Interview with Connecticut Silver Worker, Connecticut Workers and Technology Project, by Robert Asher, 28 October 1981.

Asher: Can you tell me about when you first started working, when you got out of high school?

Worker: Once I started working [with the company] they made ornate holloware -- real ornate, fancy pieces for dining tables, for all different people, stars out of Hollywood. Some of the items were even made by hand. They would make a coffee pot completely by hand. The handles and spouts were two pieces that were soldered together with silver. Then they were polished, plated, and finished, and shipped out of the plant.

RA: What were you doing when you first went into the plant?

SW: I was finish-buffing.

RA: Did you go into the trade because your father had been in the trade?

SW: Yes.

RA: And what was his -- title, so to speak, in the trade?

SW: He was in the flatware industry, in the tining division. He used to tine forks -- cut the tines, bring them to a point.

RA: Was that like a sharpening, or grinding wheel?

SW: Sharpening. As they came off the presses, they had blunt ends, and with blunt ends you couldn't pick up too much with a fork. The holloware business has changed an awful lot. Right now we're out of the holloware business, and most stuff is being imported.

RA: You started out in buffing, which is basically a fine polishing operation, right?

SW: It's a fine finishing. That's what I was doing.

RA: How do you put the finish on?

SW: The finish was put on with a rag wheel and red rouge. We cut it
down first, and then we finished it off. In other words, it
was like a fanning operation, which would make it sparkle — a
bright finish.
RA: Which wheel did you use to cut it down, the rouge?
SW: We used what they called a white diamond to cut it down. It's
another compound.
RA: Is this done by putting it on --
SW: It's done by putting it on the wheel. The compound is a solid
piece. You put it up against the wheel, and as the wheel rotated,
you picked up compound, and that's what made your abrasive.
RA: Was this a piece work process?
SW: It was a piece work process at the time.
RA: Was it hard to make the rate in those days?
SW: Sometimes it was, depending on how the work came out. Some metals
that came in were very coarse, and harder to work with. Some
other metals come in, and they have a nicer finish. It depends
on the pouring process out of the mills.
RA: Did you get a different rate for each type of metal, or was it the
same flat rate?
SW: It was the same flat rate that we got. Twelve-inch round trays,
if I'm not mistaken, used to pay us $6.37 a hundred. Well, at
that time the rate of pay was close to $.90 an hour, somewhere
in there.
RA: You got an hourly rate, and on top of it --
SW: Plus the piece work. It wasn't incentive, it was piece work.
They gave you a flat figure of $6.37 a hundred; that was it. You
could never do a hundred in an hour, to begin with. I think we
averaged between $1.80 to $2.00 an hour. So from $.90 to $2.00
-- that's what we made over and above. And when work was slow,
after the Christmas holiday rush, you'd usually drop
down almost to your day rate, because there wasn't that much work
at that time -- until the Easter rush came up. Easter rush,
Mother's Day, times when people give gifts. These were given
as gifts -- wedding gifts. It wasn't like it is today.

RA: So there would be times when you wouldn't actually get enough
pieces to work on so that you could make the maximum piece rate
that you were capable of.

SW: Right.

RA: And you could never actually do a hundred trays in a hour?

SW: No way.

RA: They weren't intending to pay you $6 an hour. They were really
thinking --

SW: Even if you wanted to you couldn't, at that time, because the
product was inspected by inspectors, and if it wasn't right you
got it back, and you'd done it for nothing. Sometimes you'd get
the same piece back five and six times.

RA: Did you ever have trouble with them changing the rates on you,
or was that pretty much held rigid by the contracts?

SW: Well, you see, at that time we had no union.

RA: This was roughly what date?

SW: My union was founded about seven or eight years ago.

RA: And you're talking about right after World War II, basically?

SW: 1954 or 1955. I worked in the silver business before that, for
different little companies.

RA: So by 1954 you had a fair amount of experience in the trade.

SW: Yes.

RA: Did they have any kind of system of classifying people as apprentices,
journeymen, anything like that?
SW: No, they didn't at that time. When you went in you started on things that you wouldn't get hurt on. You wouldn't start directly on coffee pots, where they have handles and spouts -- anything you could get caught. They'd start you on bread trays or round trays, something like that, and that's what you would do, continuously, for a month, so you wouldn't get hurt. It was very easy to get hurt.

