Interview with Worker 8 on 1/19/82 by Robert Asher for the Connecticut Workers and Technology oral history project.

Asher: Let's see, you have been in the business for forty-three years?

Worker 8: Forty-eight years.

Asher: When you started, what kind of assembly or parts were you working with?

Worker 8: I worked with dial a watch—putting the parts together. Then I went from there to changing parts, which was considered repairing—to repair the same watch after it was put together. Then, we in turn, put it on conveyors—where you set a conveyor—from the start, it went all the way around together to repair and do balancing. All the different parts were on a conveyor and they had at that time about five conveyors that took care of these. They had about thirty-five people on a conveyor each, maybe some spots had two people for the job. After that, I went to the shipping room, where they made the boxes. We used to have a box machine, and the boxes would come down and we would fit them together and pile them up. From there I went out to Middlebury. This was on Sherry street; then I went to Middlebury. In Middlebury, I went into a room where they had and we did some soldering—it was on the hair spring. From there I went to the , where they had the kick presses, where you had to keep your foot out to make the piece come down—and then those kick
became air presses. After the air presses, they went to the electronic. Then they in turn, did away with ninety-five percent of that to go on automation, where they had fifty girls who amounted to about ten because on each automation machine, it was able to do at least ten jobs — each machine. That's the way it is working right now.

Asher: What are you working on now?

Worker 8: I'm still in the press room working on drill. We call it a foot drill but it's electronically controlled. You just push the buttons — there's an electronic box in the back. You push the button and the machine comes down and does whatever it has to do — a hole or a slot or whatever. It goes into a chute, and that's it.

Asher: What are you doing besides bringing the piece down? Do you have to check as it's being machined?

Worker 8: Whoever is doing the pieces, you have to make sure that you check it regularly yourself and then the inspector, in general.—We might get one inspector for five jobs and she is responsible but you, as an operator, are just as responsible. As a matter of fact, I think you are more responsible because I think the operator knows more about the machine than the inspector. You can sense or feel that there is something wrong.

Asher: Do you make adjustments on the machine if it is not working right?

Worker 8: No, the tool setter (does). If there is something that is
not quite right, they knock it down until such time
that a tool setter can come over and repair it, whatever
has to be done, and then the inspector gives about
four or five pieces and if she finds it's alright,
they set up the machine again and you go to work.

Asher: You said that you're experienced in knowing whether
the machine is not working right.

Worker 8: Everybody has that sense of responsibility. You do it
visually. If you're working on a machine, and the
inspector only comes once an hour, and in that hour
you have done bad work, unless they find it is a
direct fault of the machine that you can't see or
know, you're just as responsible as the inspector.
You're supposed to know.

Asher: How many pieces per minute does the machine actually
make?

Worker 8: It varies according to the price and the prices are set up. The
majority of the machines go at a four cycle. In a four cycle,
you can probably do a thousand an hour and make
additional -- depending on the cycle of the machine
that calls for how many, it depends on you. If you sit
down and work every minute of the hour, you can make
a good day's pay because it's piece work. The flat
rate people also have a standard to meet, and they
get so much, whether they do it or not. If they don't,
sooner or later they're not there anymore.

Asher: You say you're using an electronic foot pedal to bring
the parts on?

Worker 8: To load them off. You push a button and electronically,
it's all connected. Some have it and some don't. Some blow off automatically. As soon as the press comes down, it releases it and throws it off. Then there are others where you have to use your foot to release it.

Asher: Have you worked on both types?
Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: Which do you like best?
Worker 8: Without the foot because with the foot, you lift it every time and by the end of the day, that's the end of your foot. It's either swollen or it hurts.

Asher: Most of them do it automatically. Do you like the automatic one?
Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: It's much easier for you.
Worker 8: Yes. By having the automatic, the price is lower, naturally. With the use of your foot, the price is greater. There are more without the foot than with the foot now.

Asher: How much do they knock down the price with the automatic as compared to the foot machine?
Worker 8: It varies but it's a pretty big difference.

Asher: Significant? Ten percent maybe?
Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: When you first started working, I guess you were doing small assembly with screwdrivers and pliers and things like that.

Worker 8: Yes. By hand. After that, the screwdrivers came down and worked electronically. You used to have to take
your tweezer, hold it in your hand, and make it go, but all of a sudden, they have screwdrivers that come down and it screws it on.

Asher: So you operate the machine that brings the screwdriver down and you just hold the piece in place.

