

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project: “Bridgeport Working: Voices from the Twentieth Century”
Arlene Witonis Rybokas (**AR**) interviewed by John Soltis (**I**), February 22, 1999

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I Ms. Rybokas, could you tell us when and where you were born?

AR I was born in Lewiston, Maine in 1914.

I What date in 1914?

AR February 22nd.

I So today's your birthday?

AR Yes, that's right.

I Happy Birthday.

AR Thank you.

I Could you tell us a little bit about what it was like in Lewiston, you know, a little bit about your family and growing up in Maine?

AR Well, Maine was a very nice state too to grow up in, and my father and mother ran a bakery in Maine and there was five children in our family and there were three girls and two boys and as we got, you know, getting older we all got involved in the business, like helping out the bakery. My father was the baker, my mother was the assistant, and as we come up the younger ones start working in the bakery, you know, selling the bread and baking the beans and whatever, ya know, came up and it was a job for the whole family. And that bakery, well, it was there for a very long time, until my father got sick and when he died, that was all. And then my uncle took it over for a while and then when the boys got older they learned, ya know, in the bakery and they were working in the bakery. And I guess afterwards I worked in a mill in Maine. And it was Bates' Mill where they made the bedspreads. That's a very well known company and I was in quality control there and then of course the war came and as the boys had to go in the service and all that stuff, there was a shift and then I met my husband, came down ya know, from here and he was with, it was really at a wedding, ya know, and

I So you met your husband in Lewiston?

AR In Lewiston, but he was born in Lewiston, just like myself. But the family had come to Bridgeport and the relatives, his cousin was getting married and we met at the wedding. His cousin's wedding. And after that, ya know, he and I got married and then I came here.

I Oh I see, he was visiting Lewiston, for the wedding?

AR Yeah, he was in the service, I mean, and he had just came out of the service.

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I So it was your marriage that had brought you to Bridgeport?

AR Yeah the marriage brought me here and his mother and father, his family owned a house on Park Terrace, right here in Bridgeport. So we got an apartment in the same house with the mother 'cause it was a two family house and so that's where ya know, it started, so....

I And what year was this when you moved to Bridgeport?

AR 1944.

I Now was he still in the Service then?

AR No, he was discharged. He was discharged, disability because he got sick in the Service and he, that's how he came out a little earlier than, you know, and so he worked in Raybestos, and I was home. And then after that, we had a little girl and the grandmother lived upstairs and we lived downstairs. And so my daughter was always either going up or the, ya know. So finally we were setting up housekeeping so I kept looking in the paper and looking for help, ya know, the factories were so busy that they were advertising for help and every time I looked I could see this ad and finally I says to myself to my mother in law, ya know, I says, "I need a washing machine. "If you could take care of my daughter, I'll go to work and I'll buy a washing machine." And this is in --Warners was right here and I lived on Park Terrace so that wouldn't be too hard.

I It's almost right next door.

AR Yeah, so she agreed that would be all right. So I went to work in Warners and that's the type of work I had done at Bates Mill [Lewiston, Maine]. It was in quality work. And I worked in that one department and so, and I not only worked to buy that machine, I bought three machines before I got through, that twenty-eight years. (laughter)

I And you started --what was it? 1946 I believe at Warners?

AR I went in there about 1946 because my daughter was only thirteen months old when I went in. Otherwise I would've never gone in because the only thing was the grandmother lived upstairs, ya know? And so, I liked it. It was nice.

I How large a factory was it at that time?

AR It was only one building at the time. It was right here in Warners and it was the -- all the departments were run by women. And it was a very nice place to work ya know, with the, the work itself was materials, very pretty materials you had and all that stuff and I really liked it.

I About how many women were employed there would you guess?

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AR Ya mean the whole building?

I No, the whole building and your department?

AR Oh, my department was very small because I was in the quality department where the materials came in and we okayed the quality of the material. The vendors would submit the samples and we used to okay the, what was to go into this place and we reject the material that we didn't, we had a card, you know, make a decision on the quality and the colors and everything.

I What did they make at Warners?

AR They made corsets, bras, and after that they started going into lingerie that was after the, later on when the war ended and the, and started to go into a regular, you know.....

I Fancier, less utilitarian items?

AR Yeah, and they selected me to do the department for Warners in the lingerie. I was the person, top inspector there.

I So yours was a relatively small department, but in the factory as a whole, about how many people would you guess worked there, hundreds? Thousands?