RA: Really? How could you get hurt?

SW: Well, you could get locked up. I got in 1948 on a merry-go-round, in the flatware industry. I didn't stay too long with them. I've got a scar here on my wrist.

RA: What is the merry-go-round, exactly?

SW: It was a four-chuck, with four motors. The fifth chuck was in front of you, where you would load. Definitely, everybody wore gloves, and I just happened to get one of the pins hooked on to my glove when I went to the first and the second buffer. It was an automatic, and by the time you tried to find the emergency stop, which was on the floor, you'd get kind of nervous.

RA: So your glove was caught in the chuck, and the chuck rotated around to the wheel, and brought your wrist on to the wheel before you could turn the machine off.

SW: Right.

RA: This particular machine, you would work five spoons on?

SW: You would load five, if I'm not mistaken. I'm not quite sure.

RA: And once you'd loaded them, you'd turn a lever, and --

SW: You had to continue loading it --

RA: As it's turning?

SW: As it's turning. It was an automatic turn.

RA: So it's moving slowly, and you're --
SW: It's moving slowly. Every time it moved, the table came up to the wheel, which put the spoon right next to the wheel.

RA: I see. Did you do the setup on that machine too?

SW: Did I do the setup on it?

RA: Getting the machine ready before you turned it on, in other words.

SW: Oh, definitely. You had to change your own wheels. When the wheels wore out or burnt out you had to put new ones on.

RA: So you would put the spoon into the chuck, and keep feeding the spoons into the chuck, and the machine would do the — polishing or buffing?

SW: It was polishing.

RA: And then you'd take the spoon out after it was done and put it somewhere, to go to the next step?

SW: It went to the next step. This was doing the inside of the bowls and the inside of the forks, only. Then it would go to a backing off machine which would do the back side of the bowl and the back side of the fork. Then it would go into a double roll, and they would do the handle.

RA: Was this kind of work also piece work, or was that hourly?

SW: Everything was piece work.

RA: Now, in the pre-union days, did you have any problems about piece work rates and the way they were set?

SW: No. Usually the piece work rates were set on one item. If it was a fork, the next piece work rate would be the same as it was on that one. That's the way it used to be.

RA: Before the union there wasn't any negotiation?

SW: Right. There was no negotiation, there was no time study.

RA: The company just said, "This is the piece rate."

SW: Right.
RA: In those days, in the pre-union period, were there any improvements in the machinery that made it easier for you to increase your output?

SW: Definitely. Since I left that back in 1948 -- in the last ten or twelve years they were doing a different process, where they would do maybe a dozen and a half at one time. They've changed the machinery and improved the machinery.

RA: Did the rate change? They must have put a new rate in.

SW: Oh, every time you got a new machine you'd get new rates.

RA: What about the impact on what you could actually take home at the end of the day? Did that change much with the new machinery, or was it about the same?

SW: As your standard of living went up, so did your standard [of pay]. It had to.

RA: In the pre-union days did the workers every really grumble about the way the rates were set, or did they accept that?

SW: They accepted it, mostly. The rates were set, and even though you grumbled, you didn't really have any place to go. Where could you go?

RA: Yes. So there was some grumbling? People were not always wild about the rates?

SW: Definitely, nobody was wild about the rates. Then once the union came in, the rates started to improve. Your base rate improved, your standard of living improved. Views on working were a lot different than what they were before. In other words, if you had a problem, you'd always have the union to go to, and in the early days you had nobody to go to. Even if you went to someone, they'd just shrug you off, and if you made too much noise, they'd get rid of you.
RA: Once you had the union, I assume that whenever there was a change in the production process the pay would have to be negotiated with the union.

SW: What usually is done is that we have a procedure they go through. They go in and time study a job, which we have a right to grieve. We try out the job, and if the person can't make — right now — one hundred and thirty percent, then as far as we're concerned the rates are not incentive rates. A normal person should be able to make one hundred thirty percent and over. Some have made as high as one hundred sixty or one hundred eighty percent. It depends on the individual. There are some individuals that adapt to it a lot quicker than some others. Not everybody's the same.

RA: Are you kind of in a pattern when you have to grieve a rate on a new job? Has that become a more common problem, or is it just about the same?

