

Factory Voices

An Oral History of Factory Work in the
North West

*The factory girls, to my mind, were the
salt of the earth. They were the hardest
working people I knew.*

- Geraldine Gill

The Factory Voices project was funded by Creative Ireland, Donegal County Council, and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

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FACTORY VOICES

The north-west of Ireland has a rich industrial history that stretches back to the nineteenth century. A cottage industry network existed in Donegal that supplied part-made products to the large shirt factories of Derry. As the Derry factories became more mechanised, production was centralised in large Victorian factories like Tillie and Henderson. Large numbers of rural people, mainly women from Donegal, moved into Derry permanently to take up factory work. However, there was still a large number of people in places like Buncrana, who had the skills necessary for work in a textile factory. Smaller shirt and textile factories began to spring up in Buncrana, providing work for large numbers of people by the mid-twentieth century. The fortunes of the Buncrana factories waxed and waned until the coming of the Americans in the late 1980s. Fruit of the Loom employed thousands of people in Buncrana and the north-west until a gradual closure and the shifting of production to cheaper markets in Eastern Europe and places like Morocco in the early 2000s. Some smaller factories continued on for a few more years, but the textile industry had moved on, and the last generation of factory workers retired or sought alternative employment, either at home or abroad.

Factory Voices is a multimedia history and heritage project. Ten former factory workers were interviewed about their working lives and the audio recordings were then archived and made available on

a dedicated website - factoryvoices.com. The interviews include the stories of men and women from the 1940s right up to the factory closures of the 2000s. One of the main aims of the Factory Voices project was to record these stories before they are lost forever. These stories are now preserved for the long-term and can be accessed freely by anyone from any part of the world. The project was also determined to ensure that younger people had the chance to listen to and consider the stories of the skills and traditions of older generations. As part of the project, a group of local secondary students took part in workshops where they listened to and read through the interviews. They then worked with Bunclara-based publisher, Merdog Books, to produce this EBook and an audio documentary, which is available to listen to on factoryvoices.com

The students decided that the best way to put together an EBook on this topic was to choose a number of themes and then pick out snippets of the interviews that best represent those themes. This EBook reflects that process, and all of the interviewees are represented across the themes in the chapters that follow. The students brought great enthusiasm to the project and also learned a lot about the past, gaining new creative skills in the process.

Factory Voices was made possible through funding by the Creative Ireland Programme, Donegal County Council and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

STARTING WORK

“

I left school, I was 14. I was sent into my aunt, she had a new baby and I was sent into her to help her ... and then when I went home after about a month or so off school my mother sent me back to school. Well I nearly broke my heart, for I lost all my friends, and I forgot all my lessons. So then my granny took me to the town and went round all the factories to get me work ... until we came to A.B. Grant's. So I went in there as a message girl, I must have been about 15 then. I had to walk from Clonbeg ... and home at night.

- *Eileen Fletcher*

“

A job came up in the Falut Factory which was the Clubman and I applied for that. And that was one of the happiest times I ever had, cause it was all modern ... My job was in the office doing the wages and sales, and doing letters and all stuff like that.

- *Geraldine Gill*



I went to London, probably 1988, I stayed there for a year and came back and jobbed about.

There was very, very little around Buncrana except Fruit of the Loom. And then I said to myself if you want something permanent, something that's gonna get a good wage, they talk about this good wage, I'll try to get in.

It was very, very difficult to get in 'cause probably they were over-subscribed by hundreds, never mind twenties or thirties. And trying to get in was proving difficult. So I was the competitions secretary in the Buncrana Golf Club behind the Drift Inn ... and [I] had to go and ask people for money to sponsor competitions. And the McCarter's had the McCarter Cup, so [I] phoned up and asked who [I] would need to see in order to get this sponsorship. So somebody told [me] it was a guy called Seamus McElhinney who was the finance director ...

So out [I] went to Seamus McElhinney's house ...

First of all [I] asked him for money for the Golf Club ... and I said to him:

'Seamus, just on another note, I'm finding it very difficult to get into the factory, and I'm wondering if you could help me?'

You know asking a director of a major company for a job, nowadays you wouldn't even think of it. But he said 'What's your name?', I said 'Brian Grant'. And he said 'Leave it with me'.

And three days later I was started ...

It's brilliant the way it worked out in the end.

- *Brian Grant*

“ He asked me if I could come in and wire a canteen for him ... in the old McCarter’s and I went into start wiring there ... and then an opening came up in Fruit of the Loom, I seen a notice on the sign board, they were looking for a maintenance electrician. So I decided, I was building a house, I’d give it a go, because, for getting a mortgage and everything.

