Interview with Worker 1, on January 19, 1982, by Beverly Dickinson for the Connecticut Workers and Technology oral history project.

Dickinson: We're going to talk about how long you have been in your present company and what your jobs have been since you started.

Worker 1: I have been with the company for twenty-five years. I started out as a strapper, putting bands and straps on watches, which was piece work. Naturally, I got older and it got kind of harder for me to keep up, so when a job came up on the board, what they call postings, -- well, it's upgrading, so I took that in a different department, which is interior handler, what I am doing right now. I like it much better. There's no stress in there, but it's heavy at times, lifting heavy watches, putting them on lines. That's what I do all day long--oh, step watches. When watches come in from other departments, they come in on big skids. We have to unload them and put them in big bins.

Dickinson: Individual watches?

Worker 1: They come in ten packs, maybe five in a box, ten in a box. You pick them up five at a time and you shove them in a bin, all one number. You have pickers, what they call order pickers. They go up and down the bins with orders and pick out what watches they need for the orders, set them in a line, and that's how they get shipped out. We have a girl, called a checker, who makes sure the right watches are with the right order. It goes down the line and you (con't. page 2)
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have a marker and a stamper that stamps the box, marks it with a bill of lading, so when it goes through, it's all with the right order with the right bill of lading. That's about what I do, really, all day long.

Dickinson: Within this process that you just described, do you do different parts of that process or are you always doing the same thing?

Worker 1: No, different parts. It all depends.

Dickinson: So there may be five or six different kinds of things you could be doing--switching off at intervals during the day?

Worker 1: Right. Exactly.

Dickinson: Do you find that better than sticking to the same particular task all day?

Worker 1: Yes.

Dickinson: Less monotonous.

Worker 1: Yes. It's much better. Maybe one day I'll come in and I'm just marking and stamping on a line, and another day I'll come in, and I'll be stocking shelves all day, putting watches in bins. That's a back breaking job because you have high shelves and you've got the low ones. You really have to get down and set them in - that's back breaking. Other than that, it isn't bad at all.

Dickinson: You mentioned that the first job you were on was piece-work. Did the rate of that change while you were on that job so it became harder to make the rate?

Worker 1: Yes. It seemed every year that it was always less money and more watches to produce.
Dickinson: So it wasn't a matter of you getting any older and not—a combination—

Worker 1: Yes, you were getting so you couldn't do it. The younger kids, the younger generation, their hands are much—you know, they can handle it.

Dickinson: But they did speed up. How many times did you notice there was a significant change?

Worker 1: Every two years.

Dickinson: Every two years.

Worker 1: Every year, every two years, it all depended. I think every year, because every year a new model watch came out, and every time there was a new model, there was always a change. The watch was just slightly different from the watches the year before but it seemed that every time we got a new watch, the regular job went up. There were more pieces for less money.

Dickinson: So, to make the same rate, you would have to put more straps on more watches.

Worker 1: That's right.

Dickinson: And it wasn't becoming any easier to do the particular job? The straps were pretty much the same?

Worker 1: Every year, instead of making five dollars an hour, say, the next year I would be making four fifty. To make five dollars, I would really have to try and get out that many more watches. It was harder and harder every year, as it is right now, today. Today, instead of strapping watches by hand, now, what they've got, are machines that are coming in. They've got machines in there now. You just put the watch on and take ahold
of two-inch straps and a buckle and a tail, and press it like that, and all you have to do is buckle if it's a strap. If it's a band, well--I think it's just straps they do with that machine, but they have a lot of them, which put a lot of people out of jobs.

Dickinson: Out of jobs? Is it still piece work?

Worker 1: Yes.

Dickinson: Is it still paid the same way?

Worker 1: I don't know what the rate is now, because I'm not in there right now. If it's better or worse, I really don't know.

Dickinson: So you've not worked on one of those machines.

Worker 1: No, but the girl who's here, she can tell you more about that because she's right in that department. She works on those machines.

Dickinson: Have you, through talking to some of the people who are working on the machines, been able to get any general reactions? Do they find it easier? Do they like it? Or is it harder to make a rate?