AR Oh, yes, they had big stitching rooms, there was rooms, there was ---women were doing stitching, you know, sewing on the bras, the girdles and that's the way it started and after that, as I said the lingerie came in. Those fancy nightgowns, slips and things like that. And then they start to diversify and they kept, and they kept growing, and then when the war ended a lot of the young fellas from the service came to work there. They came in as head of the departments and they replaced the women. There was two that are very well known, two lawyers. Let's see what their name was...Brown. Do you know Brown?

I Possibly.

AR Then they came, after the service they came and they worked in the stitching room as overseer, you know the room and in the meantime they were going to college and getting their education. GI Bill of Rights?

I Sure. So the men came back and did they displace the women or did....?

AR It was a very pleasant displacement, because they were young fellas and they came there to work, to get an education and you know they didn't push any of us out, really.

I Oh, okay.

AR No, we didn't have it, no I don't know of anybody that really had a hard time there.

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I So, they just what, expanded the.....?

AR Yeah, they expanded and they, that for a while. I worked there 'til and then after that, oh, they had building, that work went into Rhode Island, we use to get material from Rhode Island. That was all the elastic from Westerly, Rhode Island. We used to get material from there that went into these garments. And that's another thing. We had to make sure it was what the quality we wanted and then at the end they went as far as down south, like in North Carolina, South Carolina. But it was....

I And...., I'm sorry go ahead.

AR It was a very nice place to work. I mean it wasn't something, you know, I don't know, it's different now. I go in once in a while there and then when they started to move different areas, they started taking some of the departments and sending them out and in the meantime, myself, it was just the time that my husband wasn't too well, at the time and, you know, my department moved out and then they asked me if I wanted to go into another department and I says "not really", because I really wanted to take the layoff. That was twenty eight years afterwards.

I So this was like the early 70's something like that?

AR Around '75, I think. After that, when my husband died, after that they use to call me in for these promotions to work on when they have in the summer. It would be like the big promo, like the bras, you buy two you get one free and then we had these coupons we had to go through and okay the coupons and send them out.

I So they called you in on sort of like a part time basis?

AR Yeah, part time, we came in and oh, we made more money working on that part than we did-- (chuckle). It was very pleasant. They treated us very good. That's all I can say about that.

I Speaking of the money, you don't have to tell me exactly what you were making, I'm not gonna ask you that. But what, let's say when you started there in the mid-40's, about what was an average wage there? Would you guess?

AR Well, the piece workers were on piece work. I wasn't, I was --my department was on flat wage and we'd get our raises every year and like every holiday, like for Christmas, they used to give us great big boxes of pears that they used to get from, you know, for the holidays, --I forget, I think it came from Oregon, pears I think. Then we use to get the turkeys for Thanksgiving, you know, we'd have some gifts. It wasn't a very, not a, the wages weren't that high, but the work itself was pleasant, you didn't mind that...

I And did you get, let's say, paid holidays...?

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AR Oh, yeah.

I Vacations?

AR Vacations and all that, yeah, we had that.

I Insurance, sick benefits?

AR Oh, we had insurance, pensions, we got pensions, I get a little pension from them too now.

I Was there a union there?

AR We weren't on the union because we were working with the other part of the company. We were like the --let's see, the piece workers were on it. They had a union there. But we weren't piece workers. We were stand down.

I Quality control.

AR Yeah, quality control.

I Do you recall any labor problems there with...?

AR They, no they didn't, they didn't even have a strike, because I don't know.....although one of our units was striking out of state and they came to ...

I ...to picket?

AR ...picket in front of us, but we didn't go out, we didn't join them and so after that they left. But, no, they never really had a strike in that company, not as long as I worked.

I The make-up of the workers there --was it, you said, you know, it was primarily women, then the men started coming in after the war. What about the racial or an ethnic make-up?

AR Well, see when I first started the -- it was all -- I don't know how to say this -- so -- well -- they were Hungarians. They were Polish, Lithuanians. They were French and they came from all over too. You know, from different cities --Pennsylvania. They got a lot of people from Pennsylvania. And, oh they were good workers, those Pennsylvanians.

I That had moved here to work at Warners?

AR Yeah, and so it was, --and then when they started to hire the minorities. Well then, well they brought them in -- there wasn't -- we accepted them. They told us they were gonna bring them in. We kinda worried about it, but there was no problem there.

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I So it was just like another group come...?

AR They came in and of course we were kind of -- didn't know what to expect. They even painted their room with orange walls and everything where they were gonna go, you know..(chuckle).

I Really?

AR Yeah, everybody, we were a little worried to tell you truth. But it didn't go -- and now they have a lot of them working there.

I That painting the room, could you elaborate on that a little bit?

