Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Ann Francis

Pipefitter

Interviewed on February 16, 2004

Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs
Walter P. Reuther Library
Wayne State University

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Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with Ann Francis

MARGARET RAUCHER: This is Margaret Raucher and the Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project is here at the Reuther Library on April 10, 2006 to interview Ann Francis, a pipefitter and later, a recruiter and instructor for the UAW-GM apprentice program at GM's Oldsmobile plant in Lansing. And I'd like to start off the interview by asking Ann what her life was like before she entered the trades, her family upbringing, education, that sort of thing.

ANN FRANCIS: I was thirty-five years old when I went into the trades. I was raised in Florida. My family moved there — first to Jacksonville, then to Tampa — when I was four years old, from Rochester, New York.

Tampa was a large city. When I was six, my family bought an old barracks building on an army base that had been shut down right after World War II. They fixed it up and we moved in. So even though I lived in a big city, I grew up in a rural environment that wasn't like a suburb. The area was undeveloped. Mostly working class people lived there.

I went to an all-girls Catholic school, and I did that for twelve years. After that I went on to college. I was the first person in my family to go to college. When I finished the university, I went into the Peace Corps. That's kind of the fast track of my life.

One of the things that influenced me later on in life to try some challenging things was going to that girls Catholic school, because this school promoted the idea that girls could do anything. And my role models were girls who were achieving.

I didn't understand much about boys or sexism. I didn't have brothers. I was an only child. And my family, my extended family, like my mother's brothers and my dad's brother, they all lived far away in Rochester, New York. So basically, I was this only child who hadn't very much concept that boys did certain things and girls did certain things. So I think that played a big part in why I branched out and wanted to do what some might consider nontraditional things with my life.

MICHELLE FECTEAU: Can I follow up on that?

FRANCIS: Yeah.

FECTEAU: How was your father and your mother? What was their relationship, especially in terms of gender roles?

FRANCIS: My mother and father owned a small transportation business. My dad had an eighth-grade education. He had worked in a dry cleaning business and was a court stenographer for a while. At the time I was born he was working in Rochester for Moore & McCormick, which was a large shipping company. And he learned about transportation when he worked for this shipping company. In 1942 he went into the service to avoid being drafted. When he got out, one of his buddies that he was in the Navy with told him about a moving company franchise in Florida he could buy.

And at that point, my mother and dad were married — I was on the scene. My mother had been working while my dad was in the service. And this is the story: They had $500 — that was all the money that they had — and my dad said, "Well, let's start this moving company." And my mother said, "Okay." So they bought the franchise for $500 and moved to Jacksonville, Florida.

Pretty much, my mother and dad were equal partners in this business. My dad was the salesman. He went out and got the jobs. My mother ran the office and did all the bookkeeping. She was kind of the financial mind in the business.

ELAINE CRAWFORD: So what did they move?

FRANCIS: Furniture, people's furniture. It was after the war, 1946. Florida wasn't very developed after the war and so it was a good business to get into, because people were coming South. And so they had some sense of the opportunities.

It's an interesting thing when I look back on that time, how equal they were. My mother loved being a business partner with my dad. She was very emphatic about that. And yet, my dad died — this is another influence on my life — my dad died when I was seventeen years old, and my mother was left with this business. And she didn't want anything to do with it after that. I think for her it was too much, you know, that she couldn't carry that burden alone.

But I saw that my mother was a working mother, and she was very, very busy all of the time. And certainly she made huge decisions. They had to make a lot of decisions and live with uncertainty about how they would meet payroll and pay the bills, and they took a lot of risks. And I saw that both in my mom and my dad.

CRAWFORD: Did she continue on as a bookkeeper kind of person?

FRANCIS: Yes, she did. Well, she had a lot of savvy, but she wasn't interested in running the business alone. You know, she hated the weight — it's a lot of pressure running a small business and she had no one to share the day to day operations with. She asked me if I wanted the business, but at 17 I was too inexperienced about what an opportunity this would be and I said no. My mom kept on until she found a good buyer. She was able to sell

the business a few years after. She had made quite a reputation for herself in the town, among the accountants. She always had a job after that doing accounting. She never wanted for employment.

RAUCHER: What kind of subjects did you like when you were in school? Was there anything particularly that you liked more than other subjects?

FRANCIS: You know, I liked pretty much everything. Like I said, I went to this girls Catholic school and there was a double message: Even though they wanted us to be educated and they thought we could do anything, I think that they saw us more as bright young women that would graduate, marry and then be supported by our husbands.

My school didn't have a strong science department. I graduated in 1960 from high school and sports was like almost nothing in my school. The subject that I liked the best was history. I loved history. And I was active on the newspaper, national forensics and stuff like that. And I liked languages. I liked learning and still do.

I liked my history teacher in my senior year a lot. She was a lay teacher. Mostly I had had nuns when I was in school. Mrs. Brenke was a big influence on me, because she was a critical thinker. She challenged us to think on our own and not just give rote answers from the book. She wanted our opinions. So that was really important.

RAUCHER: Did you go to the same school?

FRANCIS: I went to the same school for twelve years. And the other thing that I did, kind of simultaneous with going to this school, was that I was in the Girl Scouts. I really liked that. I liked swimming. I went to Girl Scout camp every summer until I graduated from high school and eventually became a camp counselor and a waterfront

instructor. This was in Florida, so we had an opportunity to do a lot of canoeing and sailing and oh, we were outdoors a lot. I loved being outdoors.

And I wasn't a kind of person that liked dressing up. One of the nice things about going to this Catholic school was that we wore uniforms, so we didn't have this kind of pressure like the kids in the public schools did with having to have the outfits. We just had these pleated skirts and white blouses. And for me, that suited my personality. A lot of people hated it, but I really liked it. I liked the simplicity of uniforms. So that was good.

RAUCHER: These sound like kind of progressive nuns for that time. I mean, you say that they encouraged you and they gave you a feeling of self-reliance and that sort of thing. I mean, I've heard from friends of mine who went to Catholic schools that they sometimes chafed against the nuns. So it doesn't sound like you had that experience.

FRANCIS: Yeah, the nuns . . .

CRAWFORD: What order of nuns was it?

FRANCIS: They were from Canada. They were the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. That's a complicated issue, too. But I think if the nuns took an interest in you, you got a lot of support. And if they didn't, you didn't. And I don't know why exactly they took an interest in me, but I think they did, and when they did take an interest in you, you know, they really tried to develop your brain and your skills. I think they were probably more liberal and progressive. But I don't know. I would have to think about that. But anyway, I found a lot of support from certain nuns when I was growing up, and that was a big help to me. They were interested in my learning and doing well.

CRAWFORD: It sounds like you went back there. Your mother was still in the area as you grew into an independent adult. Did that school continue to exist that you had gone to for all those years?

FRANCIS: Oh, it's still there.

FECTEAU: What's the name of it?

FRANCIS: Academy of the Holy Names.

RAUCHER: It's in Tampa.

FRANCIS: It's in Tampa, and it's quite a large school now. At that time, it was all girls. Now it's boys and girls. But it was a good experience for me. It was small. The classes were small. I think that gave the nuns an opportunity to work with the students. They took an interest in me, but they were tough. They were very tough. My parents were supportive of me. I had that at home, too. If the nuns were being particularly tough, my parents would support me and say, "You know, you can do this. You're a good person." And if the nuns were being bullies at school, they would defend me. So if you had supportive parents, the discipline and toughness which the nuns promoted was helpful. But it also — why I hesitated about it — I saw it break some people, particularly a couple of my friends, and that was very painful and totally unacceptable.

FECTEAU: Did you work with tools or build things or do the kind of things, you know, that girls usually don't do? Was that something that was part of your upbringing?

FRANCIS: No.

CRAWFORD: So you didn't help in the business?

