

**Mabel Colyer, Frances Cooke, and Ethel Severinghaus
(The Long Sisters)
Narrators**

**Mike Russert
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Interviewers**

**Interviewed on August 6th, 2003
Colonie, NY**

**Mabel Colyer: MC
Frances Cooke: FC
Ethel Severinghaus: ES**

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

ES: Ethel Long Severinghaus, December 10th 1918, Syracuse, NY.

FC: Frances Long Cooke, December 30th 1916, Syracuse, NY.

MC: Mabel Long Colyer, April 3rd 1921, Sidney Center, NY.

Q: All three of you worked in the same defense plant. Could you tell us what plant you worked in, some of your experiences there, and how long you worked there.

ES: It was the Bendix Scintilla, Airplane Magneto Plant in Sidney, NY. I was there briefly, just several months, between one thing and another. I was in the inspection, inspecting cans and a few other things they dragged me into.

Q: Had you ever had any experience like this?

ES: No experience, except my sister had been in inspection for a long time. I knew a little bit about it from her.

Q: When did you work there? What months, what years?

ES: It was from September to December, 1941.

Q: Francis?

FC: I went there from 1936 in the fall. I worked on rockle machines, which had a diamond point and an indicator you pressed down to metals to find out if they were the correct hardness that was needed. I also worked on the springs which were very important.

Q: What were these springs used in?

FC: Cam followers, they were little pieces of felt fastened to a spring and the spring had to be tested 100%, for each piece, because it was very important.

Q: Where were these pieces used? In the airplanes?

FC: Yes, the cam followers. I also worked with other things, like cable screws and stuff they used in the molding room. I am trying to think of what else.

Q: How long did you work there?

FC: From 1936 to the Fall of 44.

MC: I worked there from 1940 until 1945 when the war was over. I worked on the magneto spark plug assemblies and it was mostly just general assembly work. They all went into the ignition system for airplanes. It was mostly all airplanes, magnetos, and assemblies.

Q: These jobs that you ladies did, were they jobs that were normally done by men before the war?

MC: We really don't know whether they made as many during the war, building all these extra planes and everything. It was Scintilla Magneto, originally started by German immigrants, and they, by the way I was told, made just about all the magnetos that were used on the planes at that time. There was no country or place that made them more than they did; Scintilla, Sidney. But, we really don't know who did it before we went there because there were more women and they had to split mica and make the center core of the spark plugs and assemble them. At that time, you did one or two jobs and that was it. That's the way they made production.

Q: Frances, you started there well before the war, were there more men or women working there when you started?

FC: I'd say half and half.

Q: Why did the three of you end up there?

FC: I started out to be a nurse, and my father kept complaining that he wanted me home helping him. I got so tired of his complaining that I told him I guess I would stop my nursing for a while. I went there and my aunt Louise said to me, "Well Frances you shouldn't just work in my store. You're more talented than that. Why don't you go down and apply to the plant?" They told me they wouldn't hire me for quite a long time and the next morning I got a call to come in. I said, "well why would you slight me?" They said, "because you had physics and chemistry in high school." They figured that would go along with their metals.

Q: What kind of shifts did you work, did you work a swing shift?

FC: I worked the day shift, but during the war, I worked from 11-7, nights, and sometimes the next day shift. Sometimes I was working 16 hours a day.

Q: Mabel, how about you with shifts?

MC: The war was on by then, we worked 10 hours a day, 7 days a week. The only time you saw daylight was if you went outdoors on your lunch time because the

windows were all blacked over. I lived in Oneonta at the time and they used everything that moved on the road to get people back and forth to work. I remember the old bus which had school seats like they had in old schools, bolted to the floor. That's what we rode. A lot of people from other towns took the train, anyway they could get to Sidney, because Sidney was the only defense place in the area. That's all you did, went to work and came home. We felt quite proud of the work we were doing, it was worth it.

Q: Was there military there guarding the plant?

