

**PROFILES OF SWE PIONEERS**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Isabelle French and Elaine Pitts Interview Interview**

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## **Isabelle French and Elaine Pitts**

Isabelle French was the first woman to graduate from Tri-State College with a degree in radio engineering, in 1944, and received an honorary doctorate from her alma mater in 1966. She worked on the engineering and development of radar tubes at Sylvania in Massachusetts from 1944 until 1952, when she moved to a similar position at Capehart-Farnsworth in Indiana for two years. In 1954 she joined Bell Telephone Laboratories in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where she remained until her retirement more than 40 years later. A Fellow of the Society of Women Engineers, she joined SWE in 1951 and served as chair or president of several SWE sections and served on the national executive committee for many years, including as national president from 1964 to 1966. French passed away in 2014.

Elaine Pitts studied industrial engineering at the Illinois Institute of Technology and design at the Art Institute of Chicago. She began her career in 1943 at Aldens Inc. in Chicago and then joined Spiegel Inc. in 1945 as a senior packaging engineer, where she remained there until 1952. The following year, Pitts moved to the Sperry and Hutchinson Company, where she organized and installed its packaging department and was appointed the vice president of corporate relations in 1970. She moved to California in 1979 and founded the Dalton/Pitts Associates packaging company. A Fellow of the Society of Women Engineers, Pitts joined the SWE in 1964 and served on its executive board. She is a past president of the American Women in Radio and Television and of Women Executives in Public Relations, and was the first woman to

serve as the chairman of the board of the Society of Packaging and Handling Engineers.

In their 2001 Profiles of SWE Pioneers Oral History Project interview, French and Pitts discussed their experiences growing up during the Depression; their education; their careers in engineering; and their participation in SWE and other professional organizations.

- July 2016

INTERVIEW WITH ISABELLE FRENCH AND ELAINE PITTS BY LAUREN KATA,  
DIANNE DETURRIS AND MARGARET PRITCHARD, JUNE 29, 2001

LAUREN KATA: Okay. This is Friday, June 29th. And we're here with Dr. Isabelle French, past president of SWE from 1964 to '66. She has a background in radio engineering, and is recently retired from Bell Laboratories. And she is also here with Elaine Pitts, who has an industrial engineering background with a specialization in industrial packaging, and is also a longtime member of SWE. And the two of them are going to be talking today about their experiences in engineering.

ISABELLE FRENCH: You want to start, Elaine?

ELAINE PITTS: Well, where shall I start?

IF: Who got you into SWE?

EP: Who got me into SWE?

IF: I think I know.

EP: Olive Salembier, who was a past president. And she and I were one of the two women, initially, in the Society of Packaging and Handling Engineers. And so she was trying to get me into SWE for a long time. And then I like to tell the story about the fact that when I finally succumbed and submitted my application, it got lost.

IF: Yes, I remember that.

EP: (Laughs) And then it was about another two years before I finally joined in 1964. And how about you? What got you into it?

IF: Well, my boss, when I was working for Sylvania in Boston, said that he had a notice of a meeting of women engineers that was going to be held at the Hotel Barbizon, for women, and that maybe I would be interested, and my friend Margaret Ross Linland would be interested in going. I don't remember whether they paid our way, but he certainly encouraged us, and gave us time to go. And we went to the first SWE convention at that time. And as most of you know, I have been to every convention or conference since.

EP: I think you have the number one star on your cap.

IF: Yep. So as long as I can, I'm going to keep that up.

EP: Good for you. Good for you. Well, I haven't been to all the SWE conventions. I've been to as many as I could be, but of course, when I went away and worked in engineering, interestingly enough, I still did things within SWE, but I didn't necessarily get to conventions. But I only missed a few along the way. And of course, I hate to miss them, because, of course, it's the time when you get to see fellow engineers. It's a time when you get revitalized because you can be with the students and find out what's going on.

LK: How is that different from being a member, for example, of the Society of Industrial Packaging Engineers?

EP: Well, that was a real experience, because of the fact that I was one of the first women, if not the first woman to join. And I was active in the Illinois chapter. And when I finally

became president of the chapter; that took me on to the board of directors. And then it was very interesting, because I never really felt any prejudice from the men in the organization. They really were very supportive. They accepted me, and yet, at the same time, they were there for me when I needed help. And that's one of the real, I think, strengths of an organization, is that when you have a problem, there are other professionals out there that are willing to come to your aid and help you.

