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Jean Gordon Memoir

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Interview and memoir

1 tape, 49 mins., 15 pp.

SANGAMON ORDNANCE PLANT PROJECT

Gordon, assembly line worker at the Sangamon Ordnance Plant during WWII, recalls working conditions at the plant, minority workers, accidents, security, medical facilities, production goals, plant operations, ammunition produced, and transportation to the plant.

Interview by B. David McCarthy, 1989

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted by B. David McCarthy for the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University in the fall of 1989. Margaret Reeder also transcribed the tapes and Kay Johansen edited the transcripts.

Jean Gordon was born July 26, 1924 in Niantic, Illinois and has been a life long resident of central Illinois. Ms. Gordon worked as an assembly line worker at the Sangamon Ordnance Plant during World War II. She later moved to office work at the plant. Today she is employed by the Farmers State Bank and Trust of Illiopolis.

B. David McCarthy was born and raised in central Illinois, where he earned a BA in history in 1976 from Western Illinois University. He has been employed as a teacher at Illiopolis CUD #12 since his graduation. Mr. McCarthy recently completed his MA degree at Sangamon State University in history. His thesis topic was the Sangamon Ordnance Plant. He is married and the father of three children.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Jean Gordon, October 18, 1989.

David McCarthy, Interviewer.

Q: Jean, have you lived around Illiopolis all your life?

A: Yes.

Q: At what age did you begin to work at the Sangamon Ordnance Plant?

A: Eighteen.

Q: Were you involved in the production of ammunition?

A: Yes.

Q: What types?

A: 90 millimeters and 75's.

Q: What exactly did you do in the production?

A: After the shells were completed they came down the table and I taped the lid onto the shell cases. They were put into a shell casing and then they had to be taped and then they went on down the table and then they were loaded into boxes. The 90's I believe there was four to a box. Then they were shipped to the bay unit and nailed shut and put on the boxcar and shipped out.

Q: Those are pretty large shells aren't they?

A: Yes. They'd be like anti-aircraft.

Q: And four to a box?

A: I believe they were four to a box. Now the 75's I can't remember how many went into a box.

Q: The 90 millimeters, were those the largest that were manufactured at the plant?

A: Yes.

Q: How long did you work in that particular area?

A: Well I worked there until the end of the war but six months before the war ended I went to the office. The war ended when, 1945?

Q: Did you do any other jobs besides working on the shell casings and then the office work?

A: When I first started there, I started nights, I worked in what they called the east end where they had these casings for the shells and they came down on the table and there was a girl on each side of the table and they had code numbers toward the end of the shell casings and we stapled those on the casings and then loaded them up on dollies, I guess, and then they were taken to the bays and these casings were used to put the shells in.

Q: Was this quite heavy work?

A: No.

Q: How about the finished products, were those shells heavy?

A: Yes, but I never handled those. When they started in they had a machine where a fellow did the crimping of the shell casing to the projector and then it went on down the line and we never picked them up, they just kept rolling down the table. When they got to me they were in this big black container and it was rolled up to me and I had to tape the lid shut and make sure it was tight and sent on down to the end of the table where it was boxed and shipped out.

Q: Now you mentioned that several girls worked with you there at your first job at the plant. Were most of the people that you worked with women or were there many men?

A: They were mixed.

Q: Were there any female supervisors?

A: Yes, in fact I had one when I first started working there.

Q: Do you recall her name?

A: No I don't, Dave.

Q: Now you had mentioned to me in another conversation of another supervisor you had who was a man, do you remember his name?

A: Yes, Nick Fanalle. In fact he was my boss at night and then when he went on days, he took me on days with him and I stayed there down on the line six months before the war ended and then I went to the office.

Q: Now did they run three shifts for most of the time or were there two?

A: Two.

Q: There would be a morning and an evening shift?

A: Yes.

Q: You mentioned that you worked there in the shell loading until about six months before the war ended and then you went for the rest of the war working in the office?

A: Yes.

Q: What did you do in the office?

A: Oh, I done paper work and reacquisitions for the manager of the whole area. Line 1 was where I worked and they needed another girl up in the office and of course by then things were slowing down some. So I went up there for six months and then I stayed after the war ended for a month and a half to get the office cleared out. I was the last one to leave line 1.

Q: Do you remember your line 1 supervisor, the head of the whole line 1?

A: His name was John W. Gallagher.

Q: The plant was operated by what company?

A: All I know is Sangamon Ordnance.

Q: Was there a private company involved in the materials?