SW: With the way the industry is going now, there isn't that much of a problem.

RA: But what about the last six or seven years?

SW: Then it was quite a problem. We had quite a few grievances; we settled them through the grievance procedure. Some of the jobs weren't even going when the grievance came up — in other words, it was a buy-out. They would pay you so much for that grievance.

RA: How would that work? They would pay the workers who had filed the grievance?

SW: Not only the workers who had filed the grievance, but the people that had gone to that job since that grievance was filed.

RA: So they would work out some kind of settlement.

SW: With the local union.
RA: So it's like giving back pay, because the grievance was processed even though the job was no longer in existence?

SW: Right.

RA: That's incredible.

SW: In a way the older days were a lot better than what it is today. I remember the money I was making then, and compared to the money I'm making now -- I was saving a hell of a lot more at that time than I am now. Today it's almost impossible to save any money.

RA: Do you think that's because the wage rates haven't kept pace with inflation? Is that the real problem?

SW: Not necessarily. I think it's the way life is; it's a faster life than it was at that time.

RA: What about the rates -- what percentage of the rates did you have to grieve? Did you grieve most of them, or just a few?

SW: It depends on the system you have. We had the m.t.m. system, which was measures. Most of the people weren't too happy.

RA: I guess that's what they're going over to, right now, in Wallace.

SW: That's right. I think they're having a heck of a problem. I've already spoke to some of them people over there. I told them, "To me, it's the worst system in the world. Because what it takes one person and another person to reach over for a knife is entirely different." Some people have longer arms, some people have shorter arms, some people can grab more pieces in one hand, just because of their hand. Generally when they try and use measured day work, the company turns around and tries to pick out the exceptional person. The exceptional person can maybe go a little over a hundred and thirty or a hundred and forty percent, but the other people can never go up to that rate. I think the measured day work should be measured by the average
person. If there's ten people on that job, you don't grab the fastest and you don't grab the slowest. You grab the person in between; that's how measured day rate should be measured.

RA: A lot of the people I've talked to about this whole question of time study have said that usually the time study is carried out under the best possible conditions. The time study might be done for half an hour, and a few pieces are produced, and then the time study people leave. It's been pointed out than in real production you've got machine breakdowns — all kinds of other things that come up in the course of a day.

SW: With a machine breakdown what you usually do is -- they have a clock -- clock out, and at that time you get a base rate, for the time you've clocked out. That still doesn't solve the problem. When they're going into measured day rate, they make all conditions favorable. Everything is there for you, so you don't have to move. No sooner the time study man leaves, than the conditions have already changed.

RA: Exactly. Everything's not there for you.

SW: Everything is not there.

RA: What do you mean by that; could you just describe it?

SW: At one time we used to have a trucker for seven people. The trucker used to bring over the racks, he used to bring over the work, used to put it on your bench, while the time study man was there. Once the time study man is not there, he's servicing you at that time — one trucker for seven people. What do the other six people do? They want work too. You have to go get your own work if you want to make any money.

RA: But obviously you can't make as much as the people who are being time studied and being serviced by the trucker.
SW: Right. It wasn't the trucker's fault. The trucker can only go so fast.

RA: It's just the way they set up the time study.

SW: So what we used to do was, when the trucker was servicing one person, and the other people were out of work, they'd be on the clock. By the time he serviced two or three people, the first guy he serviced was back on the clock too. It's a real rigamarole. As far as I'm concerned, time study is the worst thing there is.

RA: Obviously the way of doing it is not fair.

SW: It's not fair.

RA: There's no way you can convince anybody it has any relationship to real production conditions.

SW: Production is a heck of a thing, as far as I'm concerned. I believe in production, because without it you can't go anywhere. But everything has to be favorable, and not only that, you are on an incentive program, but your trucker isn't. Why should he bust his stones to service you? "When I get to you, I'll get to you." Right? You can't blame the guy. If these companies would turn around and figure that there is an incentive for everybody -- there should be an incentive even for an electrician to put in a bulb so the guy can work. The faster he gets that bulb in the faster the production goes out that door. But when he's on day rate, and the piece rate people are making three or four dollars an hour more than him, why should he hurry up?

