

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWR Y FFATRI
Stamina (Industrial Clothing), The Polythene Factory – Bute Street, Cardiff

Interviewee: VSE072 Marguerite Barber
DOB: 19.3.194.
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Interviewer: Catrin Edwards for Woman's Archive of Wales / ar ran
Archif Menywod Cymru

The interviewee identified herself as Marguerite Barber. Marguerite confirmed that she was born in Cardiff Docks, her mother was of Irish descent, and her father of African descent. Her father was a fisherman, and her mother worked in factories until she started a family. Marguerite has two brothers and one sister. Marguerite went to school in South Church Street school from the age of 4 until 15. Marguerite loved school, and when asked whether she would have liked to have stayed on longer at school she replied "I didn't have the intelligence honestly, I wasn't that intelligent but I would have liked to have gone into art- I loved drawing..... Or Biology if I had the brains...or if we had the money.....The opportunity." Marguerite confirmed that she had to leave school at 15.

(02.19) What did you do when you were 15 then?

I worked in the Stamina on Bute Street.

Did you know anybody there when you went there to work?

Not to talk to, I'd seen people from the docks, but there were only about half a dozen I recognised there.

Did you go with girls you knew?

No, I went on my own. My mother took me, I was so scared!

How did you get the job - do you remember?

Jackson Hall, everyone went there, you know, for jobs. We used to go there before we left school and they used to get you interviews and everything. That's how I got the job.

So you were interviewed to get the job - do you remember anything about the interview?

No not really, just the basic questions- what school did you go to blah, blah blah, and that was it then. They said, 'You can start in two weeks'.

So what did you do in Stamina?

I used to do the buttonholes of the overalls.

So what did Stamina do then?

Overalls, they did overalls, and the bibs that men wore. Industrial overalls.

So industrial work-wear?

Yes.

(04.19) Did you have any training for that?

No. No first of all, they put you on just putting buttons on the holes. Because there were about four new ones there. One of them became my best friend. We were just putting buttons, and the little hooks, and then they'd train you how to go on the machines. That was it.

So , do you remember how much you were paid when you first started working?

I think it was about £3.00.It wasn't very much at all.

What year did you start working there?

1958 it must have been.

Did you tell me your date of birth?

19.3.1943.

Tell me about the factory then- where was it ?

Bute Street.

Which end?

The top end.

What's there now?

I can't remember.

How many of you worked there?

A few hundred. About 200 I'd say.

Only women then?

The only men used to do cutting. Cut the overalls out on these big machines. Then they'd send them up then for the girls to sew.

Do you remember your first day at the factory - what was it like?

Well, the foreman came , and then the supervisor and she just showed the four of us what to do and that was it. Just putting the buttons and the hooks in the overalls, and that was it. Because we were new, we became best friends then .It wasn't too bad then once we became friends.

(07.09) How did you feel going there then?

Oh God! I wanted to run to school! I had to pass my school, and I wanted to run in there!

But as time went on, and especially when you got your wages, you thought 'Oh this is lovely, a wage packet'.

You were really young weren't you?

15, yes.

So what was the factory like then?

It was very good, not dirty or anything. Similar to this really. There was only material, nothing else in it. It was quite big it was.

What were the conditions like then? Was it hot, cold?

Oh God, not really, you were on the go all the time. The only thing, especially when the sun came out, and we were on tables, and the windows were, you know, by there. That I didn't like.

So it was hot?

Yes, and they had no blinds, or shades, so you had to just stick it out.

Was it cold in the winter as well?

No not really, 'cos they gave you these thick overalls to put on, it wasn't too bad.

Lighting-wise it was ok was it?

Yes, it wasn't too bad. Well, I didn't know anything else, so to me it was ok. But when I went to other places, I realised it was a bit Victorian-like, you know. In their ways, you know, especially the supervisors and the foreman, they were quite strict they were.

Were you allowed to talk while you were working?

