



>artist* profile<

stories from the shop floor

*Suzanne Povse outside
PFP, 2006. Photo:
Debora Kodish*

by suzanne povse

Suzanne Povse has begun writing about her experiences as a tool and die maker. She says, "During my twenty-eight years as a blue-collar woman in a nontraditional skilled labor job, I've worked as a machine operator, an apprentice, a journeyman tool and die and model maker, and, presently, as a helicopter transmission mechanic. I've stood in unemployment lines and walked picket lines. I've worked in union shops and in small job shops where the only benefit was free coffee. Except for a brief period during my first year, I have been the only female in the shops I've worked in." Her stories give us a window onto the occupational folk culture of women workers: they focus on how she made the workplace human for herself without alienating male coworkers, how she learned her craft despite obstacles, and how she learned to change the workplace. Suzanne writes for herself, for other women who, like her, were among the first generation of women after WWII to work on the machine shop floor, and for women who are just entering skilled labor jobs. She writes as a blue-collar woman, claiming the importance and legitimacy of her work. Suzanne was featured at a PFP Artist Salon on May 6th.

FIRST DAY/HOW I GOT THERE

When the elevator doors opened on the sixth floor, my knees were shaking and I was assaulted with a wall of noise and unfamiliar smells. Looking straight ahead, I walked fifty feet to the wall with the pay phone and turned left past the break room, just as my friend had instructed me. I found

the superintendent's office door immediately past the break room door and on the right. Third goal complete. The first had been to find the appropriate parking lot and a space for my car close to the main gate. The second goal was to find the administrative office that was to issue my work badge, the entrance to the building that housed the machine shop, and the elevator to the sixth floor. The third was to find the superintendent's office once I reached the sixth floor. The fourth goal was to survive the day. I put my hand around the doorknob and entered. June immediately looked up at me from her typewriter and stood. "I'm Suzanne, the new machine operator," I said as confidently as I could. Of course I was thinking that I should have introduced myself some other way.

"We've been expecting you," she said, smiling with a hint of a smirk. She knocked on the inner office door and, opening it, announced to the person on the other side that the new machinist had arrived. There was a scrape of chair and through the door emerged a hulking 6'2" man with slicked-back hair and an angular face. "This is Suzanne, Nick." There was an absence of a handshake.

"Stan's going to be her boss. I'll page him."

"Where should she put her coat and what bathroom should she use?" June asked the boss's back. He stopped and made a deliberate turn. Looking directly at me, and with contempt in his voice, Nick said, "If she wants a man's job, she can use the men's room!" The office had waist-height windows that allowed Nick a panoramic view of much of the shop: a bank of benches with toolboxes and beyond that

Bridgeport milling machines, Milwaukee horizontal mills, and Hardinge lathes. This was my introduction to the machine shop. It was on the top floor of a block-square brick factory building from the early 1900s. A week before, I had had an interview in an office building adjacent to this one. The interviewer was a more refined man somewhat more cordial than Nick. When he spread the blueprint for a machine part on the table in front of me, I had no problem answering the questions on overall dimensions and hole dimensions. And when he handed me a machined part and a set of micrometers and verniers, I imagined that I did not fumble as I held the part in one hand and operated the gauges with the other. I hesitated only slightly as I studied the barrel to read the dimensions within tenths of thousandths. I knew that I wasn't the first woman they had interviewed and that they were interviewing me only because they were required to. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. And by 1977 the Women's Movement was pushing the bar. At the end of twenty minutes, he took off his glasses, looked at me without expression, and said, "Well, I can't think of any reason not to hire you. Report to the machine shop on Monday. Pick up your badge in Personnel first. Your shift starts at seven."

Two months prior to this, a friend who was a welder in this same machine shop had told me that the company was hiring machinists. I was looking for a job. A union election for shop stewards and chairmen was taking place at that time, and

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campaigning in the shop was at its peak. The incumbent chairman and shop steward had come into my friend's welding booth to ask for his vote. When he assured them that their ticket was the one he intended to back, they shook his hand and said, "If there's anything we can do for you, let us know."

"As a matter of fact, I heard the company's hiring more entry-level machinists, and I have a friend who's looking for a job."

"Well, tell him to call and we'll make certain he gets an interview."

"Hey, thanks. One thing though, my friend's a woman." Tim had relished telling me this and describing the look on their faces. They had committed. What could they say? That afternoon, I was being schooled on reading blueprints and the art of handling a set of micrometers like I knew what I was doing. "Hold the anvil in your palm and place your thumb and index finger on the barrel and turn it down gently against the part you're measuring. No. Don't clamp down on the part like it was a 'C' clamp! Just touch lightly. You'll get the feel after a while." So, with coaching and a few white lies about my former shop experiences, I landed my first machine shop job. That was twenty-eight years ago.

