Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Renee Holbrook
Railroad Mechanic

Interviewed on October 17, 2005

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Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with Renee Holbrook

MARGARET RAUCHER: This is the Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project and it is October 17, 2005 and we are interviewing Renee Holbrook, who is — tell me, Renee, you're with the National Conference . . .

RENEE HOLBROOK: . . . of Firemen and Oilers.

RAUCHER: And you are a mechanic?

HOLBROOK: I am a mechanic.

RAUCHER: Okay. So I usually start off asking you about what your life was like before you entered the trades, when you were born, where — you know, your family situation and growing up and that sort of thing.

HOLBROOK: I was born and raised about ten blocks from where I live right now. I was born and raised in Owosso, Michigan, right at the same hospital as my mom was born and all of my siblings. I have two full sisters, a half brother, and a half sister.

My grade school was a whole block away from the house I grew up in, so we got to walk back and forth to school. My great grandfather built the house I grew up in — it's a big red brick house. My grandma grew up in it also, so there was a lot of family history in the house I grew up in.

We went to school at Owosso Middle School, and then Owosso High School. So the whole family — we basically followed my mom's footsteps when it came to school,

went to the same grade school, same middle school and same high school. That was us three older children.

And we grew up in a three-bedroom house, where we all thought we lived pretty happily, until '85, when my parents divorced.

RAUCHER: When were you born?

HOLBROOK: I was born in 1976. And the only reason my dad knows when my birthday was is because it's the Bicentennial year. And he'll tell you, "The only reason I know how old she is is 'cause she was born in that Bicentennial year." [laughter]

I have an older sister, Gayle. She is three years older than I am. And I have a younger sister, Sarah, who is four years younger than I am. They kind of messed up on the dates there [laughs], they had an oops the wrong year. We all have five-letter first names, three-letter middle names, so we all have the same amount of letters in our names. But they planned that, I don't know why, but it was a thing. My mom, my dad, and all of us have five letters in our first name.

MICHELLE FECTEAU: What's your middle name?

HOLBROOK: Sue is my middle name.

ELAINE CRAWFORD: And it could not be Susan.

HOLBROOK: Nope. Except for Sarah's — hers is Jo, and Mom won't put the "e" on the end, so it would be three letters. She said, "No, I can't do that."

So we grew up with fast-pitch softball. My dad played. We all bowled religiously when we were younger. My dad was an Eagles Club member, so we got to hang out at the Eagles Club all the time. Grew up with fish fries and bowling in the

basement, because our Eagles Club had a six-lane bowling alley in the basement. Playing cards — our whole family, grandmas, grandpas, everybody huge into cards, a few board games.

We hated each other when we were little, us three girls couldn't stand each other, couldn't stand to be around each other. Can't separate us now, but couldn't stand to be around each other then.

RAUCHER: Why?

HOLBROOK: Well, Gayle and I were close enough in age where if I had something, she wanted it, if she had something, I wanted it. We were the same build and the same height and everything, because I grew up faster than she did, and we always wanted to borrow each other's clothes. It was always the woman thing that we hated each other for. "Don't borrow my clothes!" "Mom, she's in my makeup." Things like that. Not that I wore makeup when I was younger. But Sarah was the runt of the pack. She was the baby and that's why we couldn't stand her. Mom was, "Oh, Sarah, it's okay." And Dad was like, "Oh, it's Sarah, she's younger, you're supposed to understand these things." "No, she's a spoiled brat and we want to beat her up." So we did.

But now — I think it was after Gayle graduated from high school in '91, her and I got closer. And I graduated in '95 and I went to trade school three months after I graduated high school, so I had a little bit of time. Gayle had my first nephew just before I went to trade school. So that kind of brought us together, the nephews and the niece have played a huge impact on that. So everybody wanted to babysit and be around the children.

My mom actually moved out of our house that we grew up in when I was sixteen, and I had to move in with my dad and his new wife. It wasn't pleasant. Didn't like her. Can stand her now, but didn't like her then.

And then they had my first half brother, which, you know, he got everything, and we got squat. So a little resentment there. And then a year later, they had my half sister. So my dad had a twenty-year-old, then he had one born, and then he turned forty all in the same month. The youngest daughter, the oldest daughter and my dad all have their birthday in May.

RAUCHER: When your parents divorced, you lived then with your mom?

HOLBROOK: With my mom, full time. They had joint custody, but we only went to Dad's maybe, if he could take time out of his life, every other weekend. Sometimes we'd go forever without seeing him. He'd come pick us up, maybe on a Saturday morning for breakfast.

RAUCHER: Did your mom work?

HOLBROOK: My mom worked. When my dad and her first split up, she actually worked at our grade school as a recess monitor. So everybody knew my mom. My mom is that bad woman that yells at us on the playground. "Renee, I hate your mom!" "Well, I don't care for her much, either, sometimes." [laughs]

And then she went to work full time, because she couldn't make it on a recess monitor's money, at a small — not a floral shop, but they actually supplied floral shops with green plants. And I worked down there, also, under the table. Nobody knew I worked down there. But I was like their basket person. I stocked all the baskets, and

took care of all the baskets. And they'd hide me in the back when somebody would come in to water the plants.

RAUCHER: How old were you?

HOLBROOK: Well, I'd have been ten, eleven, twelve, because she worked there while she went to Baker College to get a degree.

FECTEAU: What did she get a degree in?

HOLBROOK: She got an associates degree in like, management — nothing real fancy. But she took accounting classes and things like that, which got her a whopping job at Payless in Grand Rapids. So it was a two-hour drive each way. But I think she first started in Detroit, then Grand Rapids, then moved up to Lansing. We never saw her. She'd get up and be off to work in the morning before we had to get up, and then she wouldn't come home until after we were . . .

RAUCHER: So did you take care of yourselves?

HOLBROOK: Oh, my aunt, for a little while, lived with us. When my dad left my mom, my dad owned the house my aunt lived in, so he kicked her out, and her and my cousin that is my age exactly, except for he's a November and I'm a September child, they lived with us. So we had two adults and four kids in a three-bedroom house. So we doubled up. Everybody had a bedroom partner. And my aunt only worked a couple blocks away from the house. She works with plastic. She makes the tanks for your car that keep the washer fluid, that's what she makes.

FECTEAU: She works in a factory.

HOLBROOK: She works in a factory, not too far away from where I grew up.

CRAWFORD: Was it a unionized factory?

HOLBROOK: Actually, Shiawassee County is not pro-union at all. I can think of — our shop is union, my younger sister is a UAW member from working in Motor Products and there may be two other shops in Shiawassee County that are union.

RAUCHER: Is Motor Products a parts supplier?

HOLBROOK: Motor Products makes small electronic motors, and they supply everywhere. It's a huge brand name. Like, the United States government comes in and says, "I want 1,000 motors," and there's no bidding on it, they just know that Motor Products can do it.

FECTEAU: What kind of work does your dad do?

HOLBROOK: My father, before he had the back injury, he worked at General Motors in tool and die. He's a tool and die tradesman, but they actually put him off on permanent disability. He has all those special toolboxes that if you open them, you're, "How the hell do you work out of this thing?" I couldn't find anything. I'm like, "Dad, I need a three-eighths wrench." "It's in that box." I'm like, "Where?" I could find twelve half-inch, sixteen nine-sixteenths inch. But that was just his home box. He's got like, fourteen toolboxes, and they're all heavy and full of stuff. And he thinks he's going to give them to me. Eh-eh. But he has all those special little tool and die master grinding things that all of them need, which would be cool to have my hands on someday.

But he injured himself, I think it was permanent in '97 or '98, so he's off at home with his two younger kids. His wife works at the new Cadillac plant in Lansing, the one that's air conditioned and they tell you what to wash your hair with and they tell you what to wash your face with.

RAUCHER: Really?

HOLBROOK: Oh, pH levels for the paint. You have to get air blown before you can walk into the work area so there's no dust on your hair or on your clothes. They have to walk through a cylinder that blows everything off of them — in one particular part of the plant. Air conditioned! I'm like, "Damn, I don't get air conditioning."

My grandpa and grandma worked at Universal Technical — or Universal — it's electronic. They make motors there, too. That's where my dad started off and that's where my mom worked when I was growing up, before my little sister was born. I had an uncle and a great aunt that worked there, too. It's a pretty good-sized factory right in the middle of downtown Owosso. And that's seven people that I am genetically related to that worked in that factory. And now they're down to maybe one shift. They're just sending all the stuff out of the state of Michigan — people are buying up all the companies and shipping it where it's cheaper to make the parts.

RAUCHER: This is sort of light industrial work there. A lot of women work there?

HOLBROOD: Right. They make small electric motors. These were small enclosed motors that my grandpa and my dad and my mom and my aunt made — brushless, so once it went bad you just threw it away and bought a new one. Where my sister worked, at Motor Products, there were motors that you could rebuild and rewind and put brushes in them, so, much bigger. The company's not Universal anymore, it's A. O. Smith or — they've been bought and sold like, four times in the last ten years. But it'll always be Universal to us. We don't care what you call it.

RAUCHER: Was your dad's injury work-related?

HOLBROOK: He slipped and fell at work. He had a bad back before that, something not really serious, but it would hurt him once in a while. But it was at the plant. This was when he worked for Oldsmobile, which was down the street from the new Cadillac plant. And he slipped and fell and messed up his back really bad. And they sent him in for back surgery, and that actually made it worse. Now two of his central nervous system systems have fused together and he has pain — even when he doesn't have pain, he still senses pain.

So sometimes you'll walk in and he'll be in his computer chair rolling around making dinner, because he can't stand up long enough to make dinner. He can't do the things that he did. My grandma tells us this: Us girls had it good when we were growing up, because we got to watch Dad play softball and bowl and golf and all that stuff. And my little brother and sister, they don't have any of that. They see Dad try to get around or gimp around or do as good as he could to get around.

But he's actually moving a lot better now than he was even three or four years ago. They found out he had diabetes and so they can fix some of that sugar problem which causes pain. So he's getting around a little bit better. He can golf, so he's got that going for him. He can't bowl, but he can golf. He can't walk. He has to have a cart so he has that restful time, then he can get up. When he found out he had diabetes, he started the lose the weight that the doctor said he needed to lose to get the pressure off his back, and now he's moving around a lot better. He's up for a little while and then right back down for about an equal amount of time. So if he's up working for an hour, then he's laying down on his back for an hour, an hour and a half. So I mean, he gets to the point where he tries to help more than he should, but then we're like, "Go lay down."

But he's not the way — he's not our dad, the way we grew up. But actually, I think my little brother and sister have it better, because he's at home. When we were growing up, we saw him out on the softball field or at the bowling alley. We didn't actually see him, we saw him doing stuff.

RAUCHER: But would you say that your years growing up were pretty typical for a girl at that time?

HOLBROOK: I didn't hang out with the girls. The girls were off playing here and I was out jumping my bike with the guys. And I'd get yelled at when I got home, "Why is your rim bent?" "Well, I had to jump that curb with the guys, Dad." "Well, you're not a guy!" I think my mom said it took three years for me to get my first dump truck for Christmas so I could go play with the guys in the sand, because my dad said, "That's not a present for a girl."

