Interview with Worker 7 on January 19, 1982 for the Connecticut Workers and Technology oral history project by Robert Asher.

Asher: You said you started in 1952. What particular operation were you doing then?

Worker 7: I was doing sale operations. I was doing the 'ends' of the watches. I was winding them, setting the time, putting them up for timing, like so many hours, and then I was taking them out and getting them ready to be shipped.

Asher: Was that basically using your hands and screwdrivers for the most part? Any other tools that were used?

Worker 7: Yes. Later, I'd say in the mid-fifties, I was more or less summoning the movement of the watch. I don't know whether you have ever seen the movement of the watch but you have individual little pieces that you work with screwdrivers and magnetic tweezers to summon the movement together--crown and stem--whether the lead case closes--whether the straps were put that way.

Asher: You did the whole movement?

Worker 7: We did the whole movement, plus put the dial on, the hands, the whole movement.

Asher: So you took all the parts that had been made and basically assembled completely, to make an entire piece.

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: Was that on piece rate or day rate?

Worker 7: It was more or less on the piece work rate.
Asher: What do you mean by more or less?

Worker 7: It was more or less because we had so many movements to assemble per eight working hours. (We had so many movements to assemble.) If we assembled so many, we would get more money but if we didn't make it, then we would get less.

Asher: It was kind of like the piece rate.

Worker 7: This is what I am saying. If you made your amount that you're supposed to make, which the time rate put on there for a number of hours, then you would get more money; but if something happened and you had problems with it during the working hours, you would get less. If you didn't make that certain amount, you would get less money.

Asher: Did you have problems often?

Worker 7: Not really. The problem movements were on the parts. You may get a screw that wouldn't fit in a certain section that it was supposed to fit in.

Asher: When you had a bad screw, what would you do? Would you call the foreman and say, "These are bad parts."

Worker 7: Yes. Then you may be putting one hand on it because we had to put three on--maybe some of them would be bent and maybe you would put it on and you couldn't adjust it because it was bent and then you would have to take it off and call your foreman for that. Maybe you would get which they don't have anymore. These older watches would have the crown and stem. That's what you had to set your watch with, when you had a wind-up watch. You would get it when it was in the
movements and sometimes you would find that the little slot wasn't cut correctly on the stem so naturally it wouldn't go to the movement. It would be more or less defective for parts.

Asher: If there were a lot of defective parts, could you say to the foreman, "Look, it's not my fault if the parts are putting me on day rate or hourly because it is cutting into my quota--but it's not my fault." Could you ever say something like that?

Worker 7: Yes, I would say that to them. Depending who your foreman was, he would more or less give you an average. Sometimes you would get one who would say, "That's too bad. You could have done your work during break hour" or something like that.

Asher: Did you make the number you were supposed to make each day? Did you usually make that? Did you, most of the time?

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: Did you ever 'go over' a lot?

Worker 7: On certain jobs because I did a lot of jobs pertaining to the watch. I could assemble the watch. (laugh) I guess I could after twenty years. Some were much easier and quicker than others--and then I would 'go over,' almost every day, according to what job I was on.

Asher: How was it decided what job you would have each day? Who made that decision?

Worker 7: The foreman, if he knew you could do it.

Asher: Did you ever ask for particular jobs because you liked them better than others?
Worker 7: Yes. I have asked for different jobs because they are easier or it was easier for me to make the basic rate on them. They were more or less good to give it to me because you have certain people suited for certain jobs. Everybody can't do the same job, that's why they have so many on them. You could do a certain job better than I and I could do a certain one better than you. They more or less went along with me.

Asher: Did the basic assembly process become more difficult or less difficult over the twenty years that you worked in assembly.

Worker 7: They were less because as the years passed, the parts started coming in preassembled. They started coming in with the movement already together and the dial was together with the hands on it, so it was preassembled.

Asher: Where was it preassembled? Abroad? Overseas?

Worker 7: I won't say anything. Who knows? It was coming in preassembled.

Asher: Before they started giving you the preassembled parts, were the parts themselves, in any way, coming through with better quality or at the same quality over the years?

Worker 7: I think they were better before than when they started coming in preassembled.

Asher: The overall quality was better before the preassembly.

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: Up until that time when they started preassembly, was the quality of the parts improving?

Worker 7: Yes, they were. We were getting less percentage of
rejects.