RA: Yes. The situation you've just described to me is exactly the same as a fellow described up at Fafnir Bearing. They did a time study on one particular job where he was working, and they set it up perfectly. The machines were fine tuned, and the guy
just went at it and produced a lot of stuff. Right? And they did it for half an hour, and that was it. They took their rate off that.

SW: Which is not a true factor.

RA: Exactly. In the course of a day all kinds of things go wrong, and like you say, in a case where you're doing a lot of parts fairly quickly, shortage of materials.

SW: Anything can come to an incentive. There isn't a job that can't be on incentive. Because if a person sees that he's going to lose money because Joe is not producing for him, he's going to help Joe to get what he needs so he can produce too.

RA: I suppose they could work out some kind of a group incentive.

SW: That's what everybody should be. The trucker could get a percentage of what is due him. As far as I'm concerned, he's servicing these people, they're making big money, and he should get a cut out of the rate. This way, it would give him an incentive to furnish these people with more, so they could get more out the door. He'd get a higher pay, and the company would get their productivity.

RA: Did you ever propose that to the company?

SW: Oh definitely, we proposed it. They turned it down.

RA: Any reason?

SW: Yes. They don't see it's feasible. I know it seems kind of foolish, but that's what it amounts to.

RA: You think they're afraid the trucker might make too much money with incentive?

SW: As far as they're concerned he's not producing. He's not a production employee, he's a day rate employee. That is where I think all companies in this country are missing the boat.
RA: It seems to me that they're actually sacrificing productivity that way.

SW: There are some companies. The steel mills do have it. Everybody is on a percentage of the incentive. If he's servicing ten people, he gets a piece of the action, and he's going to hurry up so these people make more money, so he can make more money. It's the same thing. I think in parts of the auto industry they have it.

RA: So obviously it can be done. This company didn't want to do it, which you think is a mistake from their own point of view, in terms of getting more productivity.

SW: As far as the local unions, and the silver worker is concerned -- We've brought it up a number of times, and they just don't seem to want to move. Whether they're afraid of it, I just don't know. They've said it wasn't feasible.

RA: Today, with improvements and so on, a worker in the trade can turn out many more pieces than he used to be able to turn out.

SW: Definitely.

RA: Do you think the new rate of work is any harder on people? Are the machines doing enough of that increased speed, handling enough of that, that it's not a strain?

SW: What we're doing right now is using machinery that's ten or twenty years old. It's still the same machine. Different motors might have been put on, I don't know. Different pullies for the speed, and the speed can always be regulated. That I couldn't tell you.

RA: Do you think it's harder to work, in terms of what you're doing?

SW: Right now, I'm not doing this job. I'm in the tooling and engineering department. I'm assembling, making parts. I'm
not in that kind of situation any more. But the people that
are working in the flatware or hollowware industry are really
busting their stones to make a day's pay.

RA: So you think it's much harder for them now?

SW: Definitely it's much harder.

RA: Because the rate of work is faster? And the way the rates are
set they really have to work hard --

SW: They have to work hard to make a day's pay.

RA: You think it's harder than it was, say, twenty years ago, to
make a day's pay.

SW: I'd say it's much harder than it was twenty years ago. That's
my personal opinion. Other people might have a different opinion.
Maybe our pay wasn't as high -- but our cost of living wasn't
as high either.

RA: Exactly.

SW: You could do a lot more. I remember when I was seventeen or
eighteen years old, I used to keep five dollars out of my pay,
and that would handle gas and anything else I wanted to do.
Movies were twelve or thirteen cents. It wasn't that high.
You could go out and have a good time on a dollar. But today,
as you and I both know, you can take your wife out for dinner
and it costs you forty or forty-five dollars. At that time it
didn't cost you that; it cost you maybe ten bucks at the most,
and you would have had everything, with the trimmings.

RA: What about the quality of what's being produced today? What
do you think about that?

SW: The standard of quality is not what it used to be. The gauges
of metal are a little different. Your plate is much
different. But if you go back, the prices then were higher, to
sell, than they are today. So they had to cut back on the silver content that they put in the piece. What silver is today, and what it was six months ago, or a year ago -- it was even higher. It was outrageous. So no way could they put out a product at a competitive [price], so they went into a cheaper product -- a cheaper line in which the ordinary person could out and buy a thirty-five or forty-dollar tea set to have tea, because maybe they were having the boss coming that night. Then you put the tea set away -- and maybe you got a nice promotion out of the deal! -- and it would just stay in the closet. And instead of having that tea set refinished when you start seeing it turning yellow, and tarnishing -- even though you polish it, your handles and spouts, the yellow would still be in there, because they didn't have that dip detarnish you have today -- you could go out and buy another set, if you got a better job out of it, right?! For thirty-five dollars, it was a hell of a lot cheaper.

