

Nuts and Bolts: Stories from New Britain Manufacturing  
Connecticut Humanities CT at Work Project  
CCSU Students Courtney Grab and Anna Chmura  
Interview Subject: David Honyotski  
Factory subject worked at: Russwin and Corbin  
Date of Interview: February 12, 2014  
Location: East Hall, CCSU

Anna and I met with David Honyotski in East Hall on the CCSU campus Wednesday, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2014 at one p.m. David is currently the Environmental Health and Safety Coordinator at CCSU. He graduated from Western Connecticut State University with a degree in Chemistry and continued to get his master's at Rensselaer Hartford Graduate Center. David worked for Russwin and Corbin in New Britain starting in 1981 where he started as a laboratory director and moved up to a superintendent position. We interviewed David in a conference room in East Hall.

**We are archiving stories for the New Britain Industrial Museum and interviewing people who used to work at various factories, therefore I assume you worked at a factory?**

Yes, yes I did. I graduated from Western Connecticut State University. I think that was 1979 or 80. I went to work for a precious metal refinery and learned some of the environmental stuff at the same time. Then I went to work for what was called M Hart Hardware also known as Russwin and Corbin I think in '81 I came to it when they had moved out to Berlin. It's in a huge white building in the back of Sliders... Assa-Abloy now. It was a huge factory. 4000 people worked there, 9 football fields under roof, and it had a foundry and a lot of hand work and stuff.

**What did you do at the factory?**

When I came there I had the environmental background from my previous job. I therefore brought that role into a much larger one I was a laboratory director there. That was across the board, we had a builders hardware association for the door locks that you had to meet and

perform. Making sure doors were opening and closing 100,000 times, dropping the packaging seeing how it was working, surfaces and finishes, and everything. Making sure they were in guidelines so physical and mechanical testing chemical. We gave support to the plating and finishing department. We have the metal finishing like that door knob and powder finishing like in dishwashers. You're talking about a factory that shipped out 30,000 pounds a day with several different product lines.

**What was a work day like for you?**

In the beginning I was a laboratory director and then I went down into the factory as a superintendent. [I was] 27-28 years old then. I had 300 people reporting to me, maybe more. It was such a big factory we rode chariots and bicycles throughout it. It was a big scale operation. Many of the people of course came from New Britain. I had a highly unionized work force.

**Were you part of a union?**

No, I was in management. There was a separation there. Mostly, I was in metal finishing making sure all the metals got finished the right way down to assembly and there was a lot of parts. It was like its own language. 406f32d; those were part numbers and the ending was the finish. So it took I don't know how long for me to get up on that lingo, to get that portion of the job understood, to remember it.

**How long did you work in the factory?**

That was five children ago. One's here now, she's a sophomore and Tom's coming. I left in '87 '88 so 6 or 7 years. It was really cool.

**Where did the finishings and products go?**

Ya we did to Schlage, at the time this was commercial door hardware. Hotels, Motels, this school, that school and follow up business and so forth. We complement Stanley works that

made the hinges. I remember when I went there for the interview, I was overly prepared. I read that M Art got started by making ox balls which are a brass or bronze fixture that mounted on top of the ox's horns so he wouldn't get gorged. The guy was like really? I was just told to be prepared for the interview.

**What was the atmosphere in the factory like?**

I came from a factory family in Waterbury. I was kind of like a little bit used to it. It was like a day at the smoke stack. A lot of the work was done by hand, the polishing, the finishing after it came out of the rough cast, a lot of hand work, a lot of carrying. The people there were all really like the salt of the earth. Being a Polish descendants like a lot of the women were just doing this (pinching the cheeks) and stuff like that. They were all great, unionized and everything, the equipment was old and it was always not quite deafening but there was such a background noise you had to yell or speak over. It was great everyday was so so busy meeting our production goal or answering them if it didn't happen. It was a team effort and many of people were there a whole bunch of years.