LK: Is that different from the help that you get from SWE?

EP: Well, SWE provided, see -- as I think most women's organizations; which were formed about the same time, SWE really provides you with opportunities for growth and leadership development. And sometimes you were deprived that in companies, because there was, you know, many fewer women in business at that time.

IF: That's right.

EP: And so the men usually got the choice spots. And your experience in SWE helped you develop the really -- talents--

IF: Yeah. You got the chance to be a leader and so to learn to speak before people.

EP: And it pays off. It really pays off.

IF: I got to meet people that I never would have met on my ordinary job. I mean, far above what you would have the chance [for].

EP: And the other thing was that some of the professional

organizations, you never did see women move up in the organization, as far as -- and I was fortunate enough that in the packaging group I moved up all the way to chairman of the board. And I was not only the first woman, but at the present time, there hasn't been another woman in that position. Now, it isn't because of prejudice at this point. It's that several times they've had women that have been getting close to the top, and then all of a sudden something happened in their lives so they weren't able to go on. But I think it's going to happen very, very soon that they'll be another female president.

LK: Isabelle, where are you from? What is your background?

IF: You mean where I was born?

LK: Where were you born? Where did you get your education?

IF: I was born in a place outside Boston called Swampscott, Massachusetts, right on the seashore.

EP: Sounds interesting.

IF: Yeah. I always say I could see the ocean from my bedroom window, during the winter.

(Laughter)

IF: But it's never made me particularly a person that wanted to do a lot of sailing and so forth. Growing up during the Depression you -- those were things that were out of our reach.

EP: Yeah, I'll bet.

IF: But I was able to go to Tri-State because they had a quarterly system. And when I started, I didn't think I would be

able to go for more than one year of college because of, again, the Depression. It was 1941, and during my first quarter is when Pearl Harbor happened. As I progressed through my schooling, there was a dropout in the number of young men that were going to school, so that by the time I graduated, which was approximately three years later, because I went through summers and so forth, there was only, I think, about 200 people on campus. I think during 1944 they only had about 100 graduates. That's how bad it was.

But I was lucky. After I finished all of my physics courses, I was able to -- I was contacted and asked if I would be physics laboratory instructor, and that included having all my tuition paid and some money.

EP: Oh, wow.

(Laughter)

IF: And you know, \$150 for three months sounded like a lot of money to me at that time.

(Laughter)

EP: It was. It was, Isabelle. It was.

IF: And so it did slow me down a little bit in my courses, because they -- at that time, Tri-State was a twenty-seven month school, and you didn't have all of the history and other humanities that four-year colleges did. So I got my education there. And then later on they honored me with an honorary doctorate, which I don't use it too often for the simple reason

that I figure people that spend a lot of time in college and energy and sweat and tears deserve to be called doctors. I--

DIANNE DETURRIS: How did the war affect your school? How did that change your day-to-day business?

IF: Well, again, there were fewer men. I don't really think it increased the number of women that came to the school.

LK: How many women?

IF: Well, I think in the length of time I was there, only about ten. And none of them that I know of at the time I was there, graduated. One of them whom I'm going to see on my way home from the conference, and she was the only woman I had a course with, and that was English for engineers. But they've had quite a few graduates since then. I was not the first graduate of engineering at the college, but I was the first radio engineering graduate.

LK: First woman radio engineering graduate?

IF: That's right. And towards the last six months of school, we finally had a disabled veteran coming back to school from -- who'd obviously been wounded during some part of the -- I think the night we had our graduation dance (Laughs) was the day that they invaded -- VE Day. And so of course none of the other activities of war were that involved with us. (Laughs)

IF: I think we did have some CAP or reserve people that were (Inaudible) there for some preliminary courses before they went into battle, or to further service. I went directly from college

to work for Sylvania. I worked for them for about eight years.

LK: How did you get involved with Sylvania? They knew you from--

IF: No. Well, I knew of Sylvania, and it was near my -- I was going to school in Indiana, but I went back to Swampscott to live with my parents, and got a job in Salem, which is -- you know, the witches of Salem?