Well, in a way, as long as.... we had a few words, but we were so busy, we just had to keep going. But we always had this supervisor, she was only tiny, like a witch she was! She was very wirey. You'd go to the toilet, she'd be hanging out of the window waving to you!

(09.20) Did you have to ask permission to go to the toilet?

Oh yes! She'd look at the clock. She'd give us a few minutes, then she'd be waving a piece of material out of the window to get our attention.

Was that a hurry up?

Yes. Some of the older ones were going for a cigarette, which she hated. You could see all the smoke coming out of the window.

So how did you get to work then?

Walking. I was only 5 minutes away.

So what time did you start?

8 o'clock.

Did you have to clock in?

Oh yes.

What time did you finish?

5 o'clock. We'd have half an hour for lunch.

Did you have a break in the morning as well?

Do you know I can't remember. But I know we had one in the afternoon.

Did they have a canteen? What did you do for lunch?

We took a packed lunch. We didn't have anything like today, all these canteens. Everyone took their own or some went home, if they lived quite near.

Did you have somewhere to sit to eat your lunch? You didn't have to stay by your machine?

No. Oh no. We went down. I think the only thing they gave us was tea. A cup of tea, you know. If you can call it tea!

Did you have a uniform or overall?

We had to buy our own. A coarse brown thing, it used to be horrible. But it kept you warm in the winter.

Were you unionised there?

No I never heard of anything like that. We'd never been told. I didn't stay there that long anyway. I think it was less than a year I stayed.

You weren't aware of any disputes or anything?

No, no.

Were people fairly happy there do you think?

To be honest, all I can remember was just machines going all day. It was like an L shape. All the machinists were there, and we were this end doing all the buttons and button holes. All you were seeing were just heads down because they were on piece work. So they used to try and work and get as much out as they could.

Were you on piece work?

No. Only the machinists. The ones who did the main....the sewing.

(12.38) Yes, so did they play music in the factory?

No

Did anybody sing?

No!

Do you think you were well treated or badly treated by the bosses, as a whole? The workforce, not you personally.

They were fair, they never bothered me. Strict but fair, as long as you did your work, they didn't bother you.

Were there some women who could earn a lot of money on the piece work so you think?

I suppose so. I didn't bother with the machinists, they were down one end and we were the other, so they didn't talk about what they got or anything so they'd just come in, do their work and they were gone then.

(13.49) So what did you do with your money? Did you give it to your Mum?

My Nan.

Your Nan sorry, so did you give her all your money?

Yes, then she'd give me back my pocket money then.

So how much pocket money?

£1.00.

So what did you do with your money?

If I needed stockings I'd buy stockings. Or then I started wearing makeup. Stockings were only about £1 something then, you know, years ago. I needed stockings, and some makeup. Because my Nan bought all my clothes for me. She was good in that way. Anything I needed she bought me.

What about music? Did you buy any records and that kind of stuff?

Oh, about year or two later, I bought a wind up (? unclear) I thought it was wonderful! My friends would come down dancing in the front room. The music would go down and down and then we had to wind it back up again! It was lovely that, I only wish I'd kept it now to look back on it.

So it was a wind up? Like for 78s?

Yes, you had to put the needle in the thing and it would whirr and you had to keep winding it.

Do you remember any of your first records?

Oh I think it was The Platters. It was such a long time ago. I know it was The Platters anyway, I loved them.

So what were the other women like in the factory, you say you made friends?

My best friend. We were friends for years afterwards.

Was she the same age as you?

She was 6 months older than me.

What was her name?

Phyllis.

What about the other girls, did you make a lot of friends in the factory?

Well, we were friendly, you know in work, but they all came from Ely and Adamstown (?) so no. Phyllis lived not far from me, so we stayed friends, we'd go to work together, come home together.

So were you the only two in your circle of workers that came from Butetown then?

Yes.

So did you used to go out or were you too young then?

