

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Smith's Crisps, Fforestfach, Swansea

(Monica worked here from 1952 until she got married)

Interviewee: VSW049 Monica Walters
Date of Birth: 13.2.1937
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Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive Wales

Monica was born in Gorseinon Hospital. Her father was a tin worker in Gowerton. Her mother had been in service in Cwmdru House as a young girl, just down the house. She had a brother, six years younger than her. He left school when he was fifteen years old and he'd found a job in Swansea Goldsmiths, on the Kingsway in Swansea. He used to play football near Cockett Pond. He had been told by her mother never to go near it because many people who had gone swimming there had drowned. But on one particular day, he was on a half day from work, and another boy from Blaenymaes came over and said that his cousin had got into difficulties in the water. Her brother went in after him and saved him, but he lost his own life. Her mother was never the same afterwards. Unfortunately, the boy he saved turned out to be a proper rotter.

Monica was twenty one years old at the time.

Monica went to school in Waunarlwydd but wasn't very happy there as she was bullied quite a lot. She then moved up to the Gendros and was very happy. She was fifteen years old when she left school. When she first left school she went to work in Woolworths in the High Street. She wouldn't finish work until seven o'clock on a Saturday night. Her friend would be working on a Thursday, whereas Monica would have a half day on that day, so they could never go out together. She decided to go and work in the factory so that they would have Saturdays together.

She got the job in Woolworths after leaving school. She had a leaving card from school, stating what kind of person she was, her punctuality and attendance. It said that she was a good worker. She got the job in Woolworths straight away. She worked six days a week in Woolworths. She was paid one pound sixteen and a penny. By the time she'd paid for her bus fare she didn't have much money left. Monica's friend worked in an office and she didn't decide to work in the factory.

She went down to the Smith's Crisps factory and got a job straight away. They had asked her how long she had been working at Woolworth's and why she wanted to leave just after a few months. But she enjoyed working at the factory much more than working in the store.

00.07.08: 'I think it was the camaraderie of the girls you know. Yes, it was nice. And we used to have music played to us ... Time used to pass quite quickly.'

She remembers her first day well.

00.07.30: 'The noise of the tins, I couldn't get over the noise. But you get used to it after a while.'

The supervisor showed her what she was supposed to do. On the tins, at that time, there was a label that went all the way around. They had to stamp different numbers on them, and this is what Monica was doing at the time. She was also stacking tins ten high and ten across, ready for when the lorries came in. There were eighteen packets in each tin.

Monica was taken off this job and put onto boxing, putting the packets into the tins. She preferred this job but she was kept busier, and the time went quicker.

There was a time department where older women cleaned out the tins. She would have a stack of lids on her table, and girls would bring the tins to her. But then things changed, and a machine was introduced, and tins would come down on rollers. She would take two tins off at a time and take the packets from the trays, and put the lids on. Then the labeller would come over and take them.

By picking up so many packets of crisps she would wear the front of her fingers off, which was quite painful after a while. They then started having a nurse to examine their fingers every morning. Monica doesn't remember anybody being taken off the line. Also, if any of the girls had a head ache they would go up and see the nurse. The nurse sent Monica to the doctor's on one occasion to get a cat bite on her hand treated. But the doctor didn't want to be told what to do to the wound by a nurse and sent Monica back to work. The nurse was very annoyed. This happened three times. The nurse kept on about it because her friend had been bitten by a cat, and this had caused her death. The nurse was in the factory full time.

The pay in the factory was considerably more than in Woolworth's. She started work in the factory later in the day than the other girls because she was only fifteen. When she reached sixteen she had to start earlier, at half past seven, which meant that she could earn more.

At the factory, they wanted the girls to try out different jobs, and Monica took to the boxing. There was about eight or ten of them doing the job.

00.14.37: 'The quicker you were, the higher up you were.' ... 'You had to do eight hundred tins a day, for your wages. Every hundred after, you'd have one and three. It wasn't a lot really but to us it was.'

Some of the girls were slower, and one of them had been told that she wasn't even meeting her eight hundred a day target. But Monica was on the top because she was quicker. In the summer they had a tremendous amount of work to do because they were selling more crisps.

Monica thinks they were good employers.

At Smith's the foreman of 'all downstairs' was called Mr Parry. Upstairs was where the crisps were made.

