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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

"Work," I was told, "is not something you enjoy, it's something you do." I quickly learned how ingenious people are at creating a social environment around boring and monotonous tasks. Our workday included not only the tasks we performed, but coffee breaks, lunch, coming in early, staying late, talking, teasing, joking, bitching, breaking rules, and figuring out ways to beat the system. For many people at Merrimack Valley, the day starts before the shift begins.

The first shift begins at 6:30, a time early enough you'd think, to discourage people from coming in before they had to. Surprisingly, however, by 6:15 the plant could already be crowded with people sitting or standing around in little pockets of two and three, talking, kidding, having a cup of coffee or enjoying a cigarette.

I wondered, when the summer heat made the factory so hot, why people would drag themselves out of bed and into the plant so early, so I asked. One of the fellows told me, "I don't know. I set the alarm, I get up, I don't feel much like sitting in the kitchen by myself having a cup of coffee, so I go in to work. I know a couple of guys will be coming in early and it gives us a chance to throw the bull for a while. It lets me relax before starting work."

A woman told me, "I don't like to rush. Rushing makes me nervous. I'd hate to cut it close coming in, it would just start me worrying, so I get in early. That way I have enough time to clean up my area, to put things just the way I want them, and then I can talk with some of the other girls."

Another woman said, "I have to wake up early to get my husband's breakfast ready. He has to be at work at six, so I'm up, and I'd just as well come in here as stay at home."

Ann Meter told me, "I'd rather stay at home but my ride picks me up about 6:00 so I really don't have much choice."

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Richard Balzer is an Institute fellow exploring the effects of social and economic change on lower and middle class America.

In the area where I worked there were several distinct groups that formed before work. Two groups of women, in the very front of the room and another two in the back tended to meet and talk by their work spaces. None of these women smoked and therefore they could meet in the work area where smoking wasn't allowed. The women who did smoke tended to meet near the back wall, directly behind our work area, for a before-work smoke.

A group of four men, two testers, a machine operator, and a layout formed a group in the back of the room. They congregated around a railing. It was to this latter group that I became attached, as did Arnold, another new worker.

Our morning conversation, especially during the summer, revolved around sports. There always seemed to be a game to talk about. The Red Sox, having a bad year, became a constant source of mockery. Of all the players, Reggie Smith, an outspoken black player who had asked to be traded, became a target for particular abuse. Often something he said or did would be talked about, and quite often a discussion of Smith's shortcomings as an athlete and a human being would lead to a discussion of 'colored ballplayers'.

Although sports dominated our conversation, stories about the service came in a close second. Except for me, all of the other fellows had been in the service and they often compared experiences.

There was some talk about problems in the plant and occasionally someone would talk about his family. There was, however, distinctly less talk among us about families than among the groups of women I knew. Most of the women, unlike the men, brought their families to work with them. They always seemed to have pictures of husbands, children, and grandchildren. Much of their conversation revolved around their families: what their husbands were doing, the accomplishments or, for that matter, the problems of their children.

Rarely did a morning pass in our group without some teasing. For a long time Arnold and I, as the youngest and newest members of the group, received the brunt of the teasing. I always seemed to arrive later than the others and quite frequently I was met with some remark about how tired I looked. One morning John said to me, "Glad to see ya--when's your face going to wake up?" This sent everyone into fits of laughter. This remark was repeated in one form or another at least three times a week for much of my stay at Western. After a while I got used to it, expected it, and reacted to it.

Not everyone participated in these morning activities. Some people chose not to come in early. There were a few people who, though they came in early, seemed not to participate in any of the groups. They simply picked up their tools and went to their work areas, content to keep their own company and wait for work to begin.

There was one fellow who never arrived more than a minute before 6:30. When he arrived we all knew it was time to start work. The bell would ring, and, the first cup of coffee downed, the first cigarette smoked, people headed to their work places.

Once the work day begins, there are three periods when large groups of people tend to congregate as they do before work. These are the two official plant-wide ten minute breaks, and lunchtime.