(Laughter)

IF: And it was where I got a job making -- designing, developing radar tubes. And that's what I did until the end of the war. And then Sylvania moved their plant to Boston, and I worked there for -- well, during that eight years, it was about six years, I guess. That was where I was in my career. Did you want any more on--

LK: Well, we can stop, and let's have Elaine talk a little bit about your background.

EP: Okay. Well, the first--

(INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING)

IF: When I would go home for vacations when I was in school, I would have to take -- well, the first time we drove, and that was an experience.

(Laughter)

IF: But after that we went -- I went by train. And the trains were just filled with servicemen, so that you were lucky to get a seat.

EP: Lots of time you stood up.

IF: Yeah, you did. I mean, going from Fort Wayne, Indiana to Boston was not the easiest thing in the world at that time. But, yeah, the first time we went from Angola, Indiana to Boston (Laughs) we had an old -- I think it was a Maxwell.

EP: (Laughs)

IF: One of the students drove. (Laughs) And I think we used more oil than we used gasoline.

(Laughter)

IF: Every time we'd stop for gas we'd put in two quarts of oil. (Laughs)

IF: I remember going down the center of Cleveland, and they have these islands there between the trolley cars and the sidewalks. And I remember zigzagging down. (Laughs)

EP: How did you get the gasoline?

IF: Well, this was in December of '41. And they hadn't been--

EP: Oh, okay. Rationing hadn't come. Okay.

IF: It hadn't come then. But then the next time we had a vacation, this guy, he had -- he rigged up a propane [tank] on the accelerator so that he could get us home.

(Laughter)

LK: That was quite a trip.

IF: Yeah, it was a trip, I'll tell you. We were delayed slightly because (Laughs) he hadn't quite got it perfected.

(Laughter)

IF: But we did make Boston.

EP: Uh-huh, apparently you did.

IF: He was one of those that was drafted during the war.

MARGARET PRITCHARD: What about Elaine's war experiences?

EP: Well, I was born and raised in Chicago. And I also was a Depression baby. And my mother was raising two children, plus her mother on a stenographer's salary. And so there was no chance of my going to college, days. But when I graduated from high school, I still had a couple of courses that I needed for college entrance, so I immediately started night school. And then as soon as I graduated -- I mean, got those additional credits, then I did all my college at night. So it took me a number of years to do it. But the interesting thing is that the way I was affected by the war, in many ways with the rationing and things like that, but there was some serendipity for me. And that was that in our church -- the young men, of course, went away to war. And my husband had had some injuries when he was a child. He had a bad eye and a bad ear, and so he was 4-F. And he was head of one group in the church and I was head of another, and they consolidated them. And all of a sudden, we were dating.

(Laughter)

EP: And he was studying industrial engineering, which suddenly had great appeal for me. And so that's really what steered me into industrial engineering. So that was my

serendipity.

DD: What year did you start school?

EP: I started in -- please.

(Laughter)

EP: I graduated in high school around 1934, I think it was, you know, but it takes a long time if you're going nights. And I couldn't take too many credits. And of course, unfortunately, at the time that I started, I had to go downtown to the campus. And so you could only take one course a night, and you couldn't give up all your nights, there were other things that you had to do that were, you know, demands on your life. But I was very concerned about being helpful to my mother, and so I was looking for a day job also. And that's what was really important to me, so that there was some income that would not only help relieve my mother, but would help pay my way and my tuition to school.

But it was an interesting, wonderful experience. And of course, as I say, I'd met this man who was a wonderful influence. And he was a wonderful influence in my life. And so you know, he was the most supportive man in the world. And just any time he encouraged me to, you know, move up to anything that I -- anything that was a challenge to me, he encouraged me and was right beside me all the time.

IF: And he was a good friend to SWE.

EP: Yeah, he was certainly a good friend. He was a member of the Men's Auxiliary of the Society of Women Engineers. And as

I say, then what happened was, I went to work for a company in Chicago. And I worked with them. And that was the Sperry & Hutchinson Company. And they were just on a growth path. And they were building warehouses. And they had brought in a consultant who had recommended that they get a packaging engineer because of the fact that their -- they accepted merchandise any way from the manufacturers with no relation to how it was going to be used within their system. And so I was able to work with them in the packaging and materials handling area while we were building warehouses all over the country. And I was challenged in ways that I'd never known before. And that's when I really needed help from other packaging people in my professional organization.

