
Nolan: Maybe we could begin with you telling us where and when you were born.

Anderson: I was born in 1944, in Waterbury, Connecticut.

JN: Did you live in Waterbury throughout your childhood?

AA: No, Cheshire.

JN: So you moved to Cheshire when you were very young?

AA: Yes. My parents lived in Cheshire.

JN: I see. So you were born in Waterbury Hospital.

AA: Right.

JN: So that was your only trip up to Waterbury, right? Otherwise, you're a native of Cheshire!

AA: Right.

JN: So you went to high school here in Cheshire?

AA: Yes.

JN: What did you do after high school?

AA: I went to work.

JN: You went right to work. O.k.

AA: Right here.

JN: Right here at Ball and Socket?

AA: Yes.

JN: So you've had a very consistent life, then.

AA: Yes.

JN: When you first came to work here, what kind of work did you do?

AA: The same thing I'm doing now, except that it was hand feed. There had not been a lot of progress at that time. We just did it by hand.

JN: O.k. I'm going to have to break this down a little, because I'm
not as familiar with these things as you.

AA: O.k.

JN: What were you making? Is it an assembly line that we're talking about?

AA: Yes. You did work at one machine. It was a dial operated machine. You just put the shells in, and put the design on top.

JN: So you were working on a machine that used a dial to measure, to cut things?

AA: To put the designs on the shells.

JN: Shells for buttons, you mean?

AA: Yes.

JN: So you make those fancy blazer buttons.

AA: Yes.

JN: What did you do?

AA: I'd take the shells that were already cut. We were a second operation, after the shells were cut in another department. I'd hand feed it into the machine, the dial would go around and put it in, and it would come out stamped.

JN: You say you hand fed these metal circles into the machine. Was there a certain pace that you had to work at, or did you control the pace?

AA: You controlled it. You could shut it off if you had a problem. You just kept feeding the dials that were on it.

JN: How many would you do in an hour?

AA: Well, it would depend on how fast the machine went, whether it was a fast machine or a slow machine. The size makes a big difference, too. You'd do four or five thousand an hour. It depends on the machine, and your self.

JN: Why would some machines be fast and some slow?
AA: The smaller the button, the slower the machine would go. It had to do with the cans, and the pace of the machine. Right now that's a minor thing. They've speeded everything up. Everything's automated since then. There's no hand feeding at all downstairs.

JN: You began working in --

AA: 1963

JN: And there was hand feeding. Your pace was governed by the pace of the individual machine, and the size of the button you were doing --

AA: And how fast you could go yourself.

JN: Were you paid by the hour or by the piece?

AA: By the hour. At the beginning it was piece work.

JN: Which did you prefer?

AA: I like hourly, myself. It's not so much pressure. You don't have a rate to meet. I don't like piece work, because you have too many people wanting -- I didn't care, because I was the low man on the totem pole, you might say; there were other people who were after the bucks. They were out for that extra two sacks, or whatever. I just worked along. As long as I had a job, I didn't care. Some old ladies had to get two sacks more. You could make good money, if you had a good job, on piece work. I don't like it, because people have a tendency to fight over jobs.

JN: So it was very competitive among your fellow workers.

AA: Right. They would fight. I'd just take any job they gave me.

JN: Also, it seems to me, when you were on piece work, the pace of the machine itself could slow you down, outside of your own will. When did you go on straight salary?


JN: So they changed not only the nature of your work, but your rate. Could you explain what this automated machine was like, and how it differed?
AA: You still had the dial, but you had a hopper that the shells
would come down, and automatically be fed into it. If it
stopped, you had to take care of it.

JN: So you were watching the machine do --

AA: The work I'd been doing by hand.

JN: When you went on to hourly wage, could you make more money?

AA: You'd break even. It all depends. If you had a really good job
on piece work you could make good, but if you had a bad day --
This way, no matter what, you're still going to make the same
thing.

JN: I know you liked the hourly rate for the psychological, social
reasons, but could you make as much money on the hourly wage?
Did you have the same income more or less?

