

Nuts and Bolts: Stories From New Britain Manufacturing
Connecticut Humanities CT at Work Project
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Paulette Kellerstedt: Real Life Rosie the Riveter

The 83 years young Paulette Kellerstedt now a retired New Britain industrialist spending her golden years in a home she's lived in since 1951 is quite energetic, open and has the memory of equivocal to an elephant's. A strong woman with even stronger convictions, she empowered not just the women she worked with but those worked underneath her. Always proud of “her girls” and their carefully cultivated capabilities, she takes pride in being an influential working woman.

Q: “How did you get your job?”

Beginning her work at a sewing mill at the age of 16 in Fall River, Massachusetts she began her long and astounding journey. They received a ten minute and one other ten minute break. The sewing machines had to be going from the beginning of the shift until the end and there was always someone there to make sure that happened. Even though she had been promoted to “Floor Lady” she decided that the working conditions were uninhabitable and 2 years later she brought her family back to New Britain.

On her 18th birthday she got hired at Landers, Frary, and Clark in 1949. At the time her parents were working at the cotton mills but they were all being shut down. So for a while she was the only one earning money for the household at 0.50 cents an hour. She worked in an experimental division developing a new machine to make the vacuum bottles. She took a break after Landers to get married and have 3 children. Once they had grown and gone off to school, she decided it was time to go back to work and returned to Landers, Frary, and Clark but they were closed down in 1965.

She received one of the first few callbacks from the new and improved company, that had been bought out and was under new management. She quit when she realized the company was failing.

She was able to get hired into New Britain Machine specifically the Hand Tool Division, which was apparently very difficult to get into, only because she was the Den mother to a child that belonged to man with authority within the company. The neighbor's made meals for the kids during their lunch period for those parents who were working and all of their children went to Stanley School would walk home together (which is now the CCSU Art building).

At the New Britain Machine factory and second opening of Landers, she began as a girl who would step in to cover the breaks of the girls currently working at the conveyer. Eventually she was promoted to an order picker, taking her off of the assembly lines. This is one of the most logistic jobs within a warehouse setting and has a major effect on the supply chain.

She would pick pieces of an order given to her from a packing slip and place them in the boxes. Eventually she became the “floor lady” or supervisor of the women in this section. She believes that not only did her skills help her get the job and bilingualism, so did her dynamite good looks. She would also work all of the back orders and restocking needs of the warehouse with her best friend Emily Peal. She was unhappy with the amount she was getting paid so she asked her boss for a raise which lead to quite the story.

“It was quite a job. Emily and I went to our boss Tony Gagliardi to see if we could have a change of classification. We felt that we should because we were doing ordering and all types of things that were way over and above what all the other girls were doing. “Oh no.” he says “you can't have a B Classification. In order to qualify for that you'd have to drive a truck.” what he meant by that was an inside truck. Like a forklift. That's why the men had B classification and the women were not. The women didn't have anything.

We decided that that was unsatisfactory. So we went to Tony Gagliardi”s boss, his name was George Cuff. We made an appointment and went up to his office, Emily and I and we said that what we felt that we were doing was over and above, you know. We were on the assembly line, we were picking orders, we were doing over and above. As we were conversing I said to him “You know I called Ella

Grasso's office.” and at the time she was head of the O.E.O. Before she became governor. Well low and behold we got out classification but I never did tell George that no one answered the phone at Ella Grasso's office.”

“We got our classification and the other girls didn't like it one bit. We were making more money than they were. And we all worked the same hours, you know. Men worked longer hours, they were treated a lot differently than the women were... They had a lot of advantages that we didn't have. A lot of the girls were on a production line and just stood there all day long. I was in a different section picking orders.”

Soon after she was promoted to floor lady of the pickers. Altogether she had about 15 people working for her, which included men who took in specialty large orders. She did this until they closed the plant in 1981. She was New Britain Machine's first woman supervisor.

Q: “Did you like what you did there?”

A: “I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed the people. It was a good place to work. Tony Gagliardi you know, let me do my own thing. He was very laid back. They were very good to me...every summer if you wanted to take a vacation it was never problem because we had a back up group of college students, young people, you know who were looking for summer work while they weren't in school. We had a whole bunch of young people. They were very intelligent and of course easier to train than a lot of people. Incidentally I was able to get changes in classifications for my girls that worked in my area. They did drive the trucks. They didn't do a lot of it to be truthful but they were able to do it.”

Q: “Did your company ever open up any outposts in the south?”

