Natalie Johnson

Sparrows Point Steel Mill Oral History

Interview Transcription – Samantha Hawkins

(00:34) Q: Okay, so um whenever you’re ready, your name and however you’d like to introduce yourself. And you’re going to be looking at John.

A: Hi my name is Natalie, um, I’m the end of the steelworkers. I had 15 years. I worked at Mobile Equipment – one of the few women that were in Mobile Equipment. Um… It’s been rough. With starting and finishing, it’s been rough. Cause being a woman in the steel mill is not easy at all.

(01: 10) Q: What were some of the specific difficulties that you encountered being a woman in the steel mill?

A: When I first started in ‘95, I had no locker room personally to myself, you know. I had to – I wasn’t actually in the locker room with the guys but there was like a section off, but it was still in the same building. You know, it was sectioned off whereas though the guys were on one side of the locker and I was on the other side of the locker. Which that was totally uncomfortable, especially when you have to take your clothes off. Alright? But, after a while went on I protested and got on my soapbox, they got me a trailer. Right? And that’s when the other women started coming into the department. So it was about a good five of us in a department of like 60 guys and it was a mess because guys are nasty.

(02:04) Q: So how did you come to initially work at Sparrow Point Steel Mill?

A: Um, my dad told me to go work for the steel mill. My dad worked there, my grandfather, his father, uncles, cousins, and I wasn’t the girly girl. I was fit for that sit down, put on a dress job. My father said either you go to school or you go and work. I wanted to do both, so I did. I went to college, Daddy didn’t like the grades so he wasn’t gonna pay for it anymore and now I gotta go to work. So I went down the steel mill, got hired, and when they first hired me I started in housekeeping—which most women did. Why, I don’t know, but we all started in housekeeping. And I said, though, on my first day on the job, I was like “how can I make more money?” Cause I didn’t like housekeeping. So then I went to Mobile Equipment where I was told certain things like “you can’t do this job” or “you’re not equipped for this job” but overall I did every job that every guy could do. Without hesitation. Sometime I did it better.

(03:16) Q: So, uh, can you describe some other things about your first day, like when you initially started? Can you tell me about some of the things you encountered?

A: When I initially started, it was, you know, the first day was a pretty quiet day; I just didn’t like the situation with the locker room. But that was something, okay, I can overcome this. And, you know, they showed me around, and everybody was friendly to me but then you ran into people that would purposely tell you things wrong to see if you were gonna do it. Or they’d try to bully you, you know you the new person there, so they gonna try to bully you to see if you gonna crack or to see if you’re gonna be one of the ones that say okay I’m just gonna do it just to keep the peace. Which, I was not. I was the one that was gonna push back and once they realized I was gonna push back they would leave me alone.

(04:08) Q: So, uh, what were some of your duties in your specific job title? What would a typical day consist of?

A: Um, I was originally a slab-hall operator. Which I don’t know if y’all know but a slab-hall operator is a big carrier that picks up the slabs from the caster, to put them on the ground, to pick them back up, to take them to the mill. Alright? And that’s—we just moved the steel around the mill in different buildings on this slab carrier and I was the only girl on that too but it was fun. It was one of the biggest pieces of equipment down there.

(04:50) Q: And is that the department that you stayed with…

A: Yes

Q: …throughout the majority…

A: Yes

Q:..of you time there? Alright. Do you have a favorite memory or story or maybe just an aspect of your time there that you really appreciate and enjoy?

A: No. (laughs)

(05:08) Q: Alright, so in that case what were some of the negatives? The things that stuck with you in a negative way?

A: The things that stuck with me in a negative way was the death – the amount of deaths that I, you know, was there for. Cause, um, I was there for the last death of one of my coworkers who fell off of a transporter and that’s something I’ll never forget. You’ll never forget when you see someone fall and their brains are down on the ground. You’ll never forget it.

(05:42) Q: So, uh, on your last day or towards the end of working here what were some of the emotions, some of just the feelings that you had?

