

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century"
Helen Mott-Mench interviewed by John Soltis, February 2, 1998.

I: We're doing the oral history with Helen Mott-Mench. Helen, when and where were you born?

HM: I was born in [unclear], Pennsylvania, May 13, 1917.

I: Could you tell us a little bit what it was like where you lived, in Pennsylvania, growing up there?

HM: Yes, I grew up there. I was born in [unclear], Pennsylvania. It was through a strike from the [unclear]. I lived through that. I was about eleven years old.

I: Oh, really?

HM: Yes. And I used to sit on the porch and holler to people that were in the mines, that broke the picket line.

I: The strike breakers?

HM: Yes. [laughs] We used to call them Blue Birds at that time.

I: Blue Birds?

HM: Yes.

I: Why Blue Birds?

HM: I don't know. [laughs]

I: I've heard them called scabs and other things, but not Blue Birds. [laughs] That's good.

HM: [laughs]

I: Tell us about your family and how many kids there were.

HM: Well, I had five sisters and one brother. My first husband -- he was in the coal mines at that time. And then we moved out here to --

I: Out to Bridgeport?

HM: Yes.

I: Okay. A little bit about back in Pennsylvania. What did your parents do for a living?

HM: Well, my dad was a truant officer in the school.

I: Oh!

HM: [laughs] He used to ride a horse. The horse's name was Lazy. [laughs]

I: He'd track the kids down on the horse?

HM: Yes, yes, yes. [laughs] They called him Moldy. His name was Matthew Sarpolis, but they called him Moldy. And every kid that used to see him -- he used to run. [laughs]

I: I guess so. [laughs]

HM: At that time, they were very, very strict about kids going to school.

I: And, was this a small town?

HM: Well, yes. It was a very small town. On the tracks, it was named [unclear], and you walked across the tracks and it was [unclear]. [laughs]

I: Okay. [laughs] What's your ethnic background? You mentioned your dad's name.

HM: Matthew Sarpolis.

I: Yes.

HM: And my mother's name was Frances Buttka.

I: That's obviously Europe. What part of Europe were they from? Where were they from?

HM: Well, my mother was born in Poland, and my dad was born in Pennsylvania. He was a musician -- my dad -- with all his brothers -- his seven brothers. Every one of them was a musician. One of my dad's brothers was a doctor -- "Doctor John."

I: You also mentioned that you have some memories of the strikes there.

HM: Oh, yes.

I: Did you say you were eleven?

HM: I was about eleven years old. I'm just saying about eleven or twelve years old, because I know I was just a kid.

I: So, this was in the 1920s?

HM: Yes, I guess so. I know we used to sit on the porch, and we knew the people that went -- broke the strike -- and we were very bitter against it. I'd always been union, union.

- I: And then you married there?
- HM: Yes, to Mench. Fred Mench.
- I: Your first husband?
- HM: Yes. He was an international organizer of the union from G.E.
- I: While he was in Pennsylvania, when you met?
- HM: No. When he came to Connecticut. He worked in the shop, and then they appointed him the international organizer.
- I: Oh, okay. Well, we'll get to that. Maybe if we can back up just a little. Why did the two of you come to Bridgeport? What brought you here?
- HM: Well, because it was a town that you couldn't get no work. And we thought we would better ourselves if my husband was going to go to New York. He lost his way and ended up in Bridgeport. [laughs]
- I: [laughs]
- HM: I have a lot of memories. He went to G.E. and he got a job there, twenty-nine dollars a week.
- I: Twenty-nine dollars a week?
- HM: Yes.
- I: How old were you then, about?
- HM: Well, I'm here fifty-eight years, so I'm eighty-one.
- I: So this was maybe back in the 1930s?
- HM: 1940, I think. Yes, because I worked in G.E. in 1940, when the war --
- I: Okay. But this was before the war, when you came here?
- HM: Yes.
- I: So, he got a job in G.E.?
- HM: Yes.
- I: Whereabouts did you live? What part of town, when you moved here?
- HM: When I came to Bridgeport?
- I: Yes.
- HM: I lived in Yellow Mill Village.

I: Oh, really?

HM: Mayor McLevey went to file an application and he asked me if I had the money to pay the rent and I said, "Yes, how much is it?" He said, "Thirty-two dollars a month." So I said, "Here it is." [laughs] My husband didn't even know where I lived. He was working in G.E., and when he came home he had to look on the departments. [laughs]

I: [laughs] That's right. They were all pretty much the same, or they looked the same.