JOB SHOP

Exit three-quarters of the way around a New Jersey traffic circle, a quarter-mile down a suburban street lined with 1950's one-story bungalows, make a right onto Lithrow. Feel and hear the crunch of gravel under the tires of the 1972 Impala that someone gave you. Pass the brick Cape Cod with a lawn jockey whose face has been painted white. The gravel road is only four houses long, and at the end is a long, low, flat-roofed cinderblock building and a line of ten vehicles. I turn 90 degrees

and back into a parking space so I will be pointed in the same direction as everyone else. Not calling attention to yourself is one of the keys to survival when you are the only woman in the shop. I pull and lift my gearshift into park, turn off the lights, and slide out into a cold, dark February morning. It's 5:45 AM. Locking my car door out of habit, I cross the gravel to the door labeled "office" in lowercase letters.

After eight weeks of "Job Transition Training" set up by the GE corporation because the government required them to do that when laying off large numbers of people at one time, I have landed a job in a ten-man nonunion shop which has picked up the exact same jobs that I had been doing two months ago. It's 1991, and Jack Welsh, the CEO of GE and trendsetter for corporate planning, has started his annihilation of the skilled labor force and unions by instituting the practice of "outsourcing." I would be working the very same jobs with the very same blueprints, only now I would be doing them for four dollars an hour less and a very weak health insurance plan. I'm a single mother with a ten-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter. During my interview the week before, I was handed a sheet of paper listing the benefits I would be getting at my new job. At the bottom of this sheet, the last benefit listed, number eight, was "free coffee." And you know what? I felt damned lucky. Many of the 100-plus men whom I had worked with at RCA/GE in Camden, New Jersey, had been unable to find jobs, let alone one that involved only a four-dollar-an-hour pay cut. And this wasn't just a production shop. It was a "precision machining" model shop. One-of-a-kind pieces and short runs. A job any machinist would die for.

The business had been started thirty-five years before by two brothers. And they had set up

with two lathes, two milling machines and a cut-off saw in their family garage. The garage was now their storage area for stock and machinery not in use, and the small family house had become the business office. One brother had bought the other out years before. Now he and one of his daughters took care of the books and paperwork at desks surrounded by filing cabinets on the first floor of the house. The second floor stored family and business items.

The three sons were the managers in the shop. One was general manager and job hunter, the second kept track of the jobs once they reached the shop, and the third was in charge of inspection. Sibling rivalry would ooze out onto the shop floor like machine oil. Part of the skill of my job became the ability to listen sympathetically with just the right amount of indignation—but not so much that you could be perceived as taking sides, because at some point that same day you would hear first hand or second the other brothers' side of the current hot disagreement.

Ruthlessness and paybacks set the tenor for the shop. One day I unthinkingly threw a comeback at one of the brothers for a comment he had made about me and my work. At the end of the day as I started up the gravel drive to the small road that led to the highway and home, I detected a hard clicking sound from a back tire.

The attendant of the gas station that I limped into with my flat showed me the bolt—one and a half inches long—that he had extracted from the tire. It was the old "put a bolt upright in front of the tire" trick. I never mentioned the flat, and became more careful about my witty responses.

One of the older men who had worked for the family for about fifteen years lived with his elderly mother. When she became so ill that she required a lot of medical care, the family laid him off. We

all knew that it was because his mother's treatment had caused the premiums for our health insurance to increase. More pressure: We and our families had to remain healthy.

On that first day, after reporting to the office, I backed my Impala up to the shop's garage door and unloaded onto a hand-truck the two toolboxes that I had struggled to load into the back seat very early that morning.

I began setting up my bench while two of the maintenance men went out to the storage garage to pick out an adequate Bridgeport milling machine that would be mine. They drove it in on a forklift, leveled it, and bolted it to the cement floor. The boss gave me the blueprint and the stainless steel for my first job. I was given no extra material to cover errors in the machining process. Perfection was required. Errors meant exceeding the estimated cost of the job. They wanted to know who was cutting into their profit margin. That was one big difference between a union shop and a job shop. For the next three years, this 5x7 corner of the shop was the location of my eight-and-a-half-hour work day. That day included a strictly enforced ten-minute break in the morning, a half-hour unpaid lunch break, and a second ten-minute break in the afternoon. Include a couple of hurried bathroom breaks in that day.

