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HERSTORY PROJECT

Mrs. Forrester interviewed by Georgina Garrett

- Q. When did you start at Canada Car Mrs. Forrester?
- A. January, 1941.
- Q. How old were you?
- A. 16.
- Q. Why did you start working there?
- A. My stepfather was sick, he couldn't work and I had to quit school and get a job.
- Q. What made you choose Canada Car?
- A. They were hiring in those days and needed all they could get.
- Q. I know a lot of women worked there - were most of the people you worked with women?
- A. Not at first. When I first started there were 200 men and 5 women.
- Q. Did you like it?
- A. Oh yes.
- Q. How did you feel about doing something that was kind of unusual for a woman to do?
- A. I enjoyed it, I really did.
- Q. What did you do at first?
- A. I went into riveting.
- Q. Who taught you how to rivet?
- A. Bill Williams and Doug Holchak.
- Q. What did you work with? How do you rivet?
- A. They are air guns and rivets.
- Q. What were you building?
- A. The plane wings.
- Q. What kind of planes were they?
- A. When I first started they were Hawker Hurricanes, and then it was the Curtis Helldivers for the States.
- Q. Was there a patriotic feeling about building these planes?
- A. I don't think so, it was just a job.
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Q. Was it monotonous, riveting?

A. No, I really enjoyed it. There are so many different sizes of rivets and sizes of guns and full of different things and parts of the wings. I worked on the whole wing, not just one piece of it.

Q. Was it highly skilled?

A. No.

Q. In this picture you are standing across from another woman.

A. Sitting, she was riveting, I had the gun on this side and she was bucking the bar on the other side to flatten them out. It took two to rivet, she was my helper.

Q. Was there a close feeling among the women?

A. Yes. Of course there was a whole department, there was no fights or anything.

Q. Why was there a close feeling? What was there about the plant that....?

A. For one thing, the people were from right across Canada who worked there, we met people from every province. I still write to them and go to see them.

Q. Was there any co-operation among the women? Did they teach each other different skills?

A. No, I had helpers that were women but we had a lot of boys coming in. But what about me? They got higher pay because I was a woman and yet I had to teach them.

Q. Didn't your union ever complain about this?

A. Nothing you could do about it. The women got paid lower than the men. Even when I was there for 4 years, the boys came in and they were younger than me but they got higher pay because they were boys. And I was teaching them how to do it.

Q. This was pretty well universal in the plant then.

A. Yes, all over women were paid lower.

Q. Did the women ever talk about complaining?

A. No, not really, the odd one but one can't do anything about it.

Q. Did you belong to a union?

A. Yes.

Q. And the union didn't....?

A. That was the wage rate and that was it.

Q. That's really awful.

A. Yes it is. Now I wouldn't put up with it but those days this was the way it was.

Q. Do you think that's one reason so many women were hired?

A. No, the men had gone to the services so they had to hire women. Once you worked there you couldn't even quit unless you were pregnant.

Q. Why not?

A. They needed people to build the planes during the war.

Q. What, were you on a contract then?

A. No.

Q. Well why couldn't you quit?

A. This was where you started work, you couldn't work anywhere else because you started working there because they needed you.

Q. So you wouldn't be hired anywhere else if you had quit?

A. Well you probably would because during the war years, you couldn't stay out of work.

Q. Can you describe what a typical day was? Did you live on the site?

A. No, I lived in F.W.. You would sign out your tools - your motor and a gun and light and get the rivets. Then you'd start riveting and find where your job was.

Q. Did you get any breaks in the day?

A. Oh yes, a lunch and coffee breaks - one in the morning and one in the afternoon of 10 minutes each.

Q. Did you associate after work hours with any of the other women?

A. Yes, on Sunday the whole department would head down to the show at the Capitol Theatre so in the shows on Sunday night was all of Canada Car. Dancing on Sat.

Q. Did Canada Car supply the clothes?

A. Yes, at first we had one-piece overalls and after that there were two-piece overalls. We had to wear those two-piece blue uniforms with these hats to put our hair in.