AA: Yes, right.

JN: When they brought these new machines in (I'm just trying to picture
this), you were just standing there, watching the machine.

AA: Not one machine.

JN: Ah.

AA: You're operating three or four, watching three or four, sometimes
five. Or more.

JN: How many do you watch today?

AA: Between three and five. If they're all set up, and they want them
all going, at times we've got eight machines going, or better. They
just did that once, when they had a lot of work.

JN: So you don't have physical labor as much as you have mental labor on
these new machines?

AA: Right.

JN: Is that how you see it?

AA: You've still got to work with the machines, take care of them. The
more you've got going, the more you're active. You've got to pay more attention to what's going on.

JN: Let's say you came in on a typical morning, and there were four machines to watch. What kinds of things would you do during the day?

AA: I'd start them up. I'd check the orders, what I had to do. Each order's different. You might do four thousand, three thousand. If it's a different color, you have to put it in a separate box. You just watch. If it jams up, you unjam it. You clean it.

JN: How did you learn to unjam and clean this machine?

AA: They showed us. These are V & O's I'm talking about. They're easier to take care of than the dial kind. If the dial jams up or something happens, you have to get your setup man to do it, but the V & O's are easier to do. They're not that hard.

JN: So since 1965 there have been further improvements in the machines.

AA: Right.

JN: Maybe in a little while we can get back to that, and you can trace the development for us. Getting back to your day. Let's say you come in, and they want Pierre Cardin buttons -- that sounds like a fun job. You start by --

AA: The speed is all set on it; if they want it to go fast it will go fast. If the job runs good they can run fast; if the job doesn't run that good you run it slow. They just have a knob on the back of the machine; you can speed it up yourself. It depends on how good the job is. So you run it, and when the order's done, you put it in a box, and somebody takes it off.

JN: With five machines going at a given time, will they all stop at the same time, or do they stagger them?

AA: It depends on the orders. If you're having trouble, they jam up, or there's nothing coming down the chute, they stop. You go and
check it. When you've finished that one, you go check another
one. Just keep them going.

JN: So you have some control over the work you're doing.

AA: Oh yes.

JN: You decide when you're going to look at a machine, except when
there's an accident that occurs. You pace yourself, you organize
the work.

AA: Right. How I'm going to look at them. You just check them, walk
around and check them.

JN: How many hours would it take; let's say they wanted five thousand
buttons.

AA: You could do that in thirty-five minutes.

JN: With the automated machine.

AA: Right.

JN: How long would this same job take with hand feeding?

AA: An hour. The V & O's can run nine thousand an hour, if they're
at their top speed, and if it's a good job, the punch and die are
just right, and the shells are just right. You can get almost nine
thousand out of some of them.

JN: Who determines if the shells are straight and the punch and die are
straight? How do you know how those things are working on your
machine? Do you check them?

AA: You check them, the foreman checks them, the setup man checks them.
If they think the machine could be running faster, they turn it up.

JN: So they determine the pace of the machine, rather than you.

AA: Right. They turn it up.

JN: And they also determine the amount of machines you'll be looking
after in a given time.

AA: Well, we know our machines. Well, they're not my machines; I don't
take them home with me. There's another lady out there, and she has her machines. She takes care of one side, and I take care of another side.

JN: The sense of ownership is not literal.

AA: I don't like to do that. If I was taken off the job, and put on another job, I wouldn't say, "She's running mine." I don't want to characterize them as my machines.

JN: "Let's just keep it an impersonal relationship."

AA: Right.

JN: O.k. So in 1965 the first automatic feeder device was added. You mentioned earlier that there were several other innovations that you've seen since then. Can you tell us what some of those are?

AA: As far as the shells, they made them better faster. You don't have to wait as long to get shells for your machines. The V & O's are very easy to take care of; you don't have them all going crazy at one time, breaking down. They're easier to take apart than the dial ones. You don't have to get someone to help you take it apart.

