

Nuts and Bolts: Stories from New Britain Manufacturing
Connecticut Humanities CT at Work Project
CCSU Student Interviewer: Courtney A. Ramos
Interview Subject: Fred Calcinari
Factory Subject worked at National Welding, American Hardware and General Electric
Date of Interview: February 15, 2014
Location: NBIM

Physical Description: This interview was conducted on February 15, 2014 in the New Britain Industrial Museum in New Britain, Connecticut. Fred Calcinari (86) and his son, Tom were present. Fred wore dark green corduroy pants, a blue and green plaid button up, glasses and his gold wedding band. Fred also let his tattoo from his navy days peek through the cuff of his sleeve.

Q. What company did you work for?

A. General Electric. Well first it was National Welding. Then General Electric. Sixteen years in both places. Both times I was a machine operator.

Q. What was the company most known for?

A. National Welding was most known for making parts for Pratt & Whitney for hauling engines around. It was the big time. They had these great big metal tanks that came in 2 piece and the airplane engines would go in there and they'd ship them across. If they ever fell in the ocean they would never sink. They were sealed very well. There was a lot of parts; small parts for turbines made out of aluminum and titanium steel.

And GE was just assembly. Electric, cubical with different sized switches on them different types of bus work with different voltage.

Q. Did you go to college?

A. I went for 17 years. No just kidding. No college.

Q. What was your daily schedule like in the factory? Like what time did you start and end?

A. Most places was 7:00 am. National Welding was many many hours. I used to work Sunday, Thanksgiving. Some nights I went in at 7 at night 'til 7 the next morning. Hot jobs. The aircrafts was in need of these parts and you they wanted to pay no matter what to get the parts done. As many people that want to work, you get paid. You work you get paid but was a lot of work.

Q. Did anyone else in your family work in the factories?

A. My father worked 40 years at Trumbull Electric; way back in the 1900's.

Q. Is that how you got into the factories too?

A. I worked there all for myself. My father was still working there. I went in there before I went into the service. I have a brother, too, who worked 36 years in there in material handling.

Q. Did you have to fill a certain quote per day of the items you made?

A. In GE we had to do that, yeah. We had to make these big switchboxes that go into the cubical. You had to make so many an hour, but everything was inspected and if you didn't do it right you had to do it all over again. But you had a quota. I remember I used to complain "I don't want to work all this overtime. Give the work to these people that have families. My family is all grown up, I don't need the money." But they said "we need you" so I had to work. I did 10 hours or 12 hours a day. The money was good but I spent more time in there then I did at home.

Q. Were the safety rules ignored at work to make the work production faster?

A. Not too common. The boss would walk all around and make sure everybody had those eye glasses on, and the safety features on your arms and the right shoes.

Q. Did you see a lot of accidents on the jobs? Any arms chopped off?

A. No I never saw any arms or finger chipped. But one time this older gentleman came into work and went over to wash his hands, and his face and he died of a heart attack. He didn't even start working but yeah he had a heart attack. But no accidents as far as I can remember. They would have happened beyond my memory.

Q. How did you get paid? Cash or check?

A. We got paid by the hour. We got a check every Friday afternoon. Then sometimes you'd have to work all weekend as well.

Q. Did you get paid more on weekends and holidays? Or was it the same pay?

A. Oh yeah. Time and a half and double time on holidays. And that's when the paycheck looked nice.

Q. Were you part of a union?

A. Yes at National Welding. I forget what position I held, I think just a Stuart. Just a member of the union. I went to the meetings, and voted on certain things. But I was not a big shot, just a regular Joe.

Q. Were you ever part of any strikes?

A. At National Welding we had a three day strike and I had to work for my brother's father-in-law for 3 days for money and then I went back to work when it ended.

Q. What was the reason for the strike?

A. I guess it was wages. The union thought we were being treated unfair. Some people at some jobs thought they should be getting more money because their job was more dangerous. So they felt it was unfair labor. But it didn't last long: only 3 days. That's the only one I can remember. That was a union shop. GE was a non-union shop. And they treated you real well. Any complaints and you would go to your boss and he'd go to someone else and you'd have a meeting and work it out. There was one time when this one person just wasn't pulling his load. Goofing off like crazy. So four of us went to our boss and said "this guy is supposed to be

feeding us material and he's goofing off in the bathroom making orders for his own side job" They said to us "You mind your business, we know what's going on." And then pretty soon a few days later here comes a policeman grabs his toolbox and kicks him out the door. So we were watching him but they were watching him also.

Q. So they really looked out for you guys?

A. Yeah we felt good cause they were doing things to help us, we weren't all on our own.

Q. So everyone you worked with really had to work together to get the job done?

A. That's right. We all fed each other stuff to keep it going. We had to feed the main floor and all things had to be done. You had to be responsible.

Q. A lot of factories started opening up in the South because labor was a lot cheaper. Did any of the companies you worked for try to transfer down south?

A. Sure they did. When I worked at American hardware we started off it was nice because it was good. But little by little they started taking some of the floor men and sending them down south and show them how to set up the different jobs. And then a year went by and we were still working and little by little our products were going down there. Then before we knew it they told us we had to find new jobs. A lot of the stuff went down south. But then they started saying the people down south don't work as hard; they like to go fishing a lot.

Q. Were you guys encouraged to hang out and socialize outside of work?

A. Well some guys would go to the bars. But not me!

Q. No not you? You went home after work?

A. My wife would kill me. I don't want to spend money on that. I have family. Most guys didn't care I guess.

Q. How many kids do you have?

A. 5 kids.

Q. At the time when you were working in the factories, did you think that they would have such a huge impact on the country and the world?