And we took after Dad. All three of us girls played softball. I was the only one that took it into high school. I played fast-pitch. Gayle did for a few years, Sarah did for a few years. They're not the athletic type. They're the brainiacs.

Getting into school with all of us girls going to school so close together and everybody knowing Mom, they all thought we were all brainiacs. And come to find out, it was through my fourth-grade year, I think, third- or fourth-grade year, they found out I had a reading disability. So everybody was trying to push me to be like Gayle and found out that I couldn't. And then Sarah comes up, and she's some genius. So we all basically had the same teachers, or the teachers knew each other. And there's night and day between Gayle and I, and there's night and day between Sarah and I.

RAUCHER: They were not tomboys like you?

HOLBROOK: No. They were wearing the makeup. And they had no problem getting dirty, but they'd rather be clean. We all get dirt underneath our fingernails, but I'm the only one that's dirty all the time. [laughs] Sarah's going to be at law school and Gayle is a computer technician for a retirement home by our house. She's like their computer person. So she's a computer nerd and Sarah is going to be a lawyer and then I'm the grunt.

RAUCHER: Where is she going to law school?

HOLBROOK: Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. Gayle is a graduate of Baker College, and I went to tech school in Illinois at Universal Technical Institute.

FECTEAU: Why did you go to Illinois?

HOLBROOK: Why did I go to Illinois? Oh, I wanted to go to GMI [General Motors Institute], but I never got the chance to. And this particular salesman — I call him a salesman, because he kind of sold me on the school, but he was a recruiter — came to my technical, vocational auto mechanics class. And then they interviewed me outside of the class with my sister and kind of got me in there. They have three different campuses. One is in Illinois, one is in Arizona and one is in Texas, so this was the only one up here. I was looking at going to — there's a very good school in Tennessee and then there was another one down there somewhere. These are vocational schools that teach you everything you got to know in a very short time.

I actually got an entrance letter to go to Ferris State, but I listened to everybody around me when I was in high school, which I shouldn't have, and they said, "I don't think you can do this, Renee. I don't think you can make it through Ferris State. You need to go somewhere where you just learn the technical stuff." I listened, and I

shouldn't have, because now I don't have an associate's degree, I just have enough hours to have an associate's degree, but I don't have one. I have a certificate of completion.

RAUCHER: Did it bother you when you were growing up that your sisters were identified as the brainiacs and you were the one who was going to go to vocational school?

HOLBROOK: No. It doesn't even bother me now. We all have our places. And ask them: I'm the getter-doner. That's what they'll say. "We're the thinkers, and she's the one that's going to get it done." And that's the way it is. And now that I got out of school and realized, you know, these people were all wrong about me. I have a head on my shoulders, I can do this. I'm thinking that maybe I should go back to school, because now I got all this information in my head, I could help other people with it.

FECTEAU: What did you study when you went — you mentioned auto mechanics?

HOLBROOK: Auto and diesel.

RAUCHER: This was after high school?

HOLBROOK: This was right after high school. I graduated in June of '95 and I was starting my first class in auto mechanics school in September, right after Labor Day in September of that year.

I learned how to rebuild transmissions in cars, both kinds, automatic and standard, on transmissions in big rigs, both automatic and standard, diesel engines, gasoline engines, heating and air conditioning, air brakes, regular brakes, customer relations. I could be a service writer. We had a class on service writing. They show you how to treat the customer and make sure you always smile and shake their hand and how to hook up a

battery and drivability problems for cars, drivability problems for trucks. I had three weeks on hydraulics, because everything has some kind of hydraulic in it these days, if you're working on a big rig. Brakes, air bags, suspension — you name it, we covered it.

RAUCHER: And was this the school in Illinois?

HOLBROOK: Yes. Universal Technical Institute. We had so many classes, they were all three weeks long. You weren't allowed to miss more than eight hours out of the three weeks or you failed. You had to have — we had a dress code. You couldn't wear a hat unless it was facing the right way. The guys' collars — hair couldn't touch their collars. At the beginning of each three weeks we had a hair check. We had a shirt check every day.

When I first started down there, I worked in the morning, I went to school in the evening. You went to school from 1:00 to 7:00.

CRAWFORD: Did they get you a job?

HOLBROOK: When we were down there, they had a job posting board and you just kind of went to see what you wanted to do. Most of the jobs were barely enough to make your rent. You shared an apartment with — well, for a while I lived all by myself. There was only five girls in the entire school.

FECTEAU: Out of how many?

HOLBROOK: At the minimum, there was 1,500 men, and then when they had the new recruits coming in in September, it would go up to like, 2,000 guys. At the most, there was five women there at one time. You know, we'd graduate out and no more would come in, so there would only be two or three of us.

RAUCHER: And they recruited you when you were still in high school?

HOLBROOK: They recruited me in my senior year. A Mercedes dealership sent me a letter my sixth week there and were looking for female mechanics. And I'd only been there for six weeks. I still had fourteen months to go.

RAUCHER: But they were looking specifically for a female.

HOLBROOK: The letter said specifically "for female mechanics."

RAUCHER: And was the school also recruiting or trying to find women to come to the school?

HOLBROOK: Well, most of the recruiters were in the vocational mechanics class. And in my vocational mechanics class, you were hand-picked by the teacher. This teacher got to pick who was in his class, so if he didn't want no slackers or guys who were going to interrupt his class, he didn't have to. I was the second woman that he had picked in almost thirty years he taught there. And the one before me was like, seventeen years earlier. He said that he had talked to her one time while I was in the class, and she was still doing mechanics in her garage, but she basically wasn't a mechanic anymore.

And this teacher, I mean, he let me go, he let me do whatever I wanted to do, because I read the book when he told us to the read the book and I did what he told us to do and I tried. We rebuilt a class engine, my senior year. It was a Chevy 350. And I got to do the heads. And I was so happy. I got to use a grinder and I got to place all the stuff. And somebody else was supposed to do the other head and they were slacking behind, so I kind of picked up the slack and did the head for him, too.

And then our class supervisor — they had, not a student teacher, because he was just a guy that worked in a junkyard, but to help so the teacher didn't have to be everywhere all the time — he brought in a 305. He said, "Renee, can you rebuild this for

me?" So I did this 305 that year all by myself, too. I had a helper. And I redid the heads on that.

And then one of the other kids brought in a big block Ford, and they just had it all screwed up. So I went over there and I got them all the way to putting the intake on. And I did six or seven sets of heads that year, my senior year. It got to the point where somebody would come down to the vocational teacher and say, "Can you do this for me?" and he would say, "Well, go ask Renee if she has time." [laughter]

FECTEAU: But you did it in your senior year, so this was at the technical school?

HOLBROOK: No. This was at high school. This was high school. In my senior year, I actually was working at an auto detail shop in the morning, well, for my first four hours of credit. I went to work and got paid.

RAUCHER: But they had a vocational mechanics class in your high school.

HOLBROOK: Right.

RAUCHER: And you were the only girl.

HOLBROOK: I was the only girl. There's ten kids in the class and I was the only girl.

RAUCHER: Why did you — I mean, you saw this class and said, "Hey, this is for me. I want to do this"?

HOLBROOK: No. It was really weird. I got interested in cars when I was fourteen, started watching NASCAR and seeing how fast those cars could go and oh, the cool things that they could do. And that's when Days of Thunder came out. So we're all watching Days of Thunder and hot rod movies. And I started dating a guy — his dad

raced. So we're always out in the garage, you know, "What's this?" He would quiz me constantly. "What's this?" I'm like, "It's a piston." Or, "What's this? What's this?" And that's how I got interested in it all.

But I got all interested on gasoline. And I haven't worked on anything but my own car since I graduated. I've never worked in a dealership. I've always worked on diesels. But racing got me interested in what I do. I guess I can blame it on NASCAR.

FECTEAU: Have you tried to race?

HOLBROOK: I raced a street stockcar one time, and I don't have the nerve for it. I'm a watcher. I'll work on it and I'll watch it, but I don't want to race it.

RAUCHER: Well, when you decided to take this class, you really didn't care what anybody else thought, right?

HOLBROOK: Oh, all the way through high school. And seriously, in the town I grew up in, it's very clique-y. You have your rich — and most of my class were teachers' kids. So they all hung out. The jocks-slash-all-"A" students, you know, they all hung out in their own little clique. And I was a partier [laughs] — that's what I was. My sister was older, and I hung out with all her friends. I had one person I talked to outside of the softball team. And I only talked to the softball team during softball season.

FECTEAU: So you had like, one best friend.

HOLBROOK: I had one best friend. A few years after high school, we still talked. Now I see her and I don't even talk to her anymore.

FECTEAU: Why?

HOLBROOK: She's a partier, but a partier with no responsibilities. And I'm a partier, and I have responsibilities. I told myself if the partying ever interrupted my

work, if I couldn't go to work the next day because I was too drunk, I would quit partying. And she was the kind of person where guys became an obsession for her. And I just wanted one, she wanted them all. [laughter] I couldn't keep one happy, I sure in the heck don't want more than one. And she just wanted to party six days a week.

And I have my one night out with the girls on Wednesday night when we go bowling, and then tournaments, where we leave the men at home. But other than that, I'm not a big bar person. Most of the time you get into a bar and you get in a bar fight. And I have to try and keep my two sisters out of those. So that's more than enough for me.

But I seen her a couple weeks ago, after one of my tournaments, and I didn't even speak to her, because I mean, she's twenty-nine years old, or she will be twenty-nine, and she's still living at home with her mom and dad. And my mom lives with me, I don't live with my mom.

So I mean, she's working at a job that — she doesn't want to go anywhere. I want to be able to afford my own house and my own dog if I have a dog, and she's just happy where she is. So we kind of just grew apart. We had different expectations on life, I guess.

CRAWFORD: So there you were, in what, the end of eighth grade or the beginning of ninth grade — Is that when you got into the voc-tech?

HOLBROOK: Actually, Owosso don't let you take any engine or mechanical courses until your sophomore year.

CRAWFORD: So you had to be, say, sixteen?

HOLBROOK: Yeah. Actually, I would have been seventeen. I took a theory course. Everything is down in a book.

CRAWFORD: I'm trying to figure out how this teacher knew you existed and knew you had an interest in . . .

HOLBROOK: He was my theory class teacher. And everything was done in a book. He would bring in stuff and show us things, but everything you did was out of the book. And I aced all of the courses.

CRAWFORD: So this was called the theory of . . .

HOLBROOK: It was the theory of automotive, I believe it was called, so everything was done in your mind.

CRAWFORD: Okay.

HOLBROOK: And he walks in the first day and says, "What do cars run off of?" And we're all like, "Gasoline!" He's like, "Wrong!" And we're like, "What?" He's like, "They run off air. Gasoline is just there to make combustion." "Ah!" I listened while everybody else screwed off. And I wanted to know more. And he had taught a friend of mine a few years earlier that graduated with my sister, a really close friend of mine, Larron Jones, and he got him a job at a diesel shop outside of town. And so my friend, Larron, would talk to him and he liked having me in class because I could answer the questions and I paid attention.