FRANCIS: I did a little bit. I did help in the business, like I'd go out with my dad when he estimated jobs and stuff and I was in the warehouse and around trucks and dollies.

But there weren't any tools. My dad was not very handy, but he knew how to pack a truck and a storage lot so the furniture wouldn't get damaged — quite a skill. My mother was more tool-oriented than my dad. Her dad, my grandfather, was a machinist. And he was good with numbers, and my mother was too. My dad, like I said, he was a social person. I was around the trucks and warehouses, so I was exposed to a very different world probably than a lot of girls. As far as how that played out when I got into the trades, that lack of exposure to tools and working with tools was really hard. On the positive side, I wasn't afraid of hard work and didn't mind getting dirty.

I didn't follow the path that a lot of the girls in my school followed, like they didn't want to be Girl Scouts. Most of them were interested in being teachers or nurses. And they didn't want to travel. They all wanted to have boyfriends, and it wasn't of interest to me. I was really interested in doing something different, like Girl Scouts and the warehouse, but no exposure to the tools. I wish I had. I really wished that I had had it, once I hit the trades.

CRAWFORD: What did you major in college, and then where did you go when you went into the Peace Corps?

FRANCIS: I majored in political science and history.

RAUCHER: Where did you go to college.

FRANCIS: I went to the University of Florida for one year. And then when my dad died, I transferred back to the University of South Florida, which at that time was very small. Now it's a huge university, but at that time it had just opened, and so that was good.

CRAWFORD: Why did you transfer?

FRANCIS: I transferred because my mom was running the business, and it was just kind of her and me, and all this responsibility. So I came back to — it wasn't that far, but I just decided it would be best to stay at home and offer her some sort of support.

CRAWFORD: You had been living like, in a dormitory?

FRANCIS: Oh, yeah.

CATHY DAWSON: Did you like being away and on your own?

FRANCIS: I was only there a year. I think I liked it, but it was also a challenge, because I'd gone from this little bitty girls school to this huge university. And it was very hard to stay up with it academically. Mostly I was in the library or studying in the dormitory. But I liked it — the rigor and academic challenge. I didn't like some of the pressure there. It was mostly men in that school, and then there was this sorority pressure and football scene. I came to understand what the competitive male world was like a little bit more — a lot more. And so I liked it better when I went back to the smaller university. The classes were smaller and I was able to become involved in extra curricular activities like the student union.

DAWSON: You had mentioned that you were a Girl Scout when you were younger. Did you have any more hobbies that you particularly liked to do?

FRANCIS: Not really. Starting about eighth grade, I got interested in social change work. I was in Girl Scouts, and the adults who were guiding us were very involved in the community. This was 1956, when I was in eighth grade. I liked organizing things. And I got a lot of support.

There were social problems. This was the segregated South. The women that I got exposed to — there were other ones, but the leaders that I was exposed to were really

interested in trying to change the life of girls and to end segregation. And I got hooked into that. And that's kind of what I did. I liked it. And that played itself out when I got to college. It was just the kind of a path that I was on.

And my parents played a part. My parents had this business. My mother was a very organized person. My dad was civic-minded — he started a volunteer fire department in this area where we lived and did other things. Trying to bring people together to solve problems was kind of . . .

DAWSON: In your blood. [laughter]

FRANCIS: In my blood. And they had a lot of good people that were there.

RAUCHER: I was just going to ask if you maybe got some of that social justice stuff from the nuns. Were they also involved in — because you've been involved in peace stuff and all sorts of things since, right?

FRANCIS: The social justice stuff, some of it came from — it's hard to say that it came from the nuns. Catholics, some of them, tend to want to do good in the world — I mean this in a really positive way — but I wouldn't say that the nuns at my school were social justice-minded, like some of the Catholic people that I've run into since then, in my new life, my life here in Michigan. They weren't like that. They certainly didn't talk about race issues and my school was not integrated. I think the social justice piece came more from when I saw things that weren't right in my school and we girls would band together to try to fight back. We fought back against what we perceived as injustice. And we were empowered, I think, because we thought we were right about it. I mean, it's an interesting kind of concept.

RAUCHER: Can you give an example?

FRANCIS: When I was a senior in high school, there was a woman in this school, my friend Gail, who was very bright, and for whatever reason, this one nun just would not get off of her case. She would humiliate her in front of all the students. So finally, a group of us, maybe there were four of us, were talking at lunch and we just said, "The next time this happens, we are going to interrupt this." So when this nun started in on this young woman, we just stood up and said it wasn't true. I don't know why we had this in our system to do this, but we did it. And we got in a lot of trouble for it, too. You know, we said it wasn't right and that the nun should leave her alone.

Then, another example of that in my school is that we had two tracks in my school. One was for girls that were college-bound and the other was for the ones who were not. We didn't have vocational classes. And mostly, the girls that got tracked into the business/secretarial track were from either Italian or Cuban families or they were poorer. And the other ones, the richer and middle class students, got tracked into this going on to college thing.

Well, in tenth grade there was this woman, Josie, who was put in the business track — after ninth grade, you got put in one track or the other. And she started causing "trouble. " She started complaining and recruiting some people from the other track to join with her. And we fought the forced tracking. And so some of the students were able to transfer into the college track.

I think the social justice piece probably came more from my exposure in the Girl Scouts and some of the learning from these leaders, some things that I hadn't really figured out in school or known how to do. I also went to regional conferences and went to the Girl Scout Round Up in 1959. Race issues/awareness played prominently in who went and in

our training. And my parents didn't interfere. My dad never wanted me to follow the crowd and encouraged me to question things. My mother probably would not have wanted me to cause any trouble, but she didn't tell me I couldn't, once I was involved in things.

RAUCHER: What year did you graduate from high school?

FRANCIS: I graduated from high school in 1960.

CRAWFORD: And where did you go in the Peace Corps?

FRANCIS: I went to Malaysia.

RAUCHER: How did you get involved in the Peace Corps?

FRANCIS: The last year I was in college I had a political science professor who was a trainer for the Peace Corps. in Thailand. I was interested in international issues and traveling and also wanted to do something to make a difference in the world — JFK was a hero to me at that time. I was trying to figure out what I was going to do when I got out of college. And he said, "Why don't you go into the Peace Corps?" And so that's how I did that.

DAWSON: What did your mother think?

FRANCIS: She was okay with it. I think it was hard for her, but my mother was always supportive of me progressing and doing what I wanted to do. Fortunately, by the time I graduated from college, I had no major family responsibilities. I didn't have to support my family. And as hard as it was, my mom and I knew it was time for me to go out on my own.

DAWSON: Any of your friends go into the Peace Corps?

FRANCIS: No, no. They gave me a party and thought I was doing a daring thing, but they weren't interested.

FECTEAU: So, you were in Malaysia, not Thailand?

FRANCIS: Yeah, Malaysia.

FECTEAU: I was wondering about that experience in general, but also if it in any way led you toward working in the trades or if there's any connection?

CRAWFORD: What did you do there?

FRANCIS: What did I do? I taught school — not what I had intended for my life. So here I am, we're still about eleven years out of the trade experience. And so was there anything there?

CRAWFORD: What did you teach?

FRANCIS: I taught English as a second language in a Chinese school in a small town on the big island of Borneo — an experience that had a huge impact on me. It was a wonderful experience to be in another culture, to live there for two years.

DAWSON: You knew the language before you went, or you had to learn it while you were there?

FRANCIS: No, no. We had to learn it. Well, this was — we learned Malay in the Peace Corps, but as the government can do, we ended up being in a town that was primarily Chinese and teaching in Chinese schools, so we had to . . .

RAUCHER: So you had to learn Chinese.