And ultimately, I was transferred to New York, and then I began to move up within the company, and that's when I went over into communications, and ultimately ended up as the corporate vice president of the company. So that it was, you know, a wonderful exciting time for me all along the way.

LK: And what was that time period, from the time you started--

EP: I told you I didn't do well with dates, but I'll try to tell you. I was married. We were married in '45. And that was another interesting experience related to the war, and that is, you got only sheets and pillowcases because there was nothing else available as gifts.

(Laughter)

EP: Well, I mean, the normal appliances and a lot of those things were just not available to you. And then I went to the Sperry & Hutchinson Company in '53, and was transferred to New York in '64. And then we lived in New York for fifteen years, and then I moved out to California to go into business with a friend. And unfortunately while we lived in New York, my husband died. And so again, but moving to New York -- I mean to California, that's when I went back into the packaging field. And we had a very successful packaging business until he became seriously ill and passed away. And then I decided it was time for me really to retire. So as I say, it's been an exciting, wonderful life.

LK: When you talk about the support that you got from your husband, what was it like when they asked you to transfer to New York?

EP: To me, it's an interesting story. I was handling a function in the company. And part of it was done out of New York and part of it was done out of Chicago. And I knew that that should be consolidated and should be really, you know, put together as one unit in the company.

And so I talked to my husband, and I said to him, "Honey, if I do this, I'm afraid they're going to ask me to move to New York. And what do you think about it?" And his answer I think was extremely wise. He said, "Is it right for the company?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Then you have to do it." He said, "You and I deal with the move to New York if and when they offer it to

you." And you know, that's really the way you should do it. And that's the kind of support and the kind -- he was a very wise man.

DD: Okay. What's the biggest difference between when you were an engineer starting out and when you retired? What was the biggest difference that you noticed?

EP: Now, you said when I was an engineer?

DD: From when you started to when you finished.

EP: Well, interestingly enough, I seemed to wrap up a lot of loose ends when I came out here and started my own business, when I went to California and started my own business. And I left my company -- at the time I left my company, it was one of those wonderful times when they wanted you to stay, and that's a good time to leave. But the fact of the matter is, they also then gave me a major packaging project before I left. So that started us off in business with one project.

Now, my partner had been working at Lockheed, and had been working in Silicon Valley and had done a lot of consulting work. And interestingly enough, one of the people with whom he worked gave him a major project, so we started out. But before that what was interesting is, he was going to retire from Lockheed. And they encouraged people to do consulting providing there was no conflict of interest. And so a year and a half before I moved out, I called him and I said to him, "Okay, if we're going to go into business, when you do a consulting job, put that money in the bank, and I'll match it dollar for dollar, and then we'll have

startup money to start our business." And so we did that, so that by the time I moved out, we had an office, and we had our stationary, and we had -- you know, we knew exactly where we were going, and we had these two major projects to start with.

So again, as I say, I've had a lot of lucky breaks in my life, because there are a lot of people who study hard and are well qualified, and I seem to have been in a right place at the right time lots of times.

LK: Do you think that that being in the right place at the right time is true today for women in engineering?

EP: Well, I think so. I think so, because you see, I was fortunate enough, again, to go to work for a company which not only was on a growth path, but I was in a position, because there were so many things that needed to be done, to make an impact immediately so that they -- it gave me a good strong, you know, reputation within the company, and certainly set me on my path. And I worked at that time for the controller of the company, who ultimately was vice president and ultimately was president of the company. And so therefore, again, that was being at the right time, because this was a man who was on the move up, and he gave me every opportunity to grow and to be put in a position where I could grow within the company, too.

LK: How many women worked for Sperry & Hutchinson?