And then my junior year we took a small engines class. You took in your lawnmower, you tore the engine all apart and put it back together, didn't matter if it ran. It was like, "Bonus! It doesn't have to run!" And the teacher was Mr. McDonald, and he had me for an architecture class, too. Well, these two teachers [theory and small engines]

were the only two, basically, other than the woodshop teacher and the metals teacher, that did vocational learning. So they would talk. I don't know if I impressed them, but they liked me.

And I remember when I was in small engines, the principal had come in. He wanted to have a talk with certain classes about what the school needed to do to be better. He walks in and says, "And what in God's green earth are you doing in here?" I said, "Taking small engines." "Why are you taking small engines?" I said, "Because I have to have small engines to take vocational." "Oh," he says. End of that story.

Well, being hand-picked for vocational classes: It was my junior year, I was at a softball game and I had this big paper due for some class. I was up half the night doing this paper and they pull me into the counselor's office. I'm like, "There's no way I can be in trouble. I don't do anything in school except for my schoolwork and then I leave."

"Renee, you got into vocational, auto mechanics. Why do you want to take that?" That's the first thing my counselors said, "Why do you want to take that?" I said, "Because it's kind of hard to get into technical school if you don't kind of know what you're doing a little bit." "Well, are you sure? Because you're way too smart for this." I said, "How would you know? Every time I come to your office to talk to you, you're not here." He's like, "Are you sure you want to take this class?" I said, "Yes." And that like perked me up for the rest of the day. I'm like, "My senior year I'm coming to school,and I'm going to work on stuff I know I can do."

So I said, "Well, sign me up for a math class next year, too. I should probably take another math class." I had all my credits that I needed, so my senior year was my fluff-off year to do whatever I wanted. He's like, "Are you sure?" And I said, "Sure."

And halfway through my senior year I said, “Can I drop my math class? I really don’t like it.” He’s like, “Are you sure you want to do that?” I said, “Yeah.” Because I worked in a shop in the morning. We burned kerosene to heat the water to wash the cars. So I walked into school smelling like kerosene, because I’d get up and go to work at 7:00 until noon — or actually until about 11:00, 11:30, go have lunch, go into my math class. And everybody, was “What stinks?” I’m like, (sniffs) “That’d be me. If you don’t like it, go sit somewhere else.”

But then I’d get right back out of school and go right back to work. I was eighteen. There was no law saying I could only work so many hours a week. So I went right back to work after school until 7, 8 o’clock at night. So my senior year, I got like, fifty hours in a week and went to school. So I dropped my math class after the first semester and I went to school for my two hours of vocational mechanics and went back to work, or when softball season came around, I would go to softball practice. That was the only time in my senior year I didn’t work after school. We worked six days a week, first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

RAUCHER: And what did you do on that job?

HOLBROOK: I detailed the inside of cars. If there was a crevice or a crack, I was supposed to clean it — windows, scrub the carpets, scrub the seats. And our biggest customer was a Cadillac dealership. The largest Cadillac in mid-Michigan, Young’s Cadillac-Oldsmobile — no, Chevrolet. And they were our biggest customers. So I’ve driven every kind of Cadillac there is. I’ve even driven a Cadillac that had an eight-track player in it. And it was mint green. I’ve driven Corvettes and trucks and cars and some things that wouldn’t even — God, please get me to the dealership before you break down

— and some that would go so fast you didn't realize you were going fifty-five in a thirty-five, because Cadillacs rode so nicely.

But I did that for a little over a year, about a year and a couple months, before I went to school. And the guy paid me more to babysit his children than he did for me to work in his shop. He was like, "Renee, take tomorrow off." This would be a Friday evening. "Take tomorrow off and be at my house around, mmm, 3:00 is okay." And I say, "Oh, you need me to watch the kids again." "Yep." He'd come in all smashed and give me twenty bucks. "Oh, that's not enough. Let me go get you some more money." I'm like, "Come home drunk more often. I make more money off of you that way."

FECTEAU: But he wouldn't ask any of the guys that were working there to babysit.

HOLBROOK: Oh no, nope.

RAUCHER: And how'd you like the babysitting?

HOLBROOK: Oh, his house was all white. I don't know where his wife came up with this scheme, but all the floors were white, all the furniture was white. They had two young children. So I'm like, sitting in the kitchen, because I had a big huge TV in the kitchen. I'd watch TV in the kitchen and the baby would just sleep on my lap until I went to put her to bed. And the son either was sleeping when I got there or he was over at Grandma and Grandpa's. I was paid to babysit him, but he'd only come home to go to bed. He liked to be at Grandpa and Grandma's. But I would go over and babysit.

And he would try to give me mornings off, be nice, "Renee, you've been working too hard this week. Why don't you come in at noon tomorrow?" I'd be like, "Nope." You want to send me home early, you can send me home at noon. But I ain't coming in

at noon." "You ain't playing that trick on me, mister." I'm a morning worker. I get up in the morning, I go to work, I come home and I do what I got to do, and then I go to bed. I tried working third shift at the truck stop, but I was confused. I had no idea what day of the week it was.

FECTEAU: I have a question. When you decided to take these voc-tech classes in high school, how was your father and mother with that, and your siblings?

HOLBROOK: I would say my mom supported me in anything I did.

FECTEAU: Your dad?

HOLBROOK: I didn't talk to him.

FECTEAU: So he didn't know that you were taking these classes?

HOLBROOK: I don't think he did until after I started class. Actually, my dad had no idea what I was doing in high school, except for every spring when I made a softball team, I'd call him and tell him.

FECTEAU: When did he find out? How did he react?

HOLBROOK: I don't think he ever reacted in front of me. He just basically told me that that was nice. Gayle, my older sister, she thought it was nice, but she didn't think it was something I was going to take a career up in. Now she jokes about it. When I was in tech school, she used to say, "Oh, Renee's going to be a mechanic with greasy fingernails and marry some lawyer or something." And Sarah, she's the one that goes around and, you know, "This is my sister, the mechanic. She works on my car for me." But Sarah, she was pretty much supportive through everything, because she was the younger one and we'd just thump her in the head if she didn't support us. She didn't care.

Gayle was supportive, because I actually lived with her in my junior year, into some of my senior year, until her husband and I had a blowout and I moved in with my grandparents. And I think my grandpa, my mom's dad, my Grandpa Hyatt, he was a mechanic when he was raising his family, at a small tire place just down the street from where I live. And he struggled raising a lot of kids on a small paycheck. And then he became a truck driver, when I was born. So he supported me a lot in anything I wanted to do. People always say that I was his favorite, but I don't believe them. He was the kind of guy where you'd pick up the phone one day and you would say, "Hello?" And he would say, "Renee?" And I'd say, "Grandpa?" He'd say, "Everything all right up there?" I'd look around the house and I'd say, "Everything is fine, Grandpa." "Are you sure nothing is going on with you?" I'm like — and this is from Arkansas — I'm like, "Nothing is going on with me, not right now." He says, "Well, I just had a bad feeling about you, so I thought I'd call. Here's grandma." [laughter]

FECTEAU: You moved to Arkansas to stay with him?

HOLBROOK: When he became a truck driver, he moved from the house that he raised his family in to Arkansas.

FECTEAU: So you moved to Arkansas?

HOLBROOK: No, just him.

FECTEAU: You moved in with your grandfather?

HOLBROOK: They moved back. When did they move back? It was my sophomore year they moved back, because he had retired from truck driving. So they moved up here, because my whole family lives in Shiawassee County. His two youngest daughters, my two youngest aunts, they live outside. But his oldest kids, we all live right

there. I work with my one aunt. My other aunt lived with us for a long time. And my uncle lives six, seven blocks from where I work.

CRAWFORD: Did you feel like there was either a bias in your school or a prejudice anywhere that you ran across about being in voc-tech?

HOLBROOK: In my high school?

CRAWFORD: Yeah.

HOLBROOK: In my high school, I was feared. I didn't know why. I didn't know until after I graduated. But I scared the girls and I scared the guys. I'm like, "Why would I scare somebody?" Well, the two biggest guys in the school was either my cousin or a very good friend of mine, so nobody messed with me. And I was the one walking around with the dirty fingernails. I wouldn't not dress up to go to school, but my senior year, I went in my work clothes, because I knew I was going back to work or I knew I was going to vocational class. So would the in-crowd talk to me? If they needed something from me.

I really, in high school, did not care what anybody thought. I had went through that whole clique-y thing in junior high and when I got to high school, I had my sisters' friends to hang out with, and they didn't judge me. Everybody in my high school judged me.

In vocational school, some of the guys, just because they were males, thought they were better than I was. "Girls can't do this stuff." And then if you got a better grade than they did, they hated you worse. But I just didn't deal with them. If a guy didn't like me, I didn't go near that guy. I'd take a different lab partner.

We ended up having a group of people from Michigan — there was a group from Port Huron, and there was three or four guys and we became friends and we all hung out together.

CRAWFORD: Down at the Institute in Illinois.

HOLBROOK: Down at the Institute. Of course, they put the girls in the farthest away apartments so we wouldn't be near the guys, to keep us safe.

CRAWFORD: Protecting your virginity.

HOLBROOK: Yeah. Well, we all had cars, so that doesn't really work. [laughter] But I had a bunch of friends. The guys from Missouri were great. They were partiers, and we all had our hats off, we didn't care. And we had apartments in black neighborhoods and we had rebel flags hanging on the wall. We're like, "You guys are not right." [laughs] We were all just good-timing folk and we'd sit down — all under-age — and have our gallon of Jim Beam and . . .

FECTEAU: Gallon? Did you say "gallon"?

HOLBROOK: Gallon. [laughter] Yeah, it was a gallon. Every three weeks we had to take our big test to pass that course. So once we all passed that course, we had a big party. It would span over probably three apartment buildings. And one apartment had a gallon of Jim Beam, and that's the one I knew I had to go to. That was the Missouri guys. I knew I had to go to their apartment if I was going to drink whiskey. Then there was the beer apartments, which I never frequented, because I can't stand beer.

But I was always the sober person. I was the mom at technical school. I made sure the guys had their apartments clean for apartment check. And I made sure they all had their hair cut above their collars for the first day. Usually they would be drunk and

I'd be cutting their hair. And I was a sober person, because I was smart. I wasn't going to get drunk, you know, in a room full of guys — that would just be stupid. I'd have a couple drinks, you know, but I'd never get drunk. And I'd take care of the drunk guys. I wouldn't hang out with the guys or talk to or even associate with the guys while at the school. There was a couple teachers that hated me at vocational school.

RAUCHER: How come?

HOLBROOK: One said that I was down there just husband-hunting. And I don't know where he got that from, because it's kind of hard not to talk to the guys when you go to school with 1,500 guys and five girls, and two of them commuted.

When I started, my class had four girls in it. Three of them stayed in my apartment, two of them left. One left two weeks after we started and the other one left after she got in an accident a couple months later. So I lived in my apartment all by myself and the other girl commuted. And I never had a class with her. So it was kind of hard not to get along with the guys. So I made the best of it. And if a guy didn't like me, then I just didn't hang out with him or I didn't hang out with people he hung out with.

CRAWFORD: So why didn't the other teacher like you, or what do you think?