FRANCIS: We tried. Mostly it was people being very, very supportive of us and speaking English. It was very useful to teach English, because if you were successful at it, then the students could talk to you and you could talk to them.

RAUCHER: And this is the mid-sixties, right?

FRANCIS: Yeah. I graduated from college in '64 and I left for the Peace Corps in '64. And I got back into this country in 1967. I think that in terms of the connection to the trades, probably the biggest connection there is that I tried something that was really different and unique. I didn't have any idea how it was going to be. We were like the second group of Peace Corps volunteers at that time. Now there's been a lot. So I think that in terms of the foundation that it laid for me, it was kind of an adventure to try something totally different and interesting. I also wanted to make a difference in the world and I needed a job and to support myself.

DAWSON: Where did you live when you went there? Was there a group of you that went over and you lived together?

FRANCIS: There were two of us that were assigned to this town. And we were roommates for a while. After the first year, I got another assignment at another school, and so we lived apart. There were three or four Peace Corps up there eventually. And the town that we were in, there were about 30,000 people. It was a logging town.

FECTEAU: I was thinking Vietnam War. Being there at that time must have been . . .

FRANCIS: The covert activities in Vietnam were beginning. In the Peace Corps I began to see what I thought were systemic problems and things wrong with our government. We came into this country right after the British had been thrown out as colonialists, into Malaysia. And the Americans were beginning to replace them. Americans took over the same role that the British had fulfilled there. And then where the British industries had been, American industries like Caterpillar were replacing them. That's when I began my education of understanding that things are a little more complicated than they appear when

you go teach English. You know, there are reasons why the U.S. government would invest in sending Peace Corps volunteers to teach English.

RAUCHER: This was a logging town, you said.

FRANCIS: Yeah. I was in a town called Sandakan, which had beautiful jungles surrounding it — this is an island with huge jungles. And they were pulling out the . . .

RAUCHER: Were the Chinese involved in that business?

FRANCIS: Yeah, yeah, Chinese.

RAUCHER: As laborers?

FRANCIS: Mostly the Malay people were the laborers — there were different indigenous groups there, not just Malays — but they were the laborers. And the Chinese more were the shopkeepers. Some of them were laborers.

RAUCHER: Did you travel in the region, in Southeast Asia?

FRANCIS: Yes — Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, Cambodia. Actually, all across Asia, the Middle East and Europe. In fact, when you mentioned Vietnam, when we left the Peace Corps, a friend — I didn't go — a friend of mine was a journalist and she went to Vietnam and was on the last plane in before they threw out all the foreigners. So she got to go in and visit there.

When I got back to the States and was following the activities in Southeast Asia, it was very painful to me, because the place where I had lived and worked and the students that I had worked with — we had markets, just like the pictures that you would see on the TV being bombed. I had a great affinity for what was going on with the villagers. I could make that connection and wanted to do something to stop the war.

RAUCHER: So you came back in '67, you said?

FRANCIS: I came back in ‘67.

RAUCHER: And then what?

FRANCIS: Okay, we’ll speed this up.

RAUCHER: Oh no, we've got time.

FRANCIS: I came back in ‘67. I got a job teaching in Tennessee, in a program in Chattanooga, Tennessee for students who had graduated from high school, but they didn’t get high enough scores on the college tests. So we were there to help them improve their skills so they could get the scores they needed to pass the tests and get into college.

RAUCHER: And this was a federally-funded program?

FRANCIS: This was a federally-funded program. Once you were in the Peace Corps, you had some direct lines into this kind of work.

FRANCIS: I think it might have been ‘68 by the time I was working there — this was the year that Martin Luther King was killed — murdered. And that was Chattanooga, Tennessee. So again, this was another formative experience for me. And I learned so much from my experience there working with these young people, who were just like these young people today who are coming into the streets, the immigrants out in the streets. It was the same thing. These students said, “You have to march. You can’t just ignore this.”

RAUCHER: The kids were white? Black?

FRANCIS: They were black kids.

FECTEAU: How long were you there?

FECTEAU: I was there a year. And so, from there I went to graduate school, to New York.

FECTEAU: Where in New York?

FRANCIS: At Columbia, at Teacher's College. And my path there was one of growing awareness, and it was kind of a long journey. When I was in the Peace Corps, when I got to know the students, they would keep saying, "Well, why do you come here to help us? Why aren't you at home? You got a lot of problems back in your own country." And that triggered in my own mind the fact that they really were onto something.

When I was in Tennessee, it was the same kind of thing, like this is good that I was there. I like teaching. At that point I think I was a fairly effective teacher. But I also felt that I needed to get some of my own education about these issues of race and class. So that's why I went to Columbia. It was a great time to be in New York City, because there were teacher strikes and demonstrations against the Vietnam War. For the budding activist, it was very, very useful.

So then, after I finished there, I came to Michigan. That's when I landed in Michigan.

CRAWFORD: Why Michigan?

FRANCIS: I was going with somebody who was at Michigan State University, and that's why I came.

RAUCHER: How did the students do in the program in Chattanooga? Was it successful at all?

FRANCIS: I really don't know, because I was there a year and they finished out the program, and I think some of them went on. But it was a year like you wouldn't believe in that teaching assignment, once Martin Luther King was assassinated. We had young people that came from Washington, D.C. and we also had students that came from the rural Tennessee area. The students that lived in Tennessee had to stay there and live there. The

ones from Washington, D.C. could go back to Washington, D.C. So the ways that they wanted to protest were quite different.

RAUCHER: Did the Columbia experience radicalize you even further?

FRANCIS: I was very lucky to have exposure to different groups of people and different ideas. I still was that southern kid that came from Florida. So being in New York City — and also when I was in Tennessee, it was the same thing. People from big cities have different ideas than people from smaller towns and from the country. And I even felt that here, you know, there is a Lansing/Detroit kind of thing. There are very different approaches to what's possible.

But it radicalized me, being in New York. The teachers' strike was going on, and that probably was one of the first times I became aware of unions. Because when I was in Florida, it was not an industrial state — there was not much union activity.

RAUCHER: Did you get your degree? You got your master's?

FRANCIS: Yeah, I got a master's degree.

FECTEAU: Was that in teaching history?

FRANCIS: History, yeah.

CRAWFORD: So what year did you arrive here?

FRANCIS: I arrived here in 1969, into Lansing. I taught a while in Eaton Rapids, which is a little town outside of Lansing.

RAUCHER: You taught high school?

FRANCIS: High school, uh-huh. I also taught in a migrant program. There were a lot of migrant people who had come up to pick fruits and vegetables. I taught adult classes of migrant workers.

RAUCHER: That was in Lansing?

FRANCIS: In Lansing.

RAUCHER: And you sought that out?

FRANCIS: Yes. I needed employment and teaching English as a second language was something I knew how to do and enjoyed. So when I got to Michigan, there were teaching jobs. (I have been very fortunate in my life to find jobs involving social change. Some of them didn't pay a lot, but the pay was enough and the work interesting and meaningful. Today it is more difficult. The economy is depressed and the job market limited.)

In '69, in Lansing, there were different groups, local groups — faith communities, Model Cities types and others — involved in community organizing. They formed what was called the Lansing Area Peace Council. And they were addressing community issues, but they were very interested in trying to address the Vietnam War and working in the city. So they were looking for somebody who would be the director.

I had met somebody who had been in the Peace Corps and had gotten in touch with me. She took me to a meeting of this group and they were hiring the director that night. I had said, "Wow, they'd actually pay somebody to do something like that?" And she said, "Yeah, we're going to pay this person." And so then I said, "Well, if they ever have this job available, let me know. I'd love to do something like that." About six months later she called me up and said, "Were you serious?" And so I got this job.