JN: So other jobs that are related to the efficiency of your job have been automated also, like the shell makers. Who would make the button shells themselves? What would you call those people?

AA: The machine operators in the shell department. They're the same thing, machine operators, but they run a different type of machine. It's bigger, faster -- twice as many at one time. Three at a time or six at a time.

JN: Were the machines changed simultaneously in the various departments, so that the overall production increased?

AA: Oh yes. Like, they'd change one from a 30 to a 20/40. Our machines, one machine runs one size, and another machine runs another size.
The only thing you can change is whether it's a flat shell or a deep shell; that you can change, but they have to be the same size. I have two machines I can run 24's with. I can run 3608, or a flat shell.

JN: So you don't have to reset the machine, necessarily, for every button that comes through, as long as they're the same diameter.

AA: Well, you have to reset for jobs, different styles. I wish I'd brought some to show you. That's the finished product out there; they've gone through the whole shop.

JN: Maybe you could take a minute right now to explain how many different parts there are to processing a button. Most of us take it for granted.

AA: There's a lot. The metal comes in. The receiver takes that. Then he distributes it to the different departments where it's going to go. Sometimes they have to cut it with a slitter; sometimes it comes in bolts. They have a man slit it at night; he makes it into smaller sizes. They're round. He unwinds it. From there it goes to, say, the shell department. People in the shell department cut out the different sizes. If they want the 30 or 24 on the V & O's, six at a time, that comes in already cut. They just put it on the machine. In one shell department you can do one piece at a time; in the other shell department you can do six at a time, three at a time.

JN: When you speak of the shell, is that the whole button itself?

AA: No, it's just the shell. This is the raw product, right there, without anything on it.

JN: Just the front of the button.

AA: Let me show you.

JN: So the back of the button, which would actually be attached to
the clothing, is a separate, round piece. And these are the
tops.

AA: Here's what I start out with.

JN: This plain top you call the shell. Your machine puts the design
on the shell. I get it.

AA: Right now I'm running the same design. On another machine I
could have a different style. This is what they call satin.
Now somebody else cuts this [showing] before it comes to me.
This doesn't go out to the rolling room, because you don't
run oil on it; it runs plain. Anything run in oil has to be
sent out to another room to be washed, and then it comes out
to us.

JN: The machine that you operate then, if it's running the same
design, can print it on each of these shells, the small one and
the larger one? It can take both of these without changing the
setting of the machine?

AA: No. This is a separate machine. This machine runs a 24 line;
that's all it runs. This one runs 32; it can run 30, but they
just run 32 in it.

JN: O.K. So you finish these shells, the tops of the buttons, and
then what happens to them?

AA: They go to another department; they send it upstairs. This one
doesn't have to go out to where they wash the buttons, or to where
they lacquer or color them.

JN: It's just a plain gold, with the crest.

AA: Right. This goes directly upstairs, and they put a back on it.
Close it. Either on a dial upstairs, or on the automatic. They've
got automatic upstairs that feeds this part and a back. This comes
down, a back comes on top, boom.
JN: O.K.

AA: They have new ones upstairs that run both, put the back and the top on. They have ones that are improved up there; before the girls would put the tops and the bottoms on. Now they put this part in, and the back comes on.

JN: So that's these metal buttons, from start to finish. Obviously you make other kinds of buttons. Do you make plastic buttons?

AA: Not down here; that's a different plant, up in Maine. We don't do anything with plastics.

JN: So in the seventeen years you have worked here, you've worked exclusively with metal.

AA: Yes.

JN: Getting back to technological changes that you've seen in the machines: obviously you're working on the machines today with less effort, although you have more machines. You produce more in a given day than when you first started in 1963. In 1965 the automatic feeder came in. What other changes have you seen the machines go through?

AA: They run faster. They're easier to take care of. It still takes the same amount of people to watch them and take care of them. It takes less people to run them, because you only have one person. Before, when we used the dials, we had three girls, but they were not really busy. It's down to two girls. If it got really busy, I guess we could take care of it; it's hard, but we could do it. Gets confusing. When you have a lull, like now, you've got four going, or three.