The groupings during the two ten minute breaks tended to be very similar to the early morning groups. Since there were more people, the areas near the walls, the only places where one could legally smoke, became packed. Also, the vending machines which are spread around the plant and which tended not to be very busy at other times during the day were, during the breaks, the scenes of long lines. Many people took care of this problem by buying their coffee, tea or soft drink just before break time. Arnold and I avoided standing on the lines twice a day by taking turns buying each other drinks.

The normal work day at Merrimack Valley is 8½ hours. You are paid for only 8 of those hours. The other half hour is lunch time. Crammed into the lunch periods, which are staggered between 11:00 and 12:30, people eat their lunches, talk, kid around, smoke, play cards, or chess.

The people in my work area usually ate their meals either upstairs in the air conditioned cafeteria or downstairs where we worked. It became immediately noticeable that in our group none of the men ate their meals in the work area while nearly half the women did.

I felt somewhat lost my first week as to where and with whom to eat. My friend Arnold would go off to eat with his father, so this left me by myself. The first day I went up to the cafeteria. I didn't see anyone I knew so I ate by myself. The next day I ate with two guys from our shop. They were friendly enough, but after buying their meals, and sitting down, they took out a small miniature chess board and quickly became involved in a match, which I learned was an everyday lunchtime event.

The third day I decided to stay in our area and eat with one of the women from Mahogany Row, who had been helping me with my work. I went up to the cafeteria, bought a sandwich, drink and dessert, and came back downstairs to join her and her friends. They were nice enough, but everyone was a little uncomfortable, I was the only man, and I felt like an intruder. I just wasn't a natural part of their group. Once, several months later when I knew each of them better, I had lunch with them again to see if it would be less awkward. It was, but only slightly.

From the fourth day on I fell into what seemed to be the overwhelming grouping pattern, men ate with men and women ate with women. This was the pattern not only during lunch but during the breaks as well.

For a few days during the next week I ate with another new worker, Mario Galuchhi, in another cafeteria. Wednesday was the last time we ate in the other cafeteria. We inadvertently discovered that we were sitting at someone else's table. We discovered this because while we were eating three women started standing over us. They didn't say anything until I innocently asked if we could help them. They looked at each other, and one of them said, "Well, we usually sit at this table." There were other free tables, but they obviously wanted this table. We gulped down our food, apologized for sitting at their table, excused ourselves and left. We both laughed about it -- imagine people staking out a table.

Later that day during the afternoon break, I told some of the guys what had happened to us, but they didn't laugh. Eddie said, "People have places where they usually eat, and that's their table."

I didn't say anything because I could see that Eddie was serious, but it didn't make sense to me, and wouldn't for nearly a month. From that day on, however, Mario and I joined Don, a layout from our area, and three other layouts for lunch.

Soon Arnold joined us too. Every day for four months the three of us would go up to the cafeteria together, get our food, and wend our way to the back of the cafeteria where Donald and his friends were sitting. I only became aware that there was a pattern to where we sat when one day our table was occupied. Up to then I had never thought of it as "our table", but seeing other people sitting where we sat was surprisingly disconcerting. There were other tables free, but I didn't wonder why we just didn't sit at another table. Instead, I stood there momentarily with the others, wondering why these women were using our table. Finally we sat at another table, and one of the fellows, Jerry, said, "Damn women, why don't they eat somewhere else?"

The next day we reclaimed the first seven seats at the corner table in the back of the cafeteria. Rarely was our table occupied, and each time it was, it was surprisingly annoying. Once, in fact, there was no one sitting at our table but the tables had been slightly rearranged. We actually put the table back the way it usually was before we sat down to eat.

This experience made me think about the women who ate downstairs. At first I couldn't understand why so many of the women chose to eat by their work places where it was hot and crowded with tools and boards, instead of eating in the air conditioned cafeteria. I remembered (in other factories) how depressing I had found the sight of men and women eating by their machines.

I came to realize that whether they ate at "their table" upstairs in the cafeteria or down near the machines, people were looking for personal space. Some people like to get away from their machines and work places, but others make a little "nest" of the area where they work. They personalize the area, and feel very comfortable eating in that area. Those of us who ate in the cafeteria did much the same thing. We, though we went upstairs, expected to eat in the same space, in our seats at our table.