HM: Yes.

I: So you had Yellow Mill Village. Tell us a little bit about Bridgeport during that period. I mean, what did you folks do for entertainment? Go to the movies? Dance? What was going on?

HM: Yes. We went to movies and dances. But, you see, my husband became an organizer, so it passed in the years that he was mostly in Pennsylvania. There was the place that he was mostly? He used to commute back and forth.

I: Okay. In that case, let's get right to the good stuff. So you're husband is working in G.E., and you're living in Yellow Mill Village.

HM: Yes.

I: Where was your first full-time job? Was it at G.E.?

HM: Yes. I never worked anywhere else.

I: How did you get the job?

HM: Well, I stood in line and they pointed us out, and they'd call us in and we had to take an aptitude test and all -- what our schooling was, what we knew about activities and whatnot -- what-have-you. I passed the test, so I was hired.

I: What was your position? What were you hired to do?

HM: When I first went in, I worked on the Bazooka. That was my first job.

I: The Bazooka?

HM: The Bazooka.

I: The guns?

HM: Yes. He called me in the office one day and he asked me if I wanted to be a leader

because I was always doing things for the girls and fellows. They'd go to the ladies, and I'd take over their position and make sure that the guns were in progress all the time.

I: So the line wouldn't stop?

HM: Yes. So, he asked me if I'd become a leader. I said, "Well, I'll tell you something. I want you to call everybody that's working on the line and let them ask me if I want to be a leader. Because I don't want to have any friction," because in this job there was a lot of friction near different people. So he called me in and he had all the group around me and he said, "I want to make Helen a leader. Are you in favor." Oh, everyone said, "Oh, yes, sure. She helps us a lot." [laughs] So I became a leader.

I: So, by leader, would that be like a working foreman?

HM: Yes. Like a job leader -- acting foreman, if he wasn't around.

I: Oh, sure. Sure. You mentioned there was some friction in different parts of the shop.

HM: Well, jealousy. Women.

I: Personalities? That kind of thing?

HM: Yes. Things like that. I had no problem being a steward, and I was -- when we first started, there was no union.

I: Tell us about that -- how the union started.

HM: Well, there was no union in the shop and they had pamphlets to distribute, and then they had union cards. So this one organizer came to the shop and asked me if I would go house-to-house to sign people up, and that's how we became Local 203.

I: And what union was this?

HM: It was during the war.

I: It was the United Electrical Workers?

HM: Yes. The United Electrical Workers. IUECIO. [laughs]

I: Yes, affiliated with the CIO. [laughs] So you went door-to-door, signing up members?

HM: Yes.

I: How did things change when the union came in? Or did they change?

HM: Beautiful. Because we got a lot of results, and advantages we got, and the grievances were solved, like they were under-paid or they weren't getting paid for the jobs that they were performing, and all this. Because I know when I went to those union meetings for grievances, I didn't know whether I was going to win or lose. But there's a lot of people that I meet now over town. They all know me by Helen Mench. They come up to me -- I don't know them. They say, "Oh, yes, you do, Helen. You were our steward." [laughs]

I: That's great.

HM: A lot of memories.

I: You mentioned the salaries. What were folks making there? The average worker on the line there? Or the average woman working?

HM: Well, if he worked on fuses and radios, because after the war was over, I worked on making radio and wiring device fuses. After the war was over.

I: And about how much were people getting paid?

HM: Well, at that time we were sixty or sixty-five cents an hour. And before I left, it was ten or twelve dollars an hour.

I: Oh!

HM: Yes, yes. And that's what the union did for us. That's why I always say union. People sometimes are against the union, but not me.

I: How did the benefits change?

HM: Oh, tremendously. The cost of living. Our wage increases went up -- you can imagine -- from sixty-five cents.

I: Sure, sure. And how about things like vacation time?

HM: I got six weeks vacation when I left, and there was sick time, and if we went out sick, we got sick time, which we never did before.

I: You didn't have any of that before that?

HM: No. We had none of those benefits. And I'm saying it because I know it's true.

I: During that time you were there, do you recall any strikes or lock-outs?

HM: Yes, there were, I think, two or three strikes. But the last one -- we were out nine weeks. [Tape Off/On]

I: Helen, tell us about that 1969 strike. What was that about?

