

Nuts and Bolts :Stories from New Britain Manufacturing
Connecticut Humanities CT at Work Project
CCSU Student Interviewers: Patricia Ladd and Molly Ensero
Interview Subject : Lance Coulter
Factory subject worked at: New Britain Machine
Date of interview: February 11, 2014
Location: NBIM

TRANSCRIPT

Lance Coulter is a spry man, age 76, who is a retired draftsman from New Britain Machine. He is tall, thin and has a full head of short grey and white hair. He wears gold rim wire glasses, a flannel shirt, and casual slacks. Lance attends Central CT State University to learn about history, and has a passionate hobby involving all things WWII. He has a wide range of knowledge about both New Britain Machine and WWII facts, and some about the city of New Britain and the country during his days at New Britain Machine. Lance was born in 1938. He was a young child when WWII broke out.

The interview took place at the New Britain Industrial Museum, New Britain CT, on Tuesday, February 11, 2014 at 2 p.m. When I set up this interview, the Museum Director, Karen Winslow Hudkins, told me that Lance Coulter was a “man of few words.” But I was pleasantly surprised when he was very talkative the day of the interview. I stayed with Molly as she asked the majority of questions because I felt that Mr. Coulter was more comfortable with the bridged generational spread, as I am middle aged and Molly is a young woman. It was a good call, because we obtained much useful information. I returned the next day to get many pictures of what Mr. Coulter talked about.

What year did you work at New Britain Machine?

I worked from 1965 until 1990, 25 years until they closed. New Britain Machine originally was privately owned by a family named Pease, and then a second family, Howe and then they sold it to Litton Industries... and that was their downfall because that was when they had the big conglomerates and finally the government broke ‘em up because they killed the little guy. So anyway, after 10 years or so they decided to sell it off...but NBM was about 100 years old when they... and they weren’t always a machine tool builder, they diversified. During the ‘20’s they built airplane engines. They built bayonets for the Russian army...I mean anything they could do to...make money. Then they...one of the things they were noted for...a gentleman by the name of Gridley invented the screw machine, which you see the model here (points to a picture). This machine right here...they call them automatic bar machines. And when the bar stock went into the hole there, you see...one inch diameter, two inch diameter, they made all kind of parts with it. You could make little parts, big parts...they were high production machines. And then it was eventually called the New Britain Gridles. They had to keep the Gridley name for a so many years because of the patent rights. And then they diversified in other machines...like... They made a...vertical blindery...which is this

machine over here (points to a picture). And they bought a company out in the midwest which was called Horn & Dill, where they came up with the cam operated lathe, which is verticle. You know what the lathe is. They turn machine tools. Which is a machine tool (Well I made a little note, here. He reads...) Turn Machine tools covers any power driven machine that automatically can machine identical parts for metal or other materials that can be grouped into six categories...basic types...drilling, boring, threading, turning, milling, planeing, grinding, shearing, pressing...and some are small, some are big. Some you couldn't fit in this building. You could go through the roof of this building. But ours were only that big. Bar machines were not that big. Bar machines were high production machines. They could make 2-3000 parts an hour. And during the war...they were big...New Britain Machine set up... they called the 'Nut Factory' because they had all these machines that basically, ...that's what they were doing nuts and bolts...they sent them out by the railroad car full...you know. And when I started working here...when I went in for what they call the cam operated vertical lathes... is what they are.

Is that was the kind of thing you would do in the factory?

I was a machine tool designer.

How did you get your job there?

This is one of the machines I worked on. This is another one. (photos) I went to Hartford State Technical Institute. (Now called Hartford State College.) I went there for two years. And I got hired as a draftsman at Superior Electric in Bristol. Which is no longer there. It's right next to ESPN...

I know where it is. (It was located on Middle St. in Bristol CT.)

I worked there two years, and a family member of mine who worked there (NBM) told me, "Why don't you come over and see if you can get into New Britain Machine?" So I did and they hired me and I started as a detail draftsman. You draw the blueprints and dimensions. I worked my way up as a senior tool designer. Then we moved into the numerical control machines, computer operated. So we had...we designed whatever, say it was Chrysler...we sold a lot to the automotive industry. Basically, what I'd have to do is to design this part to send in and then I'd have to program the machine...I'd have to program the computer so it could turn the machine...the cam machine. I'd have to design the cams. So that's basically what I did for 25 years. Sometimes I'd have to go out on field trips. But the company...we'd have over even today over 30,000 New Britain Machines still out there. So, New Britain (Machine) at its peak was probably around 3500. It may have gone up to 5000 during the war because you were 24/7 during the war. I remember the war but I was a little too young.

Did they used to use the scrap metal that I hear so much about? People used to collect scrap metal for the war cause. Was that put into New Britain Machine?