MC: Yes, the plant was secured with a fence all around. There were guards, they had army and navy personnel in the plant to make sure that quality control was kept the way it had to be, and things like that.

Q: Ethel, what kind of shift did you work?

ES: Well, it was a day shift because I had to go down with the riders from Sidney Center. I was a school teacher and I was really working during the four months between my summer work and marriage. I was married in December and of course, the war was declared three weeks before I was married. I had to move to Saranac Lake where my husband was a regional game supervisor.

Q: How much were you paid?

FC: Thirty cents to start out with and I ended up with a dollar and a quarter when I quit.

MC: I don't really remember what my early wage was.

Q: Did you get any kind of extra rations or anything because you worked at a defense plant?

FC: At Christmas time they gave us a little piece of ham.

MC: The only thing we got was extra stamps for gas, but then everybody car pooled. And of course, as I said, we rode on the bus. At the time, my husband was in the national guard and he was down in Alabama, Fort McClellan. Everybody from Oneonta got there anyway they could. It was mostly carpooling and these old buses. They would put anything on the road that traveled and could take people to work. Later, outside of extra stamps for gas, that's about the only thing I remember that they did get. Anybody driving in car pools got some extra stamps for gas if they took passengers.

Q: Do the three of you remember where you were and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

FC: I was at the plant.

ES: I was at the plant working, I started just before.

FC: Everybody was cheering to no end.

MC: Cheering? Not at Pearl Harbor.

FC: Well I mean to be glad that the war was just about over.

MC: You're talking about D-Day.

FC: Oh, yes.

MC: Pearl Harbor was the beginning.

FC: Oh, that was terrible.

MC: That was a lot of years ago.

Q: Did you ever remember any celebrities coming through the plant that were pushing bonds? Did they push a lot of war bonds?

FC: Yes, they had to ask us to buy them. We were supposed to buy a \$25 one every month. We got a \$25 bond for \$18.75. With our small pay, you can see how much we gave up.

Q: Did you get paid overtime if you worked beyond eight hours?

FC: Yes, you got time and a half.

Q: Are there any stories you want to tell that you remember?

MC: Not really, except for the fact that everybody was working long hours. But, they took it in stride because we had a good purpose for doing it. It wasn't like we were working long hours for somebody else's profit. We were doing it because of the war effort.

ES: We were very consciousness because we knew those planes were dependent on our doing our job properly. At one time, the fellow who had been an upperclassman when I was in college, Altucher Harthill, he came down on a plane in the Pacific and died while I was working there.

Q: You are originally from Sidney Center, Syracuse, and Syracuse, correct?

ES: We were born there, but ended up in Sidney Center.

MC: They were born first, in Syracuse, but before I came along, they moved to Sidney Center to live.

Q: Do you live in Beltron currently?

ES: I live in Beltron.

MC: She, *points to Francis*, lives in Sidney, and I live in Otego.

Q: When the war ended...

MC: We had a celebration, everyone went crazy.

Q: Were you laid off?

MC: Yes, they closed the plant right down and everybody went home. About a week later, if they wanted you to come back, you got a letter. I received a letter but I didn't go back.

Q: Did any of you go back to the plant?

FC: I did.

MC: I didn't go back until five years later, and then I put in another 21 years there.

Q: Is the plant still there?

All: Yes.

FC: It has a new name now, what is it?

MC: Amphenol. It was originally Scintilla, from the German.

FC: In about 1926 it started.

MC: It went from that, to Bendix, to another name before Amphenol, which it is now.

Q: What do they do now?

MC: They still make connectors and stuff for planes, although they make more domestic products now. In fact, back then, it was the only decent employer in the whole area. People would come in from Pennsylvania and everywhere to work there. It still is, really.

FC: The railroad brought people from Middletown, to Edmeston, to Sidney for work. The train had three shifts, it would bring a group and then go right back and get another group.

Q: Thank you very much.