HM: Well, I cooked for the picketers, and I used to make soup and everything that I could think of. I had a kitchen, I had about three or four girls working for me and the Shelton Arms -- I used to go there and get all my groceries and all my meat and everything from there. They gave me a slip that I could go and get it on my name, and they'd reimburse. You know, they'd get everything for me. We were on strike at Christmas.

I: What did you go out over? What were some of the big issues in the strike?

HM: Well, it was the cost of living, and the wage hike and profit-sharing, and grievances that weren't resolved. We wanted to get all that straightened out.

I: Okay. So there you were. You were cooking for the strikers.

HM: Oh, yes. And I used to go and we used to take big thermos bottles and take them out on the picket line, and they said it was the best soup they had! [laughs] And then we had a Christmas party.

I: So, Christmas occurred during the strike?

HM: Yes. And we had it in the union hall, and we had everything under the sun. I used to go to bars, and I do once in a while now. I used to go to bars, and all the bars that I went to, I'd go there and ask them for a donation for the strikers. [laughs]

I: Oh, that's right. I remember there used to be a lot of bars right around the East Side, right?

HM: Yes.

I: The White Way, the Homeport.

HM: The White Way -- that's the one we used to go to, on the East Side. [laughs] And Home Part, McGovern's.

I: McGovern's.

HM: And Show Boat.

- I: Yes. Belmont used to be there.
- HM: Belmont, yes.
- I: Actually, that was my uncle's place. [laughs]
- HM: Yes! [laughs]
- I: So, they were supportive of the strikers?
- HM: Yes.
- I: How long were you out for, then?
- HM: Nine weeks.
- I: And how did it finally turn out?
- HM: Well, we won. [laughs]
- I: Great.
- HM: One day I went to the picket line and I said, "I'm crossing the picket line." So they said, "Helen, you're not." I said, "Oh, yes, I am." I went right through the line. I went into the shop, and I'm going to everybody, "Scab, scab, scab." My boss came -- the one I worked for. He said, "Helen, we're going to call the police if you don't get out of the shop." I said, "I came for my shoes. I can't walk the picket line with the shoes I have on!" [laughs] Oh, I was a terror in those times! How many times I almost went to jail!
- I: Tell us about some of that. [laughs] Or some of the other strikes. You said there were two or three others.
- HM: Well, the others weren't -- they were milder, you know?
- I: Yes.
- HM: It was just these same issues. That's why we went on this big strike.
- I: Oh, okay.
- HM: And then, like I say, we won.
- I: So, you spent a lot of time on the picket line, I take it.
- HM: Oh, more than I had in the house. I used to go down to the shop in the morning, about five or six o'clock, when things were -- the meals -- have my girls go and work with me. The potatoes get done and all. I don't regret any of those times

because we had it good -- you know?

I: At this time, how big a company was G.E.? About how many people were working there, at that time?

HM: Oh, there were about fifteen hundred. Maybe even more than that.

I: And in the bargaining unit, there were -- I mean, how many union members?

HM: Oh, there was -- I can't say how much, but we did have -- because when we had our union meetings, we had a big meeting.

I: So, there was strong support for the unions?

HM: Yes, yes. And when they had conventions, I used to go to the conventions. We had one in Canada.

I: What was that like?

HM: [laughs] It was union, union. [laughs] but, like I say, I have no regrets. I loved the G.E., I'll tell you. I loved it because the people were so nice to me. Well, maybe to others, too, but I'm saying for my own view, that they were very nice to me. I went to New Jersey on a job that I was going to be running, and I quoted the price of the machine. When we came back to Bridgeport, they quoted it forty-two cents a piece, and I had forty-three. So I had thirteen girls working on the machines, and I had to train these girls to do the job. That was after the war, and we had to meet a quota. I got many things through the G.E. They'd need a hundred and twenty percent, and I was preaching to the girls, and telling them how to run the machines, and how to do this, and how to do that. They'd look at me, go into the boss and say, "Helen -- she hollered at me because I couldn't meet the quota." And this one girl -- she was a colored girl -- I told her, "Tracy, you're going to meet it. You're going to meet it. Listen to me. Listen to me." She went to the boss and she said, "that Miss Helen, she told me I'm going to make it, and she says I can't." The boss says, "You listen to Helen, and you'll do it."

I: So, amongst the workers, you all generally got along?

HM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

I: And was it a diverse group? I mean, racially, ethnically? You know, where were

people from?