RA: Do you think with the faster rate of operation that they have today there are more defects coming -- as a result of that?

SW: Oh, yes. The inspecting part is not what it used to be. No way, no how.

RA: So the inspectors let more get by, in other words?

SW: Yes. The inspectors, too, are on piece work. It's a visual inspection. Years ago they used to take their time, go around the piece maybe ten or twelve times, but today, they go once around, that's it. If you seen it, fine; if you didn't, forget it. It's a quick visual inspection, because they have to do so much more today than they did in them days, to make a day's pay.

RA: Are the inspectors part of your bargaining unit?
SW: Everybody is part of our bargaining unit that's in the manufacturing end. The only people we don't have in our bargaining unit is the office help, foremen -- management.

RA: Do you think, from what you've seen, that it bothers a lot of the workers that there are more defects in what they're turning out, because of the higher speed?

SW: Yes. You figure that in the older people you'll find it an awful lot. They say to you, "Look what they're letting go." And it goes in the box. Because with the m.t.m. system, it doesn't matter. You're a packer, you pack. That's your job, no other job. If there's a leg missing off a coffee pot, forget it. That's not your job, to inspect. Your job is one thing, to wrap and pack. And you find the older people still can't do it that way. They'll pull it out. Which is the right way to do, as far as we're concerned, but as far as the system is concerned, it's not the right thing to do.

RA: So they actually might lose a little bit of their piece rate -- it just galls them so much --

SW: It galls them to see stuff like that. I think all companies are the same. You go and buy a new car, it's the same thing. You find dents on a brand new car, and it has three more dents before you take it out of the garage. Every industry is the same. It's a faster way of life. People are not looking for a perfect product any more. But yet, some of the people that are in the silver industry -- some of the smaller companies -- do have a little more pride in their work, because they don't ship as much, but they make a quality product. I think people eventually will go back to a quality product, because they're not going to spend big money on a piece of junk. They'll spend
it on something that is good. More and more today you see people are looking at these different things.

RA: How did you work your way into the job you have now making machinery?

SW: When the union started coming in we had a bidding process, and bids were awarded on physical ability, and ability to perform the job. If you had physical fitness and the ability to perform the job, they would give you a ten day trial period, and if you fulfilled your ten day trial period, you would go right into the job.

RA: You had been working in production, and then you bid on the current job? Were there a couple of steps?

SW: I bid into the schooling. We had schooling on tool and die making, and that's what I bid to. I went to school, finished the school completely, and then went into production. But as far as I was concerned it wasn't my field, so I bid out of that into an assembly area -- making different parts. I just couldn't stand close tolerances. That's my own view. If you take your job home with you, it's time to give it up, and that's what I was doing, because of close tolerances. It would give me headaches. I just got out of it.

RA: And you went into assembly?

SW: After these guys had made the parts you assembled them. You fitted them, to the correct dimensions that the prints called for.

RA: So you were assembling parts on machines -- chucks and all the various parts on the machinery that makes the silver products?

SW: No, they didn't make the products. I'm in a different phase of it.
RA: Has the steel workers local organized these other production lines?

SW: Definitely.

RA: What are these other production lines.

SW: Different concerns. What's called for.

RA: So it's like specialized machine-shop production, basically.

SW: Right.

[details omitted]

RA: Do you think imports are well made?

SW: Imports are no better made than what we make; as a matter of fact, some of them are even worse, because people over here take pride in their work. I feel that these concerns doing these imports, overseas -- for what reason, I don't know. The knowledge, the ability, and the people to do the work, are right here in these towns, the towns of this country. There's no reason why they can't be doing it.

RA: I was thinking about asking you about how you place people who have been laid off from the silver trade.

SW: They have a bumping process. They might bump from one place to another. A lot of people take early retirement. People of sixty years old and over can collect t.r.a. for a year and a half. But all that has changed with the new policy that Regan has. Some of these people are being hassled by unemployment, and the people that are really being hassled are the older people. It's not the younger people.