So was it seen as a more steady job than working with someone in construction?

Aye because you were working on a job for a few months and then you were out of work for a wee while and you were back in. At least that was steady income coming every week.

Was it easy or difficult to get the job?

I had to do an interview the same as everybody else. I was more nervous because I never had to do an interview for a job. That was really my first official interview.

- Martin Barber

THE WORK

“

We were put on a thing called a belt, a team. There were so many girls on a team from the pyjamas started at the top ‘till it was finished. But you had to keep going to keep the whole lot working as well. Teamwork. And there was some girls could work quicker than others, so then if you were slow they were giving out: ‘What’s keeping you?’.

- *Eileen Fletcher*

“

When McCarter’s opened then I applied for the job in the canteen ... Three of us was working for a while, and then it gradually got bigger and bigger. They eventually extended it, the canteen. It was a small canteen. And I done all the home baking ... It was a great atmosphere. It was hard work, very hard work, because it had to be kept spotless. And apart from you doing the cooking and the preparing, you’d all the cleaning to do as well.

- *Susan Crossan*

“

There was a new system came in then. We all had wile craic. These boys landed in from America, and everybody then, it was all about efficiency. And getting workers to go harder. That was the very first time it came to Buncrana. It was called Time and Study ... So these boys came from America, and they went out with these stop watches and had to time everybody in the factory for how long it takes you to do so many cuffs ... buttoning and collars.

- *Geraldine Gill*

“

I was in work study. Time and study man. It's time and measurement. It's setting rates, you know, for the workers and that. You know, piece rates and things like that ... to deliver productivity [and] earn a fair income as well.

- *Gerry Carlin*

“

The maintenance crew ... would have done all the services, all the pipe work and the electrical work was done. And then we, as the maintenance team would have lowered the big dyeing machines into the pits and got them ready and worked along with the Germans who'd come to install the machines. And you just done breakdown cover with the old dyehouse while everything was running. And the boiler house ... you learned as you went along.

- *Martin Barber*

“

Everybody, when they looked at this video first, of the factory floor of the girls sewing, they said, 'That's not real there, that's speeded up'. They were moving so fast. But that's the way it was. You can imagine. If you were doing, say you were sewing a sleeve into an armhole on a t-shirt, and you're doing that day in, day out, you just do it automatically without having to think.

- *Terry Tedstone*

A TYPICAL DAY

“ You got paid in the evening ... and it was cash ... We gave it all to Mammy, and she gave us back then ... for your dance and your tights and your makeup, and anything else that you needed.

- *Susan Crossan*

“ There were great money in it. I mind my first wages for a full week was £5, and we had to pay a pound for the bus ... and I think I gave Mammy a pound for my keep, we had to give our keep ... and I had £3, and we just thought that was fair great. And that bought clothes and chips ... you bought so much stuff with the money. And then you got up to £9. And then when you got on our own time, maybe you'd make £16.

- *Winifred McLaughlin*

“ Everybody in Fruit of the Loom was in SIPTU. You joined the union as you went in. I don't know about staff, not all staff, some of the staff, but all the workers on the floor were all SIPTU ... If there was a problem they would try and get in and get it sorted.

- *Martin Barber*

“ They called it being in the union ... Jim Cutcliffe was our spokesperson. Say if people weren't happy with their wages he'd come in and he would talk to us and he would take the things back to the McCarter's. They would come to an agreement. And so much was took out of our wages every week for the union ... it wasn't a wile lot at that stage, 50 pence or a pound ... As the wages went up I suppose the union went up too ... I never kind of had no dealings with that because I was younger then, and I suppose I took whatever was going ... I think it was a necessary thing that everybody had to join it. I think you had to be 16 before you got into the union.

- *Winifred McLaughlin*

“ There was a trade union ... it was a good relationship between management, mid-management and the workers ... Disputes? I'm unaware of them in my time.

- *Gerry Carlin*

“ I was a shop steward ... The union was to help the workers and actually help the factory. It worked both ways. You never really got nothing for nothing ... I would say only for the union there would have been no redundancies the way we had redundancies then like ... We were lucky with management, we had a good relationship with management. I always remember Pat saying, from the day I took over as shop steward he says, 'No matter what kind of discussion we have, we go out the gate on a Friday as if nothing happened'. You didn't hold no grudges. And we always done that, you know.

- *Martin Barber*

“ The main problem for the men was the shift work. The money was brilliant. The work wasn't that difficult. But the shift work, when you were on night shift the full week was lost to you ... The day shift, 8-4, 8-3 on a Friday. And then whenever people were off at Friday three o'clock they weren't back on 'till Monday night at 12, which was a great weekend every three weeks ... That was the preferred shift, the day shift.