JN: With these automated advances, obviously, your job has changed. Is it easier now?

AA: It's not as boring, I don't think.

JN: That's interesting. Why not?
AA: Because you're walking around, checking more things than if you just sit there and feed it over and over and over and over again. You've got more things to look for. They have these studs; I watch that too. The machine inspects them; I just check it.

JN: More variety and more mobility, really.

AA: Right. I get dirty. It's not so boring, to me.

JN: That's encouraging. Technology's been good to you.

AA: Yes, right.

JN: But the work is not necessarily easier; it's just different.

AA: Right.

JN: That's how you see it. O.k. You were saying earlier that you needed one person per machine in the old hand feeds. Now, you can run as many as eight machines with one person, with the automation. How many people were working in your job when you began? Have you seen a decrease?

AA: Yes. I would say there were five girls downstairs, just in hand feeding. Three girls hand feeding; there was some automation, as far as the hoppers. They had a few of them, but not as many as they had when they started in 1965. There were four girls, and then we had another girl on the power press, and one on the shell department. There were maybe six of us downstairs. Now we're down to about three.

JN: So you lost fifty percent?

AA: Well, you know, if you're not busy —

JN: Do they have layoffs and then rehire at times?

AA: Yes, they rehire. If they need help for a little while, they hire twenty people. They're not working for the company, they're working through Kelly in Woonsocket. Like if they need them for a week. Then if they don't need them longer, they don't have to worry about them. It's cheaper for them to do it that way.
JN: Good management finds the cheap way out!
AA: They don't have to pay unemployment insurance. You know, like summer help. Then if they do keep them for a period of time, say three months, and they think they're going to need them permanently, then they hire them.
JN: So it's a little rough on the temporary worker, but --
AA: Yes.
JN: Speaking of things being rough on workers, do you belong to a union?
AA: No.
JN: Is there a union in the plant?
AA: No.
JN: How do you feel about that?
AA: Sometimes the union's good, sometimes it's bad.
JN: Can you give me an example of when it would be good and when it would be bad?
AA: Well, you might get more raises than one a year, I would think.
JN: What would be negative, do you think?
AA: Well, they go out on strike. You've got people watching what you're doing. Like at Pratt & Whitney, you've got people watching you. That's different work altogether; that's government work, not like this. You have to be precise in what you do.
JN: You must make Navy buttons once in a while?
AA: We don't make their buttons. Waterbury Button makes them.
JN: Oh really.
AA: Heavier metal. Real heavy.
JN: What metal is this? Is this brass?
AA: It's what they call satin brass.
JN: It's very pretty.
AA: We make post office buttons and fireman buttons.
JN: So you work for the government too! Indirectly!

AA: Indirectly.

JN: I'm interested -- getting back to your feelings about unions. You don't sound as if you'd welcome one. Am I right or wrong?

AA: I don't know. I haven't thought about.

JN: You've found that you've been satisfied enough --

AA: Oh yes. It's all right. I've never worked for a union, so I don't know.

JN: Do other people in the plant here want to have a union?

AA: I don't know. Once in a while some of the men say, "We should have a union in here," something like that. It works both ways. Sometimes they're good, sometimes they're bad. I'm not one way or the other.

JN: You're content with things as they are here --

AA: Yes.

JN: Without the union.

AA: Right.

JN: If the union should come, well, maybe it'd be better; who's to know.

AA: It might be good, it might be bad, it all depends.

JN: You're a very calm person, I can tell! You're very relaxed about life; I envy that. It's great.

AA: You've got to take what comes, roll with the punches.

JN: That's true.

AA: You fit in or you don't fit in.

JN: Yes. I'm thinking, too, of the pace of work. You can produce more now, with your automated machines, and you can run more machines as an individual in a given day, in a given time. But the work itself -- are you more tired at the end of the day? Do you work harder now?
AA: Oh yes. We've got more walking; you're on your feet all day.

JN: Can you take a break if you want to?