Worker 1: I think they like it, I think so. The few that I have talked to like it. It is easier on the hands because you're not--You see, with the straps, you've got holes in your fingers from pins, what they call spring bars. You have to hold it in and snap it. They've got blisters all in here, holes in these fingers here, because I had them really bad. You couldn't even wash dishes at night when you went home because it was so sore. The machines, I think, are better. I haven't
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tried them, you know, but I've seen the girls work on them. They look much better.

Dickinson: These machines are doing the same job faster.

Worker 1: I don't know if it's faster, I really don't know. As I said, I haven't been there to really find out. They might be, I really don't know. She could probably tell you more - she knows more about that.

Dickinson: The job that you're in now - has there been any change in that?

Worker 1: Less people doing more work. I don't know too much, they're not letting me know too much. They only let you know what they want you to know, but we're going to have automation in our department. They already laid off--we had twenty-two people in our room, we've only got fourteen now, and they're saying they're going to let four more of them go when this new thing comes in. They said by the end of the month, maybe February, March, this is going to be full swing with this automation thing. How else it's going to work, I don't know. They're going to have machines that are going to be putting in--I don't understand how, putting these big ten packs, five packs, into boxes. I don't know how they're going to do that, so it's going to eliminate some people. That's going to be bad, bad for the people. There will be a lot of people out of work.

Dickinson: So the company has already advised people in your department that some of you will be let go because of automation that is coming in? Has it been rumor so far?
Worker 1: No, it's going to happen. You can see it coming.

Dickinson: How can you see it coming?

Worker 1: You see people coming in, walking around, that you didn't see before, measuring and stuff, and what I hear from my foreman, he's the one that said there's going to be automation. He's already seen a machine - where he has, I don't know, but he's seen how they're going to run. In other words, it's going to start from one end, way up here and the lines are going to meet, how, I don't know. We'll only end up with maybe nine people in our department, which is going to put people out of work.

Dickinson: How are they generally laid off? Is it seniority?

Worker 1: By seniority. The low man always goes, but like people in their department were talking now, it sure don't look good for these people. The ones that are laid off now are calling me up and asking me, "Gee, what do you think, do you think we'll ever get called back?" I was already told that you girls weren't coming back but what will happen is you're just going to have to wait your thirty days and wait until there is an opening in another department, which they don't want to do. They're like me, they came from this strapping area, and they don't want to do that anymore. That's the reason why they got out of there. Now they figured they had it all set in this department and boom, they're going to be out of a job, which isn't too good.

Dickinson: So the job you have now is considered 'top of the line'
of their jobs? Do people wait for an opening in that department, like you did?

Worker 1: Yes.

Dickinson: For the same reasons? Even though it is harder physically?

Worker 1: Yes, it's physical but it's less stress.

Dickinson: You're not under a lot of pressure to get things out quickly.

Worker 1: Right. Sometimes there is, when we have to get this out. We do it together and we get it out but--

Dickinson: It's not like an assembly line.

Worker 1: No, you're just pressured a little bit. Trying to get time on it, it's rough. When you're younger, I guess it's okay, but not when you're older. --I don't know, it doesn't look too good for our department as far as automation. It leaves a lot of people out of work which isn't good.

Dickinson: To your knowledge, has there ever been provision for retraining or transferring people to other departments who've been displaced by automation?

Worker 1: Right now in our department, no.

Dickinson: Do you have the knowledge of any other department?

Worker 1: You mean, like machines and things? There might be in other departments - I think so.

Dickinson: You mentioned the machine that now puts the straps on watches - has this sort of thing generally been pervading in the entire plant in other jobs as well? --They're bringing machines into just about every department now?
Worker 1: Yes. In another department, where they used to put the bands together—You know, bands used to come in three different parts and you used to have machines and girls putting them together. Now, I understand, they're going to come in already done, so that's going to knock these people out. From what I understand, there are just going to be three bands that come in parts, so how many people are they going to need to do that? If they're going to come in completed, they won't be needing that many people to put bands together anymore. Eventually that will probably go out, if they keep bringing them in already set up.

Dickinson: Do you have any knowledge of perhaps changes in the quality of the product that's coming out as machines are brought in? Do you know whether there is a change in say, jobs that are not put together properly or anything about the quality control?

Worker 1: I know the thing has to be perfect. Quality, we have a qc there that checks you out and if it's not right, we redo them. They have to be done perfectly.

