**UMBC Course Cultural Documentation in Participation with Communities (AMST 358)**

**Tuesday, April 16th, 2013**

**Dundalk-Patapsco Neck Historical Society**

Interviewers: Solomon Oh **(SO)**, AMST 358 UMBC and Michelle Stefano (**MS**), Maryland Traditions / UMBC

Interviewee: Darnell Hamlett, “Hambone” **(DH)**

Transcribers: Solomon Oh

**[00:22] DH:** OK, my name is Darnell Hamlett, former employee of Bethlehem Steel. They used to call me Hambone when I was working down at the plant

**[0:34] SO: Are you from the area, near Sparrows Point, or?**

**DH**: No, I didn’t live in the area. When I first started down at the plant, I lived in the city and then I moved to the Essex area, so I wasn’t really in the designated area of the plant

**[0:52] SO: OK, and did you go to Sparrows Point right after high school, or did you finish school?**

**DH**: Yeah, right after high school, I was straight down to the plant, I sit up there and I worked in a nursing home for a couple of weeks and I couldn’t do that. Right after high school I went straight down to the plant in 1973. I’ll never forget that year

[1:19] SO: What was your first impression of the mill

DH: This place is like huge. This mills was so so big it was a like a real eye opener to actually see how steel is produced and all these employees and what they was doing it was scary really scary but it was a great experience to learn the steel industry

[2:01] SO: What drew you to sparrow’s point as opposed to going for another job

DH: Money, Money I mean I’m fresh out of high school you know what I mean and I heard a few people worked down in Sparrow’s point and they made some pretty good money so I’m like lemme give it a shout so I went down there to apply. First time I went down there I applied for this job down at this school cause they still had the town down in Sparrows point and they were using the school as a testing place where you take the test and after you leave the dispensary area where you take your physicals you had to walk over to the school and I’m like I’m not walking all the way over there so I called the bus and went home. I came back a month later though.

[3:02] SO: How long did you work at the steel mill?

DH: 39 years, I did 39 years down there from 1973 till they shut it down last year. 39 years

[3:17] SO: What made you want to stay at the steel mill?

DH: Money number one you know what I mean and the bond with working with some of the guys when I was down there. I t was like family and I loved going to work. Sometimes when you have a job where you’re like man I don’t want to get up but going to work I enjoyed going to work. I love going to work when I was working down at the plant

[3:52]SO: what is more of the job you enjoyed or the environment?

DH: The job wasn’t bad but it was mostly the environment and the people you work with. You with someone for 21 days out of a month 8 hours a day sometimes 16 hours a day you form a bond you become best friends and a lot of time it carries on beyond the job. After we get off we hang out go places families get together. It was more than going to work hanging with the guys. We bonded and it was pretty neat

[4:38] SO: When you first worked at the mill? Was it hard to get incorporated into the family or with other employees?

DH: A lot of guys were like friendly a lot of the older guys because they want you to do their work for them. They going to show you how to do the work so they can sit up there and kick back. I was a great atmosphere to sit up there and work with and you learn a lot from some of the older guys. They show you the rope show you the do’s and the donts show you the job. A lot of times they show you the job and they sit back and watch you. Now it’s the reverse role now I’m the old guy showing the young dudes now its like a revolving door its great.

[5:48]SO: what were some of the responsibilities you had?

DH: It all depend on what department you worked in whether you were on the finishing side or the steel side your job could varied. You could go from a real hot job to a real cool job. It varies a lot

[6:33]SO: Was it common for people to switch department?

DH: Oh yeah yeah I mean you could stay in one department for so many years then a job opens somewhere else you can move around. That was the good part about that too you didn’t have to stay in one department. In my 39 years I did a complete circle except for the pipe mill because the pipe mill close down. I had worked in so many departmne in the 39 years its good to learn the different trades how each department works. What they do with the steel how the make the steel coming from the raw materials to actually making the iron. It’s a real eye opening learning the aspects of the steel industry

[7:40] SO: If you could describe a typical day you go through?

