

Dorothy Brown

Oral history transcript regarding her time working at the Small Arms Limited in Lakeview, Mississauga.

I am Dorothy Brown of Hurontario Street in Mississauga and I would like to tell you a little bit about my life, since I came to Ontario.

I came for the reason to be with Small Arms in Lakeview and I think it was in 1941, because I was 17 years old, somehow I have it in my mind that I was 18, but the numbers don't lie.

But, I came with the government, I was born I should say in Saskatchewan and raised there and at my age of 17, I was a little restless and I had always wanted to be in Ontario.

I have an uncle in Perth, Ontario that has a maple syrup farm and that fascinated me.

And I always heard about the wonderful orchards and fruit trees and that fascinated me.

In the paper, where I lived one day, I noticed an advertisement to come down here, with the government to work in Small Arms. I thought, this is my opportunity.

So what do you know, I was accepted, my application was accepted and I was so happy!

I boarded a train and I went to Saskatoon. There I was introduced to the University where I was to take I believe it was a 6-week course, and I thought it was in drafting, and I guess it really was that particular course, but it never did anything for me, I have to admit.

I did make, what they call a tap wrench out of an old, rusty, piece of iron bedstead.

A couple of us, went out in the back of the University, pulled out this long piece of iron, and it was iron, brought it in, went through different machines and I had to make this tap wrench by reading a blueprint. Well that was something else, I thought I'll never do this, I'll never understand what I'm doing. Believe it or not, I love to work with the machinery and I liked working with what they call the lathe. Lathe (She spells it out) However, I made this tap wrench and I was even putting fancy designs on the handles, which is called nerling. I astounded some of them at the occasion I was at a couple of weeks ago when I told them that it was called nerling.

They looked at me kinda blank and I said I understand completely.

Now, I was there for the 6 weeks, I graduated along with a few of the others, I can't really remember how many of us now.

We came down to Ontario on the train, had a ball, absolute ball, took a couple of days of course.

And I was introduced to the dormitory for the girls, which was directly across the road of Lakeshore, from the building where I worked.

It was a magnificent building. It was out of this world. Beautiful blonde hardwood floors. Oh it was just like a dance floor, and the rooms were not anything spectacular, I have to admit, but they were adequate.

We didn't have dressers and chest of drawers and things like that, we had sort of a closet and shelves and that's what we made do with.

We had, what I would call, cot to sleep in, no fancy beds, but comfortable, everything's clean, even our floors in our dormitory were hardwood, blonde, blonde hardwood, I loved it.

Now we didn't have curtains on the windows or anything, we just had blinds, it was war time, I mean we weren't there for to enjoy the beautiful things. We did enjoy the beautiful things, and that was other places in the building, outside, the building outside, oh the grounds were scrumptious. They were just gorgeous. You know we would go on picnics, on our lunch hour, and go and sit out on these picnic tables in the green green grass and the shrubs. It was so nice. I have good memories, I don't have any bad memories whatsoever.

And um, in the building, where I worked was the front building. Building 12 I believe you call it. That was the one, the dormitories here, Lakeshore's here, there's Building 12.

Now I worked on the main level, and I have vague memories, I may get a little confused, I'll try not to. To go to my department, we all had names of departments but, you'll have to excuse me I have no idea of the name of it anymore. And I went in, on the right, was my department, then there was /// it was like chicken wire, and I'll tell you it was like link fencing, and it was partitioned right up to the ceiling, you could see through of course and that was a department that was a no no to everybody, completely no no, to this day I have no idea what was made in there. Big machines, all men, no women. And I would say there were probably about 10 men on a shift in there, but you didn't go near there. You could wave to them when you went in, but you didn't speak to them. Now, I don't know. Anyways.

I'm in this department, and the assembly lines are like this. At the end of my assembly line, which contained electric drills, big big ones, and the women, all women, run those. They never sat, they stood, constantly, 8 hour shifts, they stood there and used these electric drills. As the components came off, the assembly line, there was a bench, I, and a couple of other inspectors were sitting there. We took those components and our job, was to gage them to the proper specifications. Now if there was the least little thing off centre, it was discarded, after all you know why so it may look sometimes that there's a lot being discarded a little burr of metal can do damage to one of those guns.

We had the sten guns, and the Lee Enfield. Mainly the sten guns we worked on.

So um, we just sat there used different gages for different things and checked everything, had to be exactly to the point and I am sorry but I never ever made a mistake and I'm sure the other

two girls on the other side were just as good, because we knew there was a life in our hands and it was up to us to save that life. So that's why we were so particular in everything.

It was a job that we were proud of, I was proud of, very proud of.