Only to the Hop, the 6d Hop.

Where was that?

The church vestry on a Saturday.

What did they do play records?

Yes.

Which church was that?

St Mary's, yes, it was lovely. I'll never forget that. We didn't know any different, we didn't know about night clubs, and pubs were only for the adults.

(17.20) so how long did you stay there?

I think it was about a year, then I went down to the polythene factory. I was there 8, no... 9 years.

So what year was that?

1959, 1960.

Did you have to have an interview to go there then?

The basics ... 'what was your last job, why did you leave' and everything like that. I went in a week day and I started on the following Monday. I think it was a Wednesday I went.

So why did you leave?

I just got a bit fed up you know, my first job and everything. I thought there must be more to this! But I was quite happy in the polythene factory, it was only down the road.

Did you find it quite quickly then, the job?

Yes, yes, there was a lot of work around then. You could go from one job to the next years ago. Yes, I quite enjoyed it.

(18.45) What did Phyllis do, did she come with you?

Oh... she had a baby!

Oh right.

She fell from grace she did.

So did she leave the same time as you or before you?

Let me think.....I think she left just before me. Her parents, they sent her away. They used to do then. She was sent to Bristol, she was. Unmarried mothers home.

Oh!

Yes.

So did she keep the baby?

Yes! She kept the baby. She kept him, she couldn't part with him. Her parents brought him up then.

So she came back then?

Yes, she came back, and kept in touch.

Oh that's lovely. So.....you went to the polythene factory then, so what did you do in the polythene factory?

Oh just sealing bags, sealing the , you know, you'd cut them out, then they'd go on the other machines, and about 200, cut them out on the table , then seal them up and put them in bundles of hundreds then.

Do you remember what it was called, the polythene factory?

No, that's the only name 'the Polythene Factory'.

Where was it then?

Down right down the bottom of Bute Street, you know where (unclear - canal?) goes? The historical...

Yes.

Across the road from there.

Oh right. So how big was that then?

Oh it wasn't very big. It only had two big rooms.

(20.30) So how many of you worked there?

I think it was about 12 of us.

Right! Did you prefer it being in a smaller factory?

I did because they'd come in, we'd share all meals you know. It was lovely, we were like a family. That's why I stayed so long. They'd say ' You bring that tomorrow for lunch, and I'll bring this', and we shared it all out, it was lovely.

So were you mainly women there then?

The only men were the boss, the foreman and the packer. He used to do the packing.

So you did all the work then?

We did all the, you know, the cutting the bag, the polythene and sealing them.

So were they all your age, or were they older women?

Oh some were older, yes, there was.....let's see the older ones were in their forties.

So were there some young women there?

Oh yes, there was a mix of them.

And a mix of married and un-married?

Yes.

What about - did they have children?

The older ones, yes, they all had children.

How did they cope with working and children then?

Oh, I think their mothers took care of them, yes, their parents. They must have had somebody to take care of them.

(22.00) Now, do you remember how much you were paid when you worked there?

I was paid a little bit more, I remember that. Yes, over £4, nearly £5, and yes.

How did that feel at that time? Was that a pretty good wage?

Then, yes, it was then.

Did you still have to keep giving that to your Nan?

Yes. Though in the end I just gave her £3, board and lodge, and I kept the rest.

So how old were you when you negotiated that?

Oh, 17, 18.

Was that like a part of growing up?

Yes, yes, well, it was my wages, you know. So I said how much do you want. I said 'I'll give you £3', but she still always bought me clothes. Always. Always. She was good as gold she was.

So can I ask why did you live with your Nan rather than your....

Oh, my parents got divorced.

Oh I see, sorry.

Then my mother moved to Ely, and I just stayed with my Nan then. After my mother got divorced, we went to live with my Nan, then they re-housed my mother and I just stayed with her then.

Was it just you, or your brother and sisters too?

No, I only had the one brother and one sister at that time. They stayed with my mother and I stayed with my Nan.