A: That I don't know.

Q: The pay checks that you received, were they government issued pay checks or did they come from someone else?

A: I don't know.

Q: Do you happen to recall what kind of wages you were paid?

A: I can't remember, no I won't say. Back there, what forty-seven years ago, it was pretty good wages whatever it was but no.

Q: So it was higher than you would have probably been paid in working elsewhere besides the plant.

A: Yes. In fact they paid more on the line than they did in the office and that's the reason I went to the line first.

Q: Do you know if there were many minorities that worked at the plant?

A: There were quite a few.

Q: In what capacity did they work?

A: They done everything that I done and we had two that worked in our bay, they worked back in the east end where I did. They done basically the same thing. We all had a job to do and we all done it together and it was a nice place, good group, bunch of people.

Q: Were these two minorities that you mentioned women or men?

A: They were both, I think we had two fellows that loaded the shells and then we had another girl that worked side by side with the rest of us.

Q: Did you happen to recall what date it was that you started at the plant?

A: I would say it was in June 1943.

Q: So the plant had only been operating for a few months when you started?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have any background that prepared you for work at the plant?

A: No, I just come right out of high school.

Q: What high school did you go to?

A: Niantic High School.

Q: Along another line, do you feel that the work that you did at the plant, either on the shell assembly line or in the office, prepared you for what you were going to do later in life?

A: More or less, of course I was a bookkeeper, that was my goal to be a bookkeeper and it helped me to see how the other people lived and how to set your standards a little higher because you worked with all kinds of people out there. Then I went into the office and of course I did some bookkeeping, record keeping more or less. From there I went into bookkeeping and I was working at the elevator in Niantic. It was very interesting but after looking back it could have been a little dangerous and I don't think I'd want to do it again.

Q: That's a line I wanted to pursue? Did you ever have any accidents on your line?

A: Not on our line.

Q: You're aware of others though?

A: Yes, on line 2 they had a shell explode.

Q: Do you know in any specific terms what line 2 produced?

A: The same thing we did.

Q: Do you know how the accident that they had occurred?

A: No. It happened in the bay but I don't recall what caused the shell to explode.

Q: Now would the bay be the area where after the shells were finished they would be prepared and loaded?

A: The bay is what I worked in. When the powder was poured into the shell casing they had a big machine and there was a girl that put the casing into the machine and we had a fellow that dropped the projector they called it, into it and crimped that together. Then it was rolled out on the table and a girl screwed the fuse in and then another girl fused the fuse to the projector and then they had a girl next to her that inspected it and it rolled on down and there was a girl that put the shell, after it was inspected, into the casing and it rolled down to me and I'd tape it and then it rolled down to the end of the table and was boxed. But at the time I don't think any of us realized how dangerous it could have been.

Q: Do you have any memory of when that accident occurred on line 2, was it early in the war or late?

A: I have no idea, Dave, I can't say.

Q: Do you know of any accidents or injuries that occurred?

A: No.

Q: Can you think of any other names of people that might be someone that I'd want to talk to or maybe some of the other supervisors or plant manager or anything of that nature?

A: My bosses that we had in the bay they wasn't from around here and right off hand I may think of somebody later but I can't think of anybody that I worked with from around this vicinity. You know first names was about all we knew.

Q: What about the military presence at the plant? Do you recall the commander that was in charge of the whole operation?

A: No.

Q: Alright, what about security at the plant? Could you describe some details about that?

A: Everybody was checked before they went down on the line, they had change houses, we had to change clothes when we went in and worked of a morning. We had safety shoes that we had to wear and then when we went down to the line to work, they had two security guards, one to check the women and one to check the men, to make sure that they weren't carrying anything down to the line, anything like bobby pins or anything that would cause static electricity or anything. It was pretty tight security.

Q: Was there fear of sabotage?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you know of any instances of where anyone was ever caught or arrested for sabotage?

A: No.

Q: Did you have to wear some type of name badge, some type of identification?

A: No, we just had white uniforms and we couldn't wear anything that had metal on them, white uniforms and safety shoes.

Q: What about smoking?

A: You could smoke in the cafeteria but you couldn't smoke on the line.

Q: Did they check people for cigarettes and matches when they went in?

A: Oh yes, you got checked when you went down on the line and if you had any matches or cigarettes on you why you left them at the guards' headquarters.

Q: Now you mentioned the cafeteria, could you tell me more about that?