I stayed in that.

I got there in 1941 and I left later in 1943.

Now the reason, I left, how can I express it, I had a yearning, and a feeling, that sometime this is going to be over, all these thousands of people are going to be out of jobs, including me. I'm only down here in Ontario, on my own, what am I going to do, if I don't have a job, if the war is over. So I decided no, I'm going to get, I wanted to stay here that's why, and I thought okay, I've done my part, now I'm going to look for a proper job in the city, in Toronto, so that I'm going to be stable. And that's what I did. That's where I lived. Not for any other reason. I just felt, there's going to be an end to this, one day.

I lived in New Toronto, and I lived on 14th Street and Lakeshore, right on the Lakeshore at 14th Street. I rented, had board and room with a lady that was a widow and I stayed there for quite awhile, and then in February 1945, low and behold I met a man and got married. Unfortunately, after a number of years, that broke up. Now I had 2 children, and then, let me see, I have to stop and think and make sure I don't mix these things up! In 1964, my divorce came through and I had been separated for quite a number of years before that, I met this gentleman from the RAF who was a Dubliner, but was in the Royal Airforce in Blackpool, England and then I got married again in September 1965, and I then went back to work after having my children and everything all those years, I went to work for a law firm, and I stayed actually at that law firm for 40 years. Same law firm, we did amalgamate, the last few years with a larger firm. You can imagine going from a small firm that I managed, I was in accounting, and I did all the book work. You can imagine 3 or 4 lawyers, a law clerk going from there to a large firm with 45 lawyers. But it was a good experience.

Yes the Small Arms, was great, for me, I guess it was a great opening of a new world.

Yeah we had classes.

And um, the main thing was, um just as I could see, the main thing was just to learn how to take a blueprint and read it to make something, which probably today I wouldn't know a thing about it, but I enjoyed it because it was a challenge, and I like challenges.

Everyone had their own machine, they were all the same machines, in this long line, no numbers or nothing, but everyone knew, which was their machine, and they're all the same, they could have switched around it wouldn't have made a difference, it never happened, so and so had 3rd machine, so and so had the 5th machine, and that's the way we worked.

There was no wandering around from department to department, not allowed.

I mean right away, you'd find somebody coming down, quite often a man, you in that just to check and see, why you're doing this. Did you lose something? Are you needing something?

No, the ones that, the group I was in we pretty well did stay in either that department or the one on my left.

No there were different machines, but around me it was all drills. Big drills, oh my goodness. Yes, that's right, all straight lines, assembly lines they called them.

I betcha about 3 or 400 easily (in the assembly lines).

And the dormitories, I would say a good 400 girls

It's like a big room and then off to the side, there's like alcoves, and they have a table, and on either side there would be a bench and that's where we would entertain our guests. No one is allowed up in your room, other than yourself and your roommate.

There was 2 to a room.

Another girl, her name was Dorothy also.

So if someone came to see you, it didn't matter, male or female, you did not enter the room, you stayed the South Hall.

And we had what we called the Matron, I noticed her in one book or paper that I saw at Small Arms. I recognized her. The only one I recognized of all the pictures, I'd love to find it again. She had dark hair, dark long rimmed glasses, and she wore a dark vest or jacket with a white blouse, and that's the way she dressed. All the time, that was the matron.

She certainly did. There was no ifs ands or butts with her! Very very strict, but a very nice person, but she had to be.

We had dances, oh I would probably say a couple times a month and I remember the very first long dress I owned. Long pink shear with rhinestone trim, oh was I ever feeling beautiful. And they would have the army post near there somewhere that I can't remember, but the army guys would come over and dance with us, and you met up one that you sort of would like to pair off with, you'd sit in these alcoves and enjoy your company or have a soft drink or something and through the week, course we worked 3 shifts, three 8-hour shifts, ah 7 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon, 3 to 11 at night, and 11 to 7 in the morning. And that graveyard shift was murder. I never did get used to it. But I wouldn't give in, I would go out, get up for 3 in the afternoon, I would get up in time to have something to eat and get myself showered and dressed and everything and go out, and ah go to the job. But before that, when I was on the day shift and I was finished at 3 o'clock, I'd be out at about 8, 8:30 and we'd go, I'd love to know, I'd love to walk around there. There was a little restaurant I guess you'd call it and I just

remember the inside of it, they had booths, and the army guys would come over in the evening, we'd go there about 8 o'clock, and they had worletzer (you put money in a dime or something, and they had a little bit of a dance floor) and we danced and danced, it'd be about 10 to 11, boy did we make a beeline to work. Work all night after dancing for a couple of hours.