A. Not the slightest. I just figures the industries were growing in certain towns, and they'd build more houses and factories to keep the economy going. You go to work every day and you hear rumors about stuff that's going to happen, layoffs and whatever. Sometimes it happened and sometimes it didn't.

Q. Was it hard to get into the factories for working?

A. Those days dime a dozen. There was so many places that needed help. Thousands of people from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont and all over the North East came here to work. A lot of people also had side jobs like construction. These French people next to me worked construction. That's what they did, they had the money from the factories and made a nice home for themselves and expanded. These were big strong guys that could do that, work in the factories and construction.

Q. Wow so they worked literally all day?

A. That's right, all day and night. They were younger but as you get older you slow down a bit. The young guys are ambitious. They wanted to make a lot of money and live better.

Q. Did you enjoy working in the factory or do you wish you could have done something different?

A. It wasn't bad. Good friends. We did things together outside of work. It was nice.

Q. What were some of the things you did outside of work?

A. Played baseball with some of the guys. But I also liked skiing, cross country and downhill. My wife and I bowled. We joined a league. Husband and Wife leagues. My wife was a better bowler than me. Then one time when I was bowling before I got laid off at National Welding. I met this guy who worked at GE so I got to talking to him. I told him I was getting laid off and he told me to come see him Monday. Sure enough he hired me and I got a job at GE. It was nice I didn't have to go looking around.

Q. Was your work far from your house?

A. Both places were 5 miles from my house. I rode my bike to work in the summer. Save on gas and good exercise.

Q. Did you work with a lot of women?

A. At GE yes, but not at National Welding. Only a couple of women worked on drill press. But at GE there was a lot.

Q. Did they get paid the same as men?

A. No. I don't know why. Maybe the jobs were just too different; less strenuous.

Q. Did your wife work?

A. She worked at Apprentice making zippers, then she worked as an aid in a hospital for a long time. But she was busy raising 5 kids.

Q. What do you like about the museum?

A. It's amazing. The people who contributed this stuff are great. It's such a great representation of the era.

Q. Was there anything you didn't like about the factory?

A. The bosses were good. The work was kind of heavy and dirty, but the bosses were good and always behind us. Then when I went to GE it was a little different. You're just a number there and you have a job to do and have to perform. If you don't do it they'll tell you. The only complaint I have is towards the end I was working for electrical stuff. Putting fuses and wires together, you had to be fast. But you don't want to be fast when you're doing wiring and stuff. So my boss said I have to work a reasonable hour of overtime, at least 10 hours. But I didn't want to. That's too much. One of the big shots stood by me. He said "Fred if you don't want to work all that then you don't have to." But that was for two years and then at 62 I quit and retired. You make too much money you'll be in a graveyard, what's the good in that? I worked a few jobs in a truck store, a bank.

Q. Were you allowed time off?

A. Yeah you had sick days and paid vacation time. I think only 2 or 3 sick days. I used to hook it up with the weekend. You'd see how nice it was outside and want to go fishing. So I made use of my days off. We survived.

Q. Was there someone who floated around knowing all the jobs in order to let workers use the bathroom?

A. If you had to use the bathroom you just had to work a little faster and make a few pieces to hold over until you came back. I know some places had those floaters, but I think that was in bigger factories. We made it okay.

Q. What kind of work did your bosses do?

A. They were all goof offs! I'm sure they were knowledgeable about a lot. If people complained they did their job and had a responsibility to maintain. Then near the end they started having women bosses.

Q. How did people feel about that?

A. Some people didn't like it. They felt like women didn't know what they were doing. It was a man's job. But times were different and the women did fine.

Q. Where did you meet your wife?

A. I was driving my car one time with my buddy and she was with a friend of hers. I had my little car with the roof down and I said "hey Blondie where ya going? Want to go for a ride?" And they did. Then we came back the next day and they were there and we went for another ride and that's how we met.

Q. How old were you when you started in the factories?

A. Well I started with my father. He got me a job. I worked for a few years before I joined the navy. I didn't want to ruin my father's reputation. When I'd take a day off they'd go to my father who they called Moxie and would say "Moxie where's Fred?" and he'd say "I don't know I left at 5 this morning and he was still in bed." I decided to join the navy so I didn't ruin his reputation.

Q. How old were you when you joined the navy? How long were you active?

A. I joined when I was 18 and was active for about 3 years.

Q. son "How long were you at American Hardware before National Welding?"

A. Let's see, maybe 7 years. Then I went to national welding.

Q. When you were working, was there ever a time when you totally messed up on something?

A. Oh sure there was. I didn't like to mess up but everyone messed up. It kept me up at night knowing I messed up but my bosses would say "Fred just think of all the good things you've done, don't focus on the bad." You just had to start over and learn from your mistake. I think the job has kind of been pushed to the side now. Now you have machines that do a machinists job. They don't need as many workers. All these robots. When I left National Welding there was a

robot that did all the work 10x faster than any of us. When I was in GE I saw the robotics in action doing the jobs. They used to say “Don’t worry Fred these machines aren’t going to take your place.” I didn’t believe it. That machine did what six guys could do, with no coffee or bathroom breaks.

Q. So you got to see firsthand the transition from all hand work to computerized robots?

A. Yupp. And that was at the end of my working life.

Q. I’m sure a lot of people got laid off because of it.

A. Definitely. They didn’t say that though. They didn’t want to discourage workers or have them go out and find new jobs. They had to train people in different ways to work with the robotics or get educated in something else and go into a different line of work.

Q. Did you grow up here in New Britain?

A. All my life. All 86 years. Not on the same street though.

Q. Is your old house still there?

A. Yeah we went by it a few months ago.

At this point the three of us walked around the museum for about 10 minutes. Fred showed me some of the things he used to work on and what he did in the factories.