AA: Oh yes. We have two breaks a day. We get one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

JN: Has that changed at all over the years? Can you take a minute and go, "Hi, Mary Sue, how are your buttons doing today?" Or do you find that you really have to concentrate on the machines?

AA: No, you can -- If I know somebody's around, say I'm in back of the machine and there's somebody back there; I'll say hello and ask how their work is going -- just to make sure nobody's fainted or anything like that, see that they're not having any problems.

JN: Do you feel you have about the same amount of contact with your fellow workers as you did before the automation?

AA: Oh yes. Oh yes.

JN: So, in that sense, the social pace is about the same.

AA: Yes. You talk, but you're moving as you're talking, you're not standing.

JN: So there is some kind of camaraderie, then?

AA: Oh yes.

JN: That's more or less been the same. O.k. I notice so far that in the kind of work you do, you've mentioned only other women doing it. Are there any men that do the job you do?

AA: Oh yes. They've had men do our jobs. Say we're out. Our set up man, if he's not busy setting up, and we're out and they need someone, can run the machines. It's hard to set up and operate, to keep them going. You run into a lot of problems. To set them up, and get them running, o.k., but if you're setting them up and you're operating them -- it's kind of hard to set up a machine and try to keep the machine going at the same time. You take away from
the setting up if you've got to watch them. We've tried that. It didn't work out too well.

JN: Would these men that do try to fill in periodically be temporary, or are men permanent operators in your work?

AA: There are also permanent operators that are around all of our departments.

JN: Are women?

AA: With women.

JN: So men actually are stamping the shells with you?

AA: Yes, but they're doing this part [shows].

JN: So they do a different process; that's what I was trying to get at.

AA: Oh yes. If I were out, and they needed some work, then they could put somebody else over there, another operator, a man, whatever they wanted.

JN: I'm curious because in many places you'll see this is true; women will do a particular part of a job, and men will do another particular part of a job.

AA: Well, we can turn it around. Say it was real slow in our department, and they only needed one girl there. Say they needed somebody down in the department that's doing the shells; I could go down there. Or over in the back where they make the backs, or over on the other side, and make something different.

JN: So you could fill in in any part of the production process?

AA: Oh yes. The only thing, you can't put the metal on if the metal's too heavy; you would just watch it. Check if for scrap and empty scrap. As far as putting the metal on, it's too big. You couldn't do it. But as far as watching the machines, that's no problem.

JN: So you don't really see too much, "These are men's jobs. These are women's jobs."
AA: No. You can have women doing men's jobs. The only thing is the metal part, how heavy the metal is, and how big it is. Even with an electric hoist it would be hard for a woman to put it on.

JN: I see. So perhaps the few jobs that women wouldn't equally do would be ones that would require a tremendous physical strength that perhaps only a man would have.

AA: Right.

JN: That makes sense.

AA: Right. A man could do my job.

JN: Yes, I would think it would make no difference --

AA: Anybody could do that job.

JN: Between male and female. If the men are making the backs and you're making the tops, why not.

AA: Anybody could do it.

JN: What difference would it make. It seemed to me interesting that, maybe only by coincidence, there were only women working in your --

AA: They've had men working here, they just didn't work out too good.

JN: They didn't work out too well?

AA: They tried setting up and operating, and it didn't work out.

JN: To both jobs. They never had a man in there just to do the one job?

AA: No. They had them operating and doing setup.

JN: So the men will fill in if one of you is absent for some reason, but permanently they would not do your particular job.

AA: Right. It's all right, to me. They could do anything they wanted.

JN: Although there are no official men's jobs, beyond the physical lifting of that metal bar, are the jobs that men employed in here -- Do they seem to be getting more money for them? Are they more skilled jobs?

AA: I wouldn't say skilled. Well, you've got your tool makers, stuff like that. They've got to be more highly paid. As far as what the
men are running, they may run three at a time, or two, or one at a time. It depends on how the job is. If it has to be watched very carefully, they may just do one. It’s just that putting the metal on takes a little bit [more strength], and moving the barrels, stuff like that. It’s a little bit more time consuming; it’s not just production. There’s a little bit more work to it. Some of the metal you can’t pull out, stuff like that.