HM: Well, no one was from out-of-town.

I: No, I guess what I'm trying to say was, what were their backgrounds? Were there black workers?

HM: No. We didn't have much black. There was only one in my group.

I: Okay.

HM: There was very, very little. It was mostly white.

I: And were they European -- Eastern European -- that sort of thing?

HM: Yes.

I: Did folks generally get along?

HM: Oh, yes. [laughs] Oh, yes. That's one thing I can say. It was a group that you could sit and talk to, you know?

I: Yes.

HM: And they'd tell you their questions. Because many questions they asked me when I was a steward -- what I could do for them -- I'd have to tell them, "I don't know."

If I could settle the grievance or not. But usually I came up on top. [laughs]

I: And did you -- I know you're saying it's generally a positive experience, but did you experience any discrimination or harassment from the bosses or anything?

HM: No, no. That's one thing I can truthfully say. And the bosses -- I'll tell you -- were very, very nice. Because I was in intensive care when I worked in the G.E., and I have a card from four of the bosses. They signed the card and sent it to the hospital. And now I go to the Twenty-Fifth Century Club outing. We have that every year.

I: What is that?

HM: That's the twenty-five year, that have over twenty-five years. We go on a bus and we have a big spread.

I: Oh, really?

HM: Yes. And I have gone every year since then -- with a broken leg, broken arm.

[laughs] And I have a picture of all the people that passed the twenty-five year

service. I have it on the wall.

I: When did you finally leave G.E.? When did you retire?

HM: About nineteen years ago.

I: In the late 1970s?

HM: 1977, I think -- yes.

I: How big a shop was it then? Had things started to slow down by then, at G.E.?

HM: Well, now there's about one hundred people left. In fact, I went to a retirement party two years ago, where one woman retired. But it's like the war. You have to have a pass. You have to have a guard take you into the shop.

I: Oh, really?

HM: Yes. And come out. It's just like the war. Because that's when this woman took me down there. She escorted me in with the guard. And then when I was ready to leave, they brought me out.

I: And it hadn't been like that?

HM: No, it's just that way about two years now.

I: Oh.

HM: I was surprised, too, because I thought we could just go in, you know? And now, when we go to the outing [unclear] farms and they have everything closed off. You get your bus right at the gate. [laughs] That seems funny, though, doesn't it?

I: Yes. But, you see, I guess -- you did mention the war there, if I can go back there a little bit. What was it like working there during the war, as opposed to during peace time? I mean, why was a place like General Electric -- I think of light bulbs, radios, televisions, but you said you were making Bazookas.

HM: Well, that was one end of G.E., on Seaview Avenue. I worked in that -- 101 -- and now they have that all down. And they used to have a hall down there to get appliances. But now that's gone. So when I worked there, I worked seven-to-three, three-thirty-to-eleven, eleven-to-seven.

I: Oh, split shifts?

HM: Yes, split shifts. When they needed me, they'd put me on another shifts. I was one

of those go-getters, you know?

I: Yes.

HM: [laughs] During the flood, I lived on Honey Spot Road at that time. I used to get a bus and go to the G.E. in nasty weather and all -- you could always depend on Helen. [laughs]

I: You mentioned the flood. Was this during the 1950s?

HM: It could have been -- I don't know.

I: I'm trying to recall it.

HM: Maybe because there were hardly any busses running, and a lot of people didn't go to the shop. But I went. I went. "Here I am." [laughs]

I: I guess you gave them a good day's work for a good day's pay. [laughs]

HM: Well, the bosses told me that's why I was never fired, I never had a lay off. That's one thing. In all the thirty-some years that I worked there, I was never -- they told me the reason that they never fired me was because I was too good of a worker. [laughs] And I meet the bosses at the Quarter Century Club outings -- the ones that are still living. They didn't forget me. [laughs]

I: So even though you were the union steward, when you were out there on the picket lines when you needed to be.

HM: Yes, yes, yes. That's one thing. I can't say anything about the bosses. Jo Willard -- I can never say anything against her. Even though she was anti-American, she had difficulties. She was a good steward. She helped the people. She worked in electric blanket.

I: What were some of your experiences with her? Co-workers?

HM: Yes. But she didn't work in the same department as I. But she used to go to the meetings and different things like that, you know?

I: Yes.

HM: We were just personal acquaintances, you know? We didn't get chummy or anything, you know?

