

Interview with Gloria Gomez

Interviewed by Anna Holt

1999

AH: This is Wednesday, July 28, an interview between Anna Holt and Gloria Gomez.

First I'd like to ask you just a little personal history. When you were born, when you came to Holland?

GG: OK, I was born in Laredo, Texas. We used to come back and forth to work. Then we stopped here in Holland and they offered my father a job in the factory. They use to have a factory in Zeeland. They had tanks of pickles. He decided to stay here. That's how we started staying here.

AH: How old were you?

GG: I was between fifteen or sixteen. My parents stayed here. My brother stayed here and worked. They used to send us girls back to Texas to study, for school because we didn't like the schools here. We were so used to them over there so we stayed over there. Back and forth, every summer we used to come here and then when school started we used to go back. Until finally, my mother got sick and my father wanted one of us to come over here. So I decided to come over here and look after her. After that I applied over here at Heinz for the job. I got it.

AH: How old were you then?

GG: I was about seventeen. Most of my life I've been here. [laughter]

AH: Must be a pretty nice place to be then.

GG: I like it. They treat me right. I have no problems with the people or the foremen or nothing like that. So I decided to stay. I wasn't married yet. I got married. I think I'd been here about three years, working with Heinz when I got married. I had all my kids when I was working here. And I'm still here. [laughter] A lot of people say, "How can you take it so long?" I say, "Well, you never think about how long you're going to stay here." At first when I started working here, I feel I only going to stay not even a year. And here I am.

AH: So how many years have you been here?

GG: I've been here forty-three already. What's the sense of me getting out now? They kick me out, then I'll go out. [laughter]

AH: That's the only way they're getting rid of you.

GG: Yes. I don't have too much to go, a couple of years yet. Then I'll be out of here.

AH: What was it like when you first started? What was the set-up?

GG: Like I said, over here, this building use to be there. You got that warehouse where we use to have the lines for pickles and everything. It use to run all the way from one end to the other for sterilizing. They use to pick up a _____ at that time. My first job was pushing pickles, for awhile. Then I got promoted [laughter] to dumping. I was dumping glass most of the time. There were times where I had to hurry up to keep up with the line. I told some of my friends when I started working here and I was dumping glass, when I went to bed I use to dream about it. [laughter] I use to dream that I wasn't able to keep on a high rate and they'd be falling down and I had to rush and pick them up to keep up with the line.

AH: That's when you know you're working too hard.

GG: Yes. When you're not use to dumping, I first started pushing pickles most of the time then I started dumping. That's what I did most of the time down here. Later on they built the other building where we are now. We moved over there. I was there for awhile dumping glass. Then when I started having my family then I decided to move into a label department. I've been there since then.

AH: What do you do?

GG: Before we use to pack by hand. Then as years go by we change a lot of things. What I use to do, I was a packer operator for a long time. Then I asked that I would like to run those labelers. They taught me how to do it, how to run it. That's what I've been doing since then. I've been a labeler operator for a long time. Then I've been packing once in awhile, or things like that. Most of the time I'm over here in the label department. Right now I'm working with the vinegar line too. I've been there for about six or seven years now. I've been there all year round. They use to change, like one a week on one line, the other week on the other one. Then about four or five years back one of the lead persons decided to leave, the ones that have the oldest seniority, the persons in the line too. That's why we've been there most of the time. I have no problems. There's a lot of people that don't like it. They treat you bad or whatever. I don't have no problems like that. Sometimes, I bet you the person, the way you are, the way you like to work or don't like to work. That's why sometimes they pick on you. [laughter] When you don't want to work of course they have to get after you! Otherwise, I like it. I like it here. I have seen a lot of people

come in and out. Lay persons too, that have come in and out.

AH: How about the management? How many different plant managers have you seen?

GG: How many? I don't know. There have been quite a few.

AH: And Jerry Shoup is the manager right now?

GG: The one right now, yes.

AH: How long has he been...?

GG: I don't really know. He's been here quite awhile. We get a lot of new ones in and out. They don't bother me. I just do my work.

AH: Do you think there's a pretty good relationship though, between the employees and the management here?

GG: I think so. Once you got to know them. Like I said, you have to do your work too. You have to put a little bit of effort on yourself. I think they're pretty good. We got new ones. They're pretty good. I think they're a little more considerate of other people than what some of them way back use to. They're OK. Like I said, I don't get in their way, they don't get in mine. They tell me something, well I'll do it. A lot of people don't like...to be bossed around I guess. I'm OK with them. I have no problems with none of them.