HOLBROOK: I don't know what his problem — he wasn't there for very long. And he was one of those teachers that he didn't like anybody, but he hated women worse. And I don't know why. He had this chip on his shoulder, from what I could tell. I'm glad I only had him for one course.

CARRIE WELLS: Did you feel that you got adequate training there?

HOLBROOK: I probably got better training than some of the guys did.

WELLS: Why do you think that was?

HOLBROOK: I think that's because I get out of something what I put into it. And I went down there to learn. I had an agenda. And some of those guys just went down there to party. If I asked a question, most of the teachers wouldn't have any problem answering it.

I was born with a great ability for sarcasm. We were raised with sarcasm in our family, so if they gave me crap, I'd give it back to them. And I think I earned a few of the teachers' respect. "What do you do when a Volkswagen comes into your shop?" I said, "You take the hood ornament off and push it back out." And they're like, "Oh, good job." A few of my bosses, I might take their crap from them, but the teachers weren't writing my paychecks. I mean, I paid them. So if I didn't know and I needed to know and somebody couldn't tell me, I would ask the teacher. But most of my teachers, with the real technical stuff, they liked me and they liked my work, so they gave me all the information that I needed.

CRAWFORD: So did your feelings ever get hurt? Did you ever . . .?

HOLBROOK: Want to quit?

CRAWFORD: Or just want to go off and cry or something?

HOLBROOK: Yeah. When I failed my first Allison transmission course, I was done. I cried all the way out of the building. I was so upset. I struggled with that class so much. I did not understand a word that was coming out of the teacher's mouth. He didn't not like me, he didn't like anybody. He was an equal opportunity hater, he hated everybody equally. He just didn't like people. If you were there and you weren't hanging on his every word, even if you were, he hated you.

Well, the second time I got into his class — because he was the only teacher that taught that class, I'm like, "I don't want to go into this class. I should just quit right now. Even though I'm almost done, I could just go automotive, and not even take this stupid diesel class again." And I cried that first time he failed me. He looked at me and said, "You didn't make it." And I cried all the way out of the building. And I didn't want anybody to see me, so I ran as fast as I could.

And I retook the class, and he was actually better with me the second time. But the thing was, I understood everything he said the second time. I'm like, "Wow, really? So that's what you meant that first time!" I didn't understand a word he said. But he was a real technical talker. And I aced all those tests the second time. I rebuilt four transmissions in the three weeks. But I wasn't the only person that failed his class. The second time around every one of my lab partners were second-timers.

CRAWFORD: So you could have graduated from the school without . . .

HOLBROOK: I could have went just automotive and not taken the rest of my diesel classes and been out earlier.

CRAWFORD: But it was a good thing you did, because you've ended up . . .

HOLBROOK: Right. I've done nothing but diesel work.

CRAWFORD: Did you have a job waiting for you when you graduated?

HOLBROOK: No I didn't. When I went down to school, there's a trucking company called Davis Cartage. The guy knew my grandpa. And he wanted to give me a job. Well, this company makes a lot of money, but their mechanics don't make a lot of money. And I probably could have come back and talked to him. But I went down to southern Illinois, big, huge trucking town I went to work in.

CRAWFORD: Did you know anybody there?

HOLBROOK: I actually moved down there with one of the guys from school, and stayed with him for a while. And then I became assistant manager of the Bobber Truck Stop Plaza. Actually, when I started, I was just a mechanic in the shop. It was dead of winter, just before Christmas when I graduated from tech school. I came back up here to have Christmas with my family and then moved down there and started looking for a job. And none of the dealerships would even talk to me — not that there was a lot of — we're talking "spooksville." My town that I lived in had 500 people, no cops. And the downtown area was a bank, a U.S. Post Office and a small grocery store.

CRAWFORD: So this was the town in southern Illinois.

HOLBROOK: This is the town in southern Illinois. I went to Effingham, Illinois, to try to find a job. My grandmother had told me my grandfather's favorite truck stop when he had to go through Effingham was the Bobber, so it was the first place I dropped off my application to. And they called me. "I'd like you to come in for an interview."

It's snowy, which we didn't get much down there, believe it or not, in southern Illinois. It would be there one day and gone the next. Well, it had iced over and then snowed, then iced over again. And I'm driving my little S-10 with no weight in the back all the way into Effingham for a job interview, swearing to God I wasn't going to make it! [laughs] I didn't know where I was going, didn't live down there very long, knew none of the back roads. I knew Interstate 70, that was it. I tried never to stray off that road.

And they hired me. They hired me for a mechanic. I was supposed to be the third-shift mechanic working by myself, which didn't last very long, because all of a sudden I'm the second-shift mechanic working with a partner. And then I would work third shift if nobody would come in. I'd be the person that would have to stay over, until about the second time they sent me on a road call by myself, then the guys are like, "The radio sucks, Renee." I'm like, "Okay." I wasn't worried. I don't worry about things like that. If I worry about something happening to me, then I'm not going to do my job right.

Well, by the time I went on my first road call, there was a cellular phone in the truck that was programmed for emergency numbers and the Bobber's number. And if they couldn't reach me on the radio, they were calling. I'd be in the middle of — some moron truck driver would run out of fuel, so you'd have to go and fill them up with fuel and prime their fuel filters or change their fuel filters or blow air into their tank to prime their tanks. And the phone is ringing. "Are you all right? You've been gone for a while." [laughter] I'm like, "Dude, you sent me forty miles away. It takes a little while to drive there, fix what you got to fix, then go back." "Okay, well, we were just wondering. We want to make sure you're all right." I'm like, "Okay."

And then I got out of being a mechanic, because they liked that I could take care of parts and inventory. So I became their parts and inventory person.

WELLS: How did you feel about that?

HOLBROOK: I actually still worked in the shop sometimes, but I spent most of my time in parts and inventory. Somebody would have a problem, I'd go out and help them. So it's not like I ever left the shop, I just didn't do mechanic all the time. So it gave me a chance to — people don't believe me, but if you know the parts, it's actually

easier to fix something. So I knew the parts, so when the guys would come in with problems, not only did I have the knowledge of already working on some of the stuff, but I knew what they needed to do to test the part or to fix the part. I have a gift for getting people what they need — is what I'm told. They would hire a new mechanic that didn't know how to test something, and I would go out and help them. "Do you have a ground?" Find a ground, plug it in. So I never really left the shop; I was still right in the thick of things.

But this particular shop, that's not a place you're going to go anywhere. It's just oil changes and tires, with the occasional light bulb burned out. So getting out of oil changes, I'm okay with that, because that grease running down your arm from the fourteen gallons you got to put in, it gets old. But I went from the parts person to the assistant manager of the whole truck stop in just under a year.

CRAWFORD: How long did you stay there?

HOLBROOK: I was there for just a little over a year before my second nephew was born.

RAUCHER: How old were you?

HOLBROOK: I was twenty when this happened, because I turned twenty-one down there, and I was the assistant manager by the time I was twenty-one. And my second nephew was born in February of '98 and I moved back up here in March of '98.

RAUCHER: Could you tell us where the school was, by the way?

HOLBROOK: The school was in Glendale Heights, Illinois, just outside of Chicago.

FECTEAU: So why did you come back? Why did you quit that job?

CRAWFORD: The nephew. [laughter]

HOLBROOK: The family. I'm serious. I come home to see my nephew for the first time at the end of February, and I was driving through this snowstorm with lake-effect snow in this little S-10 with two of my friends from Illinois. We're all crushed in this little S-10. And my oldest nephew is calling me — it's like 1:00, 2:00 o'clock in the morning, "Where you at, Nay-nay?" I'm like, "What are you doing awake?" He was so wired that he knew his Aunt Nay-nay was coming home that he would not go to sleep, which was keeping the baby up, which was keeping my sister up and my brother-in-law.

And I come home. I'd already broken up with my boyfriend, so I was living — a bunch of us from the Bobber had gotten an apartment together and we were living together. And we basically worked and drank. We asked the manager to at least give us a day off, so we could have one drinking night. But sometimes I'd work seven days a week or six twelves and a day off, because you just couldn't keep employees there. I'd work eight hours in the parts department in the garage and then work another eight hours at the fuel desk, running the fuel desk. And that's sixteen hours in one day.

CRAWFORD: How much were you getting paid?

HOLBROOK: Ah, it was, without bonuses, I believe they started me off at 18,000. And it was salary, so I made the same amount, no matter how many hours I worked. But I got bonuses. And I actually made my bonuses bigger, because of a problem with junk piling up. They had alternator cores from big rigs that didn't have a core charge on them, they just threw them in the back. And I made the company $600 by taking them to an electronics company that wanted them. He's like, "Well, I can't pay you the check right now." I said, "Dude, take them, pay me, don't pay me. Just get them

out of my stock." And they mailed the check to my boss — I didn't even know about it — for almost $600, and I kind of got an "atta girl" out of that. But I can't have disorganization. It drives me nuts. My toolbox has got to be right. Somebody gets in my toolbox and messes it up, it drives me nuts.

And yeah, they even had me working in the store sometimes, when they needed somebody to cover the store. The only thing I didn't work in was the restaurants. I'm like, "I ain't working in the restaurants, there ain't no way." But I was multifaceted. They trusted me so much at age twenty. We had to fill our own ATM machine. We had to go to the bank and get $20,000 and walk out of the bank with this much money in your vehicle, drive back to work and then walk into the building with this much money. You're walking around with bags of money; people know what you're carrying. It was just like, "Wow." I looked in my truck one day, I looked in the seat, I thought, "I've got enough money to pay off every bill I will ever have for the next couple of years." And then I went back to work and put it in the machine. I don't know if I so much impressed that particular boss, but he was an older gentlemen, kind of reminded me of a grandpa. So I kind of treated him like a grandpa and he kind of treated me like a granddaughter.

FECTEAU: So when you came back to Michigan, did you have a job lined up or did you start looking for one?

HOLBROOK: No. When I got back here, I lived in my sister's basement. And I started working at NAPA Auto Parts. And I got fired because I needed to get a second job. I wasn't making enough money. I was making like, $7 an hour. And it wasn't enough to help my sister out with bills, pay my truck payment, pay my student loan payment and any other — my cell phone bill, because I needed a telephone. Everybody

needs a telephone. So I was going to work parts during the day and I still was looking for another mechanic's job somewhere, but I was thinking about getting a third-shift job at Meijer's, stocking shelves at night, just to help me pay the bills, because I just wasn't making enough money in parts.

Well, I accidentally said something to one of the other guys, and he said something to the manager. And I walked into work one day and he fired me, because I couldn't be there and looking for a different job.

CRAWFORD: They really wanted a lot of loyalty for seven bucks an hour, right?

HOLBROOK: Yeah. And this is just a rinky-dink place.

CRAWFORD: Yeah, NAPA.

HOLBROOK: You're not going to go anywhere. I don't even think the manager — the manager couldn't have been making much more money than I was. So they fired me and I walked out. And my Aunt Mary, that works at the railroad, calls me — or no, actually, I ran into her and I told her I'd gotten fired. And she says she's going to talk to somebody at the railroad, because they were looking for young kids — [laughs] I was twenty-one — young kids to come in and clean up the riverbank. The railroad in Owosso is literally right on the river. Our property butts right up to the river, and it's been there for over 100 years. When Ann Arbor built up, they built right there along the river.