I did anti-war organizing in Lansing until 1972. Also, at that time I was working with a pastor there who was interested in the high school dropout problem. We had a huge high school dropout problem in Lansing. We wrote some grants to work with high school

dropouts. After I left the Peace Council, I began teaching in one of the alternative education programs which we had organized and got funded for the high school dropouts.

And that's where I began to be interested in other kinds of jobs that you could get, that you didn't have to go to college for. The students that I was teaching were not interested in going to college and they really didn't have the resources to go to college and they needed jobs. There were also women in Lansing who had gotten wind that the skilled trades jobs possibly could be opening up to women. Now, this is 1975 I think.

We formed a group called Women in the Skilled Trades. And we began to try to investigate how you could get into the trades. I'm a teacher in the Lansing School District by this time and as we began to investigate skilled trades work, I was also encouraging my students — a few of them were women and most of them were young people of color — to go to the vocational classes at the high school.

They were running into tremendous barriers there and it was making me pretty mad. I mean, like the mechanics teacher at the high school said, "Well, you can't send me girls, because all they will do is hang out in the back of cars with boys and they'll make out with them all the time. And they're distracting the class." And the girls, you would ask them, "Well, what were you doing over there? Was this true? What's going on?" And you know, it wasn't true.

Then there were racist and uncomplimentary comments about the minority kids and dropouts. It was just a nightmare. I was working with the vocational teachers and with Title IX implementation in the school district to try to break down the barriers so the students could at least get some of these skills. But it was a difficult situation. It didn't seem that

things would change, even though we had some support. There were some teachers and administrators who really wanted young women and minorities to have more opportunities.

Anyway, so as that was going on, I started thinking, well, maybe I should learn the skills — I was very naive about how much time and energy this would take. I thought I'll become a vocational teacher and then I'll be able to teach the students. I started taking technical classes at the community college. And then I started understanding that that's not how you learn a trade, you know, by going to class. It was then I thought I should try to get into the trades. I got support from the women's group, too.

RAUCHER: What group would this be?

FRANCIS: This was this group called Women in the Skilled Trades.

RAUCHER: But they weren't actually in the skilled trades.

FRANCIS: Some were.

CRAWFORD: So this was a group of women who were not in the trades, but who wanted to be or wanted to explore the problems of other people, like you were doing.

FRANCIS: Most of them were looking for employment. As I remember, the group was made up of a few apprentices and E.I.T.'s, an electrician who was teaching at the community college, a plumber in private business, women from the Department of Labor, women who were interested in joining trades and some of us who wanted to offer support.

RAUCHER: Were they feminists? I mean, you would call yourselves feminists?

FRANCIS: Some of them were and some of them were not.

FECTEAU: How did you recruit them?

FRANCIS: A core of us were feminists and we knew one another from the women's community. Another little pocket of the women that were in this group came through the

Department of Labor. Affirmative action was kicking in and the rules and regs were changing. Some of these women had come through some kind of career counseling and jobs program out of the Department of Labor. The counselors knew about us, so they would say, "Well, you ought to get involved in this group. They will support you." And we did.

CRAWFORD: They referred people?

FRANCIS: Yes, and they would refer people.

RAUCHER: These were all women in the Lansing area?

FRANCIS: These were women in the Lansing area. We hooked up with some women that were down in the Detroit area, too. I don't know when we hooked up with the women in the Detroit area, but it was maybe a little bit later. We first formed because this one woman was in the factory and the rest of us wanted to try to get into the trades.

RAUCHER: What factory was she in?

FRANCIS: She was at Fisher Body, Local 602. They made the bodies for the Oldsmobiles at that time.

RAUCHER: And what did she do?

FRANCIS: She (Vicki S.) was a truck repair mechanic apprentice. She was the first woman in Lansing to go into the automotive trades.

CRAWFORD: So here you wanted to leave this academic lifestyle that you had had and plunge into the factory.

FRANCIS: Yeah [very unenthusiastically]. [laughter] Well, I was thirty-five and it was kind of like a path that I started on, because I thought I would like to learn a trade. Also, I could get paid as I learned and would be doing something that might improve the lives of women.

RAUCHER: To teach it.

FRANCIS: To teach it — that's how it started. And I could see that taking classes was going to go nowhere. I mean, so you'd take one class, so what. And then we started learning about the jobs and I thought, well, I could try to get one of these jobs. Also, I was a very political person: I was an activist, I was a feminist, I was coming out as a lesbian. In the school district, there were difficulties and I could see that at some point I might — I could see that I might not have employment.

FECTEAU: You're saying they would discriminate against you?

FRANCIS: Yes. I felt that. I was active in the teachers' union. But it was a very difficult time. I could see that there was discrimination. I had been working on Title IX. The lesbians and gay men in the school district were very, very closeted. And that was all new to me, too. I didn't know how being a teacher, a lesbian, active in the teachers' union was all going to play itself out. I was coming out, myself. Even though I was active in the union, I didn't think they would support me as a gay teacher.

So I got to thinking that maybe this would be a good job, too. I thought that if you fix machines, they can't discriminate against you for not doing your job. Like if you're working with kids, people worry about you. But if you're working with machines, I thought, well, what could they do? What could be the problem? Seeing homophobia at work and realizing I might not be able to support myself for long as a teacher was a very sobering insight.

So some of us started trying to get into the trades. And I'll just sort of tell my story about that. But my immediate barrier was not that I was a woman, but that I was too old. There was an age restriction on people getting into the trades.

FECTEAU: What was it?

FRANCIS: Twenty-eight or something.

CRAWFORD: So you were already working in the plant?

FRANCIS: No, I wasn't. I was still teaching in the school district.

CRAWFORD: You were trying to get into an apprenticeship program outside of the factory.

FRANCIS: Yeah. Either in the factory or — I was interested in outside construction as well.

CRAWFORD: That would not have been a good place to be a lesbian.

RAUCHER: But there were age restrictions for both of those.

FRANCIS: There were age restrictions for both. So I began — this was all a learning experience, too. I mean, I didn't have a clue how you got in. I mean, how do you get in?

DAWSON: It's still a mystery. [laughter]

FRANCIS: Yeah, right. And that's why the group was so helpful, because we would share experiences. People would talk to you. They'd say, "Make sure you look in the newspaper, you got to make those deadlines, you got to get your application in." And so we were all applying for everything that we could get our hands on.

RAUCHER: And they were looking for women at this time?

CRAWFORD: Kind of. Maybe.

FRANCIS: Well, in the plant, yes, I think that they were definitely looking for women. But when I applied for the electrical union and the plumbers union on the outside, they were not really looking for women, even though, by law, they had to be looking for

women. When I applied, they were not looking. They were not very excited about — you know, they didn't know what to do with you, and they just weren't very excited. No, I wouldn't say they were looking. I don't think that they had fully digested — this would have been, oh, I think I started applying in '75, '76. I don't think that they fully comprehended that they needed to try to correct this situation and allow women in.

But in the factory, they seemed to be more interested in women putting in applications. You had to take a test and once you passed the test and scored well enough on it, then they actively recruited you.

RAUCHER: So it was outside the factory, for the plumber and the electrician, where there was no interest, or virtually none. But inside the factory was better.

FRANCIS: Yeah, I would pretty much say that was true. We had women that went out for carpenter, who went out for electrical, who went out for plumber on the outside and that was a very, very unfriendly experience for them. I'm sure that didn't happen to anybody here. [sarcastic]

PAT NUZNOV: Actually, that theme has run through all of these interviews. You knew that, though.

RAUCHER: So you applied at the factory?

FRANCIS: I had applied for the electrical on the outside, and then I got turned down because I was too old. And so then about that same period of time, the law went through in Michigan that they couldn't discriminate on the basis of age, so I reapplied for both the electrical and the plumbers on the outside and I also at the same time was applying at the factory and learning what each of those paths might be for me.