No. Mostly during the war (WWII) if the military came in they took the machine and then you'd (customers) would have to wait. That's basically what they did. They made the products, they made all kinds of screws, nuts, bolts, connects, the lot. They were one

of the first ones to run, stainless steel, it's tough...its hard to run on the machine. They were one of the first to do it. And my father-in-law, (He wasn't my father-in-law then.) He ran...he used to work 12 hour shift. They were run 24 hours. You used to work 12 hours and 12 and they'd get one day off. The operators used to run, maybe, five machines at a time. They'd have to load the machine running. They used to send boxcars full of nuts and bolts. He worked in the Nut Factory making screws, nuts, and bolts.

What's your father-in-law's name?

Well he's dead now. But Frank Yuzciewitz was his name and he used to run City Cabinet Company after the war. All of his machines were Navy Surplus. He went to an auction up at Quonset Point Rhode Island where he bought all the wood working machines he needed. That was pretty common after the war you could buy anything. There was so much all surplus left over. They were brand new. They bought them. They just didn't know how long the war was going to last.

If you wanted to make a part, if you wanted to make it for Caterpillar, Chrysler or whatever... I would design it for the company. And their guys would come out. Like with Chrysler...Do you remember Chrysler when they came out with the K-cars?

I think so, yeah.

They came out with the first front wheel drive. And we did the transaxles. They had no idea how to do it. So they sent us these castings and said, "This is what we want you to make." And so my boss said, "This how they want you to tool it." And so I would tool it and programmed it and they never changed a thing.

OMG. So you designed the part in that. You must be proud of your work then.

Yeah.

What did you do for Caterpillar?

For Caterpillar we used to do the bogey wheels...the tracks...it rolls on rollers...in the middle are the bogey wheels that support the track. We did stuff for...See this picture here (picture). Those are warheads those are made for the military. I programmed those. During the Viet Nam era we sold a lot of machines to Colts because they set up a factory in South Korea. They were making M16 rifles. They were putting up 20,000 rifles a week for the military. We were fighting in Viet Nam. So, New Britain (Machine), like I say, they had different divisions. They had the hand tool division...which you see over there... ratchets, sockets. Their brand name was New Britain (Machine) was top of the line. Black hawk was the second down. Then there was Husky. But they were all good. And then they made Craftsman for Sears. They just put the Craftsman name on it, that's all. But everything was made the same. Around the '80's they bought a company in OH called Collar/ Dayton and... they made toilets and seats for airliners. And then they bought another outfit from England, actually two and they were plastic molding machines. They made waste paper baskets... They actually set up different divisions for this. Actually, the plastic division, they rented a building and they were doing on the

Berlin Turnpike. Collar/ Dayton when Boeing was coming out with the 757. They got the contract for it. It was so top secret. You couldn't walk into the plant because there were industrial spies going around.

They kind of did a lousy thing because they... told the City of New Britain that they were going to expand and put the employment up to 600 people. It was vacation Christmas Eve Day, and they always broke between Christmas Eve and New Years, and they told the people, "Don't come back because we sold the company. Well then Litton bought it and they sold off the plastic division, and eventually they got the hand tools and the Machine Tools was the last to go. They sent it to... They were still making machines but they sent it to Saginaw Michigan. New Britain (Machine) was around for 100 years.

Well, any way, my story is... I started as a detail draftsman and ended up a senior tools draftsman.

Were you still on the floor as a senior draftsman? Were you still on the floor of the factory?

I probably spent two-thirds of my time on the floor because when you had to run new parts you had to make all kinds of changes because it looks good on paper. Now, it's all done on computer and you can see it up on the CAD system. You can actually see your cut. You can actually see... well I'm not going to clear this or I'm taking off too much material over here. And when it was originally started it was NC, numerical control. Anytime you wanted to make a change, what you did was... you wrote the program and could take it down and get it punched on the IBM cards.

I know. I used to punch the cards a long time ago.

If you wanted to make a change... I got pretty good at punching the cards because at night there would be nobody there to punch the cards. But then you would have to feed it back into the machine and it would come out a mylar tape... little dots with little holes in it. But when they came out with the computer control you could make a correction on itself. You could punch it in. You wouldn't have to go through all the I-beams.

It's come a long way.

New Britain (Machine), in fact, there was a lady here (NBIM), Paulette, that worked 22 years in the hand tool division. But they were well known all over the world. In fact, there's still Acme Screw and Machine, still have a lot of New Britain Machines.

This is a picture of the NBM basketball team.

Were you on it?

No because the war ended it because everyone got drafted. And they had baseball and basketball teams. They used to hire guys that were good ball players. One of the most famous in the state is Raybestos. The Raybestos Girls softball team (The Brakettes) is world champions.