Asher: Was the assembly process itself changing that much? (before the preassembly) Was it getting more complicated or less complicated as they changed the design of watches?

Worker 7: No, it was getting less complicated because that way you got to know more about the watch and basically all the parts are almost the same. As you got more experience on it, each time they changed models, you knew basically, how to put it together, so it got less complicated.

Asher: They did not make any drastic change in the design that would present a very new kind of assembly process?

Worker 7: No, no, not until they started making the electric--when they were making just the mechanical, but they started making electronic element watches.

Asher: Did you work on the electronic?

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: How did that change affect you? What changed and how did you feel about it?

Worker 7: I really didn't like it too much because it was less work. It was like less work for less.

Asher: With the electronic works.

Worker 7: With the electronic part because it was coming even more assembled--and it would only last for maybe a year. When they really started coming--mechanical and preassembled, which was in the seventies--1972 that it started really coming, that's when they laid off a lot of the girls and they got the pilot. They
only kept a certain amount of girls, just the pilot. We just really got the watch started, got it straightened and running really smooth, and then it would only last about a year and then it's gone. Then we were out of work again.

Asher: So there were some times when even you were laid off?

Worker 7: Yes. I've been laid off.

Asher: Despite twenty years of seniority.

Worker 7: Yes. Would you believe it!

Asher: Incredible. When you said the electric parts came in when you were working on them, did you get basically the same rate?

Worker 7: No. That was one reason why I left the watch area.

Asher: The rate was cut on the electric?

Worker 7: Yes. They were even cutting it more. We were only getting the labor rate that they had to pay you, the minimum, and I figured it was over twenty years and I deserved to get more than the minimum wage. That was one reason why I left the watch area.

Asher: When you said the assembly with the electric parts was less work and that you didn't like it, outside of the fact that they cut your pay, what else didn't you like about it?

Worker 7: I didn't like it because the parts that we had to put together were very hard to work with. It was very, very hard. The parts that came in already pre-assembled – they were very hard to work with to get a good watch. The reject rate was almost triple, and it wasn't due to the operator, it was due to the parts.
Asher: What was the particular problem with them? Were they too big to get into the watch or what?

Worker 7: Yes, because, for instance, the part frame wouldn't match the back frame or either one of them would be bent and the parts were coming in rust, so there were many, many problems.

Asher: So it was hard to do a good job and that bothered you, is that what you mean?

Worker 7: Right. It was hard to do a good job and then, since the parts came in already preassembled, the basic rate on the job - you had to produce much more than we had to years ago when we built it ourselves. We had to produce many more pieces per day.

Asher: Was it really possible to produce the extra number of pieces?

Worker 7: No, it was not, but they put the amount of pieces on the job and they wanted you to do it, but if the parts were bad, they didn't want to know anything. They wanted you to just do it. If you didn't do that certain amount, you only got the minimum.

Asher: Did the union ever put in a grievance on the new rates?

Worker 7: Yes. They probably have some in now. (laugh)

Asher: But they weren't able to get a lot of it changed, then, is that it?

Worker 7: Yes, they did get a lot of things changed and in the meantime, I got retroactive pay.

Asher: Really? But you had to fight for it.

Worker 7: Yes. You had to fight for it constantly, every week.

Asher: That often?
Worker 7: Every week, when you get your pay, you had to go to the union.

Asher: And say, "I should have really got more. I was docked here. I shouldn't have been docked there" - this kind of thing?

Worker 7: Right, because it wasn't my problem. I think the whole thing is due to your foreman, your supervisor, whoever is in charge. All of that has changed within the past two years. We have new foremen that don't know a thing about watches. They bring all these new guys in, and they supposedly do big wonders. They don't know anything themselves, and this is what they expect - a lot of production.

Asher: What did they do with the old foremen?

Worker 7: Well, they retired.

Asher: Things were better with the older generation.

Worker 7: Much better with the older generation.

Asher: Do you think that the new electronic watches were good watches, as good as the old watches with the mechanical movements?

Worker 7: No.

Asher: The quality just wasn't up--

Worker 7: The quality is not as good as the old one. I can't say it for the electronic watches aren't as good as the mechanical.

Asher: Do you think they will break more often?