A: They had this huge cafeteria where we went for lunch. You could either take your lunch or they served lunch. We used to go eat at eleven-thirty and they had a shift at twelve-thirty and maybe the last time you could eat was probably about one. It was was huge cafeteria.

Q: How was the food?

A: Good.

Q: Do you have any idea approximately how many people worked in the plant?

A: On line 1 you mean?

Q: Well both on line 1 and a more general idea of all the plant.

A: I have no idea.

Q: How about line 1?

A: I couldn't tell you because down west that's where they had the TNT and then everything started working up to the east. To this date I have no idea how many was employed.

Q: How about the location of line 1, could you describe that for me in terms of where it would have been if we could go out there and see it?

A: Alright you go to--well right now DeKalb hatchery is setting or is in the building that my line was situated in which is a mile west or about a mile north and then you turn back east and I'd say what about three blocks off of the Mt. Pulaski blacktop. Well most of it is still standing, where the DeKalb hatchery is in that building now.

Q: So most of those buildings have DeKalb in them, the long buildings have DeKalb in them, the long buildings that run for several hundred yards, those are the actual lines that much of this material was made in?

A: Yes.

Q: As you go around the DeKalb plant you see other buildings and the farms to the north of the DeKalb plant. Some of those have extremely thick concrete walls, do you know what those were used for?

A: I think those were TNT buildings and then you notice they had mounds. That was where the live TNT was stored.

Q: What about the 90 and 75 millimeter shells, were they stored in the bunkers too?

A: They were shipped out. This was the live ammunition before it was taken to the bays were stored in these bunkers and was camouflaged. And as I say, the live ammunition came to the bay and then that's where the process started where I ended up taping them together.

Q: The smokestacks that you see dotting the landscape to the west of Illiopolis, did each area or each line have it's own say heating unit or what were those smokestacks for?

A: I guess it must be for the heating, the heating of the bays.

Q: The plant was fairly self-contained in the sense that it had it's own sewer system and water supply. Do you know anything about the water supply for example?

A: No, I don't. I don't know where they got their water supply.

Q: What about persons who worked at the plant who worked outside of Illiopolis, how did they get to the plant?

A: Well Springfield and Decatur at that time had an interurban and they made up I think there was about six cars that came out of Decatur that people rode that took them to the plant and the same way from Springfield. They rode this interurban and I think it consisted of about six cars from Decatur and six from Springfield and then they took them home of an evening.

Q: Were there people who drove cars to the plant?

A: Yes, there were people that lived at Atlanta, Illinois, some lived at Peoria and they drove every day.

Q: Did they receive some type, as I recall there was some type of gas rationing during the war so did they receive some like an exemption so that they could get enough gas to do that?

A: I don't know, Dave, but evidently they did. I rode with a friend of mine, he worked out there and I rode with him so I don't know what he done for gas.

Q: You lived in Niantic while you were working out there?

A: Yes.

Q: I've heard many stories about the way that rooms were rented out etc. Can you tell me anything about the way and the places that people found to live there in Illiopolis while they worked at the plant?

A: A lot of people brought their trailers in and rented people's backyards and what houses were available but most everybody had mobile homes that people rented yards to and I think they had kind of like, oh I would say a housing unit, out in the south staff area. I remember one time the boss I was working for, they had an order that they had to get out and a friend of mine and I, the boss asked us two girls to stay and work overtime and we went to this building and we stayed all night.

Q: Like a dormitory-type thing?

A: Yes, and they had courtesy cars and station wagons that picked you up the next morning. In fact some nights when I worked overtime and went back home after ten o'clock there would be a car that when I or anybody else from Decatur worked overtime they'd take us home.

Q: The plant had a number of facilities that I would like to ask you about. First, do you know anything about the daycare center?

A: No.

Q: How about the guardposts that were scattered around the perimeter of the plant, did you have any knowledge of those?

A: Yes. When we entered the plant you had to stop and the guard searched your car, checked the car out, checked the people in it and then of course you went on to the plant and after you came back down from the change house where we changed our clothes they'd check us again. Yes, they had pretty tight security, entering and going in and out of the plant.

Q: How did the guards patrol the grounds?

A: I have no idea.

Q: On horseback?

A: I have no idea, I think on line 1 they walked.

Q: Do you know anything about the consolidation of the two plants into the Sangamon Ordnance Plant?

A: You'd better run that by me again.

Q: There was the Oak Plant and there was another plant. As I recall one was run by Johnson and Johnson and the other by Remington Rand and these two plants were consolidated and put under the control of Remington Rand. I wonder if you could tell me anything about that?