They (NBM) didn't have a big turnover. The guys would work there 30 years. They were the guys I learned from. If you made a mistake, they'd let you know.

Did you socialize with them outside of work?

Yeah. But of course most of them were older than me. A lot of them passed away.

Did you have bowling leagues?

We used to go bowling and we'd go out to eat. I'm not from New Britain, my wife is. I'm from Old Saybrook.

I'm from Old Lyme.

That used to be one of our rivals.

That was the big thing. From what Karen (Winslow Hudkins) told me when I started working here (NBIM), at its peak, New Britain had 44,000 people a day came here to work. That was three shifts.

The last 10 years that I worked, I worked for Pratt & Whitney. I was a manufacturing engineer. I did some tool design but mostly get the parts out in the shop... getting them running. I'd to talk to the guys that worked there and it used to take a half an hour to get out of the parking lot because there were so many people. They used to employ 30,000 people in East Hartford. People can't realize it because we don't make anything anymore today. It's gone.

When I came to New Britain in 1963, the same year I married my wife, I was working in Bristol. The first job I had, I worked at Stanley Works. I only worked there 3 or 4 months and I ran a machine that was a vertical butt machine. And it made the grooves on the hinges that you drop the pin in. It was built in 1911 in Holland. They would have to come out and design parts for it... Then I worked for Superior Electric which was a good job but it didn't pay a heck of lot of money. I had a boss that was working still living in the 19th century. If you got a raise it was a nickel raise which was fine in 1890, but not a lot.

Were you ever in a union?

I had been in unions. The only one I'd been in was when I worked for Boeing Aircraft cause I lived out on the west coast for a while in Tacoma Washington. But that was the only union I was ever in. We tried to start a union when Litton took over (NBM) and Litton had so much pull in Washington D.C. that they got it shut down. So, we never got it. But the shop was a union shop. It was a closed shop. I think there were 3 or 4 strikes there.

Did you ever go on strike?

No. But we used to have to cross the picket line. Of course, they would harass us because we crossed the picket line. You used to have to watch it because they would throw nails out and it would get in your tires. It could get pretty nasty. If people would come here to work, they would call them scabs. Well, they do that today when there is a strike. They spit on your car. They did all kinds of things. You'd have to watch it they'd hold their key out as you'd drive by,

They`d key your car!

Oh yeah. My mother was staying with us one time and she is from the old school. And we had her in the car and we had to stop to go through the picket line. One guy was yelling and my mother rolled down the window of the car and yelled, "Why don't you shut up and go back to work?!" Here is this 80 year old woman and the guy didn't know what to say. (laughter)

I like your mother.

I'll show you one of the awards we got. *Here we are shown a baseball bat with metal award plates on it. New Britain Machine was the last one to get this award for playing baseball in 1941 because of the war.*

What kind of wood is that?

Mahogany.

Beautiful. It`s really heavy.

I go to Central (CCSU). I always liked history; military history. The first semester I just audited. Professor Biskupski. He teaches Polish and military history WWI and WWII. Then I took Prof. Warshauer. The Age of Lincoln. Then US History the first 100 years 1776-1876, and then this semester, Andrew Jackson. I was allowed to sit in. But being a veteran and a senior I don't have to pay, unless I buy a book.

Geez some of these girls, I wish I were 50 years younger.

So what is this for?

This is concerning the Legacy of New Britain and promotion of the NBIM.

My father-in-law Walter Ladd worked at NBM as a machinist.

How long ago did he work there? A while ago. He has since passed on. It was not unusual for many generations of family to work there (NBM).

I'm reading an excellent book about mobilizing the country in war, about what they had to go through, because there were isolationists.

The remainder of 30 minutes was on Mr. Coulter`s extensive knowledge of WWII and his life as a child surrounding the war atmosphere at home. He is a truly interesting man that I adored conversing with.

-

We don't make anything anymore.

We used to smoke on the factory floor. When I worked for Pratt & Whitney, we used to have to go out on the public street to smoke.

NBM used to pay in cash at first. They used to give it to you in a little envelope.

Nobody could walk on the street because it was payday. But then, they got paid by check. The young guys would go out for lunch and not come back. Someone would have to go get them.

New Britain on a Thursday night was crowded because people would be shopping. The malls killed downtown New Britain.

Tuesday, 25, 2014, 9am

I called Mr. Coulter to verify spelling of his father-in-law's name and to verify that the engineers wanted a union that Washington D.C. did not approve. Litton had more lawyers and the engineers got a 'No' from Washington to form a union.

Mr. Coulter recalls how the engineers tried to get a union when Litton Industries took over but it was shut down because Litton had "too much pull in Washington D.C.... So we never got it." "Litton had more lawyers and you needed to go through a legal process that needed to go through Washington D.C. to be approved. The final say so, 'No.'"

Ladd 7