00.16.17: ‘There used to be an awful smell up there. I could never have worked up there.’

The manager was called Mr Baker who used to come on to the factory floor sometimes, and he was really nice. Mr Parry (now deceased) would always remember her name, if he saw her in town for example.

The downside of working at the factory was having to work on a Saturday morning until 11.30am. It was the only factory on the estate working on a Saturday. Monica estimates there were a couple of hundred people working there at the time. It was mainly girls working there but there were some men doing jobs like fitting, and handling the potatoes when they were delivered on the lorry.

When she was fifteen she would walk to work, but later on she would get the bus from the cross roads. There were lots of girls from Swansea working in the factory, but also girls from Pontarddulais, Gorseinon, one from Cross Hands. This girl would be allowed to go earlier so that she could get her bus home.

She would finish work at five o’clock, apart from Fridays when she would finish at four, and eleven thirty on a Saturday morning. Monica’s parents were pleased she had a job at the factory.

00.21.13: ‘That’s the first impression I had. I didn’t know whether I would be able to stick the noise, and tins being thrown.... Where we were the lorries were coming in, the vans they were not the lorries, and they were pulling the tins, the empties, out to give them to the women to clean. And of course, they would be dropped, and on the floor... ‘

Sometimes in the winter, when sales were down, they would scrub their tables, and time would drag. Monica liked to be busy. She would have a morning break which was about a quarter of an hour long, half an hour for lunch, and another break at three o’clock in the afternoon. She would have her breaks in the canteen. They used to make a cooked dinner there for the workers. At Christmas time the manager and his wife used to pay for a Christmas dinner there for them. The manager’s wife used to help dish it out. They lived in an apartment at the top of the factory. (This was Mr Baker and his wife.) Mr Baker moved away and was replaced by a North Walian, who wasn’t as nice as Mr Baker. Monica normally took sandwiches in to work. They were allowed to eat as many crisps as they wanted but Monica would get fed up of them. There weren’t many skilled jobs at the factory, apart from the jobs of the men who worked as fitters.

Monica wore an overall to work. The ones, like her, who worked on the labelling and boxing wore a big thick apron because when the tins rolled against you they could rip your overall. They would have to scrub that apron to get it clean. Tins that were sharp would be discarded. They’d all have a cut now and again and show the supervisor in order to determine whether they needed to go and see the nurse. There were single and married women there, and quite a few elderly women. There were two who were responsible for cleaning the toilets upstairs and downstairs, and they were elderly. Monica would spend her wages on clothes. She started going to the School of Dancing and then would go dancing down The Pier in Mumbles, and would go to the casino. She didn’t go with the girls from work but with other girls she had met through the School of Dance. Monica would give her mother money for her keep, but would keep most of it herself.

They could crisps for tuppence a bag instead of the usual thruppence, and could buy up to eighteen packets. When the new potatoes came in the crisps were 'beautiful'. There was a special room at the factory where the little blue bags of salt would be put into the bags of crisps.

There was no union in the factory. Monica remembers there was one mouthy girl from Townhill who kept on saying that they should have a union at the factory. Monica's opinion was that they were a good company to work for – they gave the workers an extra bonus at Christmas and Easter. As well as the Christmas lunch for the workers they also arranged a Christmas party for the children of the workers. Monica used to take her brother and her brother's friend. The Santa was the foreman. Monica doesn't remember any disputes. There were never any strikes there.

As well as the overall and apron they were provided with a turban to wear on their heads. The work wasn't dangerous. If Monica received a tray that she thought didn't contain enough crisps she would put it to one side – she got used to knowing how much they should weigh. This would happen sometimes when some of the girls who were hand packing couldn't be bothered to put enough crisps into the bags.

At the bottom of the crisp tin Monica had to put a lining, her number, and the number of the girl whose tray she was using, and sometimes an advert on the top. If there were any complaints regarding a tin with Monica's number on it, it would come back to her.

They used to play music to the workers, and if it was late coming on the girls, especially the ones from Gorse Avenue would start shouting. Sometimes they would put records on, other times they would put the radio on. The music would normally go on mid-morning – at approximately half past ten – and again at about three o'clock in the afternoon. They also used to put music on for the workers at lunch time. Some people used to jive around on the factory floor.