A: I have no idea, that I couldn't tell you.

Q: At the time that the plant was closed, you indicated earlier that you were one of the last people to be laid off on the job that you were doing. Could you tell me anything about the procedures or the way the plant was closed?

A: The plant itself no, but the office, well there was a personnel officer there and all we done was box up all the typewriters and box everything up. How the plant was phased out down on the line I have no idea.

Q: Were these office materials sold at auction?

A: I have no idea what they done with it. All we did was box them up and set them there. Of course I had to requisition them out and make inventory of everything that was there and from there I have no idea where they went to.

Q: What about recreational facilities at the plant?

A: You mean for us employees?

Q: Yes.

A: There wasn't really any. You went to work and you had a fifteen minute break in the morning and a fifteen break in the afternoon and that was about it.

Q: Did they have a softball diamond where they had league play?

A: That I couldn't say.

Q: What did the military personnel at the plant do?

A: They were more or less an overseer, they were in and out about every day, up and down the line, in and out of the bays and more or less checking everything and making sure everything was running right. You know they were there two or three times a day and at night too when they worked overtime.

Q: Security was provided by the military?

A: I would assume yes. No, no I think--well I don't know who hired the security.

Q: The guards were civilians then?

A: Yes.

Q: They were not military personnel?

A: No, they were civilians.

Q: You really feel that the military presence at the plant then was fairly small, is that an accurate assessment? Not a lot of military people around?

A: Well I don't know about the other lines or the southside, I can only speculate on line 1 but they were in and out, you felt a sense of security with them in and out. I would say they were well provided with government personnel and security out there.

Q: Do you recall fairly late in the war a group of black troops were brought onto the plant grounds to practice ammunition handling?

A: No, I don't.

Q: At the time that the plant was being considered or in the process of condemnation of the land for use of the plant, do you have any information about the feelings of the local people, the farmers, the townspeople on this matter?

A: No, I don't, Dave. I think I was just a sophomore in high school when this was all taking place and not living in Illiopolis, I don't know about the feelings of the people.

Q: Do you feel like you were one of the youngest people at the plant or were most people there your age or thereabouts?

A: I was one of the youngest and then this friend of mine from Springfield, a girlfriend, we were the same age but most of them was older, married and had children. But there was a few others younger but I think at that time her and I were about two of the youngest that worked in our area.

Q: Do you recall an award ceremony where the plant personnel were given special commendation for their production?

A: Our bay did. I think we put out on these 90 millimeter shells, I think around two thousand or twenty-five hundred was a pretty good days work and we decided one day we had a goal we was going to put out five thousand. Of course we had to have help from the people that was supplying the casings to us and we put out five thousand shells and we got our picture taken and written up in the little magazine that they put out at the plant.

Q: Do you recall the name of that magazine?

A: Echo, I think.

Q: Do you know anything about the way that magazine was produced, like who was in charge?

A: Yes, his name was Red McManus but I think Red is deceased now but he was the McManus that has the florist and the theatre. But Red McManus, he ran the paper and they put it out on line 1.

Q: Do you recall the union organizing activities that went on at the plant?

A: No, I don't.

Q: Was there ever any talk of the union?

A: Not to my knowledge.

Q: You remember no vote that was taken?

A: No.

Q: At the time that the plant was closed you indicated that you were involved with closing the office and you were not sure of the closing down of the production line. What about the sale of the land? We've already discussed I know that DeKalb ended up with some of the ground. Could you tell me anything about the rest of it from your experience?

A: No, I think to my knowledge some of them had the option of buying the ground back and I think maybe some of them did. But I really can't say who owned all the ground out there and that's all that I can recall that they had the option to buy the ground back.

Q: Where the Bordens chemical plant is now, is that part of the ground that was in the war plant?

A: Yes. That's what they called the southside.

Q: Can you tell me the approximate boundaries as you know them of the plant?

A: No I can't.

Q: Is the western edge of Illiopolis the eastern boundary of the plant?

A: Dave, I can't tell you for sure. I don't really know how far it extended west and how far it extended back east, or north or south.

Q: Did you ever have occasion to visit the medical facilities at the plant?

A: No.

Q: Are you aware of what the medical facilities consisted of?

A: Yes, we walked right by there to go down to the line. No, I never had the occasion to use it.

Q: What kind of set up for medical facilities?

A: Well I think they had a couple of cots in there, they had everything just like a little doctor's office.

Q: Were there doctors there at all times?