**Do you still stay in touch with anyone?**

At that time I was the first college educated [person in the family.] I was going to Renssealer Hartford Graduate Center. So I was the first college educated superintendent in the factory at the time it was the other way around. It was me at 28 or 29 and the other 5 or 6 people who ran the factory were at 50 or 60. It was a different world I was stepping into. I just learned a whole bunch of stuff it was great. We faced foreign competition.

**What was the union strike about?**

There was a huge amount of cut backs.

**So the people reporting to you were the only ones unionized?**

Yeah, for instance there were so many union officials in my department I had 2 or 3 of them, a president and a vice president they never worked, they had a desk and that was it. It was full time taking care of that. You would never say Rich help with this or that.

**What about works safety?**

They had a safety person there. There were a lot of problems because there were 30,000 pounds of shop pans that were 4 or 8 inches deep with levers that weighed 30 lbs each which is nothing but if you're lifting it 75 times a day we had a lot of repetitive injuries. Another good reason to get the equipment modernized. We also had work methods of how they were supposed to get the work done but many guys were slick and could get it done faster because it was piece work. That was always a battle. One got hurt doing it right; they knew more about it than I did. I don't remember serious injuries.

When you have a lot of people you have a lot more personal issues. We had a younger person that had alcoholism or anger issues in the workplace. We had a barber on the plant you could get your haircut, like I need it, and all the help showered on the way out. Many of the people who worked there made their own wine at home so they used to have a drink at 930 and that would be unheard of today. It was so different like that. They were just like come on have a drink. In the old country they were good.

There was a culture you had to get used to. If you had a Christmas party like we did there was such a ton of food, all homemade, the moms would make me stuff. Quite a bit of drinking and everything, just like look the other way and make sure nobody's ... they were celebrated. They worked hard and they deserved it.

Let's see what else...

The electronic lock was just coming in and they were working on that trying to get that to work the right way. Of course everything functioning was so key and critical like if there was a fire and three of us couldn't get out that door because it didn't work and we perished the corporation could be called. So product quality was always clashed between cheaper and better parts, quality and us, the realists, that we have to get this done.

**We were talking to Karen at the museum and she said that a lot of the factory workers were mortified if anything came back. They took a lot of pride in their work and there was no such thing as returns. They didn't want people sending things back or having any type of error.**

Ya that's what I thought. Some of the equipment we reworked. We couldn't get the finishing the right way. Like our big machine with the finishing on it to make chrome finish was inadequate. It needed to be replaced. So we would get blistering or things like that.

**So you said you did a lot of piece work?**

Not I. I wore a tie, a clip board, and looked good.

**The people reporting to you did piece work?**

Yeah and I had foremen and product people that would coordinate what needed to be done.

There was a list, "I need this," "I need that..." Each of those operations, everyone gets paid differently. If you do 25 pieces an hour you'd make \$7 an hour. If you did 50 an hour you would make \$14 an hour. So there was incentive to do more.

**Did people work longer so they could make more money or was it strict, in at this time out at this time?**

Let's say you knew you had to make 50 pieces an hour. You would get good at what you did.

You would be able to beat that and often times get ahead. So that you could only put in for 8 hours, say 400, so in that 8 hour day you'd put in 400 and do that and probably finish an hour early and some people were even ahead. It was an agreed upon incentive system. It put production along.

**Was there ever a time where you couldn't produce the amount of orders coming in?**

Oh yeah. You don't think about the days before the laptop...that in 90-95 the laptop/pc came in, internet and all that. I went to a warehouse where they were like these are the paper records for the past 10 years. In other words, when an order came in it got called into her and hand written. Then it came to you, it's an order, fill that with pricing. Then it came to me and I exploded it, which means made it into parts. Here's what we need if we had it in stock or whatever. And so all this was done by paper. Even the pay roll and everything. That was a mountain. There was an army of people. That didn't mean that somebody would pull something out of stock to complete and order and it was not the right stuff. Then everybody would panic and say we need 47 of these, get them, go, where are they?!

**How did you guys get paid?**

The seven of us, we were paid on salary.

**So you got checks or cash?**

We got checks, all professional. And the corporate headquarters were over here in Farmington. While they couldn't help us, they were always there to hurt us. They would come down and land on us if we didn't make our numbers for the month.

