

This interview is of Helen Hughan who was a secretary at Mercer Star Shipyards. The major themes in this interview are ship-building, World War II, dress codes, Columbia St., and the Mercers.

Interview Date: 8 January 2014

Interviewers: Pamela Stern and Oana Capota

Date Range: 1940s – 1970s

Sound Recording Length: 1:17:08

Helen Hughan is a resident of New Westminster who worked as a secretary for Mercer Shipyards in New Westminster from 1944 to 1949. Her parents immigrated to New Westminster from Scotland in 1929 when she was three years old. She lived on the corner of Mowat St. and 3rd Avenue, and her father worked at Mohawk Lumber Company. She went to F.W. Howie Elementary School and Trapp Tech High School. In 1944, when she was senior in high school, she left school early because there was a demand for secretaries. During that time businesses would go to high schools to look for secretaries. Her major duties as a secretary were recording timesheets from the employees, typing letters, ordering supplies, and interacting with office visitors. Starting out at 18 years old, she believes that working at Mercers opened up to a lot of new things and experiences that she was never exposed to, living a sheltered life as an only child. Hughan reports that she was very happy working at Mercers because her job was challenging and exciting. She married in 1949 and moved to Burnaby, where her children were raised, and moving back to New Westminster in 1971. Prior to her secretary position, in high school she worked at Copp's Shoe Store on Columbia St. on Saturdays. Throughout the interview she tells stories about the Mercers (father Ed, and sons Gordon, and Art (Arthur)) who she worked with, and speaks enthusiastically about her experience working for them.

Section 0:00 – 7:51

- In this section of the interview Hughan describes her family background and how she came to work at Mercer Shipyards. Hughan's parents immigrated to New Westminster from Scotland in 1929 when she was 3 years old. She went to Trapp Tech High School beginning in 1939 but left school early in 1944 because there was a demand for secretaries. Companies would call schools to look for students to become secretaries, and she was chosen to work for Mercer Shipyards in March 1944. Hughan recalls working at Mercers to be an exciting and interesting experience. There were 200 men on payroll and 3 people who worked in the office with her. Mercer Shipyards was a family company that consisted of Ed, the father, and two sons: Art (Arthur) who was in charge of the office and Gordon who was the ships' architect. Hughan talks extensively about the company and her experiences, such as boat christenings, her interactions with visiting Russian crewmen, and the different boats that were built at Mercers.

Section 7:52 – 14:09

- In this section of the interview Hughan describes the different types of people who worked at Mercers, she states "it was sort of a potpourri of nationalities." All of the workers were of European origin, and some of them could barely speak English. She also describes her tasks as a secretary at Mercers. She could not make mistakes on the typewriter when writing letters, as she was taught in school to be precise and neat, she

had to enter all of the employees timesheet information into a book so the workers would get paid and it also kept track of how much clients would get billed, as Mercers charged by the labour that went into building a boat. She also talks about the interactions she would have with men in the office, such as contractors, who came from different companies to work on the ships. She also describes the office setting at Mercers and recalls the office had two telephones, which was rare during that time.

Section 14:10 – 27:03

- In this section of the interview Hughan describes work parties and boat launches at Mercers, her experiences of going on boat testing runs, what her work day was like, and the wage she made, which was \$65/month. She worked from 8am until 4:30pm, with a half an hour lunch with no coffee breaks. She says compared to working at Copp's Shoe Store, where she made \$1.25 a day, the pay at Mercers was good for an 18 years old. She also tells a few stories about workers and the Mercers. Hughan recalls how Art argued with Gordon to give workers what they wanted because they were striking to form a union. Throughout the interview she speaks fondly about the Ford Model T that Ed drove, and she tells a story of how the car's wheels got stuck in the train tracks in Queensborough.

Section 27:04 – 39:14

- In this section of the interview Hughan talks about how she was always late for work, and describes the work dress code. For work she would wear skirts, stockings, shoes with heels. Near the end of war, she recalls how "it was almost impossible" to find stockings. She describes the methods that women used to keep their stockings up, as the elastic in the garters would become stretched. Women also painted their legs to look like they were wearing stockings. She compares the attitudes about dress before the 1960s and after.

Section 39:15 – 49:10

- In this section of the interview Hughan talks about how only men who worked at Mercers (except in the office) and briefly talks about her life after she left Mercers in 1949. She reports that her mother wanted her to quit working at Mercers because she would have preferred her to work a more prestigious job, which would have been working in an office on Columbia St. or in downtown Vancouver. Mercers Shipyards was located between a scow repair and a blacksmith's shop, and was anything but prestigious. However, Hughan loved her job and she was very happy working there.

Section 49:11 – 51:49

- In this section of the interview Hughan describes the Russians who came at the end of WW2 to buy minesweeper boats from Mercers. She recalls how there were a dozen crewmen, who for a couple months, came to the office everyday. Only the officers spoke English, since the crewmen could not speak English they would just smile at her.

Section 51:50 – 1:00:31

- In this section of the interview Hughan recalls that she does not remember getting sick when she worked for Mercers, except for one time during the 1948 flood. She developed an inflammation of the bowels and could not go to work for a week because the flood

made the toilets at work unusable. She believes people did not get sick as often as they do now, which she attributes to environmental pollution and the increased population density. When she was growing up most people walked everywhere, food was made from scratch, and everything was recycled, unlike how it is now. She recalls that the only major source of pollution came from beehive burners at mills that would release smoke and ash, however; unlike the pollution today it did not stay in the air.

Section 1:00:32 – 1:10:23

- In this section Hughan describes the shops and hotels along Columbia St. and her experience working at Copp's Shoe Store, and what she would usually order at a restaurant during her lunch break. She also describes the changes that have occurred along the New Westminster waterfront, such as the controversial departure of popular King Neptune Restaurant.

Section 1:10:24 – 1:17:08

- In this section of the interview Hughan describes the 1948 flood and how that affected Queensborough. The flood waters rose to where the repairways were, therefore; everyone at Mercers received a typhoid shot as the shipyard was right on the water. Hughan also discusses the different cultural groups that lived in New Westminster. Most of the immigrants that came to New Westminster were Europeans but there were some Japanese and Chinese families, however; the Chinese families could only live in New Westminster's Chinatown. She mentions that there was a lot of discrimination that was brought on by the war, and she tells a story about a Japanese family who got sent to an internment camp as soon as WW2 was declared.