Worker 7: Sure they do, because they are battery operated, number one, and their battery is guaranteed for a year. Most of the time they don't last a year and with the
mechanical one, you just had to wind it up. In fact I still have one that I've had now for almost thirty years, and I've never had any problem with it. The only problem I've had is to forget to wind it.

Asher: So you reset it.

Worker 7: Yes, you reset it. That's the only problem.

Asher: Did you find that the electronic part assembly with the conditions being more frustrating and you got more pay, just was not as interesting as the mechanical parts?

Worker 7: Yes, because when I was on mechanical, assembling all the parts together, it was beautiful because you kept your attention and your mind on something, and before you knew it, the day had gone by. There were no problems. With the assembled one, I didn't like it because you more or less did the same thing for eight or nine or ten hours, whatever your hours, and it was so boring, plus you weren't making any money, so that's what the whole situation was.

Asher: Now, when you switched over to the gyros, did you find that more interesting work?

Worker 7: Yes, much more interesting.

Asher: How would it differ from mechanical assembly?

Worker 7: For the main, with gyros, you get a basic rate. You didn't have that worry, number one, no matter if you had any kind of problems, you didn't have to worry that your pay would be cut or that you would get the minimum. You were going to get that rate regardless. Other than that, I find it very interesting because now maybe
I build whole molds, I create an assembly - molders, the IG molders for submarines and missiles and all that. I find it very, very interesting.

Asher: The parts that you are using on the gyros for assembly, are they the same size as the mechanical parts that you had formerly worked with?

Worker 7: No, they're larger. They're just size wise. The ones that I used for the watches were tiny, tiny parts for the movement but the ones that I'm using for gyros are much larger parts.

Asher: Do you find this less eye strain and general fatigue because the parts are bigger?

Worker 7: I did not mind it then because I was young and I could see very, very good, and so it wasn't straining, even when I was doing the mechanical. Now, it probably would be. I'm older and have to wear glasses to see small print and all that. Other than that, I find it very interesting.

Asher: Is the actual series of steps in turning screws or whatever, is the gyro assembly really very different from the mechanical assembly?

Worker 7: Yes. It's completely different.

Asher: Do you use different tools?

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: What kinds of different tools do you use now?

Worker 7: I use a torque, I use different screwdrivers, different tweezers and all different tools.

Asher: Is it in a sense more complicated, do you think, or just different?
Worker 7: I wouldn't say complicated, it was just different. But as you know, after you do something for awhile, you automatically know what's next. After I did something, I automatically knew what to pick up next. And the same thing with gyros.

Asher: Now the pieces are larger on the gyro. Are there fewer pieces actually compared to the movement?

Worker 7: Yes, much fewer because we would have a tray, about a foot long, I would say, with all the different sections in it for all different parts, and so there are fewer pieces to put a gyro together than it is with a watch.

Asher: Do you make more gyros than you would completed watches each day?

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: Do you do any measuring & testing after you assemble the gyro?

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: What do you measure or test?

Worker 7: I have to use a micrometer and then we have to use that constantly and (be) precise. We have to make sure that certain parts and sizes are the same, and we have to make it all around the edges to make sure that they cut the part and that it's level.

Asher: Is it your experience that there are fewer defective parts being given to you for the gyro assembly than previously on watches?

Worker 7: On the mechanical? Which part of the watch? After it was preassembled?
Asher: You said there were a lot of defects on the electrical, so obviously there are probably less defects with the gyro. In general, do you have a serious problem with defects or very few problems with defects now?

Worker 7: No, we don't have that much problem with defect parts.

Asher: That must be a kind of relief.

Worker 7: That's a relief there, yes. We don't have as much as we did when I was in the watch area. It doesn't have nearly as many defects. In the gyro, we don't have any parts that come assembled, preassembled.

Asher: So you do the whole thing yourself.

Worker 7: We have to do the whole thing ourself, yes. Then we have to do electrical tests, then we have to do a certain amount of . You've got to know math, you've got to add, subtract--

Asher: There are a lot of different steps to what you're doing.

Worker 7: Yes.

Asher: Much more varied in a sense.

Worker 7: Yes, than it was on the watches. It's much more interesting.

Asher: So you said that was the most interesting job you've had in all these years.

Worker 7: Yes, really.

Asher: And if you have to choose, which would you want - doing that or the mechanical?