Well, most of the grounds, they'd just let grow over. There were trees and grapevines. Half the trees were dead, but they all looked alive because the grapevines were so thick. Well, the city wants to make a river walk there. So they decided they

wanted to clean it up. So I went down there and I gave them my transcript and my resume and I talked to them. And I walked around the grounds with the assistant general manager at the time. He says, "Well, we don't know when we're going to start this project, but I'll call you when we do and we'll bring you in to cut down trees, and on rainy days we'll like, maybe throw a pair of coveralls on you and see what you can do." And I said, "All right." And I went home, waiting for their call.

The day after the 4th of July, in '98, I get this phone call. And I was just getting out of bed. It was 7-ish in the morning. And the phone is ringing. And my aunt is on the other end yelling at me, "Get in here! They decided to start today!" I'm like, "Dude, I'm not even dressed yet." She's like, "Get in here as soon as you can!" So I go up — and I have my own safety glasses, because I got them in school and they were comfortable — so I grab my safety glasses, I take a shower and get dressed and tell my sister I'm headed into town to go to my new job, I guess. And I put my work boots on and everything and headed into town.

And they had me with two high school kids, employees' sons. Well, one was one of those snotty kids I would like to beat up when I was in high school and the other one was a partier. Neither one of them had any responsibility training at all. So we're out there and they give us these hand saws to cut down these trees with. So we're all out there on our hands and knees, cutting down these trees with these hand saws, and the owner of the railroad comes out. And even to this day, I'd probably feel the same way as I did when I met him the first time. You never know when he's joking or when he's dead serious. He comes out and he says, "What are they doing?" And the car foreman says, "Well, they're cutting down trees like you asked them to." "Well, go get them a

chainsaw. I don't want this to take forever." "Well, we didn't know if you wanted them to have chainsaws," he says. "Well, how else do you think we're going to get this done?"

So they gave the kids the chainsaws and I got to carry the brush — only in long pants, because you didn't want to be down there by the river not in long pants and shirts. And we cleaned the whole riverbank that summer. And if one of the kids didn't come in, if somebody had football practice or something to go to, they brought me in and I cleaned the shop or I'd clean the break room or something, because I was there all day, so I would work around the shop all day.

And then all of a sudden, they had this locomotive that had to go out. I don't remember what — that day is still kind of blurry to me. But they throw me into this locomotive foreman's responsibility. And he's not old and he's not young. He was late thirties, middle thirties.

FECTEAU: That's young.

HOLBROOK: But he was mean. And everybody said, "Oh, Rick is such a . . .," [laughs] but I didn't know him. Actually, when I first started, he had just broke his hand and I had never met him, until this one day. And they had me putting up sand, because locomotives use sand for traction. This is the most archaic job you could possibly have. You put a wheelbarrow underneath the sand car, open up a valve, the sand pours into the wheelbarrow. You walk backwards with the wheelbarrow, run up a ramp and dump it into a hole. I go, "Okay." "Oh, Renee, this is better than what it used to be. They used to dump the car into the building, then you had to shovel the sand into the wheelbarrow, then shovel the sand into a dryer and then take the sand out of the dryer and put it in the hole. I'm like, "Wow, I'm glad they changed that."

So you have to fill this tank up in the ground and then you hook it up to air and it blows the sand up into a tank in the air. And then the sand uses gravity to go into the engine. You hook a hose up to the engine and gravity fed it into the front and the rear of the engine.

So I'm out there putting sand up. Oh, this is a pretty cool job. It's not too bad. It's better than hauling brush. So I'm doing this. And they're like, "Clean these windows." I'm like, "What?" "Well, we don't need sand right now. We need you to wash these windows. This locomotive has got to go out right now." "Okay." So I get in the cab and start cleaning these windows, because they told me to do it.

Okay, then they go, "Pull it inside. Change these brake shoes." I had no idea how to change the brake shoes. "It's real easy, pull the pin out, take the shoe out, put the new shoe in, put the pin in. Adjust it." "Okay." So they showed me one time. "Don't forget the inside one." "The inside what?" These are thirty-five pound cast brake shoes, and you have to put it into a spot where you cannot see. You kind of squeeze your hand into this spot — I don't know how the guys do it, because my forearm barely makes it up there sometimes — and pull this pin out with your fingertips. And if it comes out, then you pull the brake rigging back and the shoe falls. Don't get anything underneath it, because it hurts. And then you finagle the brake shoe so it's sitting up there correctly, and then you just take your forearm strength and just put it up there.

Well, if something gets stuck or dirt gets somewhere and you can't move it . . . My very first inside brake shoe, the brake head was stuck forward with no room for adjustment. One of the guys — bigger than me, been doing it longer — I asked him for some help, because there's no stupid questions. And I hear the foreman yell, "Don't baby

her!" And he sticks his head out and says, "I can't even get this one done. I'm not babying her." "Oh," he says, and walks away. I'm like, "Oh, great. This guy hates me." They're like, "Don't feel bad, Renee, he hates everybody." I'm like, "All right." I'm not the only person he hates."

And this brake shoe took us both — and that's the only thing I remember from my first day of working on locomotives.

FECTEAU: So, but you didn't bid for the job, you just happened to be there and they told you to do this?

HOLBROOK: I happened to be there that day and they needed somebody to look over the brakes. I had no idea what I was looking at. They just told me if the brake shoe was too thin, take it out. "Well, what is too thin?" "Well, three-eighths of an inch." "Okay, I can do that." But I didn't know — there's measurements you have to look at every day to make sure things aren't too close. Well, I never knew any of that stuff.

And then all of a sudden, the next day I come in — it was getting to the point where the kids are now getting into school, so it's been a month. Football practice is starting in August, so the one kid had to go to football practice and the other kid probably had jail time or something. [laughter] And anyways, he wasn't at work.

So I just started coming in, and I was wearing this particular foreman's coveralls. They didn't want me to work in just my clothes, because nobody does. I walk into the shop and I get dirty. I don't even have to touch anything.

And I walk in, and they're like, "You're going to start with bottoms." Now, everybody starts on the bottoms, so it wasn't just because I was a girl. I'm like, "Okay, what do I do?" "You have to walk underneath locomotives." My first time walking

underneath locomotives, I wasn't too sure about that, because this is the locomotive, you're underneath it, the only thing that's supporting it is a rail and these little beams and if this crashes, you are one dead chicken.

CRAWFORD: Is there a pit underneath?

HOLBROOK: It's a pit. But the rail — the locomotive is suspended about four feet in the air on the rail that's got these beams that hang onto — which they never check. [laughs] After I walked through there, "Oh, yeah, we never check that stuff. It's fine. It's been there for fifty years." "Okay."

And they're like, "Walk underneath there and make sure" — you know, they walked underneath there first with me — "make sure the cover is on the traction motor and make sure there's oil in the wicks." Then they started showing me all these little different things. And I'm like, "Okay."

So I walk through and I grab every — because I was taught, you know, better than looking is to actually feel it — so I grab every nut and bolt that I can find and I check and make sure there's oil in every wick and all the covers are there and all the brake shoes were the right thickness and that they're all tightened and make sure there are no gaps. Well, these guys come up with, "If this and this equals a half inch, you're good." What in God's green earth are you talking about?" "Okay, looks good to me. Looks good to me."

Now, all of a sudden I started spending more time in the shop than I was out on the riverbank, until they brought the bulldozer in to knock down the trees in the big opened area. Then I was running around on a Bobcat, this little skid loader, knocking down trees.

RAUCHER: But what you're saying is that the people who maintained these railroad cars . . .

HOLBROOK: These were locomotives.

RAUCHER: . . . or locomotives, I mean, you weren't certified to do this. You had no training other than your vocational school.

HOLBROOK: Right. But that wouldn't tell you anything that has to do with FRA rules, because, actually, anything that has to do with the railroad is a completely different animal. They have their own federal inspectors, you know. OSHA doesn't go in there. If your FRA inspector finds anything wrong with your building, they write you up. But no, I had absolutely no training on locomotives, except for what they're telling me at the time.

FECTEAU: Well, did they know about your mechanics training?

HOLBROOK: Yeah. They knew I could work on the diesel engine part of it. But these had different air setup brakes than I was used to. The only thing my training from vocational school helped me with was if you didn't have a ground, you weren't going to have electricity, because there it's total electricity. The diesel engine is there to make electricity from the generator. And the air brakes, a whole different animal, a completely different animal than the air brakes I learned in school.

They were like, "This is what the FRA inspector is going to look" — and this was my training — "This is what the FRA inspector is going to look for when he comes by." Well, I learned a little bit more every day. "This is what they're going to look at." And then the next day they said, "Hey, now they're going to look at this." They're going to look at it all at the same time, but they're only going to teach me a little bit at a time,

because I wasn’t hired yet. So there was no point of wasting their breath if I wasn’t going to be hired.

NUZNOV: So you were still this $7 an hour . . .

HOLBROOK: Actually, I was working for $8 an hour for — the company was called Western Partners. Anyway, it’s the owner of the railroad, one of his other companies that subcontracted employees to the railroad to do cleanup work, basically, was what they were calling the riverbank. So sometimes I’d spend a couple hours in the shop in the morning working the locomotives and in the afternoon I’d go out and push down trees or something to clean up the riverbank. Well, when that project got all done, all of a sudden I was just in the shop all the time.

FECTEAU: So did you ever ask them why they brought you in? Was it just because they didn’t have . . .?

HOLBROOK: They wanted to try me out. When I was being interviewed, when they were walking around the riverbank with me, he was looking at my transcript from school. He said that, “When this project is done, maybe we’ll try you out.”

FECTEAU: This was that mean guy?

HOLBROOK: No. This was the assistant general manager. He used to be a mechanic and then he kind of got into management. And they weren’t sure what I was going to be able to do, basically. So they got me into the shop and started training me, my apprenticeship part, sort of — but only little bits at a time. They didn’t tell me there was a big old book I could have read, until all of a sudden somebody ordered in a new FRA book. And they’re like, “Hey, this is where all the stuff you need to know is." And it’s a book an inch thick. “Really?”

So before I was actually hired into the company, I worked there in the shop, from August. I didn't really go out and work on the riverbank after the middle of September. And then in the middle of October is my hire-in date, October 12th, 1998. I already had a shirt, I wasn't hired in then. They had ordered me coveralls, I still wasn't hired.

Until this day, seven years later, I still don't have a toolbox. Everybody else, they say, "Here, you're working in the shop, here's your toolbox. Make sure every tool in this box is accounted for." Everybody had a numbered toolbox. I never got that. I just worked out of my foreman's box. They're like, "Renee, can I use this tool?" "I don't care. It's not my box. Just bring it back in case I need it."

And the reason why I was hired is they took one gentleman in the train crew and he became a conductor, so that left them a person short in the shop, so they hired me.

FECTEAU: They didn't do a bidding process where people got to bid on the job?

HOLBROOK: They bid the job. And at this point in time, the union didn't yell about me. If anybody else was to come onto the property, they probably would have yelled about it — well, in fact, we have, when they bring West staff in or they have somebody else — but the union did not yell about me, the local.