(23.47) Oh right. It meant you could stay in Bute town rather than go up to Ely?

Yes.

A lot of people moved to Ely didn't they?

Oh I know. Well, they condemned, eventually, the houses in Lauden (?) Square where I was from.

So you remember Lauden(?) Square as it was? What was it like?

Oh it was lovely.

What were the houses like then?

They were big.....my Nan had a big Victorian house my Nan had, but they were good solid houses, but um , they condemned them, and that's where they built those monstrosities then. The block of flats .But oh, it was lovely, it was really lovely the docks then. Peterwe went to school together.

The guy downstairs?

Yes. He was good friends with my cousin he was. Good friends.

So let me ask you then.....what time did you start work in the plastic factory?

8 o'clock. 8 until 5.

Was that pretty standard was it?

Yes.

What about your breaks then?

We had two down there. 15 minutes in the morning, half an hour for lunch and then 15 minutes in the afternoon.

(25.13) So would you say the conditions were better there then do you think?

I'd say they were more or less the same,'cos it was all factory work. It was clean, you know, it was very clean. They even polished the floors, they used to have cleaners in the night and they used to clean and buff the floors up in the night.

Yes, because it was an old building wasn't it?

Yes. But it was quite clean, well, polythene, it's only ... you know it's not like it was food or anything like that.

No.....and where did you used to eat your lunch?

Oh we had a canteen.

Oh, you had a canteen there?

Yes, it was a nice little canteen. It was about this size it was, and they used to take it in turns....the older ladies they used to take in turns then to, um, do the teas, or um, if you want any shopping done. You know if you wanted to buy anything for your lunch, they'd go out and buy something for you.

Oh that was very civilised!

It was nice, yes.

So did they just make teas then toast and stuff like that?

That's right, but if you needed any.... the fish shop was around the corner. They said if you wanted any chips. We'd go round and buy people.

(26.24) So you had a proper room to sit in then?

Yes, it was nice, it was ok.

What about the other facilities, toilets and things?

Yes, there wasdo you know I think there was only one. Yes, there was only one toilet.

Between all of you, and the men?

Yes, we had to go downstairs I remember. But it was clean. They used to come in and give it a good clean every day. You didn't know any different, because at home there was only one toilet. You only ever had one toilet, you know. Nobody ever had two toilets in their houses. You didn't know any different, that's the way it was.

What about heating and lighting and things?

Oh it was cold in there in the winter.

Was it?

Oh yes, that's when we started complaining.

So you did complain?

Oh yes, the older ones, they used to speak up, 'cos we had to keep our coats on in the winter it was so cold in there. Too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter.

So what did the management say to that then?

Oh, he started buying heaters didn't he, but it was no good. You couldn't feel it. It was really bitter it was in the winter time.

Did you ever threaten to walk out?

No, nobody ever did.

And you weren't unionised there either?

No. but the two older ladies, they were like the spokesperson, you know, they'd go down on Monday. If you had any complaints or anything, you'd tell them, and they'd tell the boss then when he came in. He'd sit with them on a Monday, and find out what's going on or anything. So he got some heaters, butwe were young then we didn't care. Oh God, it's not like today, got to be a certain temperature now haven't they ortoo hot or too cold you're out. They'd call you all out.

(28.36) So, on the whole, how do you think you were treated by the bosses then?

Oh they were great.

Yes?

Yes, they were great. That's why I stayed so long, 'cos they were really good. Like I said, you get on with your work and they were happy with you, and you were happy with them then. It was ok.

What about holidays then?

Oh we had two weeks holiday. Two weeks paid holiday.

Right and when was that? Could you choose when that was?

Yes, you could choose. It didn't close down, 'cos some places they closed down for two weeks. No, you could choose what days you wanted.

Right.....and what about Christmas Easter and that kind of thing?

Oh they closed down then over the Christmas and....