EP: Well, there were an awful lot, because we had 800 redemption centers, and those were -- really, all those managers

were women. In the national corporate office, there weren't as many as there could or should have been, but I have to tell you that both the president and the chairman of the board were very, very interested in seeing that women had opportunity within the company. And they both -- because I had come in in the technical area and had the flexibility to change to another area and what-have-you, they depended on me to make recommendations and to do -- you know, and they really were very, very supportive.

For instance, I had field staff of some twenty women around the country who were working with customers in our accounts, so they themselves were interested. And that of course gave me an edge in the company. Because interestingly enough, while there is always competitiveness within companies and people are vying for jobs -- and the men have been doing it for many years, and you know, I mean, what-have-you -- but they never knew where my strength was coming from. And I never let anybody know where my strength was coming from. And therefore, they'd pretty much leave me alone. It really did -- well, that's because I never ran to anybody to solve my problems. I knew that you had to solve them.

And the other thing is confrontation, as far as I'm concerned, usually ends up in a 'yes' and a 'no'. And my philosophy was: You never trigger a 'no' prematurely, so you always give yourself an opportunity to go back and fight again. But have, again, gathered your forces, and you're going in, hopefully, with additional information to do it. I'm talking too

much.

(Laughter)

LK: I have a question. Really related to both of your experiences. It's actually two parts. Did you see yourself or have you seen yourselves as mentors in the work place to other women who have worked with you and for you? And related to that, especially Isabelle working for Bell Laboratories, did you see a relationship with engineering education departments with your company, or you working with women in universities through the years? Sorry, is that confusing?

DD: It's very good.

IF: I'm not quite sure I completely understand.

DD: She wants to know if you helped to encourage other women to go into engineering.

IF: Yeah, I did. I mean, I did a lot of career -- you know, speaking in high schools and things of that nature. I tried to be helpful, occasionally, with my college. And every year I was very much involved with Engineers Week. I was on the committee for the local Lehigh Valley Section, and with the NSPE [National Society of Professional Engineers] people there. Bell Labs, of course, has a great reputation of hiring the best, and I had a chance to use that in talking to people.

I think that Bell Labs took a long time in getting to the point where they promoted women. When I went to work for them I had a title as a senior technical aide, because at that time I

think there might have been three or four women who had Ph.D.s who were considered as members of technical staff. Over the years they changed that. Well before the time I retired, I had been promoted to member of technical staff. But they usually want a Ph.D. or equivalent. And I guess I became equivalent.

(Laughter)

LK: Was that true for all of their employees or for their women employees?

IF: Their usual thing was, if a person did not have a Ph.D. when they graduated from their institution, then they offered a program that they were required to take graduate studies first as a member -- for their masters. And I guess if they completed their masters under that program, they automatically became members of staff. But if they failed, they made them -- they transferred them to Western Electric.

(Laughter)

LK: When they categorized you as a technical aide, did that mean that you were an engineer in their eyes?

IF: Well, my bosses did. But it just was the title that I came in as that. Like I say, there was a difference. But I don't know -- well, obviously, from being at different places, my salary level was pretty much set, and it became -- even starting -- well, when I started at Sylvania, it was during the war. The normal salary that you got was \$150 a month. But I was a woman in the state of Massachusetts, I could only work forty-eight hours, so

therefore I was less valuable to them, and so my base salary was \$135 a month. And once you start lower, you stay lower over the whole period of time.

But nowadays, you can work around the clock if you want to. But I think it was groups like the Society of Women Engineers that helped break down the fact that you could only work forty-eight hours in certain states. And that was result of a good reason, in the sweatshops, that the unions had put that into the law. But then we were supposedly managerial, so therefore it shouldn't apply to us, and it was erased. I don't know if I answered your question or not, or have I digressed too far?

(Laughter)

LK: Well, let's see what Elaine--

EP: Well, on the mentoring, yes, definitely.

(INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING)

EP: -- in colleges and universities in our area, and plan programs to bring them into, you know, the system, and to help young women. Within my company I had, really, a rare opportunity to do that. And we went public while I was with the company and became a Fortune 500 company. And I immediately wrote the chairman of the board and said, "I think we should have a woman on the board." And he called me in and he said, "Well, you know, right now I'm in the process of reorganizing the board." And they were having some of the people who have been on for years kind of become emeritus. And then he had already identified what other

areas he wanted on the board.

But he said to me, "Do I have to have two?" And I said, "No, no, no. You're not getting a woman. What you're doing is getting a professional who happens to be a woman in one area that you want." And he said, "Well, Elaine, it's going to be a while before we're going to be able to even look at this, but in the meantime, I want you to go out and identify some candidates."

And we ended up with the head of Radcliffe University. And she was an absolute wonderful person. I mean, she was a delightful person. And the first thing she did was come into my office and say, "I want to have a series of luncheon meetings with the women in this company, and I want to get to know" -- you know, again, so she was extremely supportive also.

But as far as my philosophy is concerned, I always tried to help anybody who worked for me to play on their strengths and try to overcome their weaknesses. But I also was very sensitive to the fact that we had young staff that were really like assistants that had great potential to move up. And I tried to get all of my managers and people who worked for me to realize that if you can develop those people and help them, when you get an opportunity for promotion, you're already covered, and you can take that promotion. But the people who stayed -- kind of hang in and don't want to develop those people... So it's just kind of instinctive, I think, with us, to try to help women as much as we can, and to mentor them.

LK: Is it just instinctive, or do you feel that maybe being part of the Society of Women Engineers reinforced that?

EP: Well, I'm sure it did. And I'm sure that any of my professional organizations did, because like in my packaging group, while I didn't feel any prejudice or anything like that, I was certainly trying to encourage other women to get active at the chapter level so they in turn could automatically get to the board who would put them into the system, and what-have-you, and certainly with the Society of Women Engineers.

But when I say "instinctive," maybe part of it is personal experience, and that you just don't want other young women to have to experience some of the bad experiences we had. So that's what I meant in a way that it's instinctive. It just kind of became a necessity to do it.

LK: Do you have anything to add to that, Isabelle?

IF: I don't think so. I mean, SWE certainly highlighted our needs and wants to help other young women and mentor them where necessary.

DD: All right. The thing that we're missing here is that we've gotten a narrative of what you did and where you did it, but what we didn't get is any specific stories of interesting things.

MP: War stories.

DD: I don't know if it's necessarily war stories. You both said that you did mentor people, but didn't mention any specific circumstances when you actually had an affect on somebody. You

said, "Oh, yes, we were encouraging people." I sort of think that, you know, a story of what actually happened with somebody is... So when you first started working, you obviously both got a lot of support out of that from your higher-ups. And I'm amazed at how much Elaine has gotten support. But the question is, then, what happened to the people behind you? Were they supported as much?

IF: Well, I--

(INTERRUPTION IN RECORDING)

MP: Why -- what happened when the guys were there after the war ended? Were they as supportive then as they were before?

IF: Well, the man that sent me to the first SWE convention was a very supportive person, and he made sure that we got promotions and things of that nature. And he had two or three women engineers working for him.

LK: This is at Sylvania?

IF: Yeah, in Boston. So at that point I was not in any position to do any mentoring. I did more, I guess, at Bell Labs than there. But it wasn't until the Equal Opportunity Act came about that we saw lots of women come into the company. And when they came in, although I probably was not in a supervisory (?), but I tried to encourage these young women to join SWE and enlarge their education. And so I know several of them that eventually became department heads. But me, I was still just plain old (Laughs) member of the technical staff.

(Laughter)

IF: But I was at an age, then, you know, probably in my fifties. And you don't get too many promotions at that point. A lot of people thought that I should have been -- when one of my supervisors retired -- that I should get the job. But I didn't feel I was that well qualified for it, and younger people were. So no sour grapes about it.

(Laughter)

EP: Well, I've got a rather interesting story, and that is that at my company, if you'd been there for twenty-five years, the chairman of the board would -- you could have a luncheon and invite whoever you wanted. And I had invited my staff, of course. And we went across to the top of the Pan Am Building for lunch. And at that time, one of the people who worked for me told the president and chairman of the board that I had already bought a condominium in California and was planning to leave in a year or so.

And when we went back to the office the chairman called me into his office and said, "You know, Elaine, I was concerned when I realized that you were about to retire, because I am too. And what's going to happen to the women in this company if we are both gone?" And he said, "I'll tell you what I'd like you to do. I'd like you to do a study and let me know where we stand compared to where we stood when you came with the company," which I did.

And when he got that study, he and the president and I met.

And from that time on, he had me go to all of the executive committee meetings, and always had the subject of women on the agenda, and was sure that we were bringing people into line financially and things like that, so that we began to see the results of what...

In the meantime, from the standpoint of the staff, when I had my first meeting of my field people in New York, we'd let the assistants do as much creative planning that they possibly could, and we let them actually participate at an equal level as the managers in the department. And it was the most successful conference.

But after that, one of those young people decided to go on and get her degree at college. And the company picked up the tab. We allowed her because of where she lived and where the university was that she needed to go to, we let her go to school during working hours as long as she kept up with her work. And that was the first that had ever been done. They had paid for MBAs for men for years, but they had not -- I don't mean they hadn't paid for them, they did if they went to school nights. But the men -- they had a program going where the men went to work four days a week, and on the fifth day they went for the -- worked on their MBA. And here this was to me a real step forward. And this young lady went on to really move. She didn't stay with the company, unfortunately, because she got opportunities elsewhere, but at least that was a significant contribution.

DD: We're going to have to wrap up here soon, but I have one more question. I am significantly younger than you, and yet everywhere I go, I'm the only woman there, often -- places. Okay. It must have been true for you. How did you deal with it? I can tell you how I dealt with it. But I want to know how did you deal with it thirty, forty years ago, being the only woman around, because you must have been?

EP: Well, I'll tell you, one of my first experiences was when I joined the Illinois Chapter of Packaging and Handling Engineers -- and my boss encouraged me to go to the first meeting -- I mean, the next meeting. And I went to the meeting, and I'm sitting in the back of the room, and I'm feeling very isolated and very much away, you know, out of it. And then I realized I got interested in the subject matter, and that was what was important. So I started asking questions. And the next time I was sitting up front.

But I have a funny story that goes with that, and that is that we met at the Builders Club in Chicago. And one day I had to go to the washroom. So I went up to the woman who was the manager of the Builders Club and I said, "Can you tell me where the washroom is?" And she said, "We don't have a women's washroom in this club." She said, "You can go down to the eleventh floor if you want to." (Laughs) And we were up at the top level. Well, interestingly enough, again, by that time I had become secretary of the group, and I had been well accepted by the other members,

and there was no discrimination. And they just said, "One of us will stand outside the john and you can just go in."

(Laughter)

EP: But you know, I mean, it was -- as I say, I received -- I got my comfort level because of the fact that I was so interested in what was going on. And then somebody saw it who said, "Well, let's give her a job." And of course, it was secretary.

(Laughter)

IF: Of course.

EP: But even so, it was wonderful. But then I moved up in the chairs there and was very accepted. And I still was the only woman in that chapter.

DD: It never bothered you?

EP: Never bothered me in the least, because it was their attitude that -- you know, I mean, their acceptance that was fine. It was a woman who really rejected me, (Laughs) you know.

DD: All right. Izzy?

IF: It was different, certainly. There were -- I think the first year, summer, when I first graduated, they had in some -- of course, it was during the war, so it made a little difference, that women were accepted more, at least in the job place. And they had summer employees that were women, so that wasn't difficult.

And I think one of the most difficult places to get accepted

is by the trades people, because they have to -- originally I was in a manufacturing area where we needed to have certain things done to our equipment and so forth. And they accepted me, and I felt that was -- and I know later that -- I mean, maybe it's because I didn't object to their having pictures of nudes in their lockers or something like that.

(Laughter)

IF: But I mean that -- maybe that goes back to the fact that my father was a general contractor, and even as a little kid I used to go with him on the jobs and tell the men how to do things if they had to be done.

(Laughter)

IF: But I think that that was why it didn't bother me too much. But I know that some of the young women that have gone into the workplace as engineers in recent years, they took offense at leering men, and so forth. So it's -- I guess it all depends on how you appear to them, whether you're trying to have a chip knocked off your shoulder.

DD: Well, you guys have very thick skin--

(Laughter)

DD: -- the both of you, to not notice. But we're running out of time. So unless you have any other questions?

LK: We can wrap it up.

DD: I'm going to turn this off, then.

END OF INTERVIEW