- *Brian Grant*

“ I found the night shift, the closer I got to a Sunday night, the crabbiter I was getting. It was very hard too, because the children were all small, I had seven children, you were trying to get the day in and, like, I found it was very hard to sleep during the day ... Shift work was hard. Night shift was hard. I liked the 4-12 because I was still doing a bit of work for myself. I used to go around wiring houses. So I could work in the morning, and you were still home at twelve o'clock at night ... I was building a house and every pound counted.

- *Martin Barber*

THE CRAIC

“ I mind going on an excursion to Portrush. I was going out with Seamus at that time, my husband ... We got a bus to Derry and then we got the train then, must have been all booked in advance by the staff in the factory. We all went to Portrush for the day and we had a great day. It was great. I remember bringing home things for my brothers, wee toys and things.

- *Eileen Fletcher*

“ I got married out of the Falut and I apparently got one of the worst doings and biggest doings that ever was. When you got married out of the factory they done you up, they plastered you, and they done everything on you. Put bows and makeup on you ... So all that day I was sitting in the office, and I was leaving. The girls done everything on me ... They took me then and they dressed me up ... and they wheeled me up the Main Street cheering.

- *Geraldine Gill*

“ But we had great craic too. See whenever people was getting married, they gave [the girl] doings ... they'd put her into a trolley on her break, and everybody would catch her and throw her into a trolley and ... wheel them all around and throw in the eggs and flour.

- *Winifred McLaughlin*

“ We went, it was promotional I suppose, we got to the Late Late Show one Christmas, it was a Christmas Late Late Show. We had a great time. That was to do with promoting the t-shirts, or promoting Fruit of the Loom ... And because I was in Sales I went, and Brenda Murphy went with me, and Terry Tedstone. It was wile craic. We stayed in a beautiful place ... And then we went to the Late Late Show and we got loads of gifts ... And we were that excited ... And we all had to wear Christmas Santa Claus suits, it was wile craic.

- *Geraldine Gill*

“ We had football tournaments and golf tournaments. I think there was even a choir, Fruit of the Loom choir, as far as I can remember. There was quiz nights. I remember one of the World Cups was played in South Korea and Japan, and the matches were early in the morning. They set up TVs in the canteen for us, in order to watch the matches. If you happened to be unlucky to be on the wrong shift, you could take the couple of hours off to watch the match and make up the hours later ... The managers and the directors would all come down and watch the matches with us 'cause everybody was interested in football, especially with Ireland playing.

- *Brian Grant*

“ They always did a party night. It used to be down at the White Strand ... but it would have been all paid for. That would have been a great night ... Everybody would get dressed up ... There'd be a band playing then and everyone would dance and waltz. And everybody mixed together. Aye it was great.

- *Winifred McLaughlin*

“ Steady money every week. That meant everything ... Fruit of the Loom was excellent. The money was good in it. The canteen facilities were excellent ... It was like a home from home.

- *Martin Barber*

“ Anytime anybody came along and was walking through the factory like Fruit of the Loom officials. Willie [McCarter] would take them in for a walk around ... Maisey would be there, Maisey Grant ... Willie would say, ‘this lady will sing us a wee Irish song now’. Maisey would get into song and sing the whole thing.

- *Paul McGrory*

“ You always had your break up for three weeks in the Summer. And Buncrana would have been completely jammed the day of the breakup because you probably had a thousand girls and maybe 500 men all converging on the street. And they all done pub crawls, and there was mayhem. Christmas would have been the same ... It was good fun.

- *Brian Grant*

IMPACT ON THE TOWN

“ I remember it was one night, it was Bagatelle were playing up near Church Street, facing down the way, and nearly everybody that was there was from the factory that day cause they got the holidays. It ws great, great to see, great fun, plenty of beer.

- *Brian Grant*

“ The factory was ... it was the heart and soul of Buncrana, there's no doubt about that you know. And to be honest, Willie McCarter and John and all, they put a lot of hard work and effort in.

- *Gerry Carlin*

“ They were training everybody as well ... the office staff were all going to Magee doing degrees that the company paid for. They were taking people to America and training them.

- *Janet McGrory*

““ If you wanted to do a course that would help you in your work, people were going up to Belfast to do night courses, in the university, they were very generous about paying for courses.

- *Terry Tedstone*

““ Everybody you knew was working in Fruit of the Loom, everybody. All sorts, like men who would probably never have entertained working in a factory.