I: But in spite of maybe personal political differences, you were still able to work

together?

HM: Yes. And I was one of them that signed the paper for her to be expelled from the union.

I: When was that?

HM: In the 1950s, I think. I think that was in the paper, about her. Because the woman that talked about me -- she asked me if I knew her. I said, "Yes."

I: Yes, that was probably back in the early 1950s.

HM: Yes. [Tape Off/On]

I: Okay. We were going to talk just a little bit more about the controversy in the union during the early 1950s, with Jo Willard. Would you tell us a little bit more about that?

HM: Well, I don't remember when she was expelled. Her and Oliver [unclear] and Frank [unclear]. I can't remember all the names.

I: Well, what was it basically about, though? For people who aren't familiar with it.

HM: Well, we say communist, and another woman that I know -- Connie Sedor -- she was with them, too. I was familiar with Connie Sedor, and she's moved out of town, so she's not around anymore. We didn't affiliate with it. We didn't get in too good with those people. Because they had their differences and we had our differences.

I: Now, this was members of the same union?

HM: Yes.

I: And some were thought to have been communists?

HM: Well, that's what they expelled them for.

I: Okay, just so I understand. And again, this was during the early 1950s?

HM: Yes.

I: And how did this come about?

HM: To tell you the truth, I don't remember. I don't recall. But things got around, and us stewards -- we were very much upset, you know, about this. And the one fellow now -- he's living in Canada. He's still alive. He was the President of our

union. Oliver [unclear].

I: The local union, here in Bridgeport?

HM: Yes. IUE-CIO -- Local 203 -- yes.

I: So, there was a meeting or something?

HM: Yes. Well, we went through different stages of getting them, and then it came to the board, and then they said, "Yes."

I: And about how many members were expelled?

HM: I think there were about twelve or thirteen.

I: Now, does that mean they were also -- these people -- they were also working at G.E. at the time, right?

HM: Yes.

I: So did that mean that they also lost their jobs?

HM: Yes.

I: And how did this effect the unions afterwards?

HM: It didn't effect the unions -- not at all.

I: You were able to carry on?

HM: Yes.

I: That's interesting. That part of history I wasn't familiar with. Let's see. I guess lastly what we're going to do -- this tape is going to be here forever in the library. If there's anything you'd like to say for posterity -- any parting words -- it's all yours.

HM: Nothing. I said everything I wanted to say.

I: Something about the union again?

HM: [laughs] I don't know. My daughter -- she worked in G.E., but she left. She didn't work very long. But there's a lot of people that I know that are still around and I meet, and it's like old times. [laughs]

I: Helen, well, that's great. Thank you. [Tape Off/On] Helen, we're going to talk a little bit more about your husband's work. You mentioned he used to travel a lot with the union.

HM: Yes. He went from city to city, in Pennsylvania, and I was -- how could I say it? I lived on Honey Spot Road then, when he passed away. But he was an international organizer of the union.

I: So by that -- he would go to different shops and start organizing drives?

HM: Yes, yes.

I: What was that like? What did he do? Just walk into a shop with the cards?

HM: Yes. Well, he'd have some of the people with him to go in with the different literature and see what the union could offer them, if they joined. In matters -- things like that, you know? I don't even know how it got about that he was made an international organizer, because he was working in the G.E. I was married -- I would have been married sixty years with him if he was still alive.

I: So, the union decided to make him a full-time organizer? He worked for the union full-time, then?

HM: Yes.

I: He left the G.E., and got out there and organized?

HM: Yes. There was another fellow, Tom Williams, from here, that was an organizer and he and my husband were very good friends. There's a lot of organizers here. One woman -- Susan Campbell, I think her name was -- she is the one that went with me to organize people from Bridgeport, and our union hall was on 600 Hallett Street, in Bridgeport here, and we used to -- it was a church at one time, and they made it into a hall. So that's where we had our meetings. Now, to tell you the truth, I don't know where their union is now. How many times I try to get in touch with them about different things, you know? Well, the union did have -- last year, at the Three Door Inn, a get-together of all union members in the city of Bridgeport.

I: Oh, really?

HM: Yes, and I attended -- I went there. And all the people that we saw -- you know?

I: Yes.

HM: And only union members.

I: That's great.

HM: It was discrimination. [laughs]

I: [laughs] Okay, Helen. I guess on that note, we'll end it.

End of Interview