I didn't score high enough on the apprentice test for the factory to get hired off the street. I would have needed to have been on the line, because you get extra points if you're from the line. If you're inside, then you don't have to score as high as if you're outside. So I applied to work on the line in the factory and I also had these applications and interviews going for electrical and plumber on the outside. And all of them came in about the same time.

At this point, I guess I want to say just a little bit more about the Women in the Skilled Trades group. One of the reasons why I knew to go in the plant is that there were three women from the Oldsmobile plant, UAW Local 652 — it's a huge plant in Lansing — in the group. One of them was the first woman into that plant, an awesome story there. And we knew each other, I think, through the women's community and going to this one bar. So, from Local 652, there was a woman named Mary Ann, who was a machine repair person, a woman named Wilma, who was a truck repair person, and a woman named Billie, who was a millwright, in that Women in Skilled Trades group. They were the first in that plant. And they started sharing stuff about how you can get points, about the tests and the interview. This was all insider information, because they knew how it all worked. They had taken the trouble to figure it out. And so they were starting to pass this information on to us. So that's when I knew that probably the way I was going to get in the trades was to go in on the line and then work my way into the trades from there.

I was offered the plumbers on the outside first. A week later I got an offer to go into the factory on the line. They can't ever guarantee you anything, but pretty much they said that if you go in, it would be six months and you'll be in the trades in the shop if that's where you want to go.

I decided to go into the factory, because I was starting to see that there were a lot of obstacles on the outside, that this might be too hard and I wouldn't make it. I thought there could be some other opportunities in the factory, like maybe I could get active in the union, and there would be a broader range of trade selections, too. So that's why I made the decision. I couldn't have made that decision alone. I had a tremendous amount of support from these women.

It was a huge decision for me, actually. I was very scared about it. I was older, and factory work was totally new to me. I pondered it quite a bit. The school district wouldn't let me go on a leave of absence. I had to sign off. So I knew I was cutting the umbilical cord there. I needed employment. It looked like a real opportunity, but I also knew that it might not work out. And I thought, wow, that could be really not a good situation for me. But it worked out. It did work out really well.

RAUCHER: So what happened? You went into an apprenticeship — no, you just went to work in production.

FRANCIS: I went to work in production. I went in in August, 1978 and I worked production until January, 1979. In December I was offered this apprenticeship as a pipefitter, and I took it. I could have waited out for some other trade, but I liked that trade. I knew quite a bit about electrical. Everybody said you should wait and be an electrician. And everybody thought I should be an electrician. In some ways that was good advice, which I didn't take, because it would have been a lot more variety. Pipefitter work is very heavy and very dirty for the most part. And for the long haul, it might have been a wiser thing for me to choose the electrical.

But I liked the idea of being a plumber and I didn't want to wait. Maybe on some level I thought I wouldn't get another chance. I was impatient. I liked that you could see the pipes and those big valves. And I like water. Maybe that was it, you know, I like liquids and — I don't know. [laughter]

But in terms of what I thought it could be, in the factory a pipefitter does a lot more things than they do on the outside. And so that was something I didn't really understand totally. It turned out to be interesting, because you work with different things, like hydraulics and pneumatics, assembly lines, new construction and maintenance.

CRAWFORD: So how long did it take from the time you got hired into the plant until you started the apprenticeship?

FRANCIS: Five months.

RAUCHER: And what was the apprenticeship like?

CRAWFORD: Where did you take your instruction at, your apprentice classes, if you will?

FRANCIS: The school, the classes were right in the factory. They had a building where they had the classes. You had this basic core of academic classes that you took. And there wasn't like — a lot of my friends who are in the outside trades, they got hands-on training in the classroom. All our hands-on training was on the floor. There were some hydraulic labs and pneumatic labs. They have quite an elaborate apprentice schedule in a factory. You move from area to area and you have to put in so many hours in these various areas. You spend so many hours in construction, you spend so many hours in maintenance, you spend so many hours in air conditioning/refrigeration, you spend so many hours in welding. So as an apprentice pipefitter, or even any of the apprenticeships, but the

pipefitters, the electrical, millwrights, you're moving a lot in the factory, which is — it's a challenge.

DAWSON: How large was your apprenticeship class, and were you the only woman in it?

FRANCIS: How large was it? Wow. I don't know, because they have these certain basic classes every apprentice takes — so we took like, math and drafting and physics — and all the new apprentices from all the trades were in there. There were probably, at that time, I want to say, thirty, thirty-five (and maybe seven pipefitter apprentices). At first we're all different trades, we're all mixed together. And then as you make it through these required foundational classes, then you go and do your specialty classes, like for pipefitters or for electrical.

RAUCHER: And how many women?

FRANCIS: Well, I was the first woman pipefitter apprentice and maybe there was one other woman in my basic classes. At the time there was one other woman in my trade— there's another program at GM called "employee in training," that it takes eight years in the factory to get through. With the apprenticeship, it's a four-year program. She (Arlene) had been in a few months before I came, but I never met her until a few years later.

RAUCHER: And what were your instructors like? I mean, did you feel any discrimination directed towards you because you were a woman?

FRANCIS: Yeah. There was a lot of discrimination. Yeah, they were very resistant to women being in these classes and they were very used to making their racist, sexist jokes. And it was intolerable. The joke part was bad enough, but if you asked questions, they would make fun of you, so any kind of learning was really discouraged.

CRAWFORD: And it was particularly hard, because you were someone who had an educational background and you knew about teaching, what was good teaching and what wasn't. I mean, that must have made it hard.

FRANCIS: Yeah. Well, it was hard for women, period. And it was really hard for minorities, period. But certainly because I had only been in the factory six months before, I had very little exposure to male culture, to male bonding, you know, any of that kind of stuff. I certainly was at a disadvantage — and no brothers, so I didn't understand this whole thing about teasing. I just was like, amazed. It was like, "Wow." And it was just so personal, it was so personal how they come at you, and the teachers come at you in this kind of toughening process. That was so important for them that you had to be tough. And I felt like they were trying to break us.

RAUCHER: So this reminded you of the Catholic girls school. [laughter]

FRANCIS: Yeah, right. I mean, it was like the same kind of battle. So I was prepared in that sense. I had the advantage of my mouth and I was older and I also had had union experience, being a teacher. That served me really well. In some ways having been a teacher helped me (gave me courage and preserved my self-esteem), because I knew I wasn't able to learn because the curriculum was poor and the instruction inadequate. But it was VERY frustrating and scary, because I had to pass the classes to stay in the apprenticeship.

The teachers were very mean and oblivious to issues of race and sex. I think that was the thing. To me, some of them went beyond just that general hazing. I think the teachers that were in the school were particularly the top of the lot in terms of wanting to break people and use their power to say who shouldn't/should be in the trades. They acted superior, played god a lot. They lorded their power over white males (especially the

vulnerable) and when women and minorities came in, they became targets of their wrath as well. It was ignorance and a lack of compassion on their part. Some of the teachers were extremely damaged human beings.

CRAWFORD: Where did the teachers come from?

FRANCIS: They came from the shop floor. Some of them liked being in the school. That was a status thing for them. It was also that they had a lot of power over us. If you failed those classes, you were out of the apprenticeship. And that was scary, you know. People wanted those jobs. So they had a lot of power..

CRAWFORD: And they knew it.

FRANCIS: And they knew it. And they used it. But it was an interesting kind of experience to be there. You were kind of scared all the time, because you thought, " God, I'm going to flunk these classes." And then you were mad a lot. And so in some ways the teachers were bad towards me, but they also treated some of the male students really poorly. And so there was some bonding that went on with the women and the men, because they were treating everybody badly. And the quality of the education wasn't so great.

DAWSON: Now, the teachers, they were skilled tradesmen?

FRANCIS: Yeah.