So you had your Bank Holidays as well, and two weeks paid holiday as well?

Yes.

So what did you do? Where did you go on holiday?

Oh God! Where did we go? Down to Barry Island, I mean it wasn't abroad. You didn't know what abroad was then did you? Um ...we'd go out, and my father, 'cos he still kept in touch with us, he'd take us out he hired a car and take us out in it I think. My Nan.... oh, we'd go everywhere, she'd take us out. Yes, abroad, it was like the side of the moon when you mentioned....

So did your father still live in Bute Town or around?

Where did he live? Adamstown. He remarried.

(30.19) So he was still in Cardiff then?

Yes, he still kept in touch. Me and my sister, he gave us away when we got married. Until he died we were still friendly.

So did you used to go away for holiday or was it only day trips?

Only day trips. Yes, only day trips we went.

So you'd go to Barry then?

And Porthcawl. That was the other highlight!

Do you remember anything about the trips? Any stories about when you went to Barry or Porthcawl?

Oh no, just the same old thing....sat on the sands!

Who did you go with then?

I went with my grandmother, 'cos she wanted to go. So we went together. And my cousin Tony.

Just family then rather than friends?

Yes, family. I said my friend, she had the baby , soalthough the parents looked after him, she still had to be there and um do a lot for him, so ...

Did you do anything with the people you worked with ever? Did you used to go out with them?

Oh we went on outings.

Right. Tell me about that then.

What was that one we went to now? Oh ...it is Cheddar caves?

Cheddar Gorge?

That's it? I think it was only about once a year they organised outings.

So how did you go there then?

They hired a...what do you call them.....charabancs years ago..

Oh you used to go on a charabanc?

Yes.

Not the White Funnel Fleet then?

No! Oh we went to Weston. Weston Super Mare.

That was on the boat was it?

Yes. Once a year they organised something like that.

Right. So it was like a summer trip was it?

Trip- yes!

Did everybody used to go then?

Oh yes!

So they'd shut down the factory then would they?

Yes, the bosses go.

(32.48) So was it organised for a Bank Holiday or something or was it a days?

No they just let you, you know, they said that they'd let you have it anyway, so.. It was great, yes. All the bosses used to come. Well, there was three, a foreman, and the main boss who owned it.

So did they arrange it or did the women?

The women, yes. They done everything. The older women arranged all that.

So did you pay for that?

Oh yes.

The factory didn't pay?

Oh no. We paid for it. No, they wouldn't.....

What about Christmas then? Did you used to have a Christmas party?

No! The day we broke up we'd finish up on Christmas Eve about 12 0'clock, then we'd go for a drink. We'd all go out for a drink and that was it. We didn't have no parties.

Where did you go for a drink? Did you go to the same place usually?

No just a couple of places where we worked. There was a couple of pubs around...well, there was a lot of pubs then but the ones we went to were just around the corner.

(33.50)Do you remember what they were?

I can't remember the name. Yes, it was just around the corner. We'd go. Leave 12 o'clock, go and have a drink together and that was it.

And how many days did you have off for Christmas then?

Only Christmas Day and Boxing Day and that was it, we were back the next day. Yes, two days. Even...well, now they don't go in New Year's Day, do they? We had to be in New Year's Day...oh it was terrible, New Year's Day going to work after being out late and then had to go to work. But now it's a Bank Holiday isn't it? They've made it a Bank Holiday.

Yes, but it wasn't that long ago when they made it a Bank Holiday was it? Well, doesn't seem that long ago. I can remember having to work on New Year's Day.

It was horrible.

So did you used to go out with women from the polythene factory? Did you used to socialise?

No, no. I still stayed friends with the one who had the baby.

(34.58)Yes.

I just stayed friends with her. But sometimes we'd go in the afternoon, if we'd finished work early. We'd just have a walk around all the shops and everything before they went home. But um, we used to go for ice cream. I always remember that. We used to go to the Italian ice cream shop, when we had our wages. Yes, Margaret, me and Margaret her name was.