FECTEAU: Why?

HOLBROOK: They didn't have a problem with me, I guess. One of the guys come in and says, "You know, this is a closed shop." I said, "Well, I can leave." And he says, "No, I'm sure you're going to be hired in soon." But nobody had a complaint with me working there. And then when I became hired in and started paying union dues, that

made everybody happy. But nobody that I know of, to my recollection ever complained about me being on the property. So that was a bonus. It kind of helped me a little bit.

FECTEAU: What was your pay like? I assume it came up.

HOLBROOK: When I got hired in, my two months of working before that didn't count. My actual hire-in date is when it started. And you have to work 120 worked days at eighty-five percent of your full wage, because that 120 days is your test time. They can fire you for any reason.

CRAWFORD: Probationary.

HOLBROOK: Your probationary time. So they only pay you eighty-five percent of your wage, which I believe at that time was $11 an hour. So I got eighty-five percent of $11 an hour.

You get your full health benefits after sixty days, which is when you have to join the union, sixty days after your hire date. So I had my medical and dental and optical insurance by Christmastime. In fact, they gave me my cards — that was part of my Christmas bonus. I'm like, "Dude, I can go to the dentist now." But at Thanksgiving, I didn't have any privileges, because you didn't get vacation time until after your sixty days or holiday pay until after your sixty days, too.

RAUCHER: How many people were in the shop?

HOLBROOK: In the diesel shop, when I started there, it was the foreman, three in the high bay and two in the diesel shop. So that'd be six.

RAUCHER: And were you the only woman who had ever worked in that shop?

HOLBROOK: The gentleman that retired right after I started, he had worked in that building for forty years. He said he can't ever recall a woman working outside of the

office for the Ann Arbor Railroad, while he worked for the Ann Arbor or in that shop with him, period.

RAUCHER: But you had no problem with them? I mean, the men didn't have a problem with you being there?

HOLBROOK: It was actually pretty funny. These people were starting — I come out of a truck stop, for God sakes, where people talk like sailors. And these guys, they didn't care who was standing around and they would just cuss. I walked in the break room one day for break and somebody was telling a dirty joke aand they stopped. He's like, "I'm going to have to tell all you guys later." I'm like, "What? Are you telling a dirty joke? Because I could really go for a laugh right now." He's like, "I can't say it in front of you." And he was getting ready to retire, so he was from the old ways — you don't talk that way in front of a girl. "Well, we're worried that you're going to get us for sexual harassment." Well, then I would tell one of my dirty jokes. I told one of my dirty jokes, it kind of lightened everybody up a little bit.

So me coming from my roughneck background I think helped out a lot, because it doesn't bother me. I mean, if it's raunchy and just downright disgusting against somebody, then I'll tell them. But if it's just a joke, general, and it makes everybody laugh, I'm not going to be offended by it.

And then the owner come down, Mr. Shepherd, and said, "Okay, Renee is out here to clean things up. No more cussing around her." And the guys would turn around, "What are you talking about? She cusses worse than a sailor!" And I'm like, "I do not." But if you get mad at something, it just kind of comes out. If something hurts you, it accidentally comes out.

RAUCHER: It sounds like they were pretty accepting of you.

HOLBROOK: At first they were worried about language — and just the older gentlemen, not the younger guys, they don't care.

FECTEAU: It sounds like management might have done some training on them.

HOLBROOK: The thing is management was worried about it. They'd come in after I'd been there a few weeks, and it was like, "These guys are weird. There's no dirty jokes." There was a couple of calendars that the guys had in their lockers, but then they'd close their lockers. I'm like, "Dude, I got 'em. I see 'em in the shower." And it finally got them to warm up to me a little bit — still nothing vulgar — and not to this day is there anything vulgar.

But I would have the best jokes at break time. Or the one guy that everybody claims is gay, but really isn't, but that's the big joke, everybody says he's gay — I would have the best slam, so everybody would be like, "Go Renee, go!" And we'd just — a lot of them just treat me like a little sister — I mean, even now, I'm just the little sister.

I mean, we'd all go out to the bar drinking occasionally — we used to, we don't so much anymore — but go out and have a few rounds. My first Christmas there, a couple nights, I don't know how I made it home, it was eight hours of straight drinking. They drink beer and I don't. I drink Jack. It was rough. I had to stay at the bar for a couple hours after they left to sober up or call somebody to come pick me up.

But at work, we just worked — until a couple years ago and some of the guys started having problems with their wives, then all of a sudden I became the bad person. Everybody in the diesel department, for some reason, started having problems with their wives at the same time — all of them. So I come to work and they're like, "(makes cat

screech noise)." I'm like, "Dude, I just walked in the door." And they were mad at me all day because something happened the night before with their wife.

My foreman says, "Go tell them to do this. Wait, they're pissed at you. I'll do it." I'm like, "What are they mad at me for?" It was a few months ago, about a year and a half, I couldn't talk to anybody in the shop, there was so much tension. And it wasn't anything that I had done. It was stuff that the guys were bringing in from home.

And people are like, "Well, women are" — and I have to hear this all the time — "women are so moody and stuff." I'm like, "Gentlemen, try having hormones running through your body the way we have them once a month and you guys couldn't handle it, trust me." They're like, "Oh, whatever."

Well, my days when I was that way, I wouldn't talk to anybody. I knew. I got up in the morning, I'm like, "This is going to be the day, somebody talks to you, you are going to rip their head off." I just simply wouldn't talk to anybody that day. I learned how to deal with it without them knowing what I was doing. I would find a job down in the pit doing the most silent thing I could do that whole day to stay out of anybody's way, because I knew that I was in a mood. They would just come out and attack me. If I went out to help them do something, they'd be like, "I can do it on my own." "Okay. Then I'll just go work over here."

FECTEAU: They call you moody.

HOLBROOK: That's what it was. And then we'd go into break time, because we all take break together, and they'd complain about their wives for the whole fifteen minutes. I'd be saying, "Can I bring a barbershop chair in here for you all, because you

sound like a bunch of women." But then they all got over it, thank God, and things have been pretty . . .

But after I worked there for six months or so, they brought us in for a test. I was right in the middle of changing something I'd never changed before, and I really wanted to do it. And my foreman said I had to have it done by the end of the day, because that engine had to go out that day. And there was like forty wires hooked to it. So I got my soapstone out and I'm writing down all the wires and where they go. And I hear, "Renee?" I'm like, "What?" "You have to go in and take a test." And I walked in there and I says, "Has anybody ever had to take a test before in this building?" Well, me and my work partner had to take this test.

So they gave us a test. It was all multiple guess. So I sat down and I took it and I gave it to them. "Can I go back to work now?" He's like, "Yeah." So I go back out there, because I knew I had to get this part in this engine before 3:30. He comes back out a little while later and says, "You learned a lot since you started here, haven't you?" "Thank you." I didn't know exactly what I was supposed to say.

Well, if you ever worked in a shop, rumors fly, and they fly fast. Apparently, my partner that had been working there longer than I have didn't do as well on the test as I had. And so they gave him a couple days off to study and regroup, I guess. So I think that might have started some of the tension between him and I, because him and I, we don't get along together at all. And that could have started some of the tension, because I did better on that test. And we haven't had one since. We've never had a test since.

NUZNOV: Nobody else doing your job besides you and him?

HOLBROOK: In fact, we just hired — a kid just came off the track a year, maybe two years ago, and he's never had a test.

CRAWFORD: So how does it work? There's the six of you, or so, that are in the diesel shop. And then how many engines, how many different engines or locomotive engines do you do?

HOLBROOK: Ten locomotives in our fleet. We have one NW2, which is just an old piece of crap. It's an old engine. When I actually call for parts on it, nobody can believe we even have one. Then we have nine EMD GP35's, which means, Electro-Motive Division of GM. And GP35 is just the model number of the locomotive. Eight of them were built in 1964 and two of them were built in 1965.

The eight that were made in '64 are all exactly the same — well, supposed to be, except for whoever does updates didn't do them maybe on all of them. And then the two that were built in '65, they have a taller hood in the front, because they actually made for a different company. My company had bought them from somewhere else, off a different company.

CRAWFORD: How far do these trains go?

HOLBROOK: Our locomotives do not leave the state of Michigan. They go from Ann Arbor to Petoskey. And there's another branch, but our furthest point north is Petoskey. And our furthest point south is Ann Arbor, where we switch out with the Ann Arbor Railroad.

CRAWFORD: And what are the other job classifications? Are there engineers and conductors and . . .?

HOLBROOK: There used to be three back in the day: an engineer, a fireman and a conductor, but on the locomotive now, since they don't need a fireman to shovel coal, they have an engineer and a conductor. So there's two people to run the train. There is track personnel. We call them section, but they're track. They inspect the track, fix the track, redo the track. If a derailment happens, they usually come out, because if a derailment happens, more than likely the track is going to be messed up — the engine runs off the track, it's going to widen the track too much. So they have to have section out there to repair — they do all repairs. They lay down new track. They dig out ties in the dead of winter. I don't personally think that I could ever be a track person.

FECTEAU: Why? Because it's cold?

HOLBROOK: Besides that, they literally have to manhandle every tie, because very seldom do they ever have the tie machine out. And they have to hand level the track. Well, we have a machine that does that. They actually go out there and they jack up the track with a track jack and then they shovel stone underneath there and they set it back down. If it's not level, then they have to do it again.

They have to pound spikes by hand, which I think I could do if I could hit well. [laughs] But we're talking a really big hammer and a really small spot. And you can hear them. If they're out working, you can hear it when they miss the spike, because it's not a "ting," it's a "ding." And you can hear the rail just go.

HOLBROOK: And then there's track inspectors, which are also in the section. And they basically walk or ride on the rail, looking for defects — too many spikes missing in one area, a track where two rails come together is loose, they have to tighten

it. So they have — these guys carry everything on the trucks. They carry stuff to tighten bolts and pound spikes and spike plates.

CRAWFORD: Are they those trucks that ride on the tracks?

HOLBROOK: Uh-huh, both section and the track inspectors have trucks that can ride on the track, because they've got to be able to go everywhere, down into the deepest of holes and the roughest of rails. I went to help on a machine one day — they were trying to clean up one of our branches. And we took the — it's basically a huge weed-eater that can cut down trees up to four or five, six inches around. So they had asked me to go out and help operate, because it's a two-person job, because it has arms that come down on both sides. I said, "All right, I'll go."

And I got to where this machine was, and I looked down the rail. I said, "So is this abandoned rail?" They're like, "No, Renee. This is the Middleton Branch. We run on this rail." I said, "What?" I mean, it looked like abandoned rail, and we ran on it. [laughs] They freaked me out. I said, "You are kidding me. Our engines go over this rail?" They're like, "Oh, yeah." I'm like, "Whoa!"

But it had been so overgrown that there was literally just enough cut out of the trees for the locomotives and the cars to go through. There was no daylight above.

CRAWFORD: Ten-foot clearance?