A: Well we used to call it doom and gloom because that’s what they would talk about all day long is the plant is closing. But I been told the plant was closing since ’95. And the plant is closing, we’re all gonna get fired, they’re gonna turn the place into a casino or amusement park. Um, and everything was kinda doom and gloom, you got the attitude that I’m not gonna do my work today, I’m not comin to work today. You know, a lot of people started missing time, and things like that. But, with me, if I come to work I’m gonna do my work so I can go home. And you know just… a bunch of just… incertainties [sic] and people getting scared and people start selling everything they owned and “I’m gonna do this and I’m gonna get another job” and people is canceling vacations and everything. But, with me, if it’s a vacation , I’m going.

(06:43) Q: So do you still have any sort of connections, with maybe old coworkers.. maybe…

A: I have connections with a lot of the coworkers because we do like a food bank here once a month and a lot of them come out to volunteer for that. We’d get caught up on things. Got some coworkers who is in school, we stay in contact, you know, by talking on the phone and Facebook. And everybody that I worked with seems to be doing well. But then we have some that’s not doing so well that’s not trying to do well.

(07:14) Q: (Michelle Stefano) May I ask a question? Going back a little bit to the difficulties you faced as being a woman in Sparrows Point, it sounds like you were a bit of a pioneer with creating that trailer for women to change clothing in, their locker room. Um, and would you mind speaking to the changes that happened in Sparrows Point as more and more women joined your department or your role in instituting some of these changes?

A: Um, some of the changes were, okay, um, the biggest changes was how the guys talked to you. Certain, some of the women down there you would talk to em and they’d be like whatever. Then you’d have the ones that okay he offended me, then you have people like me that I’mma give it back to you. Alright? And that changed a lot because once you start pushing back at the guys, they will back down. It wasn’t that you was gonna say any old thing and I’m just gonna crumble and run to the supervisor and go “oh, ooh he said this to me, my feelings are so hurt.” Nooo. I was the one that was gonna push back you mighta ran and told on me. Alright? And, you know, and it changed the way that they talked about you and you know how they treated you a certain way, it wasn’t no “Oh, let me help her. That’s a woman. Let me come lift that box.” No. You lift your own box. And things like that. It wasn’t no I’m gonna help her through the way—like that. But, um, in the locker room they gave us the trailer after I had to fight for it. Then it was a thing of keeping it clean. Okay, I could keep my trailer clean but I was so mouthy that I would go over and tell the guys “y’all gotta clean up yours too.” You know, and everybody—I’d just go in there and they’d be like “Here come Natalie! Everybody better clean up, better get that up, get this up ” because if I gotta sit over there, I don’t want to be over there nasty with you, you know? And it just changed just a little bit. And my supervisor, in particular, he just didn’t like to talk to me because I would always ask the question I knew he couldn’t answer and I would do it on purpose, because it was funny to me. And, um, other than that, you know, things just changed just a little, but not a lot. Cause you had some old timers that “that’s what it is, that’s what it’s gonna be, I don’t care what you say, the moon could meet the stars and it’s still gonna be the same for them.” So, you know, some people you change and with some people it’s like “no, I’m not.”

(09:47) Q: Before you came to work at Sparrows Point, did you expect that that was what it was going to be like?

A: Yeah. But it really wasn’t like a big alarming thing to me cause I’ve been around guys most of my life. I deal with more guys than I do women. And it wasn’t like a big shock to me but I knew it was to come. You know, we went from people selling, people going around telling people they slept with you, you couldn’t do anything, you did this, you did that. And the whole time, you were home! You know, then you had the people that if you didn’t do what they wanted to do, they’d make up stuff to try to get you in trouble and things like that. But, that’s, to me, that was so high school, to me, so I just let that roll off my back.

(10:35) Q: Alright, so, um, with the Mill’s closed, the buildings are starting to go away, what still remains of the Steel Mill? Whether it’s the people, or the community itself?