As was the case during the breaks we talked a lot about the company, traded stories and gossip, exchanging rumors we'd heard. We also talked about sports, especially golf because two of the men regularly played golf.

Politics, inflation, the gas crisis and Watergate were often discussed. Watergate was a big topic for several months. Part of the reason we discussed Watergate so often was a genuine interest, but part of the reason was that one of the fellows at our table was a big Nixon supporter and the guys liked to put a "burr under his saddle". Hal would come to lunch after

we were all seated and several times a week one of the guys would spot him walking toward the table and start talking about Watergate. Hal would no sooner put down his lunch box than he would quickly come to Nixon's defense. We would keep on talking, Hal getting madder and madder, and suddenly when Hal seemed as though he'd explode someone would switch the subject. None of us ever tired of this game of getting on Hal and seeing what he would do.

Another thing we never tired of was a little game that George had invented. There was an attractive woman who ate at the far end of our table. She frequently wore tight sweaters which showed her large breasts to good advantage. When George would spot her walking toward the table he would commence making a low guttural sound--uumph, uumph, uumph--and, as if by signal, the other fellows would join in. This chorus of throaty sounds was maintained as she walked by and kept up until she took her seat. In the four months I ate upstairs she only reacted to the sounds once, when she cracked a smile. That smile was discussed for several days afterwards, but she never again gave any indication that she had even heard the noises of her small cheering section.

Although Arnold, Mario and I ate with Donald and his friends, we usually stayed in the cafeteria for less than twenty minutes. Weather permitting, we'd go outside for a smoke, and then walk back to our area, punch in, and talk to a few of the women until the bell rang. Most people returned several minutes before the bell rang, one took a daily ten minute nap, and two others carried their chess board down from lunch and continued their game in our work area.

Lunch and the two ten minute breaks take up less than an hour of an 8½ hour day. Most of the people I knew found themselves bored and uninterested in the tasks they performed several times during the day.

I asked Steve Diner about the clock and he said, "On really bad days it doesn't matter what you do, the day won't hurry for you. Three o'clock seems like it will never come. Thank Jesus, there aren't many of those days. I'll tell you when they come I can't stand it, it's the only time this place is really hard on you. And it isn't the work. Hell, half the time I think my twelve year old kid could do my job. But when the clock is fighting you it's nearly unbearable."

Neither the clock nor the job seemed to get to some people. There were a couple of women who rarely got up from their work. I asked one how often she got bored. "Oh" she said, "once in a while I get bored, if I'm not feeling good or if Jerry (her husband) and I have an argument then things go badly, but otherwise, really, I don't mind any of the jobs. I mean, a job is a job, and I just do them. That way I find the time goes faster. It's only when you start watching the clock and ignore your work that you get bored."

I asked another woman and she said, "I don't let myself get bored. If you let yourself get bored on one job, you could go crazy with most of the work in here. I know I'm going to be in here eight hours a day,

five days a week, and so I don't let it bother me. I don't kill myself. I do my job and you know, after a while, it's three o'clock."

Most of the people I know at work, however, often found themselves bored and uninterested in their work. Some of the ways they found to cope with these feelings were: self-contained games, talking, walking around, going to the bathrooms and vending machines, telling jokes, and group games.

### Self contained games

Ann told me, "The only boards that really bore me to tears are those 'dodo boards' (simple boards that require no thinking). I work as quickly as possible on those boards, just to get them out of the way and to get back to other boards that I enjoy."

JoAnne told me, "When I get bored, I think of the new swimming pool we just bought from money I'm making. I think how every hour that passes means we've paid for more of that swimming pool. I think about the pool for a while and then I feel better."

Two women who worked behind me would switch positions on a job when they got bored. One worked position one and three, the other two and four. Then they would switch back.

Laura told me, "It really isn't that boring in this shop because we do so many different jobs, but when I was on D3 it was really repetitive and we had a lot of games to pass the time. See, we knew the jobs so well we didn't have to pay attention to them. We played twenty questions, and we had a complicated game with buttons that we called nuns and cannibals."

