

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women's Experiences in the Mill

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1379

Virginia Such

Interviewed

On

November 15, 1990

By

Joseph Lambert Jr.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: VIRGINIA SUCH  
INTERVIEWER: Joseph Lambert Jr.  
SUBJECT: Women's Experiences in the Mill during World War II  
DATE: November 15, 1990

L: This is an interview with Virginia Such for the Youngstown State University Oral history program dealing with women's experiences in the mill during World War II by Joseph Lambert at 23 S. Hartford Avenue Youngstown on November 15, 1990 at 10:00am. Mrs. Such can you tell me when and where you were born?

S: Youngstown on the east side February 7, 1921.

L: What sort of things did you do for fun growing up in Youngstown?

S: I dropped out at fourteen and had to go to work. Then I worked sixteen years after that.

L: Where did you first work at?

S: I did housework. Then I worked on the detonator line at the arsenal in Ravenna.

L: What kind of things did you do there?

- S: I worked on the detonator line and I was working with the poly ammunition line. Then I had to quit after a year. My hair turned red, my skin turned yellow and I was getting bloody noses.
- L: That was from the powder?
- S: Yes.
- L: What year did you start working there?
- S: In 1939 to 1940. Then I did housework. Then in 1942-1945 I went to work at Republic Steel I enjoyed it.
- L: Can you tell me a little bit about the depression? What it was like?
- S: We starved. We were on the soup line like everybody else. There were twelve of us kids.
- L: Where were the soup lines located?
- S: Downtown. I can't tell you where I was too small.
- L: What was downtown like?
- S: A lot of stores. Meat markets, fish markets, pet shops. Now it's a ghost town.
- L: What was your childhood like? Would you like to share a little bit?
- S: My mother died when I was three. When I was eight I was locked in an orphanage until I was eleven and a half. When I got out I went to school for a couple of years then at fourteen I had to drop out. I went to work and worked fifteen years after that. I've done a lot of work.
- L: What are your feelings about President Roosevelt?
- S: I was too young to understand that. Kennedy I understood a lot.
- L: What were your feelings about President Kennedy?

S: I thought he'd be the man to do the job. I liked him, I voted for him. Then after that the only president I voted for didn't win because I'm a democrat.

L: Can you describe your feelings when President Kennedy was assassinated?

S: I cried. I was working at Strouss's when it came on the news. They closed the store and we all went home. In fact I still have the newspapers all the headlines and everything. It was sad.

L: Do you remember when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

S: I most certainly do.

L: Can you describe your emotions?

S: I was working. I was December 7<sup>th</sup>. I got the newspaper of that. When war was declared and when it ended. Those two days I wasn't working. They shut the store down where I worked at Strouss's and we all came home.

L: How did you feel?

S: I felt bad about it. I had gotten married a month before and my husband was in the navy and I had a kid brother who was seventeen that had been drafted into the army. They drafted in those days. Then if you didn't pass they called you to the four f. I begrudged that because there were a lot of guys floating around and my husband and brother had to go to war. You couldn't buy shoes or cigarettes and there were a lot of things you had to stand in line for. It was bad. If you survived that then you'd survive to be a hundred. This generation today couldn't stand it. Today's generation is all push buttons. They don't know what it is to work hard. I have two daughters that work hard. One works at St. Elizabeth's and the other works at University of Maryland. They don't know the value of the dollar. I do.

When I worked at the mill I was making a dollar and ten cents an hour that was top wages! Ten hours a day! I loved to work. It was very interesting but it was all older men there.

L: So you were working at Strouss when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

S: Yes.

L: Where was your next job?

S: I was there until 1986 when they let us all go. I could have been transferred to Boardman but I didn't have any transportation. I started as a wrapper and then for twenty-five years I worked in the invoice office. A lot of paper work, I liked that too. I could have kept working but they let me go. When I looked for other jobs I was too old. I was sixty-five then. I told them try me out if you don't like the way I work then don't pay me. I could work circles around anybody.

L: So you got a job in Republic Steel in what year?

S: 1943. I think I was the first one hired and the last one to be let go. I think they liked a girl in the mill just to look.

L: What made you go to Republic Steel for a job?

S: It was my last choice. I figured all the men were going to war they were saying on the news to go and put your application in and I did and I got hired the same day as an inspector. I didn't take long for me to catch on.