HOLBROOK: Yeah. It wasn't even ten foot to each side. The rail bed was the only part that did not have trees on it. But the trees came all the way up to the rail bed. And farmers that farmed out there, actually farmed right up to the rail. But I had to lift my side when we went through this one section, because somebody had corn planted up to four feet away from the rail, just enough to get the snowplow by without taking out

their corn. So he was actually farming on railroad property. And they farmed right up to the road. I mean, there might have been a row on the road. And the farmers just took over everything.

But this rail, I looked down it, and the perfect shape of a locomotive could make it through there. And I said, "We run on this rail? No wonder they come back and there's branches sticking out of a car that got stuck on something."

CRAWFORD: So why is the maintenance so shoddy?

HOLBROOK: That had just got let go for so long. Actually, the year after that, they redid the whole stretch, put new ties in and new rail. And they had guys out there they had hired just to cut down trees. And that's all they did, cut them down, dropped it right there and went on to the next tree. There were piles and piles of wood, which must be starting to overgrow again, because when they go out onto that branch, they'll come back and there'll be a branch or half of a tree stuck in a window somewhere or a strobe light knocked off.

So yeah, we have thirty-one people in our local now, and we take care of 400 miles of rail. That's everybody. The engineers, conductors, all the track people, all the maintenance of equipment and all the maintenance of cars — thirty-one people.

CRAWFORD: And you guys are part of the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers. Now, is that a part of . . .?

HOLBROOK: SEIU is our parent.

FECTEAU: So you merged in with the SEIU?

HOLBROOK: It has been part of SEIU since I started there.

FECTEAU: Because that's an old union, right?

HOLBROOK: Oh, yeah.

FECTEAU: And something else, if I remember right, too, they were one that had a color bar, like black people could not be members for . . .

HOLBROOK: Oh, I'm positive of that.

FECTEAU: Up until, I think, the '60s. Well, maybe not in their constitution, but in their practices.

HOLBROOK: This particular union didn't come in until — well, the TSB Railway took over the Owosso Shops in the late '80s or early '90s. And they had actually hired back some of the Ann Arbor employees that had worked there for Ann Arbor. And the car foreman told me that somebody walked up to him one day and said, "Hey, we're starting a union. If you sign up with our union now, you automatically get twenty-five days of vacation when the new union comes in." I guess they couldn't get their checkbooks out fast enough to settle for that deal.

So, I actually met George Francisco, which is the president of the Firemen and Oilers, at a System Council 2 Conference one time. He said he actually was in on the negotiations of our original first contract.

NUZNOV: So these thirty-one people, are there classifications?

HOLBROOK: Well, yes.

NUZNOV: Everybody is not making the same pay.

HOLBROOK: No. A Class I is where you start out. That's where I started out. I was a Class I for a couple of years. Then all of a sudden we settled the first contract that I was there for and a bid went up for me to have a Class II, which is — my official title is a Class II Composite Mechanic. I don't think I'm a composite mechanic, because

I don't like to work on the other equipment. And normally I'm not asked to work on the other equipment, because I'm pretty good at what I just work on, the locomotives. I mean, I do work on the other equipment. I don't have any problem with it. When they ask me to do something, I just do it.

CRAWFORD: What would the other equipment be?

HOLBROOK: Track equipment. We do have track equipment for the track people to use. We have a tie inserter. We have a tie crane. We have things to tighten the bolts, that's called a bolt machine. They have spikers. They don't have to actually use the maul to hit the spikes in. They can use a spiker. It's all hydraulic. We have vehicles, not only the ones that go on the rail, but the signal department, they have their own vehicle. We have two signal maintainers — well, we have one signal maintainer now.

CRAWFORD: So it would just be like a regular pickup truck or something.

HOLBROOK: When I first started there, they had Dakotas with toppers on them, with just enough to put the stuff they needed in the back of their truck and get it out when they needed it. The heaviest thing they pick up is a battery — their batteries aren't light, but they're not near as heavy as ours. One locomotive has eight batteries in it. One battery weighs 440 pounds, so you don't just pick it up and throw it in. You get a bar and a couple other guys and you wiggle it and you jiggle it and you get the bar in there.

But then there's a signal maintainer — they're track people — and the track inspectors. And they basically — they work outdoors. They don't have any indoor jobs, except for the signal maintainers get to go into the signal house, the box you see at every crossing. And some of them are pretty nice, because some of them have heating and air conditioning in them. The signal house right next to the railroad, it has a heater, because

this signal box is touchy about working right when it's hot or cold outside. And if it gets too hot in there, it won't work right either. So they had to put an air conditioner in there. I'm like, "Dude, it's a machine and it gets better treatment than we do."

And our scale house is the same way. We have a scale right there on our property to weigh cars, to make sure nobody is scamming us. And it has heating and air conditioning. In the summer we go out and turn the air conditioner on and in the winter we go out and turn the heater on. And I'm like, "Dude, these pieces of equipment have more heat than we do," because our building is so old.

When you work the bottom part of the locomotives, they're packed with snow — packed! And you have to try and get the snow off of there so you can look. And it doesn't melt off, because we don't have enough heat to melt it off. So you're like, torch [laughs], and everything you can do.

CRAWFORD: So there's not this lovely roundhouse. [laughs]

HOLBROOK: I don't know if you guys down here have heard of it, but the Project 1225 steam engine that was in that movie last year, where the steam engine goes to Santa Claus — Polar Express! — the institute that has the engine that the one in the movie was designed after has just bought some property from us, and they're actually starting a steam railroad museum. And that actual engine is right out back. I can look at it from one of our doors in our building. And they have put a roundtable in. They get all this grant money and all this fundraiser stuff. So they have this nice turntable and all these people gawking at them. And they even put "Polar Express" on the engine.

CRAWFORD: And they all have the striped railroad bibs and the hats.

HOLBROOK: Oh, yeah, they all do that. They're all crazy.

CRAWFORD: What do you mostly carry? What do your cars mostly carry?

HOLBROOK: Sand for Ford.

CRAWFORD: Silica for the castings?

HOLBROOK: Yep. It goes down to Ohio. We trade that off with Ann Arbor, so it has to go to Ohio. And then automotive parts, obviously. And there's a lot of plastics plants, I guess, around. I know of one right in our town. So we haul plastic. Wood. You would not imagine how much lumber goes up north.

FECTEAU: Up?

HOLBROOK: Up north. I said, "Isn't that going the wrong way?" They're like, "No." They actually send lumber up north. Not so much anymore, but we used to have a lot of coke cars that would go, I'm going to guess, to Consumers Power. When I first started there, they had coal cars, but we don't have any coal anymore. Grain in the grain seasons. Basically our biggest ones are grain and sand.

FECTEAU: No livestock?

HOLBROOK: Nope. Thank God. That would stink. [laughter]

RAUCHER: And there isn't any kind of formal apprenticeship or training program for any of the classifications?

HOLBROOK: Nope. Your foreman pretty much tells you when you're ready. You know, I learned from everybody that was there. I was glad I got to meet Roger before he retired, because he knew everything — not so much, maybe, in the electrical part, but on the wheel part. He could change a pair of wheels with his eyes closed, I swear. But I didn't fancy the wheels. I can go over and do them. If my foreman says, "Go over and build me a pair of wheels," I'm going to go over and build him a pair of

wheels. I'm going to clean them all up and get them all ready to go so he can slap them on the floor and put them underneath the locomotive. But they let me go a little bit more towards air — air and electricity.

There would be days, or actually weeks, where all the other guys would be working over with wheels and I would be doing inspections all by myself. And what I mean by an inspection, every ninety-two days a locomotive has to come in and be inspected. And that one-inch book I was telling you about, that book tells me what I have to inspect to satisfy the federal government. And then we have sheets that tell me what I have to inspect to satisfy the company. Well, you tend to take what the federal government wants you to inspect a little bit more serious than what the company wants. So they got me started on these inspections and that's basically what I got good at.

And I would do — there's four degrees of an inspection. There's a ninety-two day inspection, which is, you know, the light stuff — make sure the air works right, make sure all of your brushes are not going to wear out and break down somewhere. Clean your fuel filter strainers, clean your oil strainers and make sure there's nothing going wrong in your engines. You're going to clean your air intake for your compressor, because you've got to have air to stop. You're going to check your electrical connectors, your contacts to make sure they're not burned up.

CRAWFORD: Now, when you check these things, do you also fix them if they're not right?

HOLBROOK: Yes. Well, being in a small railroad, you don't have money to throw at them, so you're going to fix it if you think it's going to break down in the next ninety-two days — you're going to change it then. But if you think it's going to go

another ninety-two days, then you're going to let that piece slide. But if it's something you think is going to make it break down, then you're going to change it right then and there.

CRAWFORD: Right. But I mean, when you think of an inspector, sometimes you think of someone who's merely walking around with a clipboard going, "Check, check, check."

HOLBROOK: [laughs] No. When you do an inspection, especially your FRA portion of your inspection, if it's broken, fix it. If it can slide and the FRA guy is not going to catch it, then you might let it slide, but most of the time you're going to fix it. If it's just a regular maintenance thing happened, he's not going to fine you for that. But an FRA fine is like $10,000, and sitting in the federal pen until you pay it. So you're not going to . . .

FECTEAU: So who sits in the pen?

HOLBROOK: You do.

FECTEAU: The inspector?

HOLBROOK: The inspector does, because they signed off and said it was good to go. You literally sign not only your inspection sheet that says what you inspected, but there is a cab card put into each cab that you sign and said you inspected this. And that's a federal document.

FECTEAU: Now, how did you get involved with the union?

HOLBROOK: The first contract we signed after I got there — so it would have been '99 — . . .

FECTEAU: But you had had a union before that?

HOLBROOK: Yeah, they were in the union, but I hadn't got . . . There were some internal problems with the executive board. The vice president and president and secretary treasurer were having problems with each other, saying that one was doing the other person wrong. And so they had an election and they apparently voted somebody in for secetary treasurer that wasn't doing the job at all. No bankbooks had been done, no union dues had been paid, nothing. Nothing had been done.

So the vice president said, "Okay, I'll fix it and I'll get everything all paid up. But we're having an election to decide who is going to be the secretary treasurer, because I'm not going to do it." He couldn't do both jobs. He just cleaned it all up.

Well, we had a union meeting to vote on whether we're going to accept the contract or not. Well, the last thing on the agenda that day . . . I had been talked to about it — the vice president and the president had come up to me and said, "Renee, we want you to do this job. Do you want to do it?" I said, "Well, what does it entail?" He says, "Well, you have to take the money from everybody," which usually is just one deposit from the company twice a month. And they actually deposit it into the bank for me. "And you have to make sure the union dues get paid and you have to balance our books." I'm like, "Okay, I think I can do that." And he says, "Are you sure, because we're going to bring it up in the union meeting and we're going to nominate you." This is the vice president and the president that are coming to say these things to me. I'm like, "Okay. I agree. If you guys want me to, and if I'm voted in, I will do it." "Okay."

So we go to this union meeting and they stood up and said, "We nominate Renee." And none of the guys want this job. It's work. So I took over the office. And the same day I got voted in, the guy from System Council 2 happened to be there, the

president. He says, “You know, you can just send this stuff to System Council 2 and we’ll do your paperwork and mail you back your extra money for your local.” I said, “Wait. Why don’t I try to do the paperwork myself and then if I don’t like it, then maybe the local should” — because I think we have to pay them to do it. I’m like, “Why don’t I try to do it myself and see if I can figure it out?”

