

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI

Sewing factory on Canal Parade; JR Freeman's Cigar Factory, Cardiff;

Ralph Mathers, Cardiff

Interviewee: VSE071 Veronica (Vera) Diane Lena Battle
DOB: 9/12/1934
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards for Women's Archive of Wales / ar ran
Archif Menywod Cymru

Vera Battle nee Parker says she was born in Tiger Bay in Nelson Street. Her mother was Georgina and her father was Victor Parker. Her parents were both born in the bay. Her father's family was from the West Indies. She had sisters called Beryl, Josie and Janice and a brother Graham. She says that both Beryl and Graham have died.

1:51

She says that her mother and her sisters were sent to London when they were young because their mother died. They all went into service. So they were all excellent cooks and cleaners. Then most of them came back to Cardiff, though her Auntie Charlotte lived in Birmingham. Her mother married her father and had Vera and Beryl then the war broke out.

02:57

She says that they went to South Church Street School. Her father was a musician and played the guitar and worked in the steelworks. She says her mother worked in Currans for a while, and she cleaned as well. She says her father went to London. He was in Edmundo Rossi's band and he played in Ronnie Scott's jazz club for all the Americans. He used to talk to them about entertaining people down the tube during the air raids.

4:27

She says that they had to stay in school, the same school, until they were 14. So she stayed in school until then. She names the teachers in the school. She says they had a netball team and she and sister Beryl were in the netball team. They also had a football and rugby team (for the boys). She was in school with Joe Erskine the boxer and Billy Boston who wanted to play for Wales. She says "They wouldn't have him because he was black. So he went to Wigan and he played for Wigan and he still lives there." She talks about other good football and rugby players. She says she enjoyed school. She says the teachers would look after them at the end of the day. They'd go home and come back and would play ludo, table tennis etc. and practicing the choir. "Teachers would look after us and keep us off the streets." She says it was a nice school.

07:24

When asked if she was musical she says no but she really likes music. (She walks off to show me her collection.)

07:44

She talks about her father Vic Parker's music and what records she has. e.g Down at the old dock. "It was on St David's Day, When we docked in Tiger bay.." She says he was singing about the seamen. "All my friends... all their fathers were seamen.... (She lists some of the families) And their fathers used to go away on a ship for 3 and 4 years. So they never seen them. And all their mothers was from Merthyr, up the valleys. (She names the women.)"

09:03

When asked if the women were from Merthyr how they met the sailors, she says she doesn't really know. She talks a little more about the families.

10:16

She says that when she left school at 14 you couldn't continue in school. " You couldn't go to High School unless you passed the scholarship." She says she wouldn't really have wanted to do that. She says Betty Cambell went to college and became headmistress of Mount Stuart junior school. She talks about Betty Campbell.

11:24

When she left school she went to work in a sewing factory. She says it was "up Canal Parade" but she can't remember what it was called. She says they used to sew buttons and canvas in the lapels of the men's jackets. She says she was paid 12/6 a week. She would give her mother 10/- and she'd half 2/6 pocket money. She says she would go tap dancing down West Close in an old barn. They'd have studs put in to their shoes. She names a lot of her friends and girls the same age that would go there.

12:30

She says she can't remember how many of them worked in the first factory. She says the factory was quite small and they had machinists there but she wasn't a machinist. She says she didn't receive any training when she went there. They showed them how to do the buttons and the canvas in the lapels but she didn't become a machinist until she went to Ralph Maffers, a factory at the back of David Morgan's.

13:19

She says that she worked in the cigar factory first before she went to Ralph Maffers. She says she can't remember how long she was in the first factory, but says you could leave one job on the Friday and start a new one on the Monday. She says she used to go (to the factory) with the girls from Franklin Street and Newtown. Her father got her a bike for the journey. She would cycle to the cigar factory which was on Clive road at the time. There was no canteen so they'd have to ride home for lunch and then ride back. Once a year they'd go on a bus outing to London for the day from the cigar factory. They paid £2 for the trip. They went and had a look around when they were in London. Then they'd go and meet the bus to go home.

15:55

When asked what she did at work she says they used to take the cigars down to the cellar and stack them in a 'hot room' or the drying room. They'd be put in a press and be left there to dry out.

16:26

When asked if there were any perks from working there she says no she didn't think so. She says they had to go home for lunch because there was no canteen, but can't remember what happened for morning and afternoon breaks. She thinks they probably sat at their machines. She says they had to take their own sandwiches.

She says she can't remember what she was paid in the cigar factory. It was more than the other job and the pay felt 'ok'. She says that she'd still give her mother all the money.

18:25

She says that she didn't know anyone at the factory when she went to work there. She says she didn't have an interview but just went for the job and was given it. They weren't given training but Lily the supervisor would show them what to do.

19:10

She says it was a big building and lots of people worked there all doing different jobs, rolling the cigars etc. The cigars would be sorted out in the sorting room and put on a tray and then they had to take them down to the drying room on a trolley.