L: Did you have some form of formal training?

S: If you want to call it training in that day. They'd say this is this and that is that, but I caught on real fast. I worked on the conveyor and I had a hammer would roll the pipes back and forth. I could tell by the sound from hitting it with the

hammer if it was any good or not. If it was a bell sound it was a good pipe, if it was a dull sound then it was laminated. Laminated means it's no good and we'd have to scrap it.

L: Was that your first job there?

S: Yes. A lot of times I had to shut the mill down because they were making a lot of scrap. Then I inspected threads on each end of the pipe where you put the couplings on. The pipes would go through a tester. They'd fill it up with water and you'd have to watch the gauge. There were hammers that would bang on the pipe as the water went through and that would let you know if the weld had a pinhole in it. You'd have to get out in a hurry when that thing busted.

L: Did that ever happen?

S: Yes, plenty of times. We'd get wet a lot when those things busted. Then when I got through inspecting the pipe it would go down another conveyor belt and then two guys (pipe cutters) would cut twelve inches off the pipe and they'd pick it up with a pair of tongs and put it through a compressor. The compressor had a level on it and you had to come down real easy on it and that level had a gauge and if that piece of metal cracked before it met the gauge then you had to keep cutting pieces off of the same pipe until you got a good piece. That told you if it was laminated or not. If there's a black line in the metal then it's laminated. You'd keep cutting and compressing until you got a good piece because thirty-six inches could be bad and the rest could be good. If the pipe is laminated you couldn't put threads on it because when the threads go through the machine it won't thread the pipe right. Then when you tried to put the coupling or bolt on it wouldn't screw

on right. I wish I could work in a mill again. The only thing I sort of forgot is the micrometer. It's shaped liked a C so you could see the bend of the pipe.

L: You did that?

S: Yes. I did everything fast and I loved my work. I don't think I missed a days' work. I needed the money but I liked what I was doing. I was in my twenties when I started there. My father had worked at the Republic Steel he was a blacksmith.

L: Did you feel patriotic working there during the war?

S: What do you mean?

L: Did you feel that your efforts were contributing to the war effort?

S: It most certainly was. I was doing my share. I was doing a man's job. The man wasn't there he had to go into the service. That's how a lot of us felt. Most of the girls that did work there their husbands were drafted. Like Jenny and Sue. It was hard for Jenny because her baby was a year old. I was lucky I didn't have any kids. One job I didn't like and I didn't get was to follow the crane. You'd pick up all that pipe and you never knew if any of those cables was going to let loose. I'd never follow that.

L: Did you ever have to do that?

S: I was never asked, but if I was I would have refused it.

L: Do you remember any accidents occurring?

S: The only accidents were when the pipes would blow up from the tester. We were all cautious and we wore men's shoes. The steel covered your toes so in case anything would fall you wouldn't get hurt. They were so clumsy they didn't

really work well. We all had to wear safety goggles regardless. Our hair was all tied up and couldn't be showing and you couldn't wear any rings.

L: Did you have to buy your own safety clothes?

S: Yes.

L: Did you buy those from a company store?

S: No downtown where ever we got them. The only thing they furnished were those safety toes and tongs but other than that you got all your own stuff. Hotmail gloves were only 35 or 40 cents but they didn't last long maybe only three months. You dressed like men. In the winter months it was so cold in there I must have had six or seven sweaters on. You froze in the winter but in the summer you died. And the sewer rats! I don't know how many times they swiped my lunch. I never bothered those rats. The people at the mill said they were a safety sign. If you'd see a lot of sewer rats running from one direction you'd know there was a gas leak.

L: Did that ever happen?

S: Plenty of times but no accidents they would always catch them in time. We were told to watch them not to fear them.

L: Do remember any of the other jobs that women were doing throughout the mill? Could you describe them?

S: I think a lot of the women were doing about the same thing. Welding, following a crane, hooking up pipes. No woman operated a crane. There was Mill one, Mill two and Mill three. I worked in Mill three because the pipes were bigger. In Mill three you could see the pipes being made.