JN: O.k. A few more questions. This has been very useful. Now I understand these buttons, and I tell you, when I walked in here, I certainly didn’t. It’s been very informative. These will be a little bit more personal questions. Was there anything in your high school education, or in your life, that led you to want to be a worker, or work in this particular plant?

AA: No. It was a job. Some of my relatives worked here, years and years ago. "Go on down to Ball & Socket." So I came down, and got a job.

JN: I was wondering whether, perhaps, your mother and father had worked here, or done this kind of thing.

AA: No, they were farmers.

JN: They were farmers.

AA: Most of their life they were farmers.

JN: So you went into 'urban industrial work.'

AA: They didn’t have that much of a farm left. It was my grandmother’s, so it was down to very little.

JN: Well, you must have liked it, because you’ve been here seventeen years. This is your first and your only job, so --

AA: Well, I had one little job; I worked in a small shop one summer. It was just a summer job.

JN: While you were still in school.
AA: Yes, a summer type thing. It's been lucky. It's close to home, and my mother was ill over the years. It was something close to home, someplace where I could get back and forth; if I didn't have a car, I could still get to work. When I first started out I didn't have a car; I had relatives who could drop me off. It worked out, let's put it that way, in the situation.

JN: A very practical choice, one that's also earned you a good living, too.

AA: Right.

JN: You said, also, that you got married about six years ago?

AA: Yes.

JN: Do you have any children?

AA: No.

JN: O.k. I was going to ask you what you would want them to do with their lives, but since they don't exist —

AA: I would really have them be farmers.

JN: Would you?

AA: Yes.

JN: You have farming experience, I would imagine.

AA: It's all right.

JN: Do you still farm a little?

AA: Oh, yes. I have a garden. It's different from being in a shop. I would think that I would rather have them be farmers, myself. This isn't bad. I'm not saying it's the worst job in the whole wide world.

JN: You've been here seventeen years, you can't hate it too much.

AA: No. It's just that you're outdoors. It's cleaner. To me you're producing something a little better. For people, let's put it that way.
JN: Food.

AA: Right.

JN: As opposed to a luxury --

AA: Right.

JN: Such as a button.

AA: Well, they're losing a lot of farmers; a lot of farms are selling out. It's a shame to see it.

JN: It's awfully hard to make a living farming.

AA: Yes it is.

JN: Very hard work too.

AA: Yes.

JN: Maybe one last question, now. You're in your middle thirties now. For the last seventeen years, one half of your life, you have done this. It has met your needs in many ways. If you were seventeen or eighteen again, today, would you, like you wish your children would, be a farmer, or would you do something else, or would you do what you've done?

AA: I don't know. That's kind of hard to say. Each person is their own person. They have to find out what is suited for their life. What was suited for my life was this. It all depends. If we had the farm, you know, working it — just went into the action. If the farm had stopped operating, and you had to make a living somewhere — everybody's got to make a living somewhere, here or anywhere.

JN: So given the circumstances of your life, this has been a good choice for you.

AA: Yes. Right now, yes.

JN: Do you have any future plans?

AA: No. Not right now. To have a baby someday, children, whatever. It's still work. You still have to work.
JN: You have to earn a living.

AA: You have babies, and you still need two people to work, today. No matter how good a job you have. You can make all the money in the world and still need two people -- well maybe not all the money in the world, but even half-way decent, you still need two people to work.

JN: Well, Anna, I have been absolutely fascinated by this. I have learned more about buttons, and about an attitude towards life that I find very calming and very very reassuring. I envy you.

AA: Oh dear -- Really.

JN: I think you have an absolutely lovely attitude. "This is what is, and I can take it." You're very realistic.

AA: Just live today. If you have another day, you're lucky.

JN: That's right. Well, thank you very very much.

AA: Thank you. I hope I helped.

End of Interview