DH: Lets say when I was working on the coating lines it was more like a finished product. You have you good days your bad days your hot days and your cold days but it was pretty much ok. Its kind of hard to explain the job that you do because I could talk to another steel worker and they know the language that I’m talking. It kind of hard to explain your job to someone who doesn’t know the steel industry that don’t know what goes on in the plant. I could say that I’m skimming the pot and you would say what? Skimming the pot? So trying to explain it to someone else its kind of hard

[9:14]SO: Were you ever thinking of moving on or staying at the plant?

DH: Since the plant is open 365 days we never close you get some of them days when your like man I’m ready to quit. There were so cold and my job was outside it was that one year the bay froze over that year and I was working the 11-7 shift and it was about 2 in the morning my hands were so froze and my body was so froze. I walked up to the foremans office and I said I quit I quit I refuse to go back down there again .They said come on Ham come on Ham just take a break chill out for a minute. I never went back down there I couldn’t go back down there that day I almost quit. Then you have some real hot days you be sweating you be cramping so you had some good days and some bad days. So there was some days I really wanted to quit but I didn’t im glad I didn’t. It makes you think though It really does but other than that I had some pretty good times down there.

[10:55] SO: So over the almost 40 years you worked at the plant you probably experienced a lot of changes within the plant such as racism or the role of women do you have any memories?

DH: You experience racism but if you want to feed into and elaborate on it and to actually incorporate that within yourself. If you wanted to feed into you can that’s up to you but a lot of us payed that no mind. A majority of us didn’t care what color you were you could have been green we don’t care. Cause you spend so much time with a group of people a group of men and group of women you don’t look at color because that guy might be the one that saved your life. If you want to incorporate that into your life then that was on you a lot of us didn’t sit up there and condone. But you felt it you seen it you heard about it but if you feed into it that was on you. As far as women is concerned that same women could have been the one that saved your life. So you look at each individual as a person not what color they are or gender you look at them as a person. That’s they way you need to be especially in a big industry because there is so much danger down there.

[13:20] SO: could you share one of those experiences as far as someone saving someone’s life

DH: We had this conveyer that ran after you draw the wire it would be like rows of wire and the conveyer moved. We had to go down to the basement and clean up the oil and grease and your boots would be oily greasy and slippery. The foreman would always say don’t work across that conveyer because its like 4 stories deep but you don’t want to walk all the way to the end turn around and come all the way back up so you sneak across the conveyor. One day I walked across the conveyer and I slipped and talk about your life flashing before you eyes but it was like I was on a spring board once I slipped I caught myself back up but the foreman wasn’t sure I slipped. Sometimes you gotta take heed to what people tell you ever since there I never walked across that conveyor again. And If I see people walk across it I tell them my story. Little simple things could happen that you could lose a limb a arm a leg anything so you didn’t want to take no chances in the steel mill

[15:36] SO: So I assume that safety was a real big issue?

DH: A real big issue was safety. Because you had so much dust flying around the stuff you breathe thing get in your eyes respirators. The hot iron that’s running you could get burnt so safety was a real big issue in the mill. People got killed lost limbs eyesight burns a real big issue in the steel mill. Some of us took it for granted and some of us was real heavy on safety

[16:30]SO: Could you describe the community in Sparrows point? The environment

DH: When I came down in 1973 the town was like almost gone but a lot of the houses were still there the banks was still there the school was still there but it wasn’t that many people that was still there so I can’t really elaborate on that too much because it was dying out a lot but I can say that they had some pretty grass down there. It was really amazing how does this town in the middle of a steel mill with this pretty green grass. The town was really dying out when I got down there so I can’t really elaborate on that. A lot of the buildings really faded out when I was down there. One of the schools is still down there I think they used it as a main office

[17:50] SO: After the town was demolished, did they use the space?

DH: That’s when they started building different mills came in. Some mills was leaving others were coming onboard. Modernization was big we got the new coal mill that came in a new coating line that came in. A lot of things was coming in a lot of things was fading out a lot of mills starting shutting down. Along with modernization you start losing some people.

[18:58] SO: what were some of the biggest changes from when you first started working till towards the end?