Well, I got all this paperwork, and they had boxes of stuff. I’m like, “What does this all mean?” And if I had a question, I went in and asked the old secretary treasurer, who is now the vice president, and if I didn’t like his answer, I just started calling System Council 2.

These guys were doing stuff so backwards, because they didn’t call and ask. They were charging too much for sick dues — so I didn’t change that. I just didn’t charge them anymore until they’d come to have to be charged more, because, you know, if you charge somebody less than what you charged this guy over here — “I want my money back.” So I made it all right and this year made it all right.

And they weren’t paying their bonding insurance premiums, so the vice president and I got the local bonded. It was some crazy, crazy stuff. And I literally had boxes and boxes of stuff, and nobody knows what’s in them. I still have them, and still nobody knows what — I organized them so you could pick something up and everything wouldn’t fall out. **CRAWFORD:** Have you had time to actually go through all of them?

HOLBROOK: I haven’t had a chance to go through all the boxes, but I made it so when I picked it up to finally go through it, it wouldn’t fall out at me. But the four or five years that I’ve done it, at the end of the year is my January clean out date. I take and

I put that whole entire year into one blue folder. And I mark it, "NCFO Local 1219, 2005," I'll write on it this year. And I can pick that folder up, and I can slap it on the desk and say, "Here. You want to look at this?" And nothing will fall out. [laughter] They didn't have that kind of organization.

They didn't have proper letterhead when I took over. And now I just call National, I say, "I need letterhead." They just made it a change to our constitution last year that we have to send in our local dues every month. It used to be quarterly. I actually did it every month for a while, but it got too expensive mailing, because they wanted me to do that return receipt. So it's nine bucks a month. I'm like, "Our local can't afford nine dollars a month." So I said, "Guys, my house payment I mail is more than this check. I'm just going to send it regular U. S. mail, it'll be okay. If the union doesn't get it, they're going to let me know."

And so I cleaned up all their books. They never had a — when you put on your agenda, "Treasurer Report," they never had one before. I hate the day before a union meeting. I'm up all night long, because I'm going to tell them every red cent we've spent. And where I spent it — I give them the checkbook if they want to look at it, even though the trustees are supposed to audit me every three months.

CRAWFORD: How many people come to meetings?

HOLBROOK: We just had a meeting on October the 8th. Ten people out of thirty-one, and this was a contract talk meeting — because it was deer hunting season. You can't spend a morning not out in the woods. [laughter]

NUZNOV: So ten is not a good turnout for your local?

HOLBROOK: Ten is probably the most we've had in our last . . . Usually I have five there — we have to have five to have a quorum. I drive to Clare, which is halfway between Owosso and Cadillac. I ask them to drive just as far as I drive. It's supposed to be the president's job to set up the meeting. No, I do that. I make up the agenda. I post it two to three weeks in advance, so they can't say they didn't know. I fax a copy of my flier in big, bold, black print, "Union Meeting."

CRAWFORD: So do you move the union meeting around?

HOLBROOK: Nope. We have it in the exact same place every time. We actually got a deal with the restaurant that we keep it in. And they usually charge us a pretty decent deal. This time we had four or five, six pots of coffee, and it only cost us sixty bucks. And that was the room rental and the coffee.

FECTEAU: Dougherty?

HOLBROOK: No. It's the little restaurant right down the street, Town & Country Restaurant.

RAUCHER: Are you in touch very much with the other locals, with regional groups or the international at all within that union?

HOLBROOK: I just gave System Council 2 my e-mail address, and they forward me all of their crap, because they never talk to me. They forwarded me stuff about Amtrak or some stupid joke about George Bush, which I personally don't like the man, but I don't need that stuff in my e-mail. I actually got mad one day. The owner of the railroad come down and said, "What does this mean?" You know, you're in the middle of a hard day and you're sweating, because it's 100 degrees outside and you're

working on a 120-degree engine. And he says, "What's this mean?" "Uh, duh, duh, I don't know."

So this happened to me. I went up to a meeting with him for something completely different and he brings me out this letter. So I went home in a fury and I sent them [System Council 2] an e-mail. I said, "I told you, don't send stuff to the company unless you're going to give me a heads-up. You have my e-mail, you have my phone number." Because that's what the owner of the railroad loves to do. He loves to catch you off guard. If he can catch you off guard, that's a good day for him.

And I said, "I told you you could call me. It doesn't cost that much to pick up the telephone and call me. You could send me an e-mail. E-mail me the letter you're sending to him." And I went on and on. I said, "You guys make us look stupid. I don't think it's fair that you guys make us look stupid. It's not that hard to give us a heads-up so this guy doesn't come down and say, 'Hey, what's this mean?' And you're like, going, 'Uh, what are you even talking about?'"

CRAWFORD: So what's your position?

HOLBROOK: I'm the secretary treasurer. But I also sit in — somebody told me that there should be notes taken during negotiations, so now I'm the recording secretary during negotiations.

RAUCHER: I'm wondering if you come in contact with — maybe there aren't any — any other women in the national conference.

HOLBROOK: I have not met any.

RAUCHER: Okay. So any time you meet with other folks in the union, it's always with men.

HOLBROOK: When we voted in the president and the vice president, that particular conference I went to, it was all men. The only women there were the wives.

RAUCHER: But you never had a problem with that, I mean, they've always treated you like . . .

HOLBROOK: They've always treated me — there's a woman that works at System Council 2, Marta, she and I get along pretty good. I ask her a question and she usually answers it and if she doesn't know, then she'll ask somebody.

FECTEAU: What is her position?

HOLBROOK: She's the one that does all the paperwork for the locals, all those locals that don't do their own paperwork, she does it all.

FECTEAU: And this System Council 2, it's like a regional office?

HOLBROOK: NCFO is divided into different system councils. So when I call, I don't actually talk to NCFO, I talk to NCFO, slash, System Council 2.

FECTEAU: And what is their jurisdiction?

HOLBROOK: National Conference of Firemen and Oilers are in Washington, D.C.

FECTEAU: So they're a nationwide organization.

HOLBROOK: Right. That's the national. And then they're subdivided into system councils, because railroads have to have system councils and something else — it's not just railroads that have to have them. And then we're underneath System Council 2, and they're based in New Jersey. So when I write checks out every month to pay our per capita tax, I write a check out to System Council 2 and I write a check out to the National Conference of Firemen and Oilers. Yeah.

WELLS: But Council 2 is in New Jersey.

HOLBROOK: Yeah. System Council 2 is in New Jersey. And they take twice as much as National does in union dues. They're like $31.50 a month and national a like $16.50 a month. So when we have a gripe or a complaint, we go to System Council 2. That's who we send our grievances to.

FECTEAU: You know, one question that didn't get answered, and I was just curious about, too, what is the pay differential from when you first started until now?

CRAWFORD: Between the classes, you mean?

FECTEAU: Well, she said when she first started, you were making, what, $11 an hour?

HOLBROOK: $11 an hour. And then when I got my Class II, we got a dollar raise that contract. So I was making $12 an hour. So I went to making $13 an hour. And now I'm making $13.50. And in the whole local, there's three guys that make less money than I do. And there was a gentleman that works in my shop with me that just got the same rate of pay as I do, because he threw a fit.

FECTEAU: So if you throw a fit, you can get more money?

HOLBROOK: Apparently. I'm going to try that. Because I have more responsibility and know more about what we're doing than he does. But apparently he can weld better than I do, or something. Anyways, he got the same rate of pay that I do, because he threw a fit in the shop one day. He threw a fit in the shop one day and in a couple days, there was a bid up for him. I'm like, "What's the deal? Maybe I need to throw a fit and I can get a Class III." But I don't just work in the shop anymore. I do all the ordering for the locomotive shop, all their parts. I do all of the supplies for the entire

building. I work in the other office. I actually have four desks now. And I do bills for all the departments, check them, make sure we're getting paid correctly, research the ones that aren't paid correctly.

CRAWFORD: And you're still working with your hands.

HOLBROOK: Yeah. I work in the shop as a mechanic from 6:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon — well, actually 11:30. 11:30 to 12:00, I get to eat lunch. And then 12:00 noon to 2:30, I work in the office taking care of office stuff.

CRAWFORD: I think they have a hell of a good deal.

HOLBROOK: For $13.50 an hour.

NUZNOV: So what's the top pay in the union?

HOLBROOK: Class V. There's a dollar difference between a Class I, a Class II, a Class III and a Class IV. A Class V is a foreman. They are equivalent to being more than a dollar an hour than the Class IV. But they're not paid by the hour. Their pay is based on a forty-two hour week, because they're supposed to be the ones called to fix it when, say, a train breaks down. Now they call me. My foreman monitors his calls so he cannot be reached if he doesn't want to be reached. So they leave a message on his answering machine and then they pick up their Nextel and Nextel me, and I have went out at all hours of the night, in all weather conditions and fixed an engine somewhere around Owosso, to get the guys going or give them a new one.

NUZNOV: Do you get a premium time or prime time and a half, double time?

HOLBROOK: Well, every time I pick up my telephone, I'm supposed to be paid two hours of overtime, because we are based on an eight-hour day — eight hours a day, and anything over that is time and a half. If I run it right, I don't have to go in — I

just have to pick up the telephone, I’m supposed to be paid two hours. And I don’t always charge them for that. If I go in, I’m charging them. But if it was like something simple I can answer off the telephone and I wasn’t doing anything at the time, then I won’t charge them. But if I was doing something and I had to stop what I was doing, I charge them. I’m like, “I was busy, you guys interrupted me.”

But I’ve gotten phone calls 10:00 o’clock at night, just got into bed, and had to get up, get dressed, go into work, fix something — dang right I’m charging them two hours. If I could charge them more, I would. But I got woke up at 3:00 o’clock in the morning a few weeks ago, and I shut my phone off. I didn’t answer it. Don’t call me at 3:00 o’clock in the morning. I just shut it right off.

CRAWFORD: So what do you think your prospects for the future are there?

HOLBROOK: I’m kind of worried about them right now. We just found out we’re being sold — this week. In fact, the new owners were supposed to come and look today. I'm trying not to let this stuff bother me. Nothing's done until money changes hands. Mr. Shepherd, the CEO of the company, could change his mind and decide not to sell. I know it's bothering me a little bit, because I'm not eating. But it's not sold yet. But we spent all last week cleaning the shop. I thought up until last week that I would be with the company for a good long time. If I stay in the railroad — we have thirty years of service, age sixty and out — I would actually have forty — oh, I'm sorry, forty-eight — years of service when I turn sixty, if I stay in the railroad. But you know as soon as a new person buys something, they're going to make changes and if you're not what they're looking for . . .

NUZNOV: Well, they better look close. You're doing everything there.

HOLBROOK: But if they bring in their own people. See, I don't know yet, and I haven't asked my aunt, because I don't think it's nice to use nepotism to ask my aunt who in the hell is buying the railroad, so I knew if I had a chance. They could fire everybody, because that's how they get rid of the union.