AR Well, they fixed it very nice. They made it --but they're more deeper colors than what we would have had, you know.

I Oh, was this an area that, I mean...?

AR This is the area, where, no this is where we would go for it. Like, well this was like the ladies room, you know, and it was a section there that you could sit around and you know....

I Sort of like a staff lounge?

AR Take a break, you know when you want to take a break you go upstairs, yeah. No, it was pretty. But the only thing, you know, --and I don't know. Like I says, I didn't mind working there at all.

I Sounds like, yeah, it was a good place to work and people generally got along.

AR Oh, yeah. There was no -- well they gave you -- and you were responsible for what you had to do and, you know. You know what you had to do and you helped each other. And like my place now, we have certain jobs each one did and then if something come on, on the other side that they needed help, they'd ship us over.

I How many? Did they have like one shift there, two shifts? Were people working all the time?

AR Well, they had two shifts when it was going pretty strongly and it was, I had the day shift, I worked on the day shift.

I In otherwords there was like a second shift that came in after you?

AR Oh, yeah, they came in, another one came in like, well not our department, we didn't have anybody come in. In our department, it was like the stitchers would have more because they were going into piece work after that and they needed a lot of stuff that we couldn't get before. Even elastics was hard to get because the rubber was used for war work. That's how that synthetic rubber started and that stuff when it was new when they first started, that invention that they had to make

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this new rubber with the synthetic stuff. Boy if that thing ever sometimes would go bad, it was just like a rotten egg. The smell of it, they had to be, oh there was different time we had to go through the stock and pull them out to see, some of that got added.

I So was the synthetic rubber that just wasn't made correctly or something?

AR No, this is the new invention that they, no they still use it now, but they got it down perfect now. Before that, you know, in the beginning it, you pulled the elastic and it wouldn't go back again, so.....

I That could be a problem (laughter).

AR Yeah, that was.

I The folks that worked there, --did they primarily live here on the South End?

AR No, they came from, --no the buses was running here. They had a bus run down Lafayette Street. The buses would stop right at the front. People didn't all have cars then. There was a lot of us -- all used public transportation and that.

I So you've been living pretty much here in the South End, since the mid 40's?

AR Yeah, that's how we bought this house, because, well, my husband worked in Raybestos. But my daughter was going to school here. She's going to Sacred Heart and then there's our church was here on Park Avenue and then the park.[Seaside Park] The sea.., oh! the park was, oh, we enjoyed that park. We used to get down there all the time, Seaside Park? On the beach there, so it was, all our neighbors here were different. Next door I had Polish, I had Hungarian people here, and it's only the last couple of years that these people moved out.

I And we're here on the foot of Iranistan Avenue, right?

AR Yeah right here we had, like Raymond Busalewski, --Polish. So he moved out a couple of years ago. And then there was Pauline Slater, she lived up the street and she was here for quite a few years. And then some of them died, some of the older ones died, you know. This was a very nice area. Well, it's not bad yet, the people that come --they're not too bad. I mean, we have no problems with them.

I Oh, great. Tell us a little about, it's 1950 let's say. You mentioned you'd go to Seaside Park with your family. What else would you do for recreation?

AR Well, they had a lot of things going on in the churches. We'd have different clubs, you know, we'd have meetings there. And then they had dances there and it was more family in those days. Like the ethnic groups here had their own churches. We had the Lithuanian church, and then it was a Polish church --and all the entertainment, Hungarian church. And you go their parties, you go to their bingos and you go to the dinners they'd have.

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I I should have asked earlier, what is your ethnic background?

AR I'm Lithuanian.

I Your husband also?

AR Yeah, my husband was Lithuanian.

I So you had each, group like, yeah, my family's Slovak. We had the Slovak Sokal halls we used to go to and that kind of thing.

AR Yeah, we'd go to each other's halls and, but the ethnic people didn't have no trouble mixing at all. You know, we didn't, you know, we all spoke English and all that. You know, like the parents they spoke in their language and we spoke our native too, --to our families. But the younger people, they all spoke English. Now my own daughter, well she's a school teacher. She graduated from college. She teaches in Redding, she's in the English department and her husband is an engineer. They live in Fairfield and then for a while, when they first got married, my daughter lived upstairs right here. And so then when her --then they decided get a place for themselves.

I Just tell me your opinions of what Bridgeport was like?

AR I wish it was like that today.

I How do you mean? Tell us a little bit about Bridgeport in the 40's and 50's.