- L: Were any women ever in the blast furnace area?
- S: No. They were all men.
- L: Were you ever in that area walking through?
- S: No you weren't allowed to walk through. If you didn't work there then you had no reason to be there. Sometimes it's a hazard. Those guys that worked there knew what to look for and what to expect. The reason why I was in the open hearth was because I worked with my husband and he showed me what he was doing and after that he had to walk me out and then I went to my area where I was working.
- L: So women weren't allowed in the open hearth either?
- S: No. That was too dangerous.
- L: What do you remember working there?
- S: Working like hell. I liked what I was doing. We had a lot of fun. I met a lot of friends.
- L: Do you feel that the men trusted your judgement.
- S: They had to. I think we were as cautious as the men were. I know I was. I scrapped a lot of pipes and shut the mill down. The guys didn't like it because they were on bonus but my word was it. The supervisor would come and he would look at the pipe and he'd say the same thing I'd said. We had to find out why it was wrong.
- L: How did the men treat the women in general down there?
- S: We had to watch them. They didn't dare come around me. They called me butch. Talk to me but don't you dare put a hand on me. Some guys were army guys. If

you laid the law down then they'd respect you. I told a lot of guys don't think you can make a pass at me if you're going to talk to me talk but don't you dare put a hand on me. Then there were some girls that were playing hanky panky in there. They had a name for them.

L: Did you work all three shifts?

S: Yes. I hated eleven to seven. I didn't know when to eat or what. You're up all night then you switch back to day turn then you couldn't sleep. Those were bad. I wanted to work a steady shift but you weren't allowed. I was working ten hours a day. Then the buses were running every fifteen minutes. You didn't need or worry about a car.

L: Where did you get dropped off at at the mill?

S: Right on Center Street. I walked over that miserable bridge.

L: What shift did you like working the most?

S: I loved the three to eleven shift.

L: Any reason why?

S: I got to sleep late. If you wanted to go anywhere after work then you went and you didn't have to worry about getting up early to go to work. I was living with my sister then. You died in the summer.

L: Too hot? They was nothing you could do to seek comfort?

S: No you had to sweat it out. You had to dress in overalls. Like a man's overalls and shirts.

L: Was that relatively new for women to be wearing overalls like that?

S: You had to. When I worked at the arsenal they furnished our coveralls ten miles too big so they didn't show what you had. The bad part was when you got to the gate you had leave your cigarettes, lighters and matches. You weren't allowed to go into the plant with cigarettes or matches. If you were caught you were fired because it's all powder.

L: That was at the arsenal?

S: Coming out of the gate the first thing everyone did was puff away all the way to their cars.

L: Did you have a lot of weekends free working at the mill?

S: No. It didn't make any difference to me. I was young and just got married and was worried about him being over seas in Zypan.

L: What was the most amount of days that you worked in a row?

S: Five. We never worked overtime. Five days, ten hours a day.

L: Was ten hours common?

S: No, a lot of girls were working eight. You had your choice. I wanted to make the money. I didn't have much else to do with my time I was alone.

L: Did you have a lot of breaks during the day?

S: We had one ten minute break. I made mine during lunch. The bad part was if you had to go to the restroom it would take you fifteen minutes to get there. It was far away until they started building one in each mill. On the eleven to seven you would find a lot of people in there sleeping. It was fun though.

L: Did your supervisor get mad if you had to go to the restroom because it took you so long to get there?

S: No. Whatever excuse you made he took it. He had no reason. I was the head man. They spoke to me about their problems and I spoke up for them.

L: The women did?

S: The women would tell me their problems and I would speak up for them. A lot of times we won but sometimes we didn't. I was the mouth in my department.

L: This wasn't a formal elected position was it?

S: No. They elected me because they thought I had the mouth for it.

L: Did the supervisors treat you fair?

S: Yes.

L: Where you in the union then?

S: I don't think there was a union there. I was just a spokesman. We wouldn't work unless we got what we wanted. There was nothing about pay raises or anything. It was just about the job. Sometimes they try to push more on you and it's wasn't fair. I did any job they gave me because I liked the job I was doing.

L: What did they pay you when you first started do you remember?

S: I was getting a dollar ten an hour. That was a lot of money then.

L: Did you start out at that?

S: No. I can't remember what I started out at but I was satisfied that I had a job.

L: Did women get paid less then men if they started at the same time?