Arnold told me that he would either change the number of boards he worked on or the pattern he worked on the boards. "I have to put face plates on boards and insert nineteen pieces. Every so often I'll change the pattern. I'll work backwards, and then forwards. But really it doesn't help much. I hate being cooped up; sitting on my ass putting on weight doing these dumb jobs. You know, the other day I was so bored I wasn't even paying attention to what I was doing and I burned my goddamn finger."

The way I tried to handle my boredom was to vary the number of boards I worked on and the way I worked on them. I would start with one or two boards and then see if I could work on four boards, seeing how much of a board I could do from memory. Since I frequently changed jobs and did about ten different boards, it was a challenge to see how much of a board with up to 120 pieces I could remember. Sometimes I'd have time contests to see how fast I could do a board.

### Talking

Talking plays an important role in the day. Our work spaces being as close as they were, there was often time to talk. A great deal of

personal information was transmitted at work. Quite frequently people talked in quite intimate terms about problems in their families. Learning about people, becoming involved, even at a distance, in their personal lives, creates a bond between people, an important bond which personalizes what otherwise is often a depersonalized situation.

Much of what is said is important. However, at times it becomes obvious that the talk is little more than a device to pass time. Arlene told me, "When I get bored, and believe me that is quite often, I like to talk to someone. I don't think I've ever told anyone else this, but sometimes I don't even care what we talk about. I just want to hear another voice."

Ellen said, she didn't mind the work, but she did wish that she wasn't working in a row by herself. "It gets very lonely when I'm just working in a row all by myself. The time goes very slowly."

Judy told me, "Sometimes when I have to work in a row by myself for several days I feel like screaming."

"Hell," said Ed, "if you couldn't talk and fool around you'd go crazy."

There was a lot of joking around during the day. The layouts, who circulated freely among the bench workers, were often kidding around with the women while they worked. Much of their kidding took the form of slightly off-color jokes.

Although the women often acted as if the jokes embarrassed them, they frequently repeated them later in the day. After hearing one woman tell a joke that Earl had told her earlier, I asked her if she was this way all the time. She said, "No, if you told my husband the way I acted in here, he wouldn't believe it, he just wouldn't believe that it was me." She and other women told me that these jokes and the constant kidding of the men pass the time of day.

One morning one of the women told Earl he looked tired. "Tired," he said, without missing a beat, "I used to be able to get it up all night, and now it takes me all night to get it up." There was some embarrassed laughter and as he departed, Earl said to me, "I knew those horny witches would like that. They may look embarrassed but they love to hear that stuff."

One of the women told me, "You know it really helps out with the layouts kidding around. I'd never tell those sorts of stories outside of here, I just couldn't do it, but it makes time go by." Just then Don, another layout, came by and said, "Don't listen to her. When I came to work I thought shit was a four letter word and now these women have corrupted me."

They argued for a few minutes about who had corrupted whom and then Don said, "I've got a new trick to show you." He took a golf ball, bounced it on the ground and, as it rose in the air, tugged the front end of his pants forward so the ball fell between his stomach and his pants. He said

"Woo" and the ball rolled out his pant leg. It was a show stopper. The women laughed and Don walked away with the ball.

Several weeks later I asked Earl about the jokes. He said, "Look, you can't tell some of the jokes to all these broads. Some of them really would get offended. With them you just give a little compliment about the way they look or something they're wearing, it doesn't take much, and it makes them feel good. The others, they love to hear the jokes. Oh sure, in front of you or some of the other kids they pretend to be embarrassed, but they love it. I'll tell you, a little clowning around makes life more comfortable for everyone."

### Walking

Often during the day, some days more than others, one feels like getting up, walking around and talking to other people. A sense of how free you are to move around depends largely on what your immediate supervisor is like. There were some supervisors, I was told, who made you feel uncomfortable leaving your seat at all, and there were others who supposedly didn't care how much you walked around as long as you got your work done. Our supervisor gave us a certain amount of freedom, especially if we left the area.