Where was the ice cream shop?

Oh it was down in Bute Street somewhere. I can't remember the name. Yes, we'd go and have an ice cream then and because she was courting I'd go home then.

You lived in Bute Town and you worked in Bute Town, did you used to stay in Bute Town most of the time?

Oh no, when I got married, I still lived with my Nan, but when I had the baby, they housed me then to Llanrhymney (unclear?). I stayed there then.

I mean when you were working and living here did you used to go to town to go out?

Town, yes,

You did?

Yes.

(36.16) So why did you leave the polythene factory then?

Oh I got married and started a family. Yes! Cos I was there eight years, I told you eight years.

So, did you leave when you got married or when you started having babies?

Oh no when I started having my son. . I stayed there for 7 months when pregnant. Cos you get so much don't you when you work? Seven months. And that was it then I, um, stayed home then with the baby, cos my husband was away at sea. He was a seaman. That was it. I moved to Llanrhymney for 12 years I had another baby up there. I had another son. I lived up there.

So you didn't work - I know you worked in the house, but...

No I didn't go out to work, no.

Ever again?

Not until they were older.

So how was living up in Llanrhymney then?

Oh I hated it! Oh I hated it, it was so far out but then my Nan.... my mother and my Nan...they moved up there, so it was so much better then. I was there for 12 years. I lived there for 12 years anyway. Then I came back to Adamstown.

Right.

(37.41) I lived there for 30 years, in Adamstown.

Oh right.

And now I'm here, in this place here where I am now. Clarence Road.

Are you glad to be back down?

Oh yes, yes.

Have you still got friends down here?

Oh everywhere! I've got cousins all around me.

And family?

Yes, all cousins they're all around me.

(38.01) So did you enjoy working in the factory? Did you find the work ok or did you find it boring or monotonous or was it alright?

The polythene factory, I really liked it there. Cos there was only 12 of us there and we was like a family, we became like a family there.

Do you think because there were fewer of you that you had more variety?

Yes.

Right so you weren't doing the same thing?

Yes.

I know you'reare you still in touch with your friend Phyllis?

No, sadly we fell out a couple of years ago.

Oh no after all that....

Sadly, I know. Sadly. I did see her in the market and I looked over to her and she just turned her head away. Well, I tried. I thought 'I tried anyway'.

Yes. Are you in touch with anybody else who you worked with?

No, God no. Well, the older ones, they must be in their eighties....if they're alive that is. Cos I'm 70, I was only young only in my teens and they were 40 so.... I doubt if the older ones are alive anyway.

What about the younger ones?

Oh no, they've all lived in different areas, yes.

So once you went up to Llanrumney really?

That was it yes.

You lost touch with people did you?

Yes.

So it was just family then?

Yes.

(39.44) And how do you feel now about the years you worked in the factory?

Oh...well, it was a good experience, and you were earning moneyso.....

Was there a good camaraderie there?

Oh God yes! Yes. You'd always get one there that'd make you laugh and you know, like the class clown really! Oh God yes, it was brilliant. That's why I stayed for nine years I stayed there it was brilliant. I told you I left then to start a family.

Yes. Did you ever feel like going back to work or was it...

Oh I went back to work when I got older. I went to hotel work then.

Oh yes, you told me.

I done chambermaid, and that's.... well I stayed 'til I retired then. Yes, I done chambermaid. I retired 5 years ago. Chambermaid I done, yes.

(40.41) So you enjoyed working then?

Oh yes.

Right.

Well, the children. Well, one's in Norway, and the other one's in Somerset. I thought 'Oh well, time to go back now to work', so....yes, it was alright I enjoyed it. It was hard work, but you met so many different people. Oh God it was lovely.

Well, thank you very much that's lovely thank you!

That's ok.

41.07

END OF INTERVIEW/ DIWEDD Y CYFWELIAD