A: No, I think there was a couple of nurses there at all times but I don't know that, I really don't know whether there was any doctors around there or not. It seems to me like there was always two nurses in there, one I know was there all the time.

Q: Do you happen to recall her name?

A: I think one of them at that time her name was Rebecca Ford and who was the other one? I won't say who the other one was. And as far as I know outside of somebody getting sick there was no major accidents happened that I know of.

Q: Did you have much contact with the people in Illiopolis who worked at the plant?

A: No, as I say when I got off at four o'clock I went straight home and I really wasn't familiar with anybody in Illiopolis other than the fact we'd come back to the skating rink. They had a skating rink here and they had all kinds of eating places but as far as knowing anybody in Illiopolis then, no, I didn't.

Q: You were familiar with Illiopolis before the war?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Would you characterize Illiopolis for me in terms of the amount of growth that was seen as a result of the plant? You mentioned that there was a skating rink, was that here before the war?

A: No, the skating rink and where the Ford garage is now was a restaurant and I think they had four or five taverns uptown but all those—well, I'd say in the last fifteen years has ceased business. After the war plant closed and everybody moved out, then everything like the restaurant and everything just kind of folded up.

Q: So it was almost like a boom town and after the plant was closed it didn't quite become a ghost town but it certainly went to be a little bit more quiet?

A: Right.

Q: Could you describe the size of the shell that you were making, the 90 millimeter? Just show me how big it was.

A: Well let's see, I would say like that.

Q: That's about four feet long?

A: Yes, I would say about four feet long and then the 75's would be about like that.

Q: A little over three feet?

A: And then smaller and the 90's were bigger.

Q: Then 90 and 75 are how wide the base of the shell was?

A: I would say yes.

Q: So it's 90 millimeters wide for the larger one and 75 millimeters for the small one. Was there actually a projectile as in the way bullets are made, there is a projectile, the bullet part and the shell casing?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you say that the projectile part was larger than a mans fist?

A: Oh yes.

Q: Was it as large as a softball?

A: In diameter, I would say about the size of a softball.

Q: And longer?

A: Yes.

Q: About how long was it?

A: I'd say the projectile was about that long.

Q: Was it hollow or solid?

A: It was solid.

Q: Was it designed to explode on impact?

A: I would imagine.

Q: Were there explosives inside the projectile?

A: That I can't say. I do know that we wasn't supposed to put our names in the lid. One time my friend and I, we put our name in and it was during the Battle of the Bulge and I got a letter from this fellow in New York and during the battle this card fell out of the lid and he put it in his pocket and he wrote me the nicest letter. So I do know where some of those shells went to. My brother was in the Phillipines and they had 75's over there, now I don't know whether any of ours got to where he was at or not but he sent me back an ashtray made out of a

75 millimeter base and wings from a Japanese airplane, a beautiful ashtray.

Q: Was there any attempt to promote nationalism or a spirit of camaraderie at the plant? Did they for example have fund drives where you could donate part of your paycheck or bond sales?

A: Yes.

Q: Did most people participate in that?

A: Yes, I think everybody bought war bonds, I did. I think more or less most of them did.

Q: Were there lots of posters around the plant?

A: Yes.

Q: What about secrecy about the plant operations, were you charged with not talking about what you did during the war?

A: No, not really.

Q: So you were free to say whatever you wanted to anyone in terms of what you were making and how much of it you were making?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you say that there was a lot of concern or not much concern about spying in this area?

A: If there was I don't know anything about it.

Q: Is there anything that you have thought of as we've talked that you'd like to say or add to the tape?

A: Not offhand, like I say I just worked on line 1 and when the day's work was done I went home. It was just tight security and I enjoyed working there. [I was] right out of high school and it was interesting and fun and wasn't hard but I don't think I'd want to do that again.

Q: You felt then that you were helping with the war effort and you were a significant factor along with your fellow workers?

A: Yes. I'm talking about the danger part, what could have happened but it didn't. But it was just like going into any other job every morning.

Side 2.

Q: You were saying that it was like any other job and you just went in?

A: Yes, just went in and never thought about the danger part of it or what could have happened but it didn't. It was interesting. Right out of high school you met all kinds of people from all walks of life that you worked with and it was interesting.

Q: Well I appreciate you taking your time and you have been very helpful in my information gathering, thank you.

A: I hope I've helped somehow and if I can think of anything else I'll let you know but I think the one guy that could really fill you in would be Nick.

Q: I'll be sure and speak with him. Thank you.

End of Tape