The bathroom was another experience. It was strikingly different from the bathrooms in the large unionized shop from which Jack Welsh had banished me. If I had not learned the lesson before, I knew it now. Without unions in production jobs, we would all be taking a piss outside the back door of a shop or, if a man, in a can beside our machines. The bathroom for

the shop and office was in the family house, which was a short walk out the back door of the shop and up a dirt walk. Open the back door of the house, make a right immediately upon entering, and before you was the door to the bathroom. Halfway through my first bathroom break, I focused on a door that was directly in front of me. I had heard a slight clearing of a throat, the shifting of a body in his chair. On the other side of the door, directly in front of me, was the father's desk. I could proceed no further. Rule: Hold whatever as long as possible. Keep an eye out for when the father makes a short visit to the shop, and then take a fast walk up the path to the house.

Lunch break in this job shop was another unique experience: eventually it seemed normal. Lunch was at 11:00, four and a half hours into our workday. We were allowed to wash up at 10:57. We had to punch out, be off the clock, for that 30-minute period. The "old timers" in the shop were the men who had worked there before the owners hired the lucky former GE employees. Some of these "old timers" were friends of the "Old Man," the father and original owner of the company. Some had been with him for over twenty years. At least one of these men got his son a job in the shop, and this son had put in at least eight years there. At exactly one minute before lunchtime, the old timers, a couple of whom were in their late twenties, magically pulled out and unfolded cots, and at exactly 11:00 all the overhead shop lights and individual bench lights were doused. It was nap time. Those of us who chose not to nap, namely all the newly hired GE people, pulled up our shop stools and huddled around one of our benches, talked quietly, and

ate. Warm weather brought relief. The owners furnished us with a picnic bench under the trees behind our parked cars.

On my first day in the job shop, I found out that of the six former GE employees hired, I was the only one who had been designated a "trainee," even though I had thirteen years experience in the machine shop and had completed a four-year apprenticeship program in tool and die and model-making. Because of the large numbers of workers laid off by GE in Jack Welsh's push for record profits, the government had set up a program encouraging small businesses to hire laid-off workers and train them. The government would pay the wages of these trainees for six months. I was this small shop's free labor for half a year. I guess the owners thought the government would find training a woman to become a machinist more credible than training a man. So, the question in my mind was this: "After a six month period of free labor, would I become a paid employee?" The answer was, "No," After six months, I was laid off for four months. I would be hired back for long periods of time as their workload required. This pattern of being laid off and called back lasted for three years. It seemed that when they needed to downsize, I would be given a difficult job that they had underbid and my performance would be questioned when I couldn't do the job in the estimated time. I later found out that at least one of my fellow workers would create a scene by angrily refusing to do some of the difficult close-tolerance jobs. It would have never have occurred to me to refuse a job. There was no union and no recourse for the questionable treatment I received.

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It was time for me to find another job. The company was also having financial difficulty. One day, we found out that we no longer had health insurance because the company could no longer afford the premiums. For weeks, on the day before payday the brothers would call a meeting and ask who of us could afford to go without a paycheck for a week. A couple of the oldtimers whose families were grown would volunteer. When free coffee was the only item left on the benefit sheet we had been given when we were hired, I took a day off to apply for a job at an area company. I had interviewed there before. This time, I was hired into their tool and die shop. I found myself working with some former GE employees who had also applied after we were all laid off. Although these men had less experience than I, they were the ones hired three long years before. I was shocked. I was indignant. And damned happy to have a job, benefits, and union representation.

DRILL PRESS TO MACHINIST

I sat bolt upright. Either a few of the hairs that refused to be pulled back into my short ponytail were being drawn into the RPMs of the drill press spindle, or the punchline of Jayne's "Duke the Dog" joke had woken me up. Three hours of drilling the same holes in two hundred and fifty identical machined parts was putting me to sleep. Again this morning the three of us were lined up at the bank of drill presses next to the windows on the north side of the building. The radiators were complaining and it was snowing outside. After the first week of sitting beside each other drilling parts, we had agreed that every day each of us would come to work with at least one joke to tell. That way our heads would not get wrapped around the spindles when we were lulled to sleep by the repetitiveness of the job. Of

the many horror stories of machine shop accidents that the men were driven to tell us, one was of a young man who had had part of his scalp ripped from his head when his ponytail got caught up in the rotation of the drill press spindle. The visuals of this event were in my brain to stay.

It was after Paulette's second failed punchline that Stan, our drill instructor boss, walked up behind me. "I need you in the paint shop. We have parts piling up that need to be masked." I had been hired in October. It was now January. I had spent three months attempting to work my way from the back-room assembly area to the shop floor. I knew that if I went to the paint shop, it would take me three more months to get back to the drill press area, which was definitely "the shop floor." To me it represented the first step to becoming a machinist. "Are you telling me to go or are you asking me to go as a favor?" And I knew as I said this that I had declared war. I was going to fight for the ground I had gained. The union contract stated clearly that workers were not allowed to work outside their job classification. And the job description of a machine operator did not include masking parts to prepare them for the painters to spray-paint them. My question took him off guard. He sputtered, "I'm asking you!"

