

BOOTSTRAPS

by Suzanne Povse





Suzanne Pouse and the RCA building in Camden where she once worked. Now they are upscale lofts. Photos: Eva Himmelein, 2008

My first co-workers were 1977 vintage RCA employees: all men. The older men were WWII and Korean War vets, and many of the younger ones were less than ten years removed from their Viet Nam experiences. I spent my first day on the job in a section of the machine shop that did assembly of sheet metal parts. It was a back shop behind the main machine shop.

The six-story brick building covered a whole city block along the Delaware River. It had floor-to-ceiling windows: they were selling points when the building was converted into upscale loft apartments. Its loading dock is now a bar/restaurant carrying the name of a company that at one point employed thousands of people in the region. My shop was on the top floor of the building. In the winter the wind blew through the wall of windows facing the river. I was hired at the end of October. The temperature became unkind in November along the river. Standing on cement floors in steel-toed work boots made a machinist's feet particularly cold. On these cold and windy winter days my friend — a welder who was responsible for my getting the interview that landed me my job — would wheel in a hand truck carrying a large hunk of aluminum that he had heated up with a welding torch. He would drop it on the cement floor and shove it under my bench. My feet would stay warm for a good hour.

Handling steel and aluminum for eight hours a day in bitter cold weather was not kind to the fingers either. On days like this, the senior men in the back shop would take apart a pallet and fill a steel drum with the wood and some of the brown wrapping paper we used for shipping our parts. Then they would douse the contents of the steel drum with isopropyl alcohol, which we used for cleaning and as a lubricant for drilling aluminum. They would create a blaze, and we new hires would stand around the drum laughing at their ingenuity and bravado while we warmed our bodies and thawed out our fingers. This behavior was more a statement to the bosses about the horrible conditions we had to work under than a real solution to our discomfort, but it was good for our morale.

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My first couple of months working at this company were divided between this back shop and the paint shop, where my job was putting masking-tape circles over holes in machined parts that were to be painted in the spray booth. My trainers in the back shop were Joe, a big Serb who was a widower, and Felix. Most of the time the room was noisy with the stamp of the rivet machines attaching sheet metal parts to other sheet metal parts, the sound of hand drills making holes in parts, and the tap of ball peen hammers against metal. I noticed too that when it was noisy, communication between the men consisted of whistling across the shop at one another. Someone would whistle a few notes, and someone else would whistle a few notes back. This was generally the practice of the older men.

Now, 30 years later, I work in a large shop as a transmission mechanic, and I've noticed that this way of communicating through whistling is something that happens between some of the younger mechanics. Someone will start with a few funny and unique notes, and across the shop someone else will pick it up. I laugh to myself because they're actually having fun with this back and forth response. Sometimes three or four people will pick up on this from different sections of the shop. Perhaps when you're working on a job, you have to have some fun, and the closest person may be at a distance. And sometimes the call and response is just a way of taunting a coworker. If the noisy shop were full of women mechanics, I wonder what our attempts at communicating would be like.

In the back shop, we were working on sheet metal cabinets that housed the electronic components for the Aegis defense system. I worked at a bench assembling parts with simple hand tools: ball peen hammers,

screwdrivers, pliers, socket wrenches, and hand-held rivet guns. The object was to build a finished assembly from many individual parts. My first job in this section was placing individual aluminum sheet metal louvers into 8 x 10 metal spot-welded frames. The finished products were air vents for the large cabinets that contained the electronics.

My lead man was Felix. A lead man is a worker with a lot of experience on the job who has been appointed by the boss to oversee others in the same occupation. In a union shop, he is usually top on the seniority list. He can train, assign jobs, and make sure that the jobs are done. I liked Felix. We got along well. But all of my jobs were assigned to me by Joe, the second senior man in this shop. He oversaw my work and also enjoyed cooking lunch in his makeshift kitchen behind a rack of shelves. A half hour before lunch, you could hear the refrigerator door open, followed by the rattle and scrape of pans over the two hotplates. Joe would signal that lunchtime had begun by placing a plate of wonderfully tasty pierogis or blintzes in front of me as I worked at my bench. I had no idea what lunch was like in other parts of the machine shop because I had decided that I would not venture out to the main floor unless absolutely necessary. As the first and only woman in the shop, I was uncomfortable with the attention I received. The less interruption I caused to the work process, I thought, the more obvious it would be to the bosses that I could fit into that environment. At least one of the older men must have understood my situation. It was Herb who took me aside my second day and showed me the back way to the break room and the back way to the ramp to the fifth floor, where the ladies' room was. There was only a men's room

on our floor.

I was one of four newly hired machine operators. We had all been placed in the assembly shop to begin our training. After two weeks of placing small 8 x 3/4-inch louvers into the tacked frame and peening over the tabs to hold the louvers in place there, I noticed that the three other new people, who were men, were being trained to use different air-driven hand tools, drills, and hand rivet guns. They were being shown how to set up and run the single spindle drill press and the freestanding rivet machine — learning the skills on simple machines that were the next step on the way to becoming a first-class machinist. It occurred to me that perhaps few people — in this case, few of the men — had a positive assessment of my ability to become a first-class machinist. When I applied for the entry-level machine operator job, I had every intention of working my way to first-class machinist status. It didn't occur to me that I might be incapable of that. I expected to get that job and the money and other benefits that went with it, such as good health insurance and a retirement plan.