00.36.08. 'Where we were, it was a huge space. And where the vans were coming in there was a lot of space. And we used to dance there then see. '

They were allowed to chat while they worked, and usually chatted about boys, and dances. If anybody was found to be using bad language they would be told off by a supervisor. Smoking wasn't permitted. Some of the girls would go to the toilets and would smell of cigarette smoke when they got out. Monica can't remember there being any health and safety rules in existence back then.

The supervisor would be the one who came round to check what Monica was doing. This supervisor was a woman called Margaret Eastman, who lived in Swansea. Above her was the foreman, and then there was Mr Baker the manager. After she had left, Mr Parry the foreman, became the manager. Monica doesn't think it would have been possible for any of the girls to work their way up the work ladder in this way, although they could, in theory, become a supervisor.

Monica left when she was nineteen or twenty as she was getting married. Her husband was unwilling for her to carry on working although this is what Monica would have liked.

Monica says of the women teasing the men,

00.40.38: 'They used to tease the men coming in on the vans. And I'll never forget, we were all in a row this side and that side, facing, and their van used to come in. And ..

there was a mouse found dead in one of the tins, and he threw it over to us, where we were working. We were all mad at him. We were all screaming.'

One of the girls from Cross Hands married one of the van drivers, and moved to Swansea. Monica's husband was a miner in the Number Three colliery at the time she was working in Smith's Crisps, and when they got married. He then moved to another colliery.

There were no shifts in the factory when Monica worked there, although they did introduce a night shift later on. Workers were required to clock in and clock out. They did find out that some people had clocked in on the behalf of others, and there was a lot of fuss about that. They found out who they were and they were warned rather than being sacked.

Monica would have two week holiday a year and would have to choose which weeks she wanted. The oldest ones would choose first. There was no shut down in the summer as there was in other factories.

They would have an annual trip. Monica remembers going over to Ilfracombe. They could take whoever they wanted and Monica took her parents. They had a lovely day but on the way back the boat before them had a problem so they had to accommodate those passengers as well, and it was very full on board. There was also a thunderstorm, and many people were ill. The factory paid for the trip.

Monica would take a quarter of an hour to walk to work.

If anybody was getting married they would all club together to buy a wedding present. Monica received a Westminster chime clock when she got married. Some of her colleagues from the factory came to the wedding. She isn't still in contact with anybody she worked with at the time.

Monica felt quite sad when her husband told her she couldn't carry on working but says she got used to it with time.

00.47.30: 'It was just his attitude I think.'

She wasn't really aware that this is how he felt about her working before they got married. In fact, she was a bit surprized.

There was a lovely atmosphere in the factory at Christmas time. The canteen would be decorated, and play carols over the tannoy. The girls would request particular records to be played, and shout "records, records." The girls would often sing along to the music.

Monica never worked anywhere else. She was happy at the factory and says the experience was enjoyable. Monica enjoyed her work in Woolworths – she was on the soap stall where bath crystals were sold by weight – but this was due to the interaction with people who came in to the store rather than the people she worked with. She didn't like it when a lot of the sailors used to come in, all different nationalities, and they would be buying a lot of stuff because they were at sea for such a long time. She couldn't understand what they were saying and would have to guess what they wanted. Monica thought that was hard. She remembers one man who came in to buy toothpaste for the one remaining tooth that he had in his mouth. She was then moved on to the button stall, and would have to remember the numbers of all the buttons.

She compares the two places and said,

00.52.52: ‘There [Woolworths] you had the manager over you, you had the shop walkers and they were you know, I had to do a lot of carrying. At that time there used to be wooden things that you put on top of the counter to keep it up and glass would go between each section. You had to get that from underneath. The boys wouldn’t carry it. We’d carry it, a fifteen year old, and we were carrying these big heavy pieces of wood, and the glass and things to change the counters. ‘

The work in Woolworth’s was harder.

00.53.05: ‘There was a nicer atmosphere in the factory than in Woolworth’s because [in the shop] there was the head girl on your counter over you, and there was the other girls then, and if you were the last on you would be the dogsbody. And then there was the supervisor of your department, the shop walker, and the manager, and the head supervisor.... There was a real tier going down. It was nothing like that in Smith’s.... There were only three people over you really see.’