"Then, no, I won't go back to the paint shop," I said.

He scowled, whirled around, and retreated. My stomach was knotted, but I went back to drilling my parts, waiting for the inevitable punishment for my insubordination. I had just told Jayne what had happened when the boss came back. With a smirk he said, "Report to the shears. Bob has a job for you." I stood up and turned off my machine. "See you at lunch," I said to Jayne as I picked up my chuck key, my drift, and my mics and

headed for the toolbox, which was on the end of my lead man's bench.

I still didn't have my own bench for my tools, but George had allowed me to put my small box on the end of his bench, which was by the windows at the end of the drill press aisle. As I headed toward him I saw him flinch as he poured alcohol out of his squirt bottle onto the upturned palm of his hand. We used alcohol as a lubricant when drilling aluminum parts. He had been drilling a three-quarter-inch hole through a one-inch-thick piece of cold rolled steel. As he worked on this jig for a rush job that was supposed to hit him after lunch, a hot, blue, spiral chip had curled out of the hole, caught on the spindle, and spun around at about 400 RPMs. And he had done what he had warned me not to do: "Now don't be stupid and try to clean the chips from the spindle while it's running. They can slice you to the bone." I had felt a shiver go through my spine when he said this. I felt the same chill as I saw the slice on the palm of his hand. His jaws were clenched as he wrapped his hand with masking tape. Of course, going to the dispensary in the next building meant losing at least 45 minutes—and then the hot job he was getting after lunch would not get done on time. Thus the quick fix on damaged body parts with the help of masking tape—a must in the machinist's personal first aid kit.

"What happened down there?" He gestured with his clenched jaw to the row of spindles I had been working at.

"Stan wanted to send me back to the paint shop to mask parts."

"Yeah?"

"I asked him if he was telling me or asking me to go."

"Yeah?"

"Well, it's outside my job description and I knew it would

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take me weeks to get back on the floor.”

“Yeah?”

“He said he was asking me as a favor, so I said no.”

George looked at me with his steel blue eyes, then down at his hand, and with lips curled between a wince and a smile, “So?”

“He told me to see Bob, that he had a job for me on the shears.”

“Be careful. I know that job. It’s a heavy one—cold rolled slats about five feet long, eighth of an inch thick. You’ll have to trim them to size. Get some leather work gloves from the crib. So he put Jaynie in the paint shop?”

“I guess.”

“How the hell does he expect me to get these jobs done without help?” He jammed his hand in the direction of the rack of jobs. Then, lifting the small cardboard parts-box he had on the radiator behind his toolbox, he felt the now-exposed hot-dog-on-a-bun with his good hand. “Damn dog’s still cold.” Lunch was in ten minutes. “Well, see Bob now, he’ll probably start you after lunch. Don’t kill

yourself.”

By the end of that day I was physically exhausted, but I had found a rhythm to the job: Pick up a length of five-foot steel from the pallet beside the shear. Slap it up tight to the left-hand guide. Slide it a couple of inches under the shear blade. Hold the piece down and against the side guide. Step on the trip bar with your right foot. Wait to hear the “chunk” of the blade and the clang of the trim hitting the metal catch-all basket in the back of the shear. Still holding the now-squared strip, slide it farther under the blade until you feel it contact the break stop that’s been pre-set to the desired length. Step on the trip bar again with your right foot. (Balance is important.) And one finished piece hits the pan with a clamor. Toss the scrap that’s left in your hands into the scrap bin to your right. Begin the process again. So—swing back around, bend down, pick up the next five-foot piece from the pallet. When the counter on the front of the shear registers twenty, go to the back of the shear and stack the finished pieces from the pan onto a pallet. So the waltz

of my day was: Bend, grab, turn—slap, slide, step—chunk, clamor, slide—step, toss, turn. One more time. And again, and again, and again...

Although I was exhausted, finding the rhythm of the job was fun. Maintaining it was a dance. And it was the dance that helped me survive the monotony. Three days and many pallets later, I felt like one of the marathon dancers of the 1930s. But my punishment had been my success. I had learned the basics of another machine. After that I was never again asked to mask parts in the paint shop. Instead, I got a new boss who instructed my new lead man to set up jobs for me on the horizontal milling machine. I had become a horizontal mill operator.

—Suzanne Povse

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