Walking and talking in our area was something that had to be done quickly. One had the sense that Jack, our supervisor, didn't like to see us just standing around talking. One usually only had time for a few quick jokes or comments. Walking and talking became a game--watch with one eye for Jack while talking to someone else. Frequently you'd be in the midst of talking with someone and they'd say, "Oh here comes Jack, talk to you later." Jack didn't even have to say anything, just a side-ward glance or movement in your direction was enough to get you moving.

Some people were more adept at walking and talking than others. There were two women who played this game frequently. One seemed expert at the subtleties involved, the other grossly ignorant. The one would come by and talk, but always seemed to have an acute sense of how far she could push, how much she could get away with. She rarely if ever was reprimanded by the supervisor.

The other woman moved as quickly as a giant Galapagos turtle. She'd make you feel uncomfortable, standing around talking, paying no attention to Jack's movements, until she was caught. After Jack had chased her back to her bench she'd complain that she was the only one he ever reprimanded.

### The bathrooms

One didn't have the problem of Jack's watchful eye if one left the area, so a trip to the vending machine or the bathroom was often relaxing. The bathrooms were not just places to take care of biological needs, but places to relax, either to get away from work, to enjoy a smoke, or to hang out.

There was no general pattern that I could discover of how frequently people went to the bathroom. Some people seemed able to stay at their work bench for the whole day, aside from official breaks. Others seemed to leave the area several times during the day. The bathrooms tended to be most crowded at four times during the day: before the two breaks, before lunch, and before the end of the day. One woman told me, "They don't give you very long for lunch or the breaks so I figure I'll wash my hands and freshen up on company time."

Although there was no noticeable pattern to how frequently people used the bathrooms, I did notice a difference between men and women. Men, I noticed, tended to go to the bathrooms by themselves. For example, I can't remember ever asking one of my friends to go to the bathroom with me. I'm not sure why, but it just didn't cross my mind to do it. It didn't usually matter to me who was in the bathroom. If there was someone I knew I'd take a smoke with him and talk a little. If there was no one I knew, I was usually carrying a paperback in my back pocket and would find a stall to read in for a few minutes. Occasionally I'd stand around with some guys I didn't know, bitching about this or that.

Women, on the other hand, tended to go to the bathroom in pairs. Over a one month period I became aware of at least five distinct pairs of women from our area who seemed always to be heading toward the bathroom together, purses in hand.

I became more and more curious as to why this was the case. I asked several of the women why they did it. Most seemed surprised that I had noticed the practice and had no real explanation for it. One woman looked at me as if I were a pervert. "Don't be a naughty boy," was all she said. Another woman told me she had never really thought about it. She just went to the bathroom with her friend because they talked a little while they washed up or while freshening up for lunch.

Delsane James told me she'd think about it, and later in the day told me, "I really don't know. I think it may be something of not feeling vulnerable. I know whenever we go out, with a couple or couples to a restaurant or a club, I always ask the other girls at the table if they want to go to the powder room. I feel better to walk with someone else. I guess. I never think about it, but I feel somehow less exposed walking with one of my friends to the bathroom."

### The telephone

Two other mechanisms which got people away from their benches were the telephone and meetings.

Talking on the phone, though not very time-consuming, played an important role in the day's events. In most of the factories I've visited, phones are not one of the amenities immediately available to workers. If there are phones on the shop floor they are usually pay phones, often at quite a distance from the work area. At Western there are pay phones, but there are

also phones by the supervisor's desk. Incoming calls, who received them and who they were from, were of great interest to many people. If Jack was away from his desk and the phone rang, a few people near his desk would look around at each other and then one would go to the phone and answer, "Department 81770". If the call wasn't for Jack but for one of us working on the bench, the fact was usually communicated in a loud voice. People were usually very quiet when the person first picked up the phone. Once the call was completed and it was clear it hadn't brought bad news, there would be a lot of teasing. One girl who was getting some ribbing and being asked several times who called said, "It was an obscene caller-- it was my husband." There were a few days in August when people looked up everytime the phone rang. Ann's daughter was expecting, and the call from the hospital would mean that Ann's first grandchild had been born. Those days we waited for the call, waited so we could celebrate. By the time the call finally came, Ann had already left early, the tension too much for her. We celebrated without her and again the next morning with her when she arrived with cigars and candy.