RAUCHER: Did you have second thoughts at all about doing this, as you're going through this difficult time?

FRANCIS: Not until years later did I allow myself to question the decision. I really didn't feel like I had a choice — I mean, I did, of course — I felt that I really needed to stick this thing out. I also got some support. I had one friend who had quit the trades and she was an enormous support for me, in making me feel like I wasn't crazy, because a lot of times I

felt crazy. I felt like there was something really wrong with me, that I really wasn't going to be able to do this and that what they were saying, maybe it was really true — that women, or me particularly, couldn't do this job, that I just didn't have this ability.

But at that point, I never wanted to quit. There were enough things going on to give me hope that things would get better — like, one of the great things about the factory trades is that you do move. If you can just hang in long enough, you'll get moved to a new location. Or if you can just make it through a class, you'll get a new class. So it wasn't like you were going to be on this job for a year and nothing is going to change. So I think that was helpful, and then also, having the support, and even though I wasn't making "A's," I was passing my classes.

And I'll tell you what was really helpful to me is that I had an apprentice committeeman there, he was actually looking for somebody that would take the people on, the teachers on, because he had had a lot of complaints from the men in the program before. But nobody would take these people on. They were afraid they would lose their apprenticeship job. So he was always encouraging me, "File a grievance! File a grievance!" Well, the first couple years I wasn't up for that, because I thought the teachers would find out and I would never pass my classes. But then after I'd ended my second year in the apprentice program, two things happened. They hired a woman from the outside to be the head of the apprentice program. She was an educator. She had directed a regional vocational program in Ingham County.

CRAWFORD: Like adult education?

FRANCIS: No — high school. The students would be bused in from all over the county. And she had run this. And so she got this job and it was like a whole new

ballgame. She was very concerned with the quality of teaching in the apprentice program. The combination of her, plus this committeeman, plus I was beginning to see the pattern here of discrimination, plus I felt more confident in my own abilities. And I was passing, I wasn't flunking. I had a high enough grade point average that I would pass even if they flunked me in the rest of my classes, so I was willing to file a grievance. And this committeeman hung with me all the way.

And then when we took the grievance forward, this woman who was the director, she didn't just shove it off. And changes were made. So that was one reason why I think I didn't feel like quitting. I didn't really talk about this when I was in the shop as much. I mean, with my friends on the outside, I did. But the activist part of me also kept me going there. I felt like women had supported me getting in the trades, like a lot of these guys in the union were supporting me. And I just felt like I needed to try and hang in there as long as I could.

RAUCHER: But you're in the apprentice program for four years, right?

FRANCIS: Right.

RAUCHER: Part of that time you're with these instructors, but part of that time you're also on the floor. What was your treatment like there? Was it the same, from your coworkers or when you worked with a journeyman or something like that, when you were on the floor?

FRANCIS: It was mixed. It was a mixed bag. The first experience I had was really positive, because I was put on construction and I learned a lot. Well, the VERY first experience wasn't that positive. I was put on construction, I got my toolbox, I got over to my new job. When I got to work the next day, my toolbox had disappeared and everybody

is standing there watching, seeing how I was going to react. No one would talk to me. They'd all been through that. I mean, that was just a little bit of hazing. And I was the first woman into this shop, this construction shop. They didn't seem to want to work with me or tell me what was going on. That went on for a couple weeks.

I was on days, but then, because I was a new apprentice, I didn't have seniority to hold days, and so I got bumped to the afternoons. When I got bumped to the afternoons, the foreman put me with two minority guys (a Greek and an African American), and so I had a great experience for the first three or four months. They tried to teach me everything they could possibly teach me — the greatest experience. And I loved the work. I loved working with them. But that only lasted for four months, and then I got assigned to different people. And depending on who I worked with, it either went good or bad.

CRAWFORD: The company bought your tools, right? These were not like, tools you had paid for.

FRANCIS: Yeah, they bought them. And it was: "Yeah, she doesn't have any tools, ha, ha" — you know, that one.

I was in the factory for twenty years. I wasn't a pipefitter for twenty years. But I understand the factory so much better after twenty years than I did then. But when I look back on it, the way the apprenticeship was, and I think the way apprenticeships are in general, the people who are the most successful are the people who already know a great deal about trade work when they get in there. And the training is not — you're totally dependent on the people you're working with and their skills to learn the jobs — at least that was my experience in the shop. And some of these people are really good teachers and

some of them can't, they just don't know how to teach. And some of them don't want to and some of them are prejudiced and they're not going to share.

So it was hard, because I was dependent on the goodwill of the people that I was with to learn that trade — and for my safety, too. And I got some really good support, and I had some just terrible, terrible experiences.

CRAWFORD: Did you ever feel that your life was in danger?

FRANCIS: Yeah, yeah.

RAUCHER: Do you want to elaborate?

FRANCIS: Well, I worked with a guy who said he had no problem working with women. He was an alcoholic. And he was a very angry person. And he was also pretty low in the pecking order among the pipefitters — nobody wanted to work with him. That's another phenomena that happened to me quite a bit, is that I would get assigned to work with the people that nobody else wanted to work with. And so this guy was always trying to prove to me how good he was and everything.

One day we were working, loading pipe onto a pipe rack. This was like, eight-, ten-inch pipe. It was out in this yard where there were no people around, and we were stacking — well, he was driving the fork truck, and I was to guide the pipe up onto the rack. In order to make this happen, I had to stand on this rack, and he'd basically drop the pipe off the fork lift so it would fall right into me and into the rack. I think it was intentional. He might have been a little bit drunk. When he dropped the pipe, it started rolling down. And these are huge, you know, twenty-foot pieces of pipe. I don't know if he was thinking he'd kill me, but he certainly had the intent of harming and scaring me. Loading pipe on a rack is no big deal for a sober, experienced pipefitter. So that was one time.

DAWSON: What did you do? How did you get out?

FRANCIS: I jumped off the rack and I wasn't hurt. I was in pretty good shape.

CRAWFORD: Did it just come out of nowhere?

FRANCIS: He was angry. I thought it sort of came out of nowhere. We had done some jobs together and they seemed to go well. He complained a lot and had low self-esteem. He was smart though. And I was starting to trust him a little bit. I didn't have anywhere to go with that incident. There were no witnesses. I didn't feel like I could storm into the shop and demand not to work with this guy. I just didn't feel that kind of power. Now I might — twenty years later or fifteen years later, I might have. But at that time, I felt too isolated to be able to do that, and that I wouldn't get any support to try to correct the situation.

RAUCHER: Was the job — because you talk about how big these pipes were — was the job physically difficult? I mean, you are not a large person.

FRANCIS: Sometimes.

RAUCHER: And you hadn't done this sort of work before. So was that a problem at all?

FRANCIS: At that time I was in pretty good shape. My condition deteriorated the longer I was in the shop. I had a black belt in karate and I was quite strong. I was short, and that did present some problems, because when you carry this pipe, I often was on one end and a taller person was on the other end and unless they were willing to accommodate that, I would have some problems with that.

Physically, sometimes if we were working with some of the big pipes or valves, I didn't have enough physical strength to handle — well, especially if we were in the ceiling

and I couldn't get any leverage for the bigger pipe wrenches and lifting and moving pipe and fittings. I just didn't have the physical strength to do some of it. I felt like most of it was doable, but frankly, it would have taken a lot of cooperative working together to be able to do it. And a lot of the guys use brute strength to make some of those jobs happen.

RAUCHER: Do you think it might make more sense to do it cooperatively, but the guys insisted on . . .

FRANCIS: Well, it's quicker. It was quicker for them to do things with brute force and physical strength, which you have to appreciate. Some of these jobs were really messy and disgusting, so let's just get them done. Yeah, I don't know. I think for the long haul, the physical challenges of the trade are very demanding on your body. And I think the factory is not set up to accommodate working cooperatively or safely, for men or women.