19:44

She says they used to go to London once a year for £2. She says that she enjoyed working there. She says the factory closed and moved (from Clive Road to Penarth Road.) She says she left because the factory had moved. She says she went to work in a tailoring factory at the back of David Morgan's.

"The used to make women's clothes - only women's clothes - coats, skirts, jackets, costumes they used to call them and I used to be on the overlocker and the buttonhole. Laura was there, Iris - a cousin, Min Ding, Joan Whalley, Babs.... and the thing was they used to sing, always singing all together - harmonious, and there was a lot of Greek girls who'd just come from Greece cos up the top they had a Greek church and a hall and along the side of it these cottages where they all lived. They were wonderful tailors they were!"

She talks about Michael Jackson's clothes "with the bell bottom trousers". She would have suites made there like MJ's suites for her daughter Vivienne. Then her niece and her friend wanted one too.

22:46

She says that she knew the women she mentioned by name when she went to work at the factory. They were from Tiger Bay. She soon got to know everyone else. She mentions more people - "Barbara, Nick and Chick - Chick was a Cockney Jew and Nick was a Cypriot Greek, and boy they knew about tailoring. They were wonderful."

24:30

She says she was trained on the machines when she got to the garment factory. She was trained by the supervisor and a woman called Joan, who made all the clothes for her three girls, including their coats. She also talks about the women on the presses. The training didn't last long - they were put straight to work. "There was no training like now. You soon picked it up." She says she can't remember what she was paid when she was there but it was a bit more than 12/6. She says it was a decent wage.

"The cutting room was right up the top and I used to take.. Vivienne used to come up and Joan would measure her and we'd go upstairs and we used to choose the material and they'd cut out the pattern and everything and then it'd work it's way down and by the end of the day she had a trouser suit or a coat."

27:30

When asked if she rode her bike to work VB says she thinks she walked there and walked home. She says her mother would look after Karen and Vivienne (her daughters) because she says she married an American. She met him when she went dancing. She says that she had Karen before she got married and then he used to come on leave and he wanted her to go to Toulouse where he was stationed. She went to live with him taking Karen with her. They got married in Toulouse but he treated her very badly so she came back to Cardiff but was by then pregnant with Vivienne. She talks more about her marriage. Then she didn't hear from him and found out he'd

gone back to the US. She says she met him in the Colonial Centre in the Bay where they used to go dancing.

31:32

She says her mother looked after the girls when she worked and they were in nursery as well. She says she never heard from her husband Steve Battle again. She didn't marry again.

32:48

She talks about some of her other jobs cleaning and waitressing while her children were young. She talks about her mother looking after her children.

33:38

VB was also a dancer. She went to tap dancing classes in the bay when she was young. They paid 6d for the class. And when she was 15 or 16 a man came from London looking for chorus girls.

"He was looking for chorus girls so he picked me, Iris, Shirley, Mary Beezer, Mahala, for am all black negro show, American negro show. There were already girls from the Bay up there- Maureen Genet, her sister Violet, my cousin Mari was up there. Anyway Shirley's mother wouldn't let her go and Iris' mother wouldn't let her go so me Mary Beezer, Mahala - we all went."

She talks about the show and the tour.

"I had to colour up - me and Mary - cos we were light skinned."

She talks about the music and songs in the show and the dancing, and some of the musicians and singers and where they went on tour, London, Dublin, Scotland and after a while they came to the New Theatre in Cardiff. They were there for a week. She talks some more about the show.

40:25

When asked if they were unionised at Ralph Mathers, she says no. When asked if she thought they were well treated she says yes and in the cigar factory. She says the conditions were ok. She says she never experienced any cold. She says that Ralph Mathers didn't have a canteen and they had to eat at their machines or they went out and went to a little coffee place in David Morgan's arcade. When asked if they wore overalls or uniform she says no. When asked if they could buy the clothes cheaper because they were working there, she says she didn't think of that. She used to buy material and have clothes made in the factory. She says they didn't pay to have them stitched up. She talks about the Greek girls again. She says the cottages are gone now.

44:16

When asked if they went out together as a group from the factory she says yes. She talks about the girls singing in the factory. They didn't play the radio or records but the girls would sing unaccompanied. She names the girls again. She says they were mostly Grangetown girls. She says that she didn't keep in touch with her colleagues when she left. She says that she enjoyed working in factories on the whole. "Yeah - just got on with it. You had to have a job and that was it. You couldn't stay home like they do now."

She criticizes the young generation a bit and then says that she's lucky, because she still works in the local primary school. She says that they wanted her to leave because of her age but the deputy head wanted to keep her. She talks about the various people who walk in the school from all different countries and the fact that they can't speak English very well. They kept her on because she was the only English speaker who works there. She says that she's going to keep working as long as she can.

52:24

END OF INTERVIEW/DIWEDD CYFWELIAD