She thinks that they had to smoke outside. She says that she's never smoked so she didn't really think about it, but she can't remember anybody smoking in the factory during working hours. She says that you wouldn't be able to and see to the machinery.

48:35

When asked the relationship between the men workers and the women workers she says that it was alright. She says that they all used to get on with their jobs. She also says that there were no men working near where she was working except for the mechanics who used to mend the machines or the floor sweeper. She says that in the beginning her husband used to come round and 'file your irons.' She says that the relationship was alright. When asked about harassment on either side she says no, there was nothing like that.

49:35

When asked if they were paid the same as the men and if there was ever any issue with pay between men and women, she says no. She says that she supposes the men used to earn more than the women but they weren't aware of anything like that. She says it was never discussed.

50:12

When asked about paid holidays, she says that they had a fortnight off - last week of July and first week of August. The factory would shut down and it would be at the same time as the miner's holiday. That was a paid holiday. She says that she would go on holiday. She remembers going to Slough to see her grandmother with her friend from Glyn Neath. She says that they went on the bus and it took nearly all day to get there. They left at 7am and got there at 7pm. She says that they'd spend a week there and they went to London for the day, to Buckingham Palace. They met other friends there who had travelled for hours to go to London for the day. She says that she went to Clacton on Sea for a week with her friend Eileen Carter from Glyn Neath and her mother and father. Then when she was courting with her husband John, she and her friend Evelyn from the same street, would go to Porthcawl on the bus and he and his friend Trevor would cycle down on their push bikes and they'd meet in Porthcawl. "By the time we'd get there we'd have about an hour and then we'd have to come back like you know. It was like going to London for the day wasn't it you know."

52:30

She says she doesn't remember about bank holidays, but she knows that they used to have that fortnight. She says that they didn't have a week off for Christmas. They only had Christmas Day and Boxing day. She starts comparing to today and then talking about the holidays she had when she was in school.

53:30

When asked if there were any social activities organised in the factory by the workers, she says no. They didn't have trips or anything while she was working there. They just used to meet up and go to dances. A few of her factory friends lived in Glyn Neath, so she'd go down to Glyn Neath for the weekend and stay with their parents. They'd go to

the dance in the Welfare. Then her friend would come up and stay with her and they'd go to the dance in Aberaman.

"That was the highlight of our social life - going to the dance on the weekend!"

There was a live band - Billy Bitler used to be in the Welfare in Aberaman, and he was local. They played 'In the mood' etc. and they used to do the 'whispering foxtrot' and the Tango. The girls used to dance together even though their boyfriends were with them. Although she was 21 and engaged, her father used to say 'Home straight from the dance.' She had to be in at 9.30 and her father would be waiting for her. He used to say "it isn't what happens in the dance it's what happens when you come out!". They also used to go to the Gwalia in Mountain Ash,

56:07

When asked how she got home from places like Mountain Ash, she says that they'd go to the dance at 6.30 and come out at 10.00 and either catch the bus or walk home. They'd also go to the cinema and it used to be 2/3d to go upstairs in the Palladium, Her husband used to have 5/- pocket money and he'd pay for 2 x 2/3, and he'd buy 2 Mars bars - 3d each.

57:19

When asked if there was a Christmas party at Sobells, she says there was a Christmas dance in the canteen in the evening. They had to have transport up there and back. They would play records in the Christmas dance. She would save her pocket money to buy clothes and sometimes her mother would buy something. She says that she saved her pocket money to buy her wedding dress, but her father bought her veil. She says it was something like £20 which was a lot of money compared to maybe £2000 today.

58:57

When asked how long she stayed in Sobells and why she left she says she was there for 12 years and then she left to go to Welsh Trust. It wasn't because she wasn't happy in Sobells but she had other friends in Welsh Trust and her husband worked there. She stayed there for 5 years. She finished when she had her son. She was earning more money in WT because she was training people on the machines. When asked if she enjoyed training as much as working she said yes.

60:13

When asked if she had a leaving gift from Sobells, she says that she had wedding gifts from people she worked with, but nothing from the management.

60:50

When asked what was the difference between Welsh Trust and Sobells she says it was a smaller factory. There were fewer than 100 people working there. She says she liked it there but her heart was in Sobells, that's where her friends were. She says that Sobells is the place she would call her best working place. When asked if they were doing the same kind of work as Sobells she says no. They were winding coils for wirelasses, but it was mostly for deaf aids etc.

62:22

When asked if she bought a TV set while she was at Sobells, she says no. She says she couldn't afford it.

"We could just afford to buy that little bakelite wireless, you know.... It didn't worry me. A television never worried us - we were happy with the wireless. We didn't have a television until we had our children and that was years... we'd been married 9 years before we had children but it never bothered us. We were never in - we used to go for walks every evening - so it never bothered us staying in to watch the television."

She talks about children today having a sedentary lifestyle in front of screens.

64:16

When asked how she feels looking back, she says she thought they were 'wonderful years'. She says that when you're friends with a group of good people that makes your life. And the highlight of it all was that she met her husband there. She says that she'd exactly the same again if she 'had her time over.'

65:11

ME says that although they kept in touch and sent Christmas cards, her group of friends didn't meet up very often. They decided to have a reunion when one of the friends decided to emigrate to Australia. They met up in Rhigos for a meal. They met up when her friend came back and before she went back again. Her Australian friend died very suddenly and they haven't met since then, but they still speak on the phone and write and send cards, and they'll be trying to meet up for Aino's 90th birthday. She talks about the reunion.

68:00

When asked if she thinks that there was a special camaraderie in the factory she says yes. She says there were some lovely people working there.

68:50

When asked about the time and motion people at the factory she says that they'd get someone down from the office, one of the men and they'd sit by you as you worked. You had to make sure that you were working at normal speed. If you went too fast, they would give you a target set on that top speed, and if you didn't hit that target while you were working, they'd send someone down to see you. They'd ask "why are you always so behind in your target?" But you can't always keep that top speed up. But they couldn't see that. Also if something would go wrong with the blade, the paper wasn't cutting right, you'd have to pull it out and cut it yourself and then make sure the roll was going even, but they wouldn't understand that." Then the union would come in and sort it out.

70:15

When asked if she found that oppressive, she says that it was. She says that they were doing their best to do their work at their normal speed and it wasn't their fault if things went wrong. When asked if they were part of the factory or people who came in, she says that they were part of the factory, employed as Time and Motion study. They'd fix up different targets and they'd want more production. When asked if the union was always helpful, she says yes 'the union was always there.' She says that she thinks everyone in the factory was in the same union.

72:15

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD