

Nuts and Bolts: Stories from the New Britain Manufacturing
Connecticut humanities CT at Work Project
CCSU Student: Mary Collins and Jim Enderle
Interview Subject: Henry Skonieczny
Factory subject worked at: Fafnir and Textron
Date of Interview: February 17, 2014
Location: Phone Interview

Description: This conversation with Henry Skonieczny took place over the phone because of weather constraints. Mr. Skonieczny comes from generations of workers at Fafnir to the point that his grandfather brought home ball bearings when he was a youngster to play with. Previous generations worked on the plant machines while he was fortunate enough to be awarded one of two scholarships offered by Fafnir annually. While working as an engineer there, the experiences of his grandfather and father allowed Henry to always maintain a favorable relationship with union representatives and workers alike. He is an individual who takes great pride in Fafnir's providing critical bearings to companies from Electric Boat (submarines), NASA (historic moon landing in 1969), the Department of Defense throughout the 20th centuries wars, and research projects throughout his career.

Jim: Did you work at the New Britain Industrial Museum?

Henry Skonieczny: No I worked at the Fafnir plant, for several periods off and on starting in 1961. I haven't been to the Museum as of yet, but it's something I'm planning on doing. Have you been there?

Jim: Yes, we went there last week as a part of our English class and it was really quite an experience.

Henry Skonieczny: You saw what a bearing looks like then?

Jim: We were talking as we did the tour, there was a role of their function from jet engines through to foundations on tall buildings.

Henry Skonieczny: Oh yeah. Nothing moves without bearings in this world. They're a very important product.

Jim: Now how did you get your job in the factory? Were you among the people who applied at the plant or came straight out of college?

Henry Skonieczny: Actually it was just before college, I was lucky enough to get one of two Fafnir scholarships to go to Worcester Polytechnic Institute. One scholarship was for Yale, or a future Yale student, and the other one was for a future engineering student, which I qualified for because if one of your parents worked for the company they offered these scholarships every year back in the 1950s and 1960s and even beyond that so in 1961 when I graduated

from high school, I won that Engineering scholarship and was able to go to the Engineering school. Beginning in the summer, before I started college, they normally offered these students who were awarded scholarships summer jobs and in the factory and that's where I started. I worked in the ball plant on John Street the first summer and I joined the union for three months. Then I worked in the ball instruction department and in the last three summers while I was in college I worked in the laboratory in the main plant so. I was very lucky first of all to win the scholarship and second of all to get a summer job to finance college even though the costs, relatively speaking today were very low, it was a lot of money back then to go to school. So that's when I started, in the summer of 1961 and I graduated in 1965 from college from Worcester Tech and was hired by the company after I got my degree. That was kind of an unusual path but that was the path for me.

Jim: My father has told me it wasn't unusual in that time for a person to get a job right out of high school and just stay with that company until retirement.

Henry Skonieczny: Yeah, I stayed with that company for twenty plus years and actually retired from Fafnir in 1985. I was 42 years old. The company at that point was on the block for being sold and I received an offer from a small electronics outfit in Marlborough, Connecticut that made bearing-related electronics products and went to work there for a couple of years. I went back to the bearing industry at the Torrington Company in Torrington, Connecticut. I don't know if you've heard about them but they ended up as the purchaser of Fafnir I think in 1986 or 1987, somewhere around there, and I went to work for them for another 15 years as a research engineer, so I've been around bearings all my life (laughs).

Jim: Can you give me a particular instance or two that was really unique, or a project that you were especially proud of?

Henry Skonieczny: I basically started after my graduation from engineering school, in the engineering laboratory as a research engineer and was promoted to the Senior Research Engineer in a few years. Probably the most significant project I worked on was designing and testing the test apparatus for high-speed bearings. There is a designation for the severity of operation for the ball bearing, if you can imagine, or even a roller ring for that matter. You saw how the rolling elements go between very high-precision rings that constitute the bearing? If you take the bore or the diameter of that center hole, the inner ring hole, and multiply it by the bore in millimeters times the speed in rotations per minute (rpm) of the inner ring let's say, you come up with a factor they call in the bearing industry as the DN, D standing for the bore diameter and the N standing for the speed. Typically bearings back then, the ones I was working on in the 1970s and 1980s were limited to about one and half million DN. Through one project, I was able to take speeds and severity up to four million DN, which was quite a leap in those days. That was a very rewarding project. The company invested a lot of money in the rig and my time in building the rig and things, and that was probably the most rewarding thing that I worked on. It was all related to the aerospace industry that was pushing the speed barrier in terms of engine speed so aircraft could operate at very high speed. I worked on many other things of course leading up to that but that would be the one I would put down.

Jim: I know that in that time I can remember when jet engines weren't as mainstream and soon they became where they were used on a wider scale.

Henry Skonieczny: Yeah, those were really good times for engineers if you remember the space race with President Kennedy where his goal was to land a man on the moon before the end of the decade and the bearings were crucial to that whole effort and for engineers, it was a great time to be hired and to go to work for a company kind of on the cutting edge of supplying products for that kind of massive project to put a man on the moon and we did (laughs).

Jim: The goal was to do it by the end of the year and we did is right!

Henry Skonieczny: Well, the end of the decade. He announced it when he became president and it was July or so in 1969 we finally put a person on the moon.

Jim: That's one of those instances in life where you remember exactly where you were when it happened. My father remembered in his lifetime that it seemed impossible.

Henry Skonieczny: You know Fafnir wound up supplying the crucial bearings for the lunar lander, the vehicle that actually jettisoned from the rocket ship, if you will, that was circling around the moon. It had to land on the moon with a cushioned landing. The bearings were in the feet of that lunar lander or the legs I should say, some were sliding bearings or low-friction bearings so that was quite exciting, as well as other bearings that were in pumps and things like that. So for Fafnir, that was a very busy time for them. There was a big aerospace business and a big agricultural business as well.

Jim: I can imagine! I can recall reading about the construction of tall buildings where bearings allow the building to shift a little bit.

Henry Skonieczny: Right, they do move! If they weren't allowed to move something would fracture at one point. Bearings are very critical. You know, during the Second World War, the Germans were very famous for their ball bearings. Prior to 1911, when Fafnir was formed and incorporated, the Germans and English were leading the pack as far as high precision bearings. We actually had Fafnir plants that were targeted by the Germans in World War II. We had missiles protecting those plants in New Britain because they figured if they could knock out our bearing production, they would bring the war to a standstill as far as our side of the war – tanks and airplanes, things like that. It was a very critical manufacturing operation here in New Britain.

Jim: That's fascinating and Fafnir was right at the base of our entire war effort. Over the years that often gets lost in history.

Henry Skonieczny: And when we had the chance, we took the initiative and bombed the heck out of the German bearing facilities. You know, both sides had their eyes on the same hardware

basically, and we did a number on Germany. I remember seeing the film footage on that, the bombing of Germany.

Jim: I wanted to ask a question about OSHA, in what way did that factor into your work?

Henry Skonieczny: Yea, OSHA came into being and they had a lot of restrictions in terms of safety issues and Fafnir, or course, complied with all that. I wasn't as involved with them. That would have been more the plant engineers that would have been involved in terms of compliance, making sure we passed all the inspections. Everybody was issued safety glasses and if anyone was near any kind of moving machinery there were regulations. Ladders had to be a certain quality for the plant maintenance people. So the answer is no, someone else was handling that part of it, I was actually living with the equipment and designing the equipment and running the equipment in the laboratory.

Jim: I was going to ask too, I know about that time, there were many businesses that were establishing factories in the south where there was a lower wage.

Henry Skonieczny: That started kind of after I got there, when I started in the summer of 1961, it was pretty much a family-owned organization and in 1968, a conglomerate named Textron bought it. And they would go around the country and begin buying all kinds of companies and the whole idea was to make money with diversification. They would buy a bearing company, then they would buy an aerospace company, then a stapler company, things like that. If one market was down, another one would be up hopefully. Around that time, maybe three or four years after I started, I don't recall any other southern plants. Maybe there was one, maybe it was the Pulaski plant, around the time I started officially in 1965, and you're right, over time they sent most of the product line down south except for things made primarily in New Britain and Newington. But eventually, all the other products ended up in various locations down south.

Jim: I can remember in the 1970s I applied for a job at a Dr. Scholl's plant in Chicago and one of the questions they asked was whether we were willing to relocate to Tennessee because the overhead was lower in the south. That job didn't work out but I know a lot of companies were doing that about then.

Henry Skonieczny: The problem was there was a large learning curve, a steep learning curve for these people down south. A lot of the production engineers, for the training ended up taking the transfer to bring these people up to speed down there. Over the years, I've worked with a lot of people primarily from the Shiloh plant for Fafnir that made precision bearings for machine tools. Eventually they became familiar with the production and all the problems, all the engineering. Primarily the product engineering stayed in New Britain at that time.

Jim: I didn't realize, not being from Connecticut originally, just how much industry there was in the New Britain area. My introduction to this was in a veteran's initiative to begin training

veterans and bring some of this work back to the area. It was such a vital part of this area's economy.

Henry Skonieczny: We did a lot of work with Electric Boat, submarine work and other shipboard building operations. Mainly with the Electric Boat stuff we did research projects and government contract when I was with the Torrington Company when I went back. At that point Fafnir had basically been swallowed up by Torrington and had become part of Torrington Company.

Jim: I'm wondering about a story I heard about industrial work in that time. Many of the people came from other areas of the country and sort of became adopted members of the community and the company with bowling leagues and other activities. Did you do socializing after work with co-workers?

Henry Skonieczny: Basically, when I was growing up as a kid all of my family, practically 95% of my relatives, my father, my grandfather, all worked at one time or another for Fafnir. That the way it was in and around the area and for some reason my family settled in with Fafnir. So I grew up with bearings, my grandfather used to bring them home for me to play with (laughs). It was kind of a natural occurrence that I went to work there. But to answer your question, growing up, they would always say, in terms of socializing after work, they would have Christmas parties with Santa Claus and hand out really good presents to the employees and the kids and they would rent a theater in the area and show movies. There was a lot of community activity, I would say, it maintained itself during the 1960s and into the 1970s before it tapered off. When we were purchased by Textron, all over the organization, bowling leagues, softball leagues, basketball leagues, it kind of started to taper off. We used to have a publication called the Fafnir News. I don't know if the museum has any old copies. It was like a small, nice-colored magazine. It started as a black and white and was in color eventually and it featured employees and their accomplishments and families, births and deaths, and kind of kept everybody informed about the whole community, the community of people who worked at Fafnir. Over time, I saw that disappear. And with it the socialization you mentioned. I mean if it were, I guess it's just different times.

Jim: I know my father worked at the railroad and was on softball and basketball teams through work. The family would pack up and go see his games. Those were good times for the families.

Henry Skonieczny: Yeah, they would go on picnics and things like that for the families in the summertime. And before, when it was still a family-owned organization, up until 1968, the owners took good care of people. I mean there were strikes. Actually some pretty back strikes over the years. You know the union contract would be up and it was a strong union. If the contract was up and the employees felt that they weren't getting what they deserved, in terms of benefits or whatever, they would go on strike. As a salaried employee, I would have to cross those picket lines. It was pretty much peaceful, but there were some instances where nails were thrown into tires, things like that.

Jim: I know that it can get pretty bad in instances like that. Was that a difficult experiences for you, to cross the lines?

Henry Skonieczny: Not really, I was used to it, I used to see my father out there picketing. He worked on a machine as a union member. Pretty much it was peaceful, they would have a police officer or two out there looking over things. You know, they would take their time opening the space and eventually the officer would come and clear them away so we could drive our cars through, the salaried people. Most of the salaried people, they would put in the machines to make product. During that strike, I think the longest one I remember, was six months or about six months. That's a long time!

Jim: Maybe for you it was a little different, having grown up on both sides of it. Maybe for some of the engineers, it may have been tough to actually go and work on machines.

Henry Skonieczny: It could be intimidating to a lot of people. It probably was.

Jim: I would imagine. This is a pleasure for me to talk to you. Are there any questions you would like to have been asked?

Henry Skonieczny: I was in touch with Karen, the curator of the Museum. Do you know Karen Hudgens, have you met her?

Jim: Yes she did the tour.

Henry Skonieczny: She and I go to the same church and she sent some information because I was wondering what time was involved or what was needed. She explained the purpose of the project and how it's going to work, to try and capture the experience of the people who built the Hardware Capitol of the World so these experiences can be preserved and used to help future generations understand the accomplishments or I should say those who came before, in a nutshell. There was a question in there about how people were paid. Well, the union often paid on the idea of piecework actually, I'm not sure if you know what that means. It means they are paid by the pieces they produce, rather than by the hour. That brought on a lot of innovations because a lot of these people were, in order to make a lot of pieces in an eight-hour shift, they came up with ways of setting up machines in little jigs and fixtures and things like that, to try and help make product faster but not have the quality suffer. It forced people to think and innovate. And then there were people who were just on straight hourly rates and the salaried people, of course, were paid salary. Even in the summer, I was paid a straight hourly rate. That's kind of answers that one, I guess, in terms of how people were paid. Could you work your way up? Yes, especially in the early days where there's more opportunity. You probably don't realize it, but once you get bought by these big conglomerates, much bigger companies, the first thing they do is send their accountants and their lawyers and their money people in to infiltrate the organization. They leave the engineers alone and this is smart move because they have all the knowledge. You could see over time how they, in terms of those fields, how it might be hard to work your way up once a large corporation like that would

purchase your company. But engineers could work their way up, certainly. There were a lot of good engineers and a lot of smart, experienced people when I got there that helped me along.

Jim: By the time you've been in this business for most of your life, you've seen so many contingency plans and unique circumstances that those people are so valuable.

Henry Skonieczny: I think the biggest thing that's changed for most companies is the amount of loyalty on both sides. Many times the employees stay because the company treated them right and vice versa, so they felt, like an obligation to do the best I can because I knew if I worked hard and did a good job I would be rewarded for it. And I was. But today, it just seems like there is no obligations. I see in my kids, I mean, I had two or three jobs in my whole lifetime, my whole career. My kids went way past that already! The younger generation, if they're not happy with something, and the same thing with the company. You know, if we can save money, we'll lay people off. Without any regard so that's the biggest change I've seen in my life, the whole attitude between the two parties.

Jim: I know I just listened to a documentary on the argument to raise the minimum wage and the pros were if workers felt they were being treated well, they would stay and be productive. It's costly to lose people and have to constantly train new personnel. It was a very good debate for both sides.

Henry Skonieczny: I think if you treat people right, they will do a good job for the most part. And if you start treating them like some companies do today, you don't get the results.

Jim: I don't remember exactly when it started, but maybe in the 1980s, there was a belief that job changes seemed to be a quick way to advance one's career. They called it being "upwardly mobile."

Henry Skonieczny: That's provided there were jobs though right?

Jim: That's true (laughing). I've also over the course of my life, have seen a number of cycles between management and the union. If there are no jobs, management would work contracts to their benefit, then the union, when there were many jobs, would renegotiate when it swung their way.

Henry Skonieczny: I've seen unions really taken a beating over the years.

Jim: There is some give and take like a constant cycle.