Occasionally the phone would be used for a prank. Someone would call from the back of the room and a person not expecting a call would get all excited until he found out that someone was playing a joke. I was involved in a phone prank. One day, Loraine called me back to her desk. She told me a woman from another department had at first been going to be transferred into our department but it had been called off. She said, "We want to play a joke on her. Call her and tell her you're from the union and that she's going to be transferred."

It had been a slow morning so I didn't need much coaxing to play along. They gave me her extension. She was in the next department, no more than a hundred yards from where we were. I made the call, told her I was a union official and convinced her that the transfer was on again. As a last flourish I told her we were doing this all on the QT so she shouldn't tell anybody until we had it "locked up". She told me, "Ralph, I've always supported the union, you don't have to worry. I won't mention it to anyone."

Within five minutes she had come over to the three women who had put me up to it and told them she had been told, by sources she couldn't mention, that she was going to be transferred. They waited several days before letting her in on the joke.

### Meetings

Meetings, though infrequently held, were enjoyed almost regardless of their purpose by most people. The time we spent at meetings was time we could write off on our bogies so it didn't hurt our bonus. No one, except for our supervisor, therefore, was ever in a hurry at meeting time. From the time we left our tools and benches the pace was slow. People would talk to friends in other departments as we meandered to the meeting place. You

could smoke at a meeting so we did. If there had been a popcorn concession someone could have made a fortune.

Except when it meant exposing themselves, people would try to think of ways to extend the meeting when it was coming to a close. The longer the meeting, the more time we were legitimately away from our work. On more than one occasion I heard people whisper, "Ask something, ask something."

Questioned out, the meeting would finally end, and it would be time to return to work. The leisurely pace of the walk back to our shop was in marked contrast to the desperate pace set when we left the plant at the end of the day.

### Group Games

Each group has all sorts of practices and games which are peculiar to it. In our work area there were a number of these games. Some of the ones I participated in were Candy Time, Wet Towel Time and Tea Time.

### Candy Time

Susan, one of the women working in our area, kept us supplied with candy. Two of the drawers in her desk were always filled with a variety of candies; on any given day the drawers might contain toffies, candy kisses, hard candies, chocolates and Bit-O-Honey. Occasionally someone else would bring in some candy and refill Susan's stock. However, for the most part, it was Susan who kept the candy supply stocked.

A visit to the group's candy store was for many people including me, a daily must.

### Wet Towel Time

Wet towel Time was a seasonal phenomenon, a way to deal with the summer heat. Ann would appear by your work space during the afternoon, and either hand you a wet paper towel, or, if she knew you better, slap it on the back of your neck. Her hand full of wet towels, she's pause long enough for a little talk before passing on to the next person. Wet Towel Time gave her a break from her work, allowed her to pass a few minutes talking, and helped cool you down.

The wet towel game was a very short game, lasting only a few brushes of the neck, a swipe of the face, and a quick pass or two over sweaty arms and hands. I extended the game a little when the girl behind me and I started seeing who could make a basket with the rumped paper towel.

### Tea Time

Tea Time was another summer game played in our department. One of the younger women, an Englishwoman, brought a big jar of iced tea mix in to work. She made three cups of tea every afternoon, after lunch and before the afternoon break, for herself and two women who worked near her. I

don't remember when she started expanding it, but soon Arnold and I had cups of daily tea also. Our only responsibility was to have our cups ready when she called "Tea Time". She would take all five cups to the nearby water cooler, fill them with water, return, and make the tea.

I almost got into a lot of trouble because of Tea Time. One day, I don't remember why, I was making the tea. I had left my desk, collected the cups, filled them with water and gotten the tea. I was in the midst of making it when I started hearing several people say psst, psst. It took only a few seconds for me to discover several women behind me, pointing their fingers in another direction. I looked over my shoulder and saw the plant manager and one of his assistants walking in our direction. I immediately got the message and jammed the cups out of sight behind a box of parts, threw the box of tea back in the bin and quickly walked back to my seat.

