AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER


Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Theme Music: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

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Nancy Groce, Host: Welcome to “America Works,” excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project. This episode of “America Works” features Chicago-based folklorist Bucky Halker interviewing iron worker Sharon Sisson and her husband, iron worker Richard Sisson. Their interview, which was recorded at Iron Workers Union Local #63 Headquarters in Broadview, Illinois, covered numerous topics, including Sharon’s early experiences as a woman entering a previously male-dominated trade.

INTERVIEW

Bucky Halker: Now how did you get into ironworking, Sharon?

Sharon Sisson: They had a sign at the unemployment office.

Bucky Halker: A sign at the unemployment office? [Laughter] What did it say?

Sharon Sisson: They were looking for people to fill a test slot that they had. So I started as an apprentice through the school program.

There was a good portion of guys that came through the apprentice program when I was a student there and they served their apprentice with one company doing one thing. I personally think that they should serve so many months with, like, different contractors just to see everything. Otherwise, you have one guy that did curtain wall his entire life; doesn’t know anything about anything else.

Bucky Halker: Your first job—what did you do?

Sharon Sisson: I worked on skylights at O’Hare [Airport] in the maintenance building. I worked at Block 57. I did a lot of work at the Navy Yard; different other small jobs. I did a couple days doing some enforcement steel on the Sears Tower. I worked one day at the Hancock Center... And we did all the emergency stairs at the Board of Trade.

Bucky Halker: Now, did you do any welding, too...
Sharon Sisson: Lots of welding. At the Cook County Jail.... We did a bunch of welding steel plates up and I worked with the little guy in there. He’d work on one side and I’d work on the other and we just passed the welding stinger back and forth. And at the end of the job, the guy says, “I never knew no woman that could weld.”

Bucky Halker: Were there many women in the apprenticeship program or starting in the market when you...

Sharon Sisson: No. I don’t know whether it got easier. And some women, I consider, were more sheltered because they had a father in the business. So, it’s just my opinion, mind you, that the men respected that more because they knew their father. I had nobody.

Bucky Halker: Now what sort of reception did you get when you started?

Sharon Sisson: I don’t want to say that it was real warm either. It depends. And there was a large mix of people who didn’t like it. There were young guys and there were old guys.

Oh, there was several comments made, you know: “I was taking a job away from some man in the family.” And I was thinking--my son’s father died when he was very young, and my thought is “Why is my family worth less than yours?” Because I’m a woman and a mother? You know? Because you’re a man and a father, your family means more? I don’t think so.

My pink tools. My pink bucket. My pink bibs wasn’t just because I’m a girl. I did it on purpose knowing that it’s going to bother them. And there was one job I worked on that I actually could not wear my pink bibs. And I made a comment that “it’s pretty bad that I have to adjust my clothing because you can’t handle it.” You know, it’s like, “Excuse me? I’m not here to model for you, dude.”

I can’t say they’re all bad and they’re all nasty and they hate women. That’s not true. But there’s prejudice everywhere for everything. It’s not just women.

Richard Sisson: She could do the work that most any guy could do. And she could do more work than a lot of guys wanted to do. So she was always a good employee to have on a crew.

Sharon Sisson: They knew what they were gonna get. I came to work every day. For the most part, I did what I was told. Did my little job--whatever it was that they gave me to do. I can deal with I don’t like you just because you’re a girl. It’s your problem dude, it ain’t my problem. And I didn’t like that I wasn’t always judged by what I could do.

So, it wasn’t all bad, but most of the protection that I got was created by myself. I didn’t look out for me, nobody else was going to. But they were all pretty swell...

There was one guy there named Mario and he was married and he had kids. And the guy obviously had the hots for me. He was asking me to go out with him... He used to drip water on me from up above, little drops of water. And I didn’t like that.
And I said that’s it. I’m going to put a frickin’ snake in his lunch box! Once again, my buddy’s like, “Oh, God... Come on.” And I’m like, “this guy, he needs to be taught a lesson.” I walked into the shanty one night and I got a big glass of water out of the water cooler and threw it on him. And I said, “Now leave me the hell alone!” And he wouldn’t leave me alone.

So I went to the pet store that night and they didn’t have a snake cheap enough--but they did have a spider. A ginormous tarantula like this. And they wanted $25 bucks for it. And I told the lady, I said: “I’ll give you $15 cash and I’ll bring it back tomorrow and give me $10 back.” And she said, “OK. You want to rent my spider?” “Yeah, I only need it for a day.” So she’s like, “OK. Here.”

So, I take the spider. Everybody leaves the shanty, I dump it in the guy’s lunch box.... And we came in at coffee time and everybody’s sitting around, playing cards...and these guys over in the corner--everybody knew except him. Everybody. So, they’re all kind of watching out the corner of their eye. And he flips up the top of his lunch box and he reaches in without looking. And everyone’s going “aaaah” [Deep breath]. You could feel the sides of the trailer just suck in from everybody going “aaaah”--afraid he’s going to bring this spider out, right? He brings out his sandwich; eats his sandwich. And after a while he gets his chips. Then he drags the lunch box over, and he has to look in it for something. And there’s the spider in there!

He jumped up, kicked the lunch box across the floor. It end up in my feet and I looked in there... “There’s...there’s...there’s a spider in there!” And I reach in and picked out the tarantula. “It’s just a little ol’ hairy spider.” I swear to God, he peed his pants! I put it in a baggy, put some holes in it, and I took it back to the pet shop. Never messed with me again! [Yeah.]

Richard Sisson: You also have fun swearing like a truck driver. [Laughs]

Sharron Sisson: Oh, shut up! Don’t mess. Don’t mess. Because I’m not going to put sugar on it first. There’s no pudding before I give you the answer. You’re just going to get it. Many don’t do that. Some aren’t appreciative of that quality. There’s no other way to be in our environment, okay? There’s other places where you could beat around the bush and its okay and exactly...sometimes you have to do that. But not here.

Richard Sisson: She also has a very sly way of surprising crews. People would show up for work in the morning and there’ll be 20 gifts on the table for everybody on the job. “Where did this come from?” Nobody knew.

Sharon Sisson: Valentine’s Day, I went around to every guy on the job and I said, “Do you want pink, yellow or red?” And they’re like, “What?” And they’re thinking that I’m going to hang some ladies panties in their car or something--because that happened once, too. And I wouldn’t tell them what it was for. And some guys would not choose. They were terrified of what I was going to do. And other guys, you know, they were into it. “Ok, I’ll take this color...”

And all it was... My son and I spent the night before Valentine’s Day, went to the florist and I got long stem roses--pink, yellow and red. Everybody chose, whoever chose their color, got their
color. And they got a little baggy of Hershey’s hugs and kisses--those candies--tied up to a flower. And the next day, there they were. At the end of the day, there was one guy that got half-way home, turned around and came back because he forgot his rose. [Laughter.] That’s important to me. It meant that goofy stuff that I did was in fact appreciated.

Richard Sisson: She had a lot of fun, trust me, she had a lot of fun.

END OF INTERVIEW

Theme Music: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce (Host): You’ve been listening to Chicago ironworkers Sharon Sisson and Richard Sisson. They were interviewed for the Library of Congress’s Occupational Folklife Project by folklorist Bucky Halker. To hear their complete interview as well as interviews with other ironworkers who were documented as part of the Archie Green Fellowship project “Ironworkers in America’s Upper Midwest,” please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife.

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.