Soon after I noticed the disparity between my training and that of the men who were hired with me, Felix called me to his work area. In his hands was a thick roll of paper that I assumed was a blueprint for a job we were going to do. But when he spread it out on the work table, I saw that it was a schematic drawing showing the locations for small electronic terminals pressed into fiberglass boards. These boards were the forerunners of computer chips. "This is what you should be learning," he said. He explained that one floor below us was an assembly shop where women sat at benches all day and pressed small electronic terminals of various diameters and lengths into fiberglass boards. He, of course, was implying that by

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learning to read the schematic drawings, I could get a more suitable job. I was appalled by the discrepancy between what I was expecting of myself and what he was expecting of me. After the shock wore off, all I wanted to do was strangle him. A machinist's labor grade and pay were much higher than a board assembler's. I'm sure that Felix did not intend to insult me, but his words clearly exposed his opinion.

I never knew if he thought I was incapable of being a machinist or if he just thought that this was an unsuitable environment for a woman — dirty, hard, and sometimes heavy work with men who spent their lunch hour in the locker room watching 16mm films. (I might add that when there were finally three women working in the shop, the lunchtime films were discontinued. The reason, I was told, was that they no longer seemed appropriate.) I never asked Felix why he thought I should be working a floor below because I had no intention of following his advice.

That day I learned that there was at least one man who thought I was capable of becoming a first-class machinist. After Felix spoke to me, I thanked him for the information and went back to my bench. Joe came up to me. "What did Felix want?" When I told him, all he did was shake his head. That was all I needed to see. He might not have been able to do anything about it, but it meant the world to me that he disapproved of what was going on.

That first year in the back shop with Joe and Felix, when it became evident that I was not going away, the general manager who had hired me said, "Well, if you're going to work in this shop you might as well learn something." I had been in the shop about three months at that point, and two other women had been hired after me. They had been masking parts in the paint shop.

Now we were all placed in the drill press section under the supervision of a new lead man, George. George liked us and enjoyed setting up our jobs and overseeing our work. Our job was to load milled parts of various sizes into drill fixtures and spot-drill, drill, and tap holes. At times there were four to six different procedures to execute on one loaded part. This would require using six spindles. After loading a part into a fixture, I would spot-drill; scoot down to the next spindle on the multiple spindle table, and drill either a blind hole or a through hole; then move down to a third spindle and put threads in the hole at the tap-spindle. And sometimes there were hundreds of the same part to be loaded, drilled, unloaded, etc. The difficult part of the job was staying awake.

One day, soon after I started feeling confident about my new skill as drill press operator, I asked George if I could see the blueprint and set the hole depth myself. He had seen that we were competent on the drill press and seemed to be tickled that he might have a crew of women who actually could set up jobs. All that setting up the job required was knowing how to read a simple print, how to measure the depth of a hole, and how to use pin gages to see if the hole I was drilling was within the allowed tolerance. My small toolbox now held a set of 0–1 inch micrometers, 1–2 inch micrometers, a set of verniers, a small selection of slot and phillips screwdrivers, an adjustable wrench, pliers (needle nose and blunt nose), and a set of hex wrenches. After finding the information I was looking for on the blueprint, I proceeded to set up my row of spindles by simply adjusting the setscrew on each spindle to the required depth. I would then check the size and depth with a pin gage and my set of verniers. It turned out that setting my own stops caused a stir. The men were

astounded by my mechanical skills. I accepted their compliments graciously and reserved for a later time my outrage at their low expectations of me. The men who had been hired with me were already operating horizontal and vertical milling machines. Needless to say, my determination to be an A mechanic was strong. But it was at this time that I realized that people's low expectations were deadly and that their well-meant protection was undermining my confidence.

Over the 30 plus years I've worked in machine shops and model shops, tool and die shops, and transmissions shops, there have always been special men who have understood my position or recognized my ability or just liked me, who have both taken the time to teach me new skills and taken the generally unpopular role of being my advocate and ally. There was only one time when a woman was in a position to help my career. When I started working for RCA, the company had an apprenticeship program for tool and die and model making. Once a year applications were taken and interviews were set up for four or five positions. The third year that I submitted an application, I was not feeling good about going into the interview, but when I walked into the room I was surprised to see a friendly face among the ten interviewers. That year the company had decided that it might be wise to include the head of Employee Relations, and the head of that department was an African American woman. I was at ease; the interview went well. I was accepted as an apprentice tool and die and model maker. The next time this woman was walking through the shop, she took me aside and congratulated me. She said that I had done well on the interview. With a slight smile as she was walking away, she said, "I gave you a one hundred."