Worker 7: I would want gyros. I had experience in gyros before, about fifteen years ago. I was only in there for a short while, but then they knew that I was experienced
on the watch. Meanwhile I was laid off in the watch area while they were changing and we were waiting for another one to start, so I was in gyro for awhile soldering, which I liked very much. Soldering wires to the gyro under the microscope. I liked it, it was very, very interesting. They knew I had experience in soldering so when they started soldering on the electrical watch, we had to solder in wires under the microscope to make connection with the electronic and make it work. Then they called me from gyro back to the watch area. I was in the gyro for--nine years.

Asher: Do you do any soldering now, also?

Worker 7: I think I will be but it's not very much soldering that I'll be doing. I think I will be doing some because we all have to be certified solderers to work on the gyro. There has been a certain amount of soldering but not like in the watch area.

Asher: Now you say that today on the gyro you get a base rate and that's it, a flat rate. Is it a decent rate, in your opinion?

Worker 7: Well, I guess you never think you get enough money. You never really, but it's fair. Much better than the watch area.

Asher: But the work is not necessarily more skilled or do you think it is more skilled?

Worker 7: It is.

Asher: You think it is more skilled.

Worker 7: It's more skilled now that it was going back fifteen years ago. You see, on the watches now, there is no skill whatsoever.

Asher: In the assembly.
Worker 7: In the assembly part. That's all they do, because all the parts come preassembled.

Asher: You're lucky you moved to where the skill is.

Worker 7: Well, I was very unhappy there. With my seniority, I shouldn't have to be going through a problem every week or every day or whatever, so that's why I made my move. That was just a year ago - last January, the end of January of '81.

Asher: You bid on a job and you got it because of the seniority?

Worker 7: Yes. When they post a job, you sign, and if you have the highest seniority and you're interested in it, you get the job. But I did have a little problem trying to get out of the watch area. (laugh) They didn't want to release me.

Asher: Because you were too good a worker?

Worker 7: Well, I could do a lot of jobs and I was a steady worker. I was never out unless it was an emergency. They depended on me so naturally the foreman didn't want to release me. I had a little problem there, but after so many days after you have been on a job, they have to release you or they have to pay you what you would be making on the new job, so naturally they're going to release you on the last day.

Asher: You said that the strain of small assembly never really got to you but there must have been other people who really did find it a strain, I guess.

Worker 7: Yes, some of the people couldn't do it, because you had to have a very steady hand. You have to use

Asher: People?

Worker 7: Yes. I know of girls that get very, very upset over the parts and find it very, very frustrating. If you
had the time and could get in the department—you would be amazed the way things are.

Asher: Do you think because of all this upset and strain that some people might smoke more, drink more?

Worker 7: Smoke, more definitely.

Asher: Are you allowed to smoke while you are working? In the assembly?

Worker 7: No. You have to take a break. You can't smoke in the department where we are assembling the parts. There's no smoking in there. We have a smoke area. When I was in the watch area, the girls there go out for a smoke almost every hour.

Asher: Then you are allowed to do that, because you're on piece rate. It hurts your rate, but it's your choice.

Worker 7: Right. Some of them go out every hour. In the company you are allowed, I think, six minutes per hour. I think that's in the contract. The girls take advantage of it, but myself, I don't smoke, so what am I going to go out every hour for? I usually take a break once in the morning and once in the afternoon.

Asher: Again, without mentioning names, do you know of anybody who maybe developed a drinking problem because of the strain when they switched to electronic?

Worker 7: Not a drinking problem but a tranquilizer. (laugh)

Asher: I was going to get to that. They needed to take tranqs--

Worker 7: To survive—to deal with it.

Asher: That's too bad.
Worker 7: I didn't get to that but that's why I made that move to get out, because I figured it wasn't worth it.

Asher: People would just get really tense and angry and irritable by the end of the day on electronic? Is that what would happen?

Worker 7: During the day, yes, you get very, very uptight, and always going to the union for something that wasn't going right. All of this accumulated on you which made it very, very hard. The work is not going right. The parts aren't going right. You knew if you didn't make a certain amount, that you weren't going to give it back and that aggravated enough there, so by the end of the day you were really going.

Asher: That's a very interesting story you have told us.

Worker 7: Yes, it is the truth.

Asher: I believe you, I believe you. Can you think of anything to add or do you think we have covered everything?

Worker 7: Well, I have enjoyed working--that's why I have been there so long.

End of Interview