A: “They closed the plant and moved to Covington, Tennessee. I went down to help set up the warehouse down there. I found it very different. It was kind of funny, we had about 2 inches of snow and I was staying in a hotel, a motel in Memphis and driving to Covington every day. I got there and there wasn't a living soul there. And down the road came this farm tractor with a young man who was the maintenance man at the plant and I says “Where is everybody?” and he said “Ma'am it snowed! A

whole 2 inches!” (She laughed) They certainly weren't accustomed to snow there. But they ended up going out of business. It was a different work ethic. The people were wonderful. There was a man who was supposedly supervising the whole thing. The people were very polite. It was always “yes ma'am” or “no ma'am” you know. But they worked at a different pace. They were not very fast, I don't know how to explain.”

“As nice as they were they just didn't get it. My girls, at New Britain, they were fantastic. They could walk and chew gum the same time. They were multi-tasking. They really did work hard. They earned their money, you know...A lot of our ladies were Polish. I remember one of them, she was just a sweetheart. She came to me and said “How come the other girls, they make more money than I do?” and I said” Well, I'm putting you in for a change of classification. I'm going to try and get it for you.” She was doing the same work as the other girls. So finally it came through and she was thrilled to death.”

“It was tough, you know. The women had it hard in the factories. We worked the simple jobs of assembly lines but it was hard work.”

Q: “Were you ever a part of any strikes?”

A: “Yes. And I was very involved in the strikes. As a supervisor I had to go to work. It was very sad. Because we got some young people to come in as replacements and I had to work with them because they obviously were not experienced like my girls were. And so, but they were willing and they were able. But I can remember when I came through the line I took one of the girls out because she did not have a car and was afraid to walk out so I took her out in my car. And I took her out and they took a nail and scraped the side of my car. And I actually saw in my rear view mirror, and I know who the girl was and I was very surprised that she would do something like that. They should have realized that I was a supervisor and I had to work. I did not agree with the strikes because I felt that we earned good money, working conditions were good, the place was pleasant, it was clean, it wasn't noisy and, um we had like I said the benefit of being able to take time off in the summer if we wanted to, and I

couldn't but the other girls could, you know.

Q: "What did you think of the union?" (She had mentioned the union briefly earlier in the interview)

A: "I thought the union was very demanding. I can remember one day I went up to one of the girls , we had tried a new way of picking the orders, we had set up what looked like a bunch of holes in a metal container thing and each hole represented a different order.

There was a girl at the top of the conveyer and the girls that were picking the orders would put them on the belt and this girl had sorted and put in a different hole. This girl, obviously it was a difficult thing to do because there were multiple amounts of orders, you know. And I mean you had to look at the paper work to see who was getting what, you know. And I sat down with her and asked her, I said "Ivette is there something we can do to help you?" I said "this is the bottleneck" I says. And I say "I know you're doing a good job but I would like to know if you have any suggestions on how we could make it better?" and she said "Well I can't think of anything right now" you know?

So a little while later it seems the union put a grievance against me for harassing the help. Now Ivette had no problem with it but the union had seen me stop the conveyer me sitting over there and talking to her, you know. So they put in a grievance against me and it went to arbitration and they asked me about it and I told them the truth and they said no problem...I was so afraid. I would go grocery shopping and when I picked anything up off the shelf I would look around to see if anyone was watching me. Because I knew at work it was terrible. I couldn't touch anything and it was ridiculous, really you know. If I touched anything I would have a grievance filed against me, that I was working.

The union stewards just stood there watching everybody. They didn't do anything. I mean if you see something on the floor, you're going to pick it up and put it away and you put it in the right place, right? Well, they would not allow me to do that. I could not do that. It was kind of ridiculous, you know? And it all got to be out of hand but there's two sides to every story. The union and the non-union, both of them are good and bad. So, you know, I will say that in some cases the union is what

killed some of the companies here in New Britain. I really do. They had such heavy demands, you know. But on the other hand we had a lot of industry in New Britain.”

She began to talk about her mother who was a highly skilled and efficient foot press operator and that how a foot press operator “obviously” connects to a power press operator. Her mother worked at almost every possible industrial factory in and around New Britain at some point or another.

She herself never had to do piece work but her mother did. She mentions a particular machine that her mother had to operate that would slam down and take off the fingers of the women. To fix this problem, the company decided to tie the women's hands up so that when the press came down, a pulley system would pull their hands away from the danger zone. This did not go over too well with the women of the factory not because it was a serious safety issue but because it was preventing them from grabbing the next piece to put into the press until the press had lifted. It was obstructing their piece work which in turn was causing them to lose money.