Dickinson: Did you find when you were still doing the watch straps that there was more problem with quality control as the rate was increased?

Worker 1: More now than before.

Dickinson: More now that the rate is faster?

Worker 1: They want everything just so. What they do is when you box the watch, you have to put this little thing in it—it's got to be perfect on there with the price tag and stuff like that. They knock it right down if it
isn't.

Dickinson: It will affect the person's rate?

Worker 1: What they do is each girl has a different colored pencil that marks all the boxes that they put down. They know which girl has an orange pencil, which girl has a purple, which one has a black, whatever, so they know, when they check that at the end of the line and the color code is on there, they know which person did it, and it goes back to that person. What they were doing in the past was trying to make that girl go through that whole skid, which is, whew, a lot of watches.

Dickinson: You mean all the ones she had done?

Worker 1: Yes. For day work. Right now, I don't know if they're still doing it, but they were doing it.

Dickinson: What do you mean for day work?

Worker 1: In other words, you wouldn't get your piece rate doing it, you would only get a flat rate. Say, if you got five dollars an hour for what you were doing, now you would go to three sixty.

Dickinson: You had to spend all the time going over and making sure all her other ones were done properly.

Worker 1: All they needed was to find one and they would go over (them). Before, you see, they used to complain because when they didn't have that marking down, the whole line would be knocked down and the whole line would have to go through it all. Everybody complained - why should I have to take day work when I know I didn't do it. How do you know it was mine and it wasn't hers?
Now you have marking on it and you know which watch belonged to which girl and she has to go through it all, and she gets the rate. I don't know if they're still doing it but they were doing it.

Dickinson: Previously, everyone who was on that line would have to stop - the line would actually stop. So it was actually more to the company's benefit. The girls, of course, would be at a lower rate but it was the company's benefit to find out who was doing it.

Worker 1: Right. Then they would give all the girls a warning. Then they give three girls a warning; then you get what they call an incident report. If you got it again, they would give you three days off to see if that would help, without pay, naturally. They would want you to correct it. I don't think it happens too much now but that's what they did do though. She can tell you more about that because she's in that area.

Dickinson: What about the area you are in now - is there any similar kind of problem? Is there someone checking?

Worker: Yes, there is a checker. Actually, that is what I was doing, checking.

Dickinson: What would happen if something went through that was not right in your department?

Worker: They'd tell you about it and if it kept happening, they would give you a verbal warning, a written warning or they would take you off of it and put someone else on it, and then you would start a job of doing something else. Usually if they have someone that they like what they're doing, they usually keep them on it, when
they're running the line.

Dickinson: So basically, during one particular day, if everything is going smoothly, you do the same job the entire day.

Worker 1: Right.

Dickinson: How do you find relations between workers and management?

Worker 1: It's pretty good. Well, a lot of times, like the girls say, the foremen lie a lot. They'll tell you one thing and then do another. We usually get along pretty good.

Dickinson: If there is a certain problem, the foreman will generally take care of it?

Worker 1: Yes, usually. It's not too bad.

Dickinson: Do you ever have to work overtime?

Worker 1: Yes.

Dickinson: Is it voluntary or is it expected?

Worker 1: Usually they'll ask you if you want to work your two hours tonight. They don't push too much.

Dickinson: There's no problem if you say you don't want to?

Worker 1: No, as long as they have enough to work. Say they need eight people to run a line, as long as they've got their eight people, they won't push you.

Dickinson: Of the fourteen that they have back there during the day?

Worker 1: Yes. If you have two lines that are running, one in watches and one in displace - I'm on a display line - and say they're going to run just displace, as long as they have five people to run that line if they need five, they're not going to worry about it. Sometimes, if both lines go on and they're really open handed,
they want you both to stay. When that happens, you have one person trying for two jobs, which is hard, but they do.

Dickinson: Generally, do you think that people in your department, rather than go home and know that someone is working twice as hard because you're not staying, do people sort of give an extra effort to stay, do you think? Is there that sort of camaraderie?

Worker 1: No, no. People don't care. I don't usually stay myself because I have a lot of travelling – it's quite a trip.

Dickinson: You live in _______ and drive to _______?