Henry Skonieczny: It's a little different in my case because I sort of straddled the fence a little bit. I received union scholarships because my father worked at Fafnir and also the Fafnir company scholarship and so my loyalties were split between the unions and the management at that time. I had no problem with unions at all, even back then, even when they went on strike, I figured they had a good reason to do it. Eventually the strike was settled. Anyway, I

never took sides and I tried to maintain good relationships with the union people and guess what? They did the same and we got along.

Jim: I come from generations of construction workers. My Dad was a union carpenter and I was a union electrician. I took some ribbing for that within the family. I can understand what both sides are trying to do and it must have benefited you to understand both sides.

Henry Skonieczny: Oh sure. One thing I wanted to mention was that after Fafnir moved out of New Britain, they eventually tore the main plant down. It was on Myrtle Street and Goose Street, surrounded by a couple of streets in sort of the Polish section of New Britain. Back then, the city bought the land and they were selling bricks from the building for a buck or so and my wife surprised me, my Christmas of 1997 or whenever they tore the building down, and she gave me a brick with a little plaque on it because I spent so many years there. Somehow a reporter from the New Britain Herald, it was a local newspaper, got hold of it and they came and interviewed us and took our pictures. I don't know if you have access to the archives of the New Britain Herald but if you look on the front page on January 3rd, 1997, you'll see my story!

Jim: I would love to see that. That's something I can look into.

Henry Skonieczny: I know years ago they had a great archive. It might possibly be in the New Britain library also.

Jim: I can look into that, I know anytime a person spends so much time in a place, there's an investment and a lot of memories.

Henry Skonieczny: I have the brick on my fireplace mantel and I go down there and think about old times once in a while (laughing). It's kind of sad to see the building, well first of all the company, and then the building. I guess that's progress. For somebody (laughing).

Jim: I know in Chicago I grew up in an area with a lot of factories and because they were such solid buildings, they converted them to expensive loft apartments. They don't make buildings like that anymore. Beautiful brick buildings!

Henry Skonieczny: They saved one building, the grocery plant is still in existence today, a six-floor facility. You're probably not too familiar with New Britain, but it's on the corner of Myrtle Street and Grove Street and it has that big outside elevator, external elevator, which was added after they renovated it. Everything else, including the main plant which was right across the street from that Grove Street plant is gone. There is a cake company or a food company that is in there now.

Jim: As old buildings go, because they don't build anything like that anymore. It's too bad they didn't save it.

Henry Skonieczny: No, but the problem with the main plant was the pollution. There was no OSHA or government regulations from way back then. A lot of the floors were oil-soaked, it was really a fire hazard. The wood-block floor, the oil would soak in. Even in the exterior grounds, there was pollution. They had to dig up all the earth and haul it someplace, you know, because it was so polluted. I think renovating that main plant was out of the question, it just wasn't safe.

Jim: It probably would have cost more to fix that problem than the building or land was worth. I couldn't help but think as I walked through the Museum just how ingenious people can be!

Henry Skonieczny: In the central laboratory where I worked for the three summers I worked before graduating from college and my twenty years there as an engineer, at one time or another, I had something to do with it in terms of evaluating, testing, and developing those things. The main laboratory did the testing for all the product engineers and as an offshoot the main laboratory was this research kind of area that I developed into and got to explore these high-ND bearings I was telling you about. It was very exciting and the more experience you gained, the more fascinating it gets and the more good projects you can get your hands on and spend time is really good. Machine tool bearings I was, have you seen, the really high precision bearings, super-precision balls down to the millionths of an inch, roundness and things like that. We did a lot of work on spindle testing, evaluating and development. If you need to tie me to any of these areas, it would probably be the aerospace bearings primarily. And you have to remember, when I started college in 1965, I started working full-time there, and we were still using slide rules!

Jim: I remember slide rules!

Henry Skonieczny: I didn't get the first Hewlett-Packard hand-held calculator until 1973 or 1974 (laughing).

Jim: I certainly will. It's been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you again for your time!