Worker 8: You hold it together and take the screwdriver and put it on each screw and it automatically turns the screw. It does it much faster.

Asher: So the screwdriver is held by some kind of brace or something and you just turn the screwdriver on by hitting a button or switch or whatever.

Worker 8: Yes. (unclear)

Asher: How long ago? Thirty years?

Worker 8: Oh, no. Maybe fifteen years or so.

Asher: Did you prefer the new kind of automatics—well, not automatics, but new screwdriver that was held?

Worker 8: I couldn't tell you that because I never worked on it. I was still doing it the old way—and then I was transferred to another job, so I didn't have much experience with that.

Asher: When you were on the conveyor belt, were you doing just repair?

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: Did you like the repair better than the assembly?

Worker 8: Yes, I do.

Asher: What would you use? Screwdrivers and small pliers for the repair?

Worker 8: The little parts like the wheel, the balance wheel, the whole bit. You put the back on and you screw it
on and give the wheels a little turn to see that they were all moving in the right direction, and it went to the next person to be balanced. They balanced the wheels.

Asher: While you were working on the repair, did the tools change very much?

Worker 8: No, not while I was there. After(wards), they created a complete repair department, where they did the watch from beginning to end, that was considered--
where they could take a watch apart and fix it. If it was a watch that had been preassembled, then they fixed it. They created that along the way, and they since have done away with that.

Asher: When you were on the conveyor belt, how did you know which ones to repair? They were marked?

Worker 8: They came to me in trays and they were put together and inspected. Maybe the balance wheel was off or the center wheel was off or whatever, and there was a little ticket put on there - the center wheel or whatever. You had to take the whole thing apart and just change the part that called for changing, and then put it back together again.

Asher: Where did you go after you worked on the conveyor belt? What was the next job you had? In the stock?

Worker 8: Yes. We had to weigh that material--little parts, and so many in a little plastic--

Asher: Why did you go to that? Was there a reason?

Worker 8: Yes, it was a better job.

Asher: Was it paid more or it was more interesting for you?
Worker 8: It was a flat rated job. At that time, they were in the process of making changes in our jobs and they didn't need as many girls as they had previously. This job was open and I decided I would like it and took it.

Asher: Did you prefer working on flat rate to piece rate?

Worker 8: No. Up to this point, I prefer piece work because I think it keeps you alert. Like I said, up to this point, I wouldn't want to lose my speed. I stay with it and I think I can keep up to the girls who are younger or whatever.

Asher: After the stock job, what was the next one?

Worker 8: By that point, I went on inspection, but that was during the war. I was inspector at that time. Then, I worked in--where I was doing the soldering on the hair spring. Then that department was closed down, so I was given preference of what jobs I would like to go on, due to seniority. They did mention that there was an opening in the press room, where they make the big parts. But he said, "You don't want that." I said,"Yes, I do. I'll take it." So I took it. I've been there for a lot of years now, just in that department and I really like it. There were some big changes made there. It's been cut so badly now -
I think there are about seven girls left. There probably were about one hundred and fifty, and now it's down to seven on manual. The rest is all automated.

Asher: When you first went into the press room, how big were the parts that the press was turning out? The size of my finger nail or smaller?

Worker 8: The frames, back frames (unclear) Some were small parts - the little pellet levers that go inside.

Asher: What about the gears? Were they pressed or made some other way?

Worker 8: I didn't have anything to do with the gears. (unclear) I've never made too much progress in the shop because I've always been in (unclear). The only way I was advanced was the first time we got the upgraded jobs, and you had to apply (for them). At this point, it doesn't interest me. Along the way, I was only on different jobs because of seniority or a job was closing or a room was closing down.

Asher: You're saying you think they held you back from certain jobs because of your union work?

Worker 8: No. I wouldn't say they did but to say, at the time, that they were promoting people (unclear)--Time, alone, eliminated those positions anyway. I do feel that the union was something that they felt I was more interested in than anything else. (unclear)

Asher: When you went to the press room, it was a hydraulic kind of press at the beginning?
Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: There was a mechanical foot lever that you used?

Worker 8: No, your own foot control.

Asher: The power of your foot did the stamping.

Worker 8: There were some little, tiny parts,—little wheels.

Asher: That must have been hard.

Worker 8: It was. It was terrible.

Asher: Did they pay a good rate on that because it was such hard work?

Worker 8: No. (Guess they figured) we wouldn't make money anyway. (unclear)

Asher: So it was very hard, then, when a lot of the power had to come from your foot. When did they change over from the power not coming from your foot?