RAUCHER: Since we're almost to the halfway point of this tape, maybe we better move on to post apprenticeship, to what happened after you finished your apprenticeship.

FRANCIS: After I got my journeyman's card, I got assigned to the construction shop. It was a very scary moment to get my journeyman's card, it was a very scary kind of thing. I felt like I had been through a lot of experiences, but I didn't feel very competent. And there were still very few women. I had some good working relationships with people, but I still didn't have a clue how I was going to survive on the job and actually do the job. And now I've got my journeyman's card, right, so I'm supposed to be able to do all these things.

So I did get my journeyman's card and I went down to the construction shop and I was on construction for maybe eight months. And I worked with a couple of people who had been in my apprentice program. It was a fairly good experience. But here I'm still at

this point where I'm not like, ready to lead a job or feeling very confident. I never knew what kind of assignments I would get. I always was uncertain what I was going to have to do and who I would be working with.

Then a job got posted. Now, get this combination: A job got posted and also, at this point, I'm exhausted. So a job got posted out of the training department — remember we've got a woman head of the department — to do what is called "job analysis." I don't know if they ever did this on the outside. But what they wanted to do was to document all the skills and knowledge that they could of each trade so that they could set up proper training programs. And this was her kind of idea, what she wanted to have happen.

And so they posted this job. And what they wanted was somebody with a journeyman's card with a college degree and experience on the floor. I didn't see the posting. Somebody came into the women's locker room, one of the women tradespersons, and she throws this job description in front of me. And she said, "That job description has your name on it."

And I looked at it, and it was still hourly, so that was good. And so that's what happened: I interviewed for this job. It was an hourly job. I got it. And I went into the training department. It wasn't totally the end of my story with tools, but it was really the end of my official working on the floor. Very hard decision. It was a very hard decision, but very easy in some ways. You know, it was like the longer I wasn't out there, the longer I felt glad.

RAUCHER: So what did the new job entail? I mean, what were your responsibilities?

FRANCIS: Well, it was a great job. I went around and I interviewed all these tradesmen on all shifts and documented what the skills or knowledge were that they used to do these jobs. And we had like, I want to say, twenty trades or something like that in the shop. So I documented the work and did all of this and we validated it with the tradespeople. We got groups of tradespeople together.

It was kind of like I was back with my dad, almost. I was a salesperson, working with people, getting them to talk to me. I knew enough about both sides (training and trades work) that it was a positive experience, and it was very helpful to me. Because by the time I got my journeyman's card — I don't know what other people say, but I felt pretty beaten down. I was forty years old when I got my journeyman's card. A lot of my self-confidence was totally shattered.

And I learned a lot. I mean, that was the radicalizing experience for me. I learned a lot about how it all worked. It was very humbling, too. I got my comeuppance, as my parents would have said. I had bit off something that I really didn't understand the complexity and the difficulty of. I was very deeply involved in my work and invested. I liked a lot of the people that I worked with and I was concerned about them. But I was exhausted. So this job was great — something I liked, and I looked forward to coming into work every day.

CRAWFORD: I have a question. Many times in plants, if people feel like they're being asked for information or they're being studied, their gut sense is that you're similar to the time study guy and that ultimately this information will be used against them in some fashion.

FRANCIS: There was that.

CRAWFORD: Yeah. Do you know or do you think that ultimately some of that was?

FRANCIS: I don't think it was used against them immediately. I really think they thought it was strange, but some of them may have known the long-term consequences. Well, you know, you might say in a way it was a little bit used against them, because they did revamp the apprentice program and entrance exam, and it wasn't such an old boy thing after that.

CRAWFORD: Did they use it for the merging of the trades or the classifications?

FRANCIS: Ultimately, they might have. But in my local, attempts at merging fell apart when the big layoffs started coming. They tried to do that merging of the classifications. It was also union-backed. It was union-backed and there were a lot of protections against that. But yes, I saw that. I did later, when I went into management in the construction department in 1994. I was on an assignment where they tried to do this merging of the trades and I'm like, "Oh." They did it in NUMMI and Saturn and places like that. So maybe the purpose of the job analysis was to combine trades, but I didn't know this and I did see it used in other ways.

RAUCHER: Were you still involved at all with women in the trades during this period?

FRANCIS: Yeah, we would get together. We would go out sometimes and we would also do presentations to high school students. We were still involved and trying to recruit and support women. But frankly, after a couple years in the trades, it was high burnout. Other women had a very similar situation that I had.

Like in my situation, I did file the grievance, but once I was into about my third year, I really had to rein in my activism. Even though I was trying to be supportive of women when I could, my activism died down and I was focused more on surviving on the job and learning my trade. I think that was pretty true of a lot of the women that I met.

After I got through it, I started getting more active again. So we stayed connected, but . . . Also, our goals/vision changed — our understanding of what was involved and what some of the costs to women could be. We knew women needed to be better prepared and that there needed to be institutional support. Originally we were trying to get a lot of women into the trades. We were going to do this and then other women were going to come along and that percentage was just going to grow. Later we were more reserved about our recruitment tactics, letting women know the pros and cons and that this is going to be a little more challenging. We were much more cautious than to just say, "Oh, anybody is going to be able to do this." I certainly was more cautious, although I did become a full-time recruiter after my job analysis job. I worked recruiting women and minorities and doing the pre-apprentice program.

RAUCHER: Do you want to talk about that? This is after you did the job analysis.

FRANCIS: Yeah.

DAWSON: Can I ask a question? When you were doing the job analysis, did those guys who were training you in your apprenticeship, did the change get them out of there?

FRANCIS: Yeah. They got out or were forced out.

DAWSON: Good.

CRAWFORD: You said when you turned out you were exhausted. Were you working a lot of overtime throughout this apprenticeship?

FRANCIS: No, I couldn't. I could have; it was offered to me. And that was a bone of contention.

CRAWFORD: You weren't taking it.

FRANCIS: I wasn't taking it. But I literally couldn't take it. I had to have my day off. I mean, I worked some overtime. But some days I would just sit on the edge of the bed and wonder how I was going to make it into the shop. And so I wasn't working a lot of overtime. But it was a big bone of contention. I was another example of how women ruin the trades.

NUZNOV: Because you weren't sucking up them twelve-hour days.

FRANCIS: Right.

CRAWFORD: Well, and if everybody doesn't suck them up, pretty soon they'll go away.

NUZNOV: How long did you do the job analysis?

FRANCIS: About two years. And then at that point, there was this real affirmative action push— GM was cited for not having enough women and people of color in the trades, which would totally freeze their operation of getting apprentices in.

RAUCHER: What year would that be?

FRANCIS: Well, let's see, I went in in '78, so that would be '84 or '85.

RAUCHER: So that's why they needed to hire somebody to do the recruitment part?

FRANCIS: Yeah. And so they had this pre-apprentice program. And they were not getting enough women and people of color into this and they needed teachers to teach people and prepare them. So a friend of mine (Chris M.), actually, who had been a carpenter

on the outside and in W.I.S.T., they hired her as a consultant, as a developer, and then we worked together on this. And so I did that.

Eventually I got hired into the apprentice program as a salaried person, which was kind of an interesting experience, because when I was an apprentice I said to myself one day, "Boy, wouldn't it be great if one day I was one of these apprentice instructors," not even thinking that that could ever happen. And then I got hired to do it. It was like karmic or something.

RAUCHER: What did you do with your friend, the carpenter? You set up some sort of a program to recruit women and minorities?

FRANCIS: Yeah. Well, the UAW and the corporation had one, and then we also designed our own. We had been through this, we had been in this Women in Skilled Trades group. We knew some of the stuff that women and people of color needed to be able to survive on the job. Both of us had teaching experience, too. So it was the greatest opportunity. It was wonderful working together.