AR You could take the bus, go downtown, right here would be this general...bus. I lived in Park Terrace then. There was another bus line that would go down Park Avenue. So after work, like when you're working, we'd go downtown. You know, downtown they had all the shopping centers on Main Street. They had all those big stores where the --Read's and Howland's and Levitz. Oh, Levitz that was my favorite store and we'd go down there. I know, I always had, I'd go down I'd get myself a hamburg, potato salad and pickle --that was my treat, and then go do whatever you do. We'd shop 'til after nine, you know, when the stores close. We'd go on the bus, even if we got on this bus there was nothing to cross here, we could, I had to go through Seaside Village here, not Seaside, Marina Village [housing project]. Marina Village was a very nice place. People lived there. They were like, their husbands were like in the service or, you know, they were a lot of them from different places that moved here, you know? And they were all living there. They'd all be sitting on the porches there, you know, you knew them. You'd go by and that, there was no problems at all.

I And downtown was a very bustling.....?

AR Oh, that was a big thing to go down after payday, you know, after payday you'd go down and then you'd see different ones going here and there, you know. It was like that whole Main Street that was all of stores.

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I Where would you get that hamburger and pickle?

AR I used to stop at, oh, it's one of these...

I H.L. Green's or something? Woolworth's?

AR Well, Woolworth's had, that Green's had a nice one. Well they had different places you could go. You could even go in Green's there and at the counter. They used to put out a good meal there too. Just at once, everybody'd go, get a meal. You sit down and then you roam around and then you come, you know, and you'd come home at 10 o'clock, you wouldn't think nothing of coming in --very safe. And like, when I lived on Park Terrace, we had our club in the church hall there and we'd meet every week there and we'd come home, nothing. I don't know why --too bad it didn't stay that way. So where do you live now? I think it's getting a little better, because they're making that ballpark that they made down....

I Oh, the Blue Fish?

AR Yeah, I think that that's something that we really needed. That's for them and the people that have gone to it, they really like it. They say it's very nice. I haven't gone there, but I heard from the different ones, my daughter's husband was telling me that it's a very nice ballpark. And so, that was a good thing. See, we don't even have a movie here anymore. You know in Bridgeport -- movies.

I That's true. I remember downtown there used to be many of them, weren't there?

AR Yeah, oh yeah, they had on Park Avenue we had a movie.

I Oh really?

AR And then we had another one on State Street and down Main Street, was that couple of buildings there are.

I Here on South Main Street, there was a...?

AR No, this Main Street here. They've got, --I think they made senior housing out of it.

I Is there anything that I've forgotten to ask you? Well, you wouldn't know what I forgot. Is there anything you would like to add that I didn't ask you? --or anything you'd just like to say, for posterity?

AR Well, I hope it keeps getting better. I think the politicians are getting a little better, this last one I really like --Mr. Ganim. It shows up.

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I Ganim? Joe, yeah, the Mayor?

AR I think his work shows up. The only thing I have against the others, --they come in here, they stay a little while, and what they do when they -- I don't know if you call it retirement -- they even leave -- like Mrs. Moran. I'm very, very disappointed on her. I worked on her, when she put us into bankruptcy, I was so embarrassed. I was down in California and when they asked where you come from, I hated to say I came from Bridgeport. It seems everybody knew about this bankruptcy and that was oh! That was a very embarrassing thing to think that, because that went all through the...

I Oh, sure.

AR And they says, this was a place where they had so much water work was done. And the people that worked -- lotta work and everything -- and even the other two -- one is in Easton, one of the Mayors, -- where's the other one?

I Yeah, Bucci and Paoletta?

AR Yep.

I Yeah.

AR He's in Easton, he's another one. He just picked up his check and he collects. We're paying those trips. What did he contribute to us?

I So you're reasonably happy with the job that's being done in City Hall now?

AR Oh, you can see! You can see! You're going down, even Seaside Park now, they're really doing something in there. Making it much nicer and then, you know, therefore, well somebody blocked up the street and you had to make a turn to go to Seaside Park. What a bottleneck that was, I'm telling you! I says "Gee! you wonder -- those engineers what they use for their brains, you know." (chuckle) I says, "Here I am. They stop here and the bottleneck, you know, and a lot of people go down to Seaside."

I Oh, sure.

AR And especially on Sundays -- they come from New York and everything. This is just like a midway here, well but...

I Well, it's safe to say you're optimistic. Up on Bridgeport?

AR Yeah, I can see some difference here, you know. That's a little, the others they just took their pensions and ran and they, you know, what did they turn...

I Okay, I thank you for your time, is there anything else?

AR I think I'm all through. **END OF INTERVIEW**