Worker 8: A long time ago.

Asher: Ten to fifteen years?

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: That's when they went to the electric foot lever, was that it?

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: When that happened, did you think that was a good change?

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: It made the job easier, basically?

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: Then the next switch was to being totally automatic.

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: So those were the three steps. When they went from the foot lever, where you had to supply the power, to the
electric foot lever, did they increase the number of pieces you had to make to get your rate?

Worker 8: That's what they call a complete change. If they make a substantial change in the job, that calls for rate timing of the job.

Asher: The job was retimed.

Worker 8: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, it was actually a whole new setup. You put the piece on with a tweezer and kick your foot out. That was one thing. Later they made it with their Bentley, where you could almost put the piece on with your finger—then just flick the buttons. Either it blew off or you had to take it off.

Asher: You obviously could make more pieces, but was your take home pay a little better now with the electric foot pedal?

Worker 8: The only way to say that our pay was good or bad was with the increases and the change in the jobs. Sometimes, the change in the job let you make more money but as far as (unclear)

Asher: So you didn't get any kind of significant pay increase when you went from the mechanical foot pedal to the electric foot pedal.

Worker 8: Oh, no; except you had to do more pieces.

Asher: Do you think that made it harder in a way, or what?

Worker 8: Now it was more time consuming. You had to spend more time. Before, it was strictly up to you what you could do. You probably tried to work faster but you could only work as fast as the split would let you go. On the automatic, all you had to do was go this way,
put another piece on this way. Sure you could do more pieces, but the money wasn't that great as far as the difference is concerned from the foot to the automatic.

Asher: Do you think the take-home was a little bit more when they went from foot to automatic?

Worker 8: Yes, but all that came from general increases, not from the base.

Asher: It didn't come from the piece rate.

Worker 8: No, it didn't, because they, in turn, were saying that it was easier, so now the rate shouldn't be as good as this one was. That you, as the piecework operator, would find your way of doing this, and probably be able to do as many or a little bit more, even though the rate wasn't any better. If you evened out the same or a little bit more, you were probably lucky. The change didn't warrant anything because the money wasn't there - they felt by doing that, that it was easier for you.

Asher: You said your foot didn't get as tired when you went from mechanical to electric. Did you feel, though, because you had to make more pieces, that the job was harder in that sense?

Worker 8: No, no.

Asher: That was okay. Since they went to the electric foot pedal, during that time, did they make any other changes in the machine that would make the number of pieces you produce higher? The machines worked faster. In other words, did your rate depend on producing more
Worker 8: Yes, because the machine is electronic and they can set it fast. In setting the machine faster, that automatically makes the rate lower. They figure, if the machine is faster, you can do more pieces against this rate than you could if the machine is slow, (where) naturally, the rate has to be higher. By the same token, if the machine changes and they don't change the rate, you've got to work just as hard, maybe not physically, but you still have to keep going--

Asher: To concentrate.

Worker 8: Yes, you have to concentrate and stay with it.

Asher: Do you think that the rates are too high and that the speeds are too high now?

Worker 8: No, definitely not.

Asher: You can handle it.

Worker 8: Yes. The girls would like to have them going faster.

Asher: Really?

Worker 8: They do, sometimes. Nobody knows about it.

Asher: So they get some more parts.

Worker 8: And make a little money.

Asher: Why do you think the company doesn't set them faster?

Worker 8: They set them according to what they think will not produce scrap. The engineer comes in and sets the machine--and they bring in a timer to time it accordingly.

Asher: Yes, but you think they could actually get it going a little faster.

Worker 8: Sure. The tool setters speed it up a little bit for the girls so that they can make a little more money.
Some of them go out of bounds, and then the first thing you know, I'm in the office for something (unclear)

Asher: So they cut the rate, seeing as how you can produce more. As long as it doesn't go too fast, the quality of the part is decent.

Worker 8: Yes. (unclear) --they set it up--you can make an adjustment as long as you don't go overboard.

Asher: You might actually be getting more parts but then you could take it easy for a few minutes--the total number in a day, but the strain on you wouldn't be quite as much.

Worker 8: Yes, that's what they do it for, not so you'll go way up here. They do it to help the operator.

Asher: Basically, certainly in the part stamping, the technological changes have made your job easier. The pay hasn't increased greatly, but the job is better now.