Q: “Did your factory have any issues with OSHA?”

A: “OSHA came in and were making my all of my girls wear hard hats. It was kind of ridiculous really. I mean what was the point? I have no idea and even I had to wear hard hats when I went into what they call the racks which is when they have shelving all over the walls and everything, you know? There was a lot of interesting things that happened. The strike wasn't a good thing I don't think anybody won with that.”

“...I think it was 1976. we had a big blizzard. Ella Grasso was the governor at the time and she actually closed down the state. After a few days we went back to work of course, you know. And one of my girls, she came to me and said “Paulette,” she said “the roof looks funny. It looks like its aiming down.” and sure enough it was. And at this time the roof on the civic center had caved in. and we indeed had a problem. So I remember Berlin Steel came in and took them 6 months to redo the ceiling and place the beams and stuff like that. But all the time, we kept working. I remember that day when I called the boss, I told him that we had a problem and need to send everybody home. And he says “No,

I'll be right down.” so he came in and he says well don't have them work down in that end of the building. And I thought to myself “WOAH!” I wasn't very happy about that. I mean after hearing that the civic center had collapsed, you know that was scary. I think that was the scariest thing I had to put up with.”

She explains that the warehouses and the factory was never too loud for her that, once again, her girls were amazing. “There was no way I could keep up with them.” referring to the ladies who assembled the tool boxes on the assembly line on the outside of where she worked.

Q: “I just have a few more questions. How did you guys get paid?”

A: “Oh I was on salary as a supervisor. As a picker it was an hourly rate. At the beginning you got a raise every 3 months, a nickel. And this happened until you reached a, you know, a plateau. And the girls with the B classification got paid more than the girls who didn't have it, you know. And then it was strictly salary and you were given, one of the nice things about the union, they gave you a certain amount of vacation time. The longer you worked there, the more vacation time you would get that was paid by the company. We had medical insurance which was great and you can contribute, if you wanted, to your pension.

She explains to me that she had “made a very poor decision” when it came to investing in her pension when she was laid off. Apparently she was told hat they were getting 15% interest in the company's CD (certificates of deposit). Unfortunately that particular company (Landers) went out of business and now only receives a stipend of \$168 a month but is happy with it and grateful for it “because a little is better than none.”

She spoke for a few more minutes about how things are very different now. How “back then” 15 years at a factory wasn't a lot. That there were real old timers then and that you used to work in order to have a pension. She believes now that the pensions are basically handed out and has heard from a friend that the average time spent on a job is currently at 6 years, which to her seems like almost nothing.

Q: “Did you get paid with cash or by check?”

A: “By check.”

Q: “Were they handed out at the end of every week or did you get it in the mail?”

A: “No. actually I signed the time cards as a supervisor. And the checks would be cut depending on if they took a day of something, you know. They would cut the checks and I would hand them out.”

Q: “Were you allowed to socialize with your co-workers? I know sometimes the companies don't like the intermingling.”

A: “Oh yes. My friend Emily Peal and I worked together for many years. [The fifteen years she was at New Britain Machine] Her husband was a steward in the union but he was in the machine division, not our division. She was a lovely lady and we worked together very very well. We worked as a team. We worked on two main lines I would call it. We had one where we sent parts to NAPA, the other was to Husky and stores like home depot. We mad tools for Sears, for JC Penney, and we made tools for other companies under different brands.

She reveals a symbiotic relationship between the factories in New Britain. They would buy screwdrivers from Stanley to which her company would sell other goods. How interesting that these companies worked together as kin.

She then returns to her many friends at the factories and how they all worked very hard together. Often times the girls would move from factory to factory so there was almost always at least one friendly face in the crowd.

Q: “Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?”

A: “No, not really. I will tell you though that when they shut down New Britain Machine or New Britain Hand Tool Division it was really sad. They were taken over by a division of Litton Industries. It seemed that Litton would buy companies but they didn't pay attention. It wasn't like it was before, you know. A family had owned New Britain Machine.”

Paulette is an amazing woman. Her life-story is a testament to the unbelievably hard working

women working in these factories. My favorite thing about Paulette is that no matter how much we spoke of her achievements and accolades, she would always tie it back to “her girls” and praise them repeatedly. She really cared for her fellow woman and manipulated the power she was able to obtain to help better the lives of those around her. Her story is most certainly an interesting one.