DH: Modernization they would build the A battery we used to have 1-6 batteries than 7-12 battery and then they built this one big battery and it eliminated a whole lot of batteries. It was great for modernization but modernization took a lot of jobs. It took less people to sit up there and run an operation. Its good and its bad we love modernization but its bad because it takes job

[20:00] SO: Do you still keep in contact with your former employees

DH: Yea yea yea we keep in contact. You spend so much time with a group of people you just can’t like since the plant shut down see you later man we gone. We still call each other, we still go over each other house especially crab season coming up we eating some crabs. We still keep in contact with each other keep in contact with the families. We want to know how you doing you just can’t brake a bond like that and its great with a group of people like that.

[20:59] SO: Do you work in the same department with your group of friends?

DH: Through my 39 years in the plant I’ve been in a lot of departments you meet a lot of different people in every department. I might meet a group of people in this department and meet a different group of people in a different department. A lot of guys you would see but you might not now there name but you know they work down at the point. I know a lot of guys I didn’t know their name but it all depended on what department you worked at

[22:20] SO: What was your favorite job?

DH: My favorite times was when I was working down in the coal coating and the blast furnace. Those guys and young ladies we was real tight real tight. I might be having a bad day they would say Hey ham go chill out for awhile we really looked out for each other. There was a lot of after work activities we did with each other. We might have a caravan 10 cars everyone going down to Kings dominon or Hershey or the beach somewhere. The grownups would get together go out go to each others houses go to clubs. The bond that we had was great and a lot of guys I still keep in contact with them. If you spend 21 days out of a month with somebody you going to create a bond. It was some of the best years down there. Even though the environment was rough, the people made the job. That was the time were I didn’t mind going to work I used to love going to work. I used to work overtime go in there my days off.

[25:00] SO: How did you feel once you heard the plant was coming to an end

DH: It was a heartbreaker to see that plant close. For so many people and for so many years that plant provided for so many families especially this community here. That was a lot of our lifeline to see that plant close down and so many jobs lost and so many people close to retirement. It a big heartbreaker for the plant to be gone its something a lot of people never though was going to happen. I was so close to retirement I only had 4 more years to work so it was kind of devastating for me. I’m mad with them but I’m not mad with them because it provided me with a great lifestyle it provided me and my family a great lifestyle a great living. I wouldn’t trade the years I spent down at the plant for the world

[26:50] SO: Looking back now, what some of the things you miss most about the mill

DH: The people about 99.9 percent of the time it’s the people. I miss working with my co-workers, some of them you can have but mainly it’s the co-workers. I could have beef with you and 10 minutes later we talking and laughing. I miss the people I miss my co-workers I miss them a lot that’s why we still in contact with each other. We still call each other talk to each other see what going on with them. I really miss the people you work with a great bunch of people even some of the supervisors was ok some of them you could have.

[28:49] Would you mind just talking about the nicknames at Sparrow’s point and also where yours came from?

DH: We had so many nicknames down at the plant. I might not know your real name I might know your last name I might never know your first name.We would give somebody a nickname on how they look what they do your last name. My last name is Hamlett and they got handbone out of Hamlett. Some nicknames I can’t really say how we got the m cause its really out there. Some of the nicknames could have been some of the things that you did its just crazy how someone would give you a nickname. A lot of times you might know peoples real names. One time a friend of mine went to a co-workers funeral. We looked at each other and couldn’t figure out his name. There happened to be a big picture of him and I was like his name is herl. Majority of times it was the older guys that gave the nicknames. Majority of the people down there had nicknames even some of the young ladies had nicknames. You might not know the individuals real name but all you needed was a nickname and we knew who you were talking about.

[32:03] Could you talk about Troy when you first met him and your friendship with him

DH: We were working on the coating lines. Troy came in the 90’s him and a group of guys. Troy could talk but good guy love him to death always wanted to learn. We had a lot of fun with him. Hes a real nice guy, his wife his kids.

[33:18] If they start imploding and getting rid of all the buildings landscape changes, what remains?

DH: A lot of heartache a lot of memories. I hope they save the star that’s one of the big issue. So many people look forward to that star during the Christmas holiday. Last year everyone was inquiring about that star not being lit and it was lit. I pray that someone gets that star whether it be the Dundalk society or the Museum of Industry. That would be a heartbreaker if someone couldn’t save that star. That was one of our main landmark