A: What remains is that the memory of the mill. Because, you know, a lot of people were there. I was raised off a steel mill salary, my kids was raised off of the steel mill salary. Alright? And you have that memory that no matter what’s gonna be there you gonna ride past, that’s where the Mill used to be. No matter—you can put a church there, that’s where the Mill used to be. Like, so a lot of people don’t know that from before Bethlehem was there, it was cemeteries down there and things. Whereas, though, we were working on like a payloader digging in the dirt and we start seeing tombstones which one of my coworkers had that area sanctioned off. Whereas though, you know, nobody could dig there anymore. Because we were finding tombstones and all kinds of things down in that dirt so they had to have the archaeologists come out and do stuff and now the areas like untouchable.

(11:51) Q: (Michelle Stefano) Earlier you were mentioning that um, you have a lot of negative memories of Sparrows Point. Could you talk more about that? Do you look back in fondness on your time there?

A: Um, I do sometimes when my kids ask me about it but I tend not to too, because I really don’t want to remember the negative stuff. But the most negatives was the deaths. I mean, a lot of deaths went on down there and it wasn’t like “Oh, Joe died today, let’s stop.” No. “Joe died, okay, pull the steel, let’s go.” It can be Joe died over there laying on the ground now. Okay, y’all go over there but you need to come over here, let’s work, let’s get this done. It was constant, never stopping. Nothing ever stopped. It wasn’t “Oh we shut down for Christmas. No we shut down for this holiday.” The only thing that was gonna shut us down was if we didn’t have no power and no water. And if we didn’t have that they was figure out how we could get a generator to get it going. Cause it was, I mean, no stopping.

(12:59) Q: (Michelle Stefano) What do you tell your kids about Sparrows Point?

A: I tell them that Sparrows Point was a good place and that Sparrows Point was what fed you so don’t talk bad about it. And, you know, they like well, well my son he goes, “Well, Mom, you shouldn’t have to work like that, you should have a sit down job.” I was like “Why is that?” He said “You need to just relax.” I said “What do you think? Sit down people just relax and do absolutely nothing?” It’s not the same. He was like “Well, I just think you should sit down. You shouldn’t have to work out in the cold.” I said, “Well, I feel as though I shouldn’t have to go outside in the cold but I went. You gotta do somethings you gotta do just because. But, he doesn’t get it he just thinks his mother is supposed to just sit down and, you know, put on a pretty dress and go to work. But that’s not the mother he has.

(13:50) Q: What’s something you would want somebody who’s unfamiliar with working in the Steel Mill to know or be aware from your experiences?

A: How dangerous it is. Just because you’ve done a job a hundred million times, you get so repetitious with it you stop looking at the little things that can harm you. Like, on the slab carrier, I pick up hot steel. I only can hold it on the truck a certain amount of time. You start taking that for granted, start doing other stuff. Meanwhile you’re in danger of your tires catching on fire, you’re in danger of having blow outs and once the tire blows out you’re not going anywhere. You’re sitting there with a hot slab about to burn up. You know? It’s just the little stuff, like when I was on the crane… The little stuff, like power lines and swinging stuff into somebody because that was my biggest fear. I didn’t want to hurt anybody. I didn’t mind getting hurt, I just didn’t want to be the cause of hurting anybody. You know? But, it’s just the little stuff that people take for granted. It’s as simple as walking. It was like, see if we had to walk across the field to go across the railroad track. You could trip, fall, anything could happen just that fast. You know cause it’s not like paved ground where you’re supposed to be walking. You know, you just get out and get off mounting your equipment and just fall, just slip and fall. People took that stuff for granted, they would just hop down out of stuff without going down properly so my biggest concern for anyone going to the steel mill would be for your health and your safety.

(15:30) Q: (Samantha Hawkins) How did the steel mill management help protect against all those injuries? Or did they not?

A: Well we had a big like safety team. Any issues that we had we could address to the safety team. They was pretty big on safety with ocean (?) regulations and things like that but ultimately it was up to you to do the proper things. Even though they taught you how to do the proper things, it was ultimately up to you to follow that procedure. Because it was very easy to get hurt.

(16:03) Q: (Samantha Hawkins) And with so much loss just sorta being pushed aside and moving on very quickly in the plant with just getting your production done, how has the community and how have you and your coworkers mourned all those losses?