Q. How did the men treat you?

A. Good. I was only 16 and I was pretty green. A couple of married guys gave me a book on sex, marriage and birth control and I never thought about it and I read the whole book between lunch breaks. They explained it all to me. I was awful shy but not after 5 years in there.

Q. Why was that?

A. I don't know, they never treated you like girls or women. We were just another fellow employee, that's all.

Q. So other than wages, you didn't encounter any discrimination?

A. No.

Q. Why did you stop working there?

A. The war ended and that was it, everybody was out the next day.

Q. What about the men, were they laid off?

A. Yes, we all were, some were hired back for the buses they were building. My husband's brother was hired back to make buses, he stayed there two more years and then he went to the paper mill.

Q. So you met your husband out there. Were you familiar with what the barracks in Canada Car were like for the women?

A. I was just there once visiting a girl friend. The walls were like paper is all I could say about it.

Q. Did you try to get another job after Canada Car?

A. Yes, I was a telephone operator in the Fort William Telephone Exchange.

Q. How was that different from working at Canada Car?

A. The wages were better but I enjoyed Canada Car more. The straight work in the afternoon was split-shift.

Q. The telephone operators were mostly women I guess.

A. It was all women then.

Q. Did you encounter discrimination in wages there?

A. No.

Q. Did any woman play a role in the union at Canada Car?

A. There must have been but I forgot now.

Q. How did you feel about the union?

A. I couldn't say - I paid my union dues and that was it. Had the odd meeting.

Q. How did the war affect you in other ways besides going to work?

A. It didn't really affect me at all. I had no brothers to go or relatives that went overseas, it didn't affect me.

Q. Did other women talk about it?

A. Yes, a lot had their husbands killed or their brothers. We felt bad about it.

Q. Do you know of any other war industries in Thunder Bay?

A. There was a shell plant on Mission Island. They called it starch work.

Q. Did you move up the ladder when you were working since you worked for 4 years.

A. No, I started at .42¢ and at the end of 4½ years I was getting .83¢ an hour and we worked 12 hours with overtime most of the time. On Sunday was double time - 4:30 from the afternoon to 4:30 in the morning. We didn't pay any income tax at first, just the last year or two.

Q. Would you say it was satisfying work?

- A. Yes, I enjoyed it. It wasn't boring, it wasn't sitting in one spot. You could walk around.. At the telephone exchange you always sat in one chair for 4 hours and that was it. This was different.....
- Q. Why did you walk around?
- A. Well in that job I finished one part so I moved around to the next.
- Q. So you would rivet in all different parts of the plane.
- A. Yes, the wings and other parts.
- Q. Was there any kind of risk involved in it?
- A. Not really, on my 17th birthday there I was bending over and was drilling with the rivet. My hair was hanging down and it caught that and I had a big bald spot. A lot of times, for fun, somebody would pull out your three-pronged plug and put it in upside down and you would get a shock when you put the motor on. It was fun - it knocked you on your rear end but it was fun.
- Q. Was there a feeling of comaraderie?
- A. Yes. The bosses didn't come and sit and watch you, you could joke with them.
- Q. Why do you think they had that kind of atmosphere?
- A. Made of the kind of people - people from all over. After the war we went to Winnipeg and we just stood there and everybody said "Hi Canada Car". You didn't know their names but you recognized their faces.
- Q. Was it the fact that you were all working on a project for the war?
- A. That had something to do with it but at the time it didn't enter our heads.
- Q. Do you think there should be more jobs like that for women?
- A. Yes, I liked my experience. The paper said 700 but 7,000 worked there.
- Q. 6,800 yes. Did you ever want to go back. Did you apply to work on the buses or street cars?
- A. No, I worked at the telephone exchange before I married and then I had two kids to look after so I just quit working. But I'd go back tomorrow if I could go back to the way it was then.
- Q. Is there anything else about working at Canada Car you can tell me? I heard there was a woman president or manager, because she had been an engineer of an aircraft - McGill I think was her name.
- A. I don't remember her at all. There probably was.....

Thank-you very much.