

Nuts and Bolts: Stories from New Britain Manufacturing  
Connecticut Humanities Ct at Work Project  
CCSU Students: Morgan Skovich and Keller Beck  
Interview Subject: Helen Politz  
Factory Subject worked at: Landers, Frary & Clark  
Date of Interview: Wed., February 12, 2014 12:15p.m. -1:20p.m.  
Location: 111 Lewis Rd, New Britain, Ct.

**General Description of the subject:**

88- year-old recently widowed Helen Politz. Wears a matching teal sweat suit with a cream turtleneck underneath paired with matching white slip on shoes. Hanging around her neck, a gold chain with a cross and her deceased husband's wedding band. Her curly pixie cut was managed and her manner was quiet but excited. By her side was a one-foot tall percolator from the early 1950's that sat next to a crumbling cardboard box that looked as if it had seen better days. Politz started working in the lab for Landers, Frary & Clark when she was just 17, for over 10 years until they closed. – She receives a \$23.85 a month pension. Afterwards, she worked for Federal Savings and People Savings bank until she retired.

**Transcript Excerpt:**

Q. How did you get your job in the factory?

A. At that time we didn't have education so we applied to the factories. Mrs. Collins hired me. It was post wartime so most women did factory work. [Finished high school and then just went to work.] That's what you did.

Q. You said you had to test the Percolators, how many did you test a day?

A. We had to go to the department where they were making Percolators. Well, they'd start with nothing – just the body and at the end they were already packed in the box. We had to take the whole box and start with the way it was packed and look for any fault that you could find. [Had to look for dents, if it was packed right, etc.] Sometimes we worked on one Percolator for two weeks because you had to look for everything, [it would take days sometimes because if it was something technology wrong on the inside, it was the lab who would pick it apart and fix it] and then the next day we would do the frying pan, so I had go to Mohegan Market on Main St., buy the food to cook in it.

Q. Is that what you had to do, test them by actually using them?

A. Yep, we tested them by actually using them. You had to actually use the product. [They would give me money to buy food at the market and cook it in their product.]

Q. What type of other objects did you test?

A. Whatever product they wanted, thermos bottles, vacuum cleaners and toasters. The good thing about the hair dryers though was that when you took it home and did a whole report, you got to keep the product. Mine is up in the attic.

Q. They were telling us in class they told us about women in class who went to work with wet hair to test the blow dryers, did you ever do that too?

A. Yes, I did that, sure. There were round sinks where you washed your hands in every department [so she would stick her hair in there]. I used to wear my hair straight back then. But the day we tested toasted, we got so tired of it. I think to this day I don't even want to look at toast.

Q. Did you believe in / take pride in the products the company you were working for was putting together for society?

A. Oh yes. The products were made so well compared to what you buy now. The job was so interesting [she stressed how interesting her job was over and over] I can't believe to this day about the products. You took a lot of pride because if we found something that wasn't right we would stay all day and night to fix it.

Q. How much were these products being sold for back then, for example – the Percolator?

A. The Percolator was \$8.00 back then but the top grade one was around \$15.

Q. While on the topic of money, how much did you earn while working there?

A. \$18 a week for 40 hours in cash. [There was no pay for overtime but they did work overtime because it was their job]

Q. So does that mean you didn't do piece work [Getting paid by how many piece you made]?

A. Oh no, no, no – I was on a salary. I worked above the assembly line; they were the ones who did piece work. To be frank they didn't like me very much because when I found something wrong with an item the entire assembly line would be shut down.

Q. Did you get breaks while you were working or were you pretty much working the whole time?

A. We got coffee breaks and a half hour for lunch.

Q. Did you socialize with people you worked with outside of work?

A. No no no, we didn't have any money to go out but we were friendly within the lab. It was much more chit chatty than on the assembly line – since they were working and getting paid per piece. But there was much more of a sense of community in the lab where I worked.

Q. We learned through this assignment that Polish people were discriminated against so how did you get pushed up so high when applying when you were 17?

A. Well, the Polish community looked out for each other so Leo helped me out because he liked me so much – It was prestigious to be in the lab. [There were only 2 women and 4 men including Helen.]

Q. Did you have a favorite product to test?

A. The Percolator. I hated vacuum cleaners because they were really heavy. But the Percolators were my favorite because we got to use a big thermometer. When we found anything, like I said, they used to hate me because I would shut down the whole line!

Q. Did you have keep in touch / form relationships with people that you used to work with at Landers, Frary & Clark?

A. There's a few that I still talk to. My husband and I have been to Aruba 15 times and till this time I talk to the people from the factory that I met in Aruba. I was never friends with anyone in the assembly line, I was friendly with them but we were segregated because I had a better job. They'd see me and they'd said, "here comes trouble."

Q. Was the factory job a union job?

A. Yes but I was in the lab so that wasn't part of me.

Q. When they were on strike did that affect your work?

A. It did, but not our pay, they would just jeer at us on our way in – we were office help so if there was a strike we still went into work.

Q. What did you do with all of the products – it seems you got to keep so much?

A. Well, I gave most of it away – I just had so much! I pretty much handed it all out but some I use to this day, like the Percolator.

Q. Do you have anything else that you would like to add in, maybe something we didn't cover or that you'd like to reemphasize?

A. We worked hard – we worked 7 in the morning till 4:30 with a half hour for lunch with maybe a 10-minute coffee break. In the lab we made salary but we worked hard. Now everyone just goofs off. Landers was very well known and it's too bad they closed down because they made such good products. Lastly, one thing you have to remember, every product – you learned a lot, it was so interesting.