A: All the losses… they just… for me, it’s a big thing of just starting over. You know? But, I had no problem starting over, I had no problem turning the corner to a new direction. But then you have others that are just so set in their ways and how its going to be and you also have guys and gals that have been going there since high school, straight outta high school, the plant is all they know. And their mindset is in plant life. I’ve never ever worked another job like Sparrows Point. With the rules, the hours, the actual work … it’s nothing like Sparrows Point. Most people like you go to work every day same time… not at Sparrows Point! You may work at 7 to 3, they come at you at 2:59. “Hey Natalie, can you stay from 3 to 11?” I’m like oh yeah, now I’ve been there from 7 to 11. Go home, you thinking I’ll be home eight hours and you’re right back. 7 to 3 – Let’s Go. You know? Most jobs don’t work like that. You have most jobs where when you’re time is up and you punch out you go home. Nooo, not at Sparrows Point! You have no relief? You don’t go home! You stay, at least another eight or at least another four until they find someone to cover your job or you cover your job. So it’s just different. It’s a total different world from regular work world and Sparrows Point work world. There wasn’t no “Oh I’m sick, um, I can’t do this today.” You should’ve stayed home . Okay, you sick but you’re here. What are you gonna do? You know so, there was no “Oh I can just relax today.” It wasn’t happening. Not at Sparrows Point.

(18:09) Q: Are there any lessons that you’ve learned at Sparrows Point, not even necessarily for work, that you take with you in other aspects of life?

A: Yes, I’ve learned do not take anything for granted. Not a day, not a minute, not an hour. Don’t take nothing for granted because it could be gone just like that.

(18:38) Q: (Michelle Stefano) Is there anything you’d like to add?

A: Mmm, no not really.

Q: Any other questions?

(18:42) Q: (Samantha Hawkins) Were you involved in the union at all?

A: Yes, everyone that worked at Sparrows Point was union. Everyone.

Q: Did that ever help with the discrimination issues that you faced?

A: Sometimes and sometimes I wouldn’t let it escalate to letting it go to the union. Most things I handled myself. But you have others that, you know, won’t speak up. They’ll go to the union have someone speak for them. But most of my problems I’ve addressed on my own but I know I have the backing of the union to help me if I needed it. Even if today, even though we’re not working there, if I’m having an issue or something is going on, I can call up here to the hall and they’ll do their best to address my issue, try to help me out with it and steer me in the right direction to go.

(19:32) Q: (Samantha Hawkins) Do you remember any specific examples of a time another woman went through the union and made some significant progress changing things?

A: Yeah.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

A: Okay, I used to work with a lady named Gail and she got injured and she was out for some time. In fact she ended up having to get on disability. And, she was about to lose everything—her house, her insurance. She went through the union and they helped her out with her insurance and things like that to help her stay on track. And, you know, get the things that she needed. But as in, in kinda like discrimination… so the union helps everyone really. You just have to take the initiative to speak up what the problem is because if you don’t make the problem aware, it’s not a problem. It may be with your problem but if I don’t go, “Hey, I’m having a problem with this, can you help me?” They’ll never know I had a problem.

(20:40) Q: You said that your father and grandfather had worked for the Mill, are there any stories or anything that you remember them telling you as you were growing up?

A: Well I don’t know how much truth to the stories there was but they had some stories. You know like, my uncle he would start in the coal ovens he had all these glorious and glamorous stories that you hear but everytime you hear the story it changes so I don’t know how true it was. My father was pretty much a laid back person and his advice to me is “Don’t let them push you around, stand your ground and don’t let them push you around.”It’s all he ever told me—“Don’t let them push you around, if you know what you know, do what you know and don’t let them tell you different.” Alright? With my grandfather it was all “Make all the money you can, there’s a lot of money down there to be made, make all the money you can.” That’s all he was about was make the money.

(21:41) Q: I was just wondering, what are your plans for the future?

A: Um, I’m about to start school next week and this is going to be a field that’s totally different than the steel mill cause I’m going to do into the medical field for surgical tech and we gonna see how that pans out but I’m kinda excited about it and I’m ready to start. And I don’t know where it’s going to go, but I’m gonna do my best.

Q: Good luck. Are we all done? Well thank you, that was wonderful!