S: We got paid every ten days. I couldn't tell you about the men because I didn't know what their wages were. The girls got paid according to their job. I had a lot of responsibilities because I would do any job they put me on that's why I made a dollar ten. In fact Jenny wasn't making a dollar ten but she couldn't complain

because she couldn't do the different kinds of jobs I was doing. That's how I met her and Rose. We were the three musketeers. She's probably forgotten all of this stuff, I didn't.

L: Were you exhausted at the end of the day?

S: Some days. When you're in your twenties you can face anything unless you're a lazy bum.

L: Did you and your friends go out a lot after work?

S: Sometimes. When there were birthdays we used to go to Brass Rail. It was downtown. It's gone now. We'd go there for birthdays, lunch or to have a shot. That was fun. Jenny would talk about her husband, I'd talk about mine, other girls would talk about the guys they were dating in the mill and those guys were married! That's not right. I think there is a bank on that corner now. I remember when I got married. My gang was on the eleven to seven shift. George Byer, our boss was there. He tried to get the girls sober because they had to be at work at ten o'clock. Half the girls were drunk and didn't go. Then when we all had to leave and we weren't going to see each other anymore that was sad. After we left the mill I lost track of Jenny for twenty some years. We were together everyday for three years.

L: Were you following the progress of the war?

S: Yes I did very closely. My husband was in the navy, and my brother was in the army. My husband was in Zypan on Tinia Island. I have seashells from him. My brother was also stationed on that island but neither one of them knew that they were there until I got in touch with my husband and he got in touch with my

brother. My brother hijacked a truck full of beer and my brother and his company had a shingding up on the mountain.

L: When did the mill start letting women go?

S: In December 1945.

L: Not anytime before the war was over?

S: No after the war was over they started letting go because the guys were coming back and were getting their old jobs back. That was sad.

L: Leaving the mill?

S: It was like my second home. Dirty, hard work, but like my second home.

L: How did you feel losing your job when the men came back?

S: I felt bad losing my job but I hustled looking for another job. I ended up washing, ironing and baking. I was home with two kids. Then in 1956 both of my kids went to school all day and that's when I started my job at Strousses. In 1986 they said goodbye after thirty years.

L: Did you feel it was right that the men should get their jobs back?

S: Yes. I couldn't see a women working there when the war was over. My husband got his job back. He worked there a while and then he went to the Sheet and Tube. He went to the open hearth and that's where he retired from in 1978. I think that's the only kind of job he knew. He was good at it. He was a slagger and a first helper. He made a lot of money.

L: Were there many women that wanted to stay on?

S: No I think a lot of them wanted to get out. They had to work because they had no choice. Their husbands were away. They'd get an allotment, a government

check. Fifty-six dollars a month! How was anyone supposed to live on that? I didn't have any kids. I don't know what the government was sending to those that had kids.

L: Were you buying bonds at all?

S: They took it right out of your pay. In Strousses I bought bonds too.

L: Where you able to save a lot when you worked at the mill?

S: Yes because I was living with my sister. I knew how to spend and save my money. I had to pay for my support, buy my clothes, and try to save. I can't tell you how much I did save. I really liked working in the steel mill.

L: How do you feel today when you drive around the area and see all these plants shut down?

S: Sad. It makes me want to cry. When those mills shut down it took bread out our mouths. They didn't have to do that but those are your politicians. It was bad. People depended on the mills for their bread and butter. My husband was a dropout yet he got a job in the steel mills. Where are you going to go now without a degree and get a job? Nowhere.

L: When the men started coming home do you remember the celebrations?

S: Oh yes it was something. We were all downtown crying and being happy. My husband didn't come home until the end of December 1945. He was there two years, nine months and three weeks.

L: Did you find a job soon after the mill?

S: No then I started to do housework. In fact I was doing housework for Krizen he's a judge. He lived on Prospect Street. I ironed his shirts that he went to college in.

Then when I had to go before him he recognized me but I lost my case. It's a long story.

L: Do you have any other memories about the mill that you'd like to talk about?

S: I really enjoyed working there. Any job I worked I liked or I wouldn't have stayed there but I really liked it there. I still like to work and make a few bucks. In Maryland they are looking for women my age to work because they're reliable. These young girls go out and come back at two or three in the morning and don't go to work. They're not reliable.