RA: They actually challenge their claims at unemployment?

SW: Yes. They have to file appeals, they have to go and reopen their claims. Some of these people have never collected in their lives. They've worked thirty years on the job -- some even forty years --
and they're hassling them at unemployment.

RA: That's the Connecticut unemployment office, with a Democratic governor.

SW: This comes out of Washington. It's a new unemployment rule, and you have to follow it. And the new t.r.a. rules that came into effect -- say you collect unemployment for twenty-six weeks; the t.r.a. picks up the next twenty-six weeks at the same rate of your unemployment. If you collected $130 before, that's what you will collect on t.r.a., no more and no less.

RA: T.r.a. --

SW: Trade readjustments.

RA: Because of the imports.

SW: Right. A lot of these people that are sixty years and over, I feel myself -- it's unfair to them. As you know, they say there is no discrimination against age when you go looking for a job, but I think some of these people in Washington had better look around. Let them go try to find a job at sixty years old. Not just on who they know, but just going from door to door, from business to business, trying to get a job. Then they will know what the hell it's all about. Because no way is a company going to hire a person sixty years old when they can hire a person that's twenty.

RA: In terms of placement of people who are not going to retire, can you often find jobs that match the skills they've developed in the silver industry?

SW: [details omitted]

RA: Do you have any feeling for what kinds of manufacturing work someone who had the skills developed in the silver trade would be qualified for?
SW: There are different little places around, and other silver plants, all over the country. But most people have roots here, so they try to find a place close to home. There are small silver plants, and some have found jobs.

RA: How about other trades besides silver?

SW: There might have been. We don't keep in touch with everybody. The ones that run into a problem get into contact with us, and we try our best to help them out in any way we can, especially ones who are laid off, or take early retirement. Anything we can do for them, we do. People who have accepted severance we consider to have quit, and they're not considered part of the local. Neither are the people who retire, but we feel with the Reagan administration cutting their t.r.a. out -- and they retired under the assumption, especially the ones that are sixty years old, that they would collect until they were sixty-one and a half, at full t.r.a., which at the time was $169 a week. A person could live on that, plus his early retirement. But now some people are not getting anything -- nothing at all.

[end of side one]

RA: Do you have any feeling for whether the local offices of the Labor Department -- the employment bureau -- is doing a good job in trying to match the skills of people in the silver trade to available jobs?

SW: I think they have a problem, just like we have, with the people on layoff. With cutbacks here and there, and industry the way it is, it's harder to find a job -- and unemployment has the same problem. There isn't that many jobs. Mostly on unemployment they have jobs for skilled help. They do find skilled help jobs in some categories. In some others, no way. It depends on what
category you're in. If you're looking for a carpenter's job today, that's down the drain too, because there is not much building being done. But if you go into the tooling end of it, there's still some being done, because companies still have to have tools, and machinery, to operate.

RA: I think some countries -- Sweden in particular -- have a whole bunch of laws that require all kinds of advance notice of changes in technology that are going to lead to loss of jobs, or any major changes, so people get some advance notice about what's coming down the pike. We don't have that.

SW: [Management today] doesn't feel an obligation towards people. They have younger ideas, and the older people, who were in management before, felt a little bit more for these people than today. I think all companies are doing the same. It's too bad. Wherever you're working, you're just a number, and that is it.

RA: Over the years, to your knowledge, have workers in silver plants given all kinds of suggestions to management that were helpful in increasing productivity?

SW: Oh yes. People have had different ideas on helping productivity.

RA: What kinds of suggestions -- can you give me any specific ideas -- have workers made over the years?

SW: Let's say a worker has five or six different kinds of machinery. Instead of letting the machinery run, with the lights on, all the time, he would shut one machine off, and go to another machine and shut the lights off. This would be a savings for the company. They show them short-cuts -- solder, buffing, all different things -- where they could do the same work in a shorter time. There are different angles -- people would make suggestions, and no matter what it was, the suggestions were darn good.
RA: So basically, then, in the last twenty years there were no major
new processes, but small changes in the machinery to make it
work a little faster.

SW: Right.

RA: A little better, too?

SW: I wouldn't say better; just faster.

RA: That's interesting.

End of Interview