Hypothetically, one isn't supposed to make tea during working time. No one gave it much thought until the manager and his associate passed by. Their presence had changed Tea Time into a serious rule violation. The instinct of my fellow workers was to help protect me.

Often, breaking rules becomes the way that one deals with boredom. Sometimes breaking rules is a singular activity, at other times it becomes a group activity. There was, at least in our group, a feeling of being us, and we were often engaged in a general, if imaginary, struggle against them. They set the rates, They made the rules, but We would find ways of doing things, We have our own systems to deal with the day.

### Leaving the plant

The last activity in the plant is leaving. People may slowly come in at the beginning of the day, but they leave in a rush. The 3 o'clock bell rings, and there is a mad dash for the time clock, the door and waiting cars.

Just as I wondered why people came in early, I often wondered why people made such a mad dash to get out of the plant. Why, when they knew they were destined to wait in long, often unpleasant lines of cars to get out of the parking lot? People gave me a number of explanations. There is a deep feeling of relief when a day of work is done. Another day worked, another day gotten through. Once that bell rings people want to get out of the plant, no matter what.

Not everyone leaves in a rush. A few people do wait for the traffic to ease up before leaving. For many of the bench people there are after-hour Western Electric connected activities. More than 3000 people participate in the more than two dozen after-hour activities which run from a full schedule of men's and women's athletic leagues, to macrame clubs.

I played in the soccer league. Unfortunately my team, the Panthers, had the distinction of winning only one of the twenty-three games we played. I enjoyed the games nevertheless, and the stopping off at a local club for

a couple of beers afterwards. Some of the players on the better teams took the games and the league very seriously. They might think of staying out, missing a day of work, but they wouldn't miss a day when they had a league match afterwards.

We had one outstanding soccer player in our group and players from other teams were always stopping by to talk with him. One of the layouts was constantly kidding him about the number of engineers and bigshots who stopped by to talk about soccer with him. "Hell," he said, "Andy's only been here a year, and he already knows more bigshots than I do."

The after-hour activities bind workers together in close groups of people sharing similar interests. People often look forward to their group's meetings, and league play.

#### Not all Peaches and Cream

The human environment, at work, supportive for many, can be cruel and devastating for others. People can be very nice and very compassionate. They can also be very mean and catty. Many people enjoy the informal teasing, the constant joking, but others don't. One woman on the evening shift warned me, "Watch out. People will smile at you, but they'll talk behind your back. If you're smart you won't tell them anything, unless you want everyone to know it."

After working downstairs for a while I learned that workers have mixed feelings about other workers. One day in sheer frustration Ann told me, "It kills me. Here we bust our butts to really produce, and it's not fair that Sylvia sits there and doesn't do anything. My husband tells me that's how it is. He worked on a farm, and he said the strong horse always pulled extra for the weaker horse, and that's how it is in here."

A friend told me she didn't enjoy working near a certain woman because it made her nervous—you didn't know when she was going to throw something or say something, or tear into somebody. Earl told me, "Arnold's got himself a bad temper and he better watch himself, because if he gets some of the process checkers mad at him, they'll really make it hard for him."

Still another woman told me, "Judy knows I'm friendly with Claire, all the girls know it. I know they don't like her but why do they talk about her to me? They want me to say something bad about her, but I won't do it."

Most of these negative comments remain fairly muted and don't interfere with the way work is being conducted or social relations carried on. On occasion, however, the kidding can cause serious unhappiness; tempers can flare and a person can start crying. One day Bertha told me, "I was just joking around with Jane. It was so hot I said her back must be sticking to her chair. Well, she got all huffy and told me she didn't like that talk. She yelled at me. You know what I did? I didn't say anything, I just walked into the bathroom and cried. Why'd she talk to me like that? I was just kidding around with her. We haven't said a word to each other for the last two weeks."

One day in September I was working on some 296 boards when a little teasing erupted into yelling. All of a sudden, without warning, Janet started yelling at the top of her voice, "I won't have it, I won't have it." She slammed down some boards and started crying. She sat at her desk for more than a minute crying, her face buried in her folded arms, before a friend came over and took her away to one of the bathrooms. The two women who were teasing her couldn't understand. "We were just joking around," one said. When Janet came back from the bathroom, she said, "I don't know, it just got to be too much for me. I just couldn't take it anymore."