Worker 8: Yes. I think the people who are (unclear)--the people who are on automation take care of thirteen machines max(imum) and not less than five--they have to go around and check all the machines and if there's something, they have to do that. These are people who are on their feet all day.

Asher: Whereas you sit. You could probably get automation, if you wanted to, couldn't you? You have enough seniority. But you don't want to.

Worker 8: I don't want to go over there. I can make more money on piecework.

Asher: You can make more money on piecework than on the automation machines.

Worker 8: The automation machines are flat rated.
Worker 8

Asher: Why do you think the company doesn't have all the machines as automation machines then?

Worker 8: They do but the - that's why there are so few in our room. Those are eventually--they may have--if they have five or six or ten at the most--they may keep that many as the changes are made as far as the new model coming in, but they're automating more all the time.

Asher: So you think it's a matter of time before they eliminate your machine and put you on automation probably?

Worker 8: I think they'll always have a few, like I say, there might be five or ten.

Asher: Why would that be?

Worker 8: New parts coming in, new models. Before they put them on automation--

Worker 8: It's like a pilot production, so you were in that area.

Asher: So it will always be the pilot production and you don't use the automation machines for the pilot production.

Worker 8: Right. After they get it as they see fit, they set up the machine on automation and they roll it.

Asher: Well, I guess technological changes for you, at least, have been good, although they have eliminated the jobs of a lot of people.

Worker 8: That's the sad part of it. They eliminated many jobs.

Asher: And you also feel that people who tend the automation machines have to really work fast.

Worker 8: They have to go on some machines that are a distance--a walking distance that's quite a bit at the end of the day (unclear) --I'm sure they would cover a lot of
ground.

Asher: Do you think there is more absenteeism among the people who have to work on the automation machines, because their job is just not that pleasant in many ways?

Worker 8: It's pleasant enough but because of the working (unclear) --you can't keep it up.

Asher: They get tired and they take --

Worker 8: They do, they take .

Asher: I assume the contract must provide for a certain number of sick days each year. No paid sick days at all? So, if you take a day off, you're on your own. And yet, sometimes, people will do that even though they are losing money because they're just too tired.

Worker 8: Yes. Sometimes they work a double shift - Sometimes they work ten to twelve hours. They ask them to come back after they have gone home. They might go home at three thirty, and call them back at six and work until eleven thirty or twelve. It was a tiring situation, but they don't even take that into consideration. People take time off they'd rather not. Two or three times they get a record of discussion, instead of saying, "Gee, that person has worked steady, and certainly they deserve it." It's not costing them anything except they have to fill it - they have people who come in as replacement. It's really no disadvantage to the company or the person unless there is a group of them. As individuals, there's no hindrance to them.

Asher: Have you ever tried negotiating to get actual paid sick days?
Worker 8: Sure.

Asher: No success, so far.

Worker 8: No. Last time around, they asked for six.

Asher: That's what state workers get. They get, I think, five a year--and it accumulates. Do you get any personal days?

Worker 8: No.

Asher: You see, they get a few personal days too, so they can actually get ten days off a year.

Worker 8: We get nothing except for paid holidays.

Asher: When you close down for the Christmas break, you don't get paid during that time, do you?

Worker 8: At Christmas time, we get four paid days, because we have a floating holiday--so we collect one day from unemployment. The following week, we had one day's pay--New Year's Day, I think. The rest we get in unemployment. The sign up is at the plant.

Asher: So you get about two weeks off but you don't get paid by the factory for most of that, you have to collect something from unemployment. Is there anything like a vacation pay? In your contract?

Worker 8: Yes.

Asher: Is it two weeks or three weeks?

Worker 8: Depending on the length of service. I have five weeks plus two extra days. After thirty years, I think they give you two extra days.

Asher: Can you think of anything else to add?

Worker 8: Not really. I have not been involved in too many changes--
Worker 8

Asher: Except on the stamping machines--

Worker 8: And the foot presses.

Asher: That's very interesting, though, what you told me.

Worker 8: Those were the days when you kicked that—when you were handed a layout. You were only doing a little part and you wondered why you had to do all that to make that little thing, and it seemed so strange that all of a sudden, those weren't there anymore, and what a difference it was where you sat down, put that part on and just go like that.

Asher: Did you ever get cramps from all the kicking?

Worker 8: Sure I did. Of course, I was a lot younger then, too.

Young people can take a lot. Fortunately, for people today, the work is easier. The money is not that good, but the work is easier.

Asher: Shall we end here?

Worker 8: Sure.

(End of Interview)