- *Janet McGrory*

““ For years in the clothing business you were sort of thinking this is on its last legs, we're going to close, you know. Then all of a sudden it was a bright future ahead. Everybody was on a high.

- *Terry Tedstone*

“ As I keep saying now, a lot of the houses that are in Bun-
crana now that were bought at that time, were bought
with money from Fruit of the Loom. Mortgages were
well paid by Fruit of the Loom.

- *Brian Grant*

“ It brought work to the Leisure Centre
as well, ‘cause it heated the pool so there
was work brought there too.

- *Susan Crossan*

“ And also in them days you’d have to order fabric
for the shirts. And the law was then, which was
probably a good law in Ireland then, they would
get allocations for fabric. You wouldn’t be
allowed to take say fabric in from Hong Kong
or someplace unless you bought so much fabric
that was home produced ... They would have
to show proof that they bought so much home
fabric before you were allowed then to import
from Hong Kong.

- *Geraldine Gill*

FRUIT OF THE LOOM MOVES TO MOROCCO

“ The writing was on the wall ... it was a matter of time I believe ... that reliance on a massive industry such as that, it crippled the town and the surrounding area, even Derry to a large extent.

- *Gerry Carlin*

“ Definitely Morocco, I have to say back then, there was no airs or graces, it was a poor place. But the jobs that people were going into were paying way, way more than what they would have known normally. Despite the fact that they were only getting a quarter of what the people were getting here. It was well paid in Moroccan terms. As Fruit of the Loom said in all their literature, they would always pay at least, if not more than the National Minimum Wage of the countries they were operating in.

- *Brian Grant*

“ There were loads of people from Buncrana going out [to Morocco], you know sewing instructors, taught people the methods of sewing ... everybody here was supporting that setup because everybody knew it was inevitable the way things were going ... we knew that we were going to get a pretty good redundancy. It was very strange, a lot of people then started to look forward to getting redundancy because we got nearly 5 weeks wages for every year we worked, so you only had to be working there about 10 years and you'd have a whole year's salary as a redundancy coming up.

- *Terry Tedstone*

“ As we mentioned earlier about the Christmas parties and the camaraderie, that was gone 'cause everyone was away except for the very few that was left. And the factory was that vast you might have went through the day without seeing more than two or three people.

- *Brian Grant*

“

It was a big loss to the town. It still is a big loss to the town. When we finished we were in the Knitting Room. It was shifted from the Shore Road to Ballymacarry and we finished in the Knitting Room, stripping the machines down, getting them ready to be boxed and shipped to Morocco ... It was a sad time, and like there were a lot of people, I'd say if Fruit of the Loom opened tomorrow again, the young ones would be glad of it, they really would.

- *Martin Barber*

“

They find a cheaper place to employ people, and the markets move ... We were sitting on the periphery of Europe here, and Germany was very expensive to employ workers ... there were certain parts of Europe that would take them in and they shopped around until they finally got people here and there, and they started to move out. But it was reasonably gradual. They just didn't shut overnight.

- *Paul McGrory*

“ When me and ... the first four, or five or six people went out, we never worked in Ballymacarry again after that. That was us finished in Fruit of the Loom in Ireland, and we were Fruit of the Loom Morocco then ... That was May 2007 ... The production had finished in about March 2006. I think about 50 of us were kept on to take apart machines, take apart bits and pieves, to box them, to pack them up, to ship them out to Morocco ... It was sad ... Stuff that you'd done for 18 years, you knew you were losing your job. You knew somebody else was getting it. And you didn't know what the future held.

- *Brian Grant*

“ It was sad then to see, you know when you hear the first whisperings that they were leaving, that they found somewhere else cheaper ... and the next thing, people are selling it off for scrap. And you're just like - where did that all go wrong?

- *Janet McGrory*

LEGACY

“ People were closer knit than they would have been them other places. You got to know the people over a period of time. And I'm still friends with people who I started with in 1990.

- *Brian Grant*

“ The craic was great.

- *Eileen Fletcher*

“ I loved it. I loved doing what I was doing. But it was hard work.

- *Susan Crossan*

“ It was a great place to work, very fond memories, a very happy place.

- *Geraldine Gill*

“ There are so many great memories,
there really are ... even as an outsider so
to speak, I was very much welcomed.
That to me was fantastic.

- *Gerry Carlin*

“ It was great, I loved it...

- *Winifred McLaughlin*

“ Fruit of the Loom was a great place to
work. It really was a great atmosphere.
Great craic with the boys you worked
with, and the girls in the canteen were
brilliant. It was like a home from home.

- *Martin Barber*

“ The factory girls, to my mind, were the
salt of the earth. They were the hardest
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