Most times the teasing comments are innocent. The intention of the person making them is to have a little fun, but not to drive someone to tears. People are occasionally intentionally cruel, their comments obviously are made to hurt, and they do. The most graphic example of this that I saw was on the evening shift. A woman who had worked at Western for several years but had just transferred to the department I was working in had spoiled a number of boards. The layout, a woman, really chewed her out. Dale didn't say anything in her own defense, she just sat there as the woman yelled at her. When the woman left she began crying. She sat there trying to do her work as the tears ran down her cheeks. I went over and tried to comfort her. She kept trying to wipe away the tears, but they kept returning. In a halting voice she said, "What did she think, I wanted to make those mistakes? I didn't know how to do the job, no one really taught me. I didn't want to do it wrong." Just as she said, "Why'd she talk in that horrible way to me", she began crying again, her mouth curled and she couldn't talk. I told her we could discuss it later and suggested she go to the bathroom to calm down and pull herself together.

She left and when she came back she said she felt better. For the rest of the night she cried occasionally and talked about Nancy. "That's what I can't stand about this place, the way some people treat you. Nancy treated me like a dog. I'll get her back, you just watch, I'll get even with her."

Just as the teasing can go too far, some people consider the interest others take in their lives as prying. Jane told me, "I don't like the way these women are always prying into your life. They want to know everything about you. If you talk to a man in here, they think there's something going on. I'd rather be by myself than spend time with a lot of them."

Some people choose to severely limit their participation with the group. I've seen more than one person who preferred to sit with a book or by themselves during a break rather than chewing the fat with other people.

There are, unfortunately, some people who would like to participate, but who are ostracized. I remember one fellow on the evening shift. There was nothing wrong with him, he was always trying to please people. He was a little awkward, and became the butt of many jokes, some good natured, others not. He tried on a couple of occasions to eat with a group of us,

but when he sat down the other guys either ignored him or the joking and laughing seemed to stop. I asked one of the fellows why this happened, why people weren't friendlier with Eddie. He said, "I don't know man, he just is a creepy dude. I just don't enjoy eating my dinner with him."

So Eddie would either eat by himself in another part of the cafeteria or would go see "another friend."

### The future

A supervisor once told me, "You talk to the people on the bench, you hear them bitch about this and that, how they don't like it here. Well, let me tell you this, there isn't a week that goes by that I'm not stopped in the grocery store, or somewhere else in town by eight or ten people who want me to help them, or their relatives, get in here."

"Look, I'm not going to lie to you, a lot of the jobs people do here are boring. You think my job is so exciting? It isn't. I'm in here, like most of the people, because I need to make a living. I'll say this, if you've got to work, this is as good a place as you'll find in the whole valley to work."

Many people did not particularly like their jobs, but admitted that of the places they could work Western was one of the best. It might not offer satisfying work, but it did offer decent pay, good clean working conditions, and steady employment.

Although many of the bench people occasionally bemoaned their fate, talked longingly about missed opportunities, and about not having enough schooling to get a better, more interesting job, they generally accepted the reality of their work situation. Most of these people do not expect to find their jobs exciting, challenging work. Instead they look for jobs that will give them decent pay to allow them to make money to buy their enjoyment outside the factory. Many have turned down jobs as secretaries which they consider to be "nicer", because they don't pay as well.

The workplace is not just the bends, thrusts, reaches and inserts required to fulfill the tasks; it is the card games, the talks, the joking, the coffee breaks, the complaining, the breaking of rules. It is the good times and the occasional cruelties.

That people accept the limitations of their job is an economic reality. For older workers, who have known the depression and hard times, these limited jobs are work, work that pays. Younger workers entering this environment, not knowing the economic deprivation and insecurity that their parents knew, have found it more difficult to adjust to this world. They want more than an enjoyable environment; they want work which is rewarding and interesting. For them, comaraderie may not be enough.

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