

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
WOMEN IN THE MILLS DURING WWII

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

O.H. 1377

JUDY MESHEL

Interviewed

By

Joseph Lambert, Jr.

On

November 13, 1990

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INTERVIEWEE: JUDY MESHEL  
INTERVIEWER: Joseph Lambert, Jr.  
SUBJECT: Women In The Mills During WWII  
DATE: November 13, 1990

L: This is an interview for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Joseph Lambert, Jr. with Judy Meshel regarding Women In The Mills During WWII. It is November 13, 1990.

Can you tell me when and where you were born?

M: I was born in Campbell but I was raised in Warren.

L: What year was that?

M: November 10, 1918.

L: Can you tell me what it was like growing up in Warren?

M: I came from an ethnic background. My parents were Serbian and we lived mostly with Romanians in our neighborhood. We really didn't have anything, because it was the end of the Depression. We didn't have much, but what we did have was all on an equal basis. What one had wasn't any better than the others. We went through the public schools. I lost my father in 1936 in a steel mill accident. He burned to death working on a crane. My mother survived that and is still living. She will be 89. I went through schools in the Warren area and I finished at

Howland High School in 1938. I went to work and then the war came. I worked in many different places. One of these places I worked was Republic Steel. I worked there February 1943 until May 31, 1944. I had never been in a mill, but they were hiring women to replace men that had gone to war. We signed a piece of paper saying that when the men came back we would give up our jobs. They put me in what they called the Cold Strip Research Department as a tester. You work awhile and then become a first class tester. They give you a order book that had steel specifications listed by the softness or hardness of the steel order. When steel came out of the mill they would cut it and then I would test it to see that it matched the specifications that were in the book. You worked three shifts. The morning shift was quite busy and the midnight shift was very quiet. They showed us how the steel was made. They used different machines in different departments. I stayed there about a year and then that was it.

L: You said that you got a job there in 1943 did you work anywhere else?

M: I did. I worked at G.E. Trumbull Lamp Company. I worked at Packard for a while. Then I did store clerk work. I went to the mill during the war. My husband was in Army Air Force training. I thought that I would go into the steel mill because they were calling for people and they made more money at the time than other places. I was a store clerk while I was in high school.

L: Did you respond out of patriotism?

M: My age group did things because we knew it had to be done. I don't think we stopped to think about patriotism. It was just about getting a job. Some may have, but I just went in to get a job. Of course, I was also very patriotic.

L: Were you first intimidated when you first went to Republic?

M: No, we had no problems where we were at. It was strictly business there. We were respected. My foreman was very responsible and very helpful. They knew that we knew nothing about this business, but they took the time to train us.

L: What were your first impressions?

M: It was so large. It was overwhelming for someone who has never been in the steel mill. It was so big and large. You don't have any concept until you are in there. Then you wonder how all this got put together.

L: Were there very many other women that you worked with?

M: There were two women on each shift. There was one woman that became a timer for when the steel would flow through. They did have a department where the women flopped the tins. That was an on going program, not just during the war. We were just substitutes.

L: How did you feel about signing that agreement?

M: I didn't mind it because I was married and I thought that my husband would be coming back. There wasn't a job that I was involved in at that time that I thought I would be staying at.

L: Tell me what it was like to be involved in the Depression.

M: We never had much. There were very few cars owned by families. I remember coal trains coming down the track. We lived near the train tracks. I was in elementary at that time. My mother made bread and we had a garden. My grandmother had a cow. Everyone in the neighborhood helped out each other in order to survive. Sometimes the neighborhood helped themselves to the coal on

the coal trains. The man was the head of the household and went out to make money for the family. Then the G.I. Bill came and helped a lot of the boys get into college.

L: Can you remember your emotions when the attack on Pearl Harbor happened?

M: No. I don't recall that much. All I remember is what was announced over the radio.

L: When you got your job at Republic Steel, did you have to go through any type of physical examination?

M: Somebody told me that they were hiring so I went there and filled out an application, and that was about all I had to do. I did have to go out and buy a pair of safety toe shoes. I didn't need a helmet. There were no special clothes to wear.

L: Did you have to buy your own shoes?

M: Yes.

L: Did you buy them from a company store?

M: From the company store in the mill. They had one right around the corner from where you turned in your pay cards.

L: Were there any other rules that women had to follow on terms of safety clothing?

M: I don't know.

L: Do you remember what the other women were doing in the hot strip?

M: They were doing the same type of work only it was out of the hot strip mill and I was in the cold strip mill.

L: Did you have to go through some sort of formal training?

M: No. That was surprising. They hired you and told you to report to your floor foremen. They told you what they expected of you and showed you the book of classifications and then showed you how to work the machines, but there was no formal training.

L: Did you feel nervous about this?

M: I always am at any job until I get comfortable.

L: Can you tell me exactly what your responsibilities were?

M: When the man came in with the steel I would check what company it was for. I had a folder and opened it up to the company and read. I would take this piece of steel and balance it on a Rockwell machine. It would show the specifications. The needle would move and tell you how strong the piece of metal was. I would okay it or not. If I was not sure then I would call a foreman to recheck it. It was a simple procedure.

L: Were there any other types of machines that you used?

M: Yes, I used the Olsen machine as well.

L: Did you find your job tiring?

M: No, because in between you could sit. It was steady. There wasn't any pressure in that job.

L: Were there separate facilities for women?