**If they didn't make numbers did they cut pay?**

No. They knew if you were doing well enough or not. I put a lot of pressure on myself. They would get after you in the right way whether it be silent intimidation or harsh or whatever.

Everybody has a different personality but man the guy I worked for over there his name was Johnny Banelli and John had been in the Air Force in WWII and was highly decorated. He was a level above us. He just had a way, if he called me today and told me to run through that wall I think I would do it. He was just the greatest guy. He was dedicated to the place, knew everybody, and yet knew how to keep everyone under control. He was so valuable to the real world and interfacing. He would come to work at 4:30 in the morning, look everything over, and know what was going on for the day. If you interrupted him, say I was upset with something, he'd be like, "Come on, let's get coffee and work through it." Or the other way around, "What the hell were you thinking? You went to college, he didn't, try being the smarter one; get out of the office and go! Don't you have something to do?" Like that a little bit. Then you'd feel bad for interrupting. Then the next day he'd be like, "How's it going slugger?" You'd want to work for him. They were a great group.

**So your dad worked in factories as well?**

Yeah he worked at Scovill. A lot of my uncles and my grandfather did to. It was industrial America.

**Were you all in the New Britain area?**

Oh no. I'm from Waterbury, Sin City. My mom and dad were great. My dad got back from Korea and he had to take care of his mom. He said I guess I have to get a trade. In those days they took you in and they made you a journey man. You did that for four years and then you were a trade's man in welding, tool making, and all kinds of things.

**Did you specify in one area or did you have to be a jack of all trades?**

You had to be accepted into that field. So what he did was take a roll of metal and make that into car parts, into the black Chanel lipstick case, hammer those out get them finished, painted, and

gone. It was cool. Every time he did a job he kept one in a big jar of the fridge. I was fascinated by that.

**Is that why you went into factory work?**

Ya I do believe so. There are papers of me from in the second grade learning to write and it was like “When I grow up I want to make metals for America.” So it must’ve been why. I didn’t do so bad. At the time, my brother went to Georgetown. I went to Western and got a chemistry degree. My sister went to Syracuse. Out of the 30 cousins I had, my mother was one of ten; I was only the second one to get through college and the first to get a master’s degree. So my education, to sit here today, means a great deal to me. That’s one of the nice reasons to come to Central and finish up here.

**You mentioned the Christmas party. Did you socialize a lot while you were there?**

How much do you want to know? We had fun. We did our fair share of drinking. They were good to me. Sometimes, us superintendents, we had Christmas parties, but we kind of thought the workers were there and we had to go around and say hello so we did that too. We had six Christmas parties by the time we were gone Friday. Unfortunately there was no thought of safety. We didn’t think like that then. Everybody was great, everybody I can remember all of them.

**The factories sometime picked up and moved down south because the work was cheaper there. Did your factory experience that?**

Yeah, that’s really good. Of course with the union there was that whole, “Don’t send my job to Georgia.” The thing up here was don’t go! Some people went but wait a minute... They’re paying you this up here and if you go down here it’s going to be less. That was going on. Then they went to the next phase where they were sending jobs over to China and overseas. That got

much larger and stuff.

**So the people in the factories got upset when coworkers would go with the factory down South?**

Well there were people that were upwardly mobile and educated like us. The people in sales were always coming and going. They were on the fly. I kind of wish I had done a little of that with the marketing group. They were young, that's when you do it. Do it now. Of course somebody who was not educated like that was afraid. They didn't know anything else. There certainly was a huge variety of people, a lot going on with foreign competition, changing out jobs, downsizing, trying to bring in technology and checking things with engineering.

Management was like, "We have to do this."

**That must have made a hostile environment when jobs were eliminated by new equipment and automation.**

Yeah it was a tough place. I had some friction with the union. There was a little conversation in the men's room they had with me about behaving. It taught me that you only live for this set of time and you have to go where it's good, or you're going to live with it. Don't be afraid to say, "Oh Colorado, that's where it's happening." Free weed. Good rebates on electric cars. But you have to go where its good. After the Korean War the industrial world went down, down, down.