And the women and the guys that were in this program, they were just so dedicated. I mean, you know how they say people don't want these jobs and they can't do them, they can't find them? I mean, we had many more people than could possibly get in. And they worked so hard. And it was awesome. It was just awesome.

RAUCHER: Who ran this program? The one you're talking about.

FRANCIS: Oldsmobile and the union (GM/UAW). It was a joint program. For a while, the recruitment and pre-apprentice program was a success. The percentage of women and people of color in the trades that were eligible increased. (This is a great story that should be written down.) The same committeeman (Roger L.) that had supported me in that

apprentice program was still on committee. Chris M. — this woman that hired on as the instructor, who knew all about discrimination — she just wouldn't take any crap. And this guy, this apprentice guy, he wouldn't either. And me. So we could really fight a lot of battles, make sure the apprentice selection process was fair and get what we needed to get people trained and through the interview. It was awesome.

And had the factory not been downsizing, it could have been a very different future for women and people of color. I mean, there's a lot of things happening, which you all know, that caused this whole kind of historical moment to not really blossom the way it could have. But some women and people of color did get in and some still have jobs.

I think a lot about affirmative action these days, because Michigan has got this anti-civil rights initiative on the ballot. Affirmative action was always something that got thrown in my face when I was on the floor. You know, "The only reason why you're here is cause you're a woman." Or, "The only reason why you're here is because you're a minority." And so I think a lot about that.

One of the things that made the big difference for women getting in the trades in the factory is when they passed the union contract that changed the job classifications. Before the 1970's, the GM/UAW contract prevented women from entering certain classifications. The women in the union fought that right from World War II on. So the union contract was reinforced by affirmative action. They were both there. The union was obligated, under contract, to make sure that women had access to the trades and the union was required to represent you.

RAUCHER: But originally you were an instructor in this program with the carpenter friend of yours, teaching folks that you'd recruited, newly recruited?

FRANCIS: We posted in the plant. You could post openings for the pre-apprentice program. And this was advertised in the union paper as well. So people, if they were interested, they could come. They came for a while, the women and the people of color who were interested came. And then after a while, the pool was exhausted and then it became more and more difficult to recruit.

DAWSON: You didn't recruit outside of the plant.

FRANCIS: Not at first. It was much harder to get in from the outside. When the pool of women and people of color on the inside started diminishing, we began working more with people from the outside. At my plant (Local 652) the level of competency to get into the trades began to change in general. Like, engineers were applying for these skilled trades jobs. So people from the shop floor were competing with people with engineering degrees from the outside. And that was a dynamic that you didn't want to get into. But it was the truth of it. People who had these degrees, inside and outside the factory, might not be so skilled with the tools, but they could score high on the tests. So you know, there was a lot of things happening in the trades. And then they were starting to subcontract out.

One of the questions that I saw [on your interview questionnaire] was, "If you had a choice, would you do it again?" I guess that one really boils down to what you think about the trades for women. I think it really did change — it got better for women over the twenty years that I was there. But it's not easy. Women can still face harassment and must deal with working in a male culture. It just isn't an easy ride. And now, the labor market's changed and there's very little chance. Like at our plant, most of the skilled trades people that we recruited were all laid off and got put in a Jobs Bank. But you know, the trades, it's still a wonderful option for some women.

And as far as my experience of not being exposed to tools and stuff as a kid, if I had children of my own, I would make sure that both the boys and the girls were exposed to this so they had the option. It's just like math — if you don't study math early, these things are harder to come by.

And so, would I do it again? I might do it again, but I'd do it differently. I'd concentrate a lot harder on learning the skills. And I might not do it again. Like I always said, "If I knew what it took to be a pipefitter, maybe I would have been a doctor."

Some women wouldn't go into the trades. I think in our plant, some of the women saw how hard it was for the women that were in the trades, and they chose to stay in production. They knew that they could make it in production.

CRAWFORD: Isn't the pay quite a bit different?

FRANCIS: The pay is different, but, you know, you can be a repairperson or a floater or a machine operator. And for some people, having more control over your job, maybe, and a little better job, where you have more assurances of what it is, they prefer that. I think it depends on the personality, seniority and circumstances.

But I think the major reason why there's not as many women — because the factory, with the UAW, had a good affirmative action plan — is that now the jobs have all dried up, so there's no plan. There are no jobs, there are no jobs for anybody.

RAUCHER: In the auto plants.

FRANCIS: In the auto plants.

NUZNOV: So how big is that plant now, that you said was originally very, very big?

FRANCIS: I think there was like 24,000 when I worked there. I think it's 6,000 now.

NUZNOV: So the skilled trades that are left in there were people that were established early on.

FRANCIS: Yeah, the high seniority ones, but a lot of them were laid off too.

RAUCHER: You wrote your dissertation, Ann, about women, and you did an oral history of women in the plant you worked in.

FRANCIS: Actually in plants all over the state, not just my plant. It is called "Journeys of the Uninvited: a Feminist Oral History of Tradeswomen in the Auto Industry."

RAUCHER: Could you talk a little bit about that experience? Are those women still — are some of them retired now or are they still working?

FRANCIS: Some of them are retired, some of them are laid off.

RAUCHER: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about that experience, about doing that project, and the interviewing and that sort of thing? When did you do that, anyway?

FRANCIS: I retired from GM in '98. And I started the interviews at about that same time. It was healing for me to do those interviews and to talk to women. You've got to admire these women, you just have to. I interviewed women who were the first, and then a group of women that were the second wave of women that got in, and then a small group of women who were the latest ones, newcomers.

Basically, the stories were extremely similar. Women wanted these jobs, they needed good-paying jobs. They liked the fact that they could be trained on the job and learn a skill at the same time and that they would have good employment. So that was, I would say that most everybody that I talked to was motivated in that way.

One of the things that I didn't expect to find out, which has really sustained me — and I couldn't look at it this way when I was kind of buried in the shop. People would say, "Well, things have changed." And I'd think, "You could have fooled me," because things just seemed like the repeating story of sexism, the repeating story of all the games and women having a difficult time on the job. But in talking to these women, what I could see is that some things had changed, even though we were a small minority. And it makes me so proud of all the women who were in the trades for whatever length of time any woman could handle it. And of the women that have stayed, hearing the stories and analyzing the data make you know that they made a contribution.

When I did the analysis of my interviews, I put it all together and I looked at them. I could see that what was making the difference was the laws, yes, but also these individuals working with individuals, one by one, working day after day, and then things started to change. And you know, that combination of them just hanging in there and using all sorts of strategies helped them survive and changed the environment.

Now, some people never change. And we also cannot forget the women who were harmed by the experience. The costs to some women were devastating. But it was significant to me that the level of sexual harassment in '99 was far less than the level in the early 70's, when women first started in. Things had really, really changed. And I know the laws had an effect, but also it seemed like the attitudes of the people, the guys had changed, and there was much more acceptance. So, had the factory jobs not been shrinking, I think conditions for women would have continued to improve as more women entered. Skilled trades jobs are good jobs. We just have to keep circling back around with this and find other opportunities/places to enter.

RAUCHER: Well ladies, do you have any other questions?

NUZNOV: I'm looking at my cheat sheet. Can you think of anything?

RAUCHER: Or did you have anything you wanted to add, Ann, something that we've missed?

FRANCIS: I guess I wanted to say something about affirmative action. Many of the people that got into the trades got in because of affirmative action. It was absolutely critical that these laws came into play, that they said that women had to be in there, because I don't think it would have happened without it. Now, maybe some people have learned. And maybe some of that gets passed on. But even though things changed, I don't believe we've had a big enough cultural mind change, heart change to guarantee women access to the trades.