M: Yes. We had to leave our area and cross a bridge to go to the bathroom. Women did wear slacks or skirts.

L: Did you wear skirts inside the mill?

M: Yes, I didn't wear slacks

L: There were no restrictions against that?

M: No, not in those days.

L: Did you have children then?

M: No.

L: Did you live with anyone else?

M: I lived with my mother.

L: But you were married at the time?

M: Yes. I think that was the only year. Then I went out on my own. We had a gas ration at that time. You had to write down the mileage to and from work. I went out to work because I knew I had to.

L: What were you getting paid at that time?

M: We started of at 65 and a half cents an hour. When you became a first class tester you made 91 cents an hour.

L: What title did you start out with?

M: There was no title, but they called us a tester.

L: Were the men being paid more than the women?

M: I wouldn't know that.

L: Did you drive to work yourself?

M: Yeah.

L: Did you carpool with other employees?

M: I did with a fellow that worked in the roll shop. I would pick him up and bring him home. We lived on the same street. When I worked at General Electric there were 4 to 6 of us in the car.

L: How did your mom feel about you working in the mill?

M: She never gave it a thought. Even though my dad was killed there. We never discussed it.

L: While you were working there do you recall any accidents that may have occurred?

M: No, not while I was there.

L: Did you feel your job had any danger to it at all?

M: No, because I never left the little shed where I worked. It could be dangerous if you were out walking in the mill and not paying attention. The only thing that you had to pay attention for where I was when the crane was coming through but they blew a whistle to warn you.

L: Were there any unusual smells or noise in there or was it dirty?

M: There would be an odor because of the heat and steel. It was noisy during the day, it slowed down in the afternoon, and was quiet during the night. You had to learn to adjust to it. Being young you were able to adjust very easily.

L: Did you prefer any one shift?

M: I enjoyed the afternoon and night shifts. During the day there were too many people and bosses around to feel comfortable.

L: What were the most days you ever worked straight?

M: Fourteen days straight. I would end one shift and swung right into another.

L: Was it common to work weekends?

M: Depends on how your shifts swung in and out.

L: How many hours did you work in a typical day?



M: We were suppose to work eight hours and had a half an hour lunch.

L: You say that you had a lot of time, but did you have a designated time for a break?

M: I don't recall. At the lamp company the lamps were coming on a conveyor at a constant speed and did not stop until the next shift. In the steel mill you didn't need a break.

L: How was your home life affected?

M: It wasn't. I was at home with my mother and my brother had joined the Navy. By working, it was a routine way of living. I can home, slept, ate, and that was about my day until I went back to work.

L: So you were able to fulfill responsibilities at home?

M: Yeah.

L: Did you have much time for recreation or entertainment?

M: Some weekends, but being married I didn't look forward to it. During the week we didn't do a whole lot. There were changes because of gas rationing. There were still clubs, restaurants, and movie houses to go to. The activities were still going,

L: Was this down in Warren?

M: Yes.

L: What sort of specific things were there to do down in Warren?

M: I like movies. I love music and jazz. We would go to clubs to listen to music. We went to Youngstown to see plays. There is a lot more available now than

M: No, not at that time.

L: Did you have saving bonds or anything?

M: We did have saving bonds taken out of our pay.

L: That was automatic then?

M: No, you had to sign a paper if you wanted it taken out of your paycheck.

L: As the war was coming to an end, were the men starting to come back into the mills?

M: I don't know when the women began to get released because I left early. My husband was killed in 1944 and I was back in the community. I can't say that the women were released right away. It all depended on when the men came back. Some men did and some men didn't. Some men went to college.

L: Can you tell me why you left the mill?

M: I went to join my husband before he was supposed to go overseas. After that I went to work at Packard.

L: Did you have any desire to continue working there?

M: No.

L: Did you resent leaving?

M: No. It was just another job. I didn't want it to become a career.

L: When did you get a job at Packard?

M: It must have been in 1945. I'm not sure. I worked at Packard from January 1947 to July 1948.

L: Do you remember the sort of things you did at Packard?

M: I inspected a harness that was used in a car. When I left they were putting in conveyors. I worked there and made 87 cents an hour. After three months I made 98 and a half cents an hour. It was raised to \$1.10 in 1948.

L: Did you compare the two jobs at all?

M: No. I worked at Trumbull Lamp until I got married. When you got married you had to leave your job. That is why I wasn't there during the war. GE was very nice to work for. It was a steady flow of work. The steel mill was very easy.

L: Is there anything else you would like to talk about concerning the steel mill?

M: No, like I said, I was amazed when they took us through the mill. It was really amazing how things were put together. They look so complicated if you don't know anything about it. It didn't affect me one-way or the other. It was just a job.

L: Was there any reason why you wanted to work in the steel mill?

M: My father worked in one and there was one right by where we lived.

L: You grew up next to a steel mill?

M: Yes.

L: Was there anything on the porch from the mills?

M: Not where I lived, but at my aunt's house in Weirton, West Virginia, they had to sweep the cinders off the porch each morning.

L: Did you live by the Mahoning River?

M: No, we lived by the railroad tracks and a steel mill.

L: Did you ever go to the river when the mill was operating?

M: No. The only time I went down by the river was to go to Packard Park for baseball games. At that time we never paid attention to pollution.

L: Okay. Thank you very much for you time.

M: I'm glad that I could help you.

End of Interview.