Worker 1: Yes, so I do my eight hours and I want to drag, because by the time you get home, it's just late. I don't usually stay, but if I know they're really busy, then I stay,–like last week, we worked on Saturday. They had eight hours but I only stayed for five. I understand this week they're going to work a Friday night and Saturday, overtime. It's the busiest week, I guess. Some weeks they get big orders, and some weeks they have small orders and there's not really that much. You get some people, though, that stay for all the overtime because they live right in town, which isn't bad, so they don't care. When you've got to travel so late-- summer isn't bad but winter travelling.

Dickinson: Do you have any general observation you would like to make about the way your job is going? I know you mentioned that the prospect of automation means
layoffs. Is there anything you want to add to that? Anything that might be a consequence of it?

Worker 1: I don't think it's that great that they're going to be putting in this automation. I really don't. It might be better for the company but not for people, not for people.

Dickinson: Do you think as well as actual layoffs that there will be a sort of downgrade of the skills involved on the job? Do you think the jobs might become more monotonous?

Worker 1: Yes. Our department is not that--It's the other departments that are really forced. Ours isn't that bad. I know the other departments are really hurt--I don't know, I might, because I don't know what it's all about yet. I only know what they're saying and they're only telling me what they want you to know. Our foreman did say there is a big machine coming in that's going to be doing a lot of the work. Where we put the watches in the bins, he's saying now, that the watches, when they come up from the other departments, instead of being on small skids which can be tied and put in big bins, they're going to come in on these big wooden skids where you're going to have a forklift come, bring it into our department and stack them three high, so the forklift is going to be doing the work of all our people.

Dickinson: So it might not be as physically demanding for the people who are left but it's going to displace people who are doing that now.
Worker 1: He said it's going to be entirely different from what we're doing now. Where you had the girls picking the wires and putting them on a line, you're going to just have these forklifts doing it, picking them and bringing them over and then the checker - I guess they're still going to have a checker - is just going to make sure that they're all there, that they go with the order, and then whatever this machine is going to be, it is going to take them, pack them in a box - how, I don't know - and send them out. Then there will be automation for stamping it - the address. It really doesn't seem possible but with what they come up with today -- How do they take an order with the address stamped onto the carton - I don't know how they're going to do that. I've never seen it before but maybe I'll have a chance now. The foreman says it's supposed to be going full swing within the next month, and they're revamping our place like crazy, making more room. It's a mess in there right now getting ready for it. All I know is that I'll have a job, I know I will with the seniority I've got. There will be people with five/ten years in our department who are going to be out.

Dickinson: As much as ten?

Worker 1: Sure, because we've got a lot of high seniority there. There may be nine people with high seniority, say, ten up to thirteen years and then you go down ten, nine, eight, and they'll be right out. They'll be forced to go
Worker 1: They'll be given a choice to another department.

Dickinson: Yes, which I know they're not going to like. It's a lot of work.

Worker 1: Is the pay generally lower in the other departments?

Dickinson: All the other departments are piecework. It's piecework. Day work jobs, where my department is, they have an assortment room. That's where they make up the assortments. They put watches in assortments that come into our department. They want (them) for the big displays - you must have seem them in stores - these big, big things where they swivel.

Dickinson: Oh yes, the watch cases are set in and they turn.

Worker 1: That's what we do. The assortment room packs them on a line, which is a day work job. It's a different watch--maybe ten watches, which are all different, into this big assortment box, which comes up to us and we send it out. When we're sending them out, at the end of the line, there's also the big displayer, like I mentioned, that goes with that assortment so that when whichever company that ordered it, gets it, the watch goes with that, and they set it up.

Dickinson: So you make sure that everything goes together and that they are shipped out together.

Worker 1: That's the only other department that's really new and has a flat rated job. All the other ones are piecework. In the banding room, they mostly make bands. That's piecework. Strapping, piecework; boxing, piecework;--that's it.
Dickinson: Are there actually departments that make some of the components, the pieces to the watch?
Worker 1: Not where I am. That's where they make all the pieces for the watches. Ours is a final pack. Everything is completed - strapped, boxed and shipped out. We are mostly the shipping. All the pieces, the parts, they make in and that's really tedious. That's how it is at our place.
Dickinson: Is there anything else you would like to say?
Worker 1: No, that's about it.
Dickinson: Well, thank you.

(End of Interview)