AH: What are the primary products that you make in this factory?

GG: Vinegar - apple cider, that's more the main that we run most. We run white vinegar too, but mostly the cider vinegar that we run. We do the decanters and the malt and salad vinegar, different kind _____ decanters. We do a lot of relish, sweet relish mostly I think. We run hamburger relish and dill relish, barbecue relish - but

we don't run that too much. We have piccallili relish too. We don't run that much. Mostly in the green season, we run for a few days, but not that much. Now we start doing mustard. They're doing mustard in the plastic bottles. And sweet relish in the plastic bottles. Dill pickles, we do a lot of that too. Gherkins and sweet pickles, I think that's probably mostly what we run. We had some of that in the cans, sweet relish too. We've got hamburger slices. We run quite a lot of hamburger slices too in the line. Right now mostly the green season, fresh pickles we're running now. So what they doing mostly is bread and butter slices. We got a new one...just a few years we start with sandwich slices. That's what we're running most right now. And spears, that's one of the main things too, that we run a lot around this time of the year. Most of them are fresh pickles so we get those out of the way.

AH: You get way more busy in the summer?

GG: In the summer we get more busy. We use to run about ten hours a day, six days a week. There were times when there were Sundays too. They work only eight hours on Sundays. It depends on how the pickles come in. They got a lot, sometimes we got a good season, sometimes we get... It depends on the weather too.

AH: How has this summer been?

GG: Well, this summer hasn't been that bad. Some people may not like it. To me it's OK because we're just working eight hours. There's a lot of people that prefer to work ten hours because they come for the summer to work. They want to work more so they have a little more extra money. To me, eight hours is good enough. You have to work Saturdays, good enough. Sundays I don't work. I like to stay with my

family. Most of the time we work ten hours, but right now we're maybe kind of slow. I don't know. We're just working eight hours. We may work one or two days, nine or ten hours, but not too often. Otherwise, it's OK I guess.

AH: How many people do you think they hire extra in the summer?

GG: I don't know. There are a lot of them. Some of them like it, some of them don't. It's too hot sometimes. It's warm upstairs in the second floor too. It's kind of hard because they've got all of those fresh pickles coming and the steam on. It got kind of hot upstairs. Try to keep the fans blowing. You have too many lines running and too much electricity going. It's kind of hard.

AH: What are the other Heinz products? Not made in this factory, but...

GG: They've got a ketchup. They've got a barbecue sauce too. We don't make that over here...

AH: Baby food?

GG: Baby food, we don't make that in Holland. I forgot to mention, we make juice, baby juice, thirty-two ounce. We make that. Mostly after we're done with the summer, then we start with that, the juice. We make baby juice. That has to be sterilized. Right now we're using all the sterilizers that we got, so we don't do that in summer times. Barely, once in awhile they have an order they have to get out, they'll we'll do it. We got apple juice. We got apple-cherry, apple-grape, mixed juice, banana-apple too. They're going to make more products later on. When we're done with the green season they're going to run a couple things.

AH: So the main Heinz office is in Pennsylvania?

GG: Pittsburgh.

AH: Is there much connection between the two? Do they come over and see what's going on or are you pretty independent over here?

GG: Once in awhile they come. They don't come that often. We do our job. They report it. They like it. They're not here most of the time. They may come once in awhile to check the factory, how things are. The ones who are here are the ones who take care of it.

AH: Have you found that this factory has grown a lot over the years?

GG: Yes, it has grown a lot. Before it was kind of small. Now it's getting to be more and more. They put in more lines.

AH: Randy mentioned something about other factories closing.

GG: Ye.

AH: Do you think that has a lot to do with why you're getting so much bigger?

GG: I don't know. Maybe, could be. Some of the stories they were having in the other factories we are getting now. They closed quite a few. We thought this was going to be closed a couple years back. Then they decided not too. We're making pretty good. We're making some money. So they decided not to, so they closed other ones. Not a long time ago, they were going to close more. They said this wasn't one of them. They have grown a lot since I can remember.

AH: I bet that was pretty scary.

GG: Yes. My husband was kind of happy. He don't want me to work no more. I'm so use to working. Most of my life I've had to work, so it's kind of hard for me to stay

home.

AH: What do you do with yourself all day? [laughter]

GG: I know. I may keep myself busy for a couple of weeks then after awhile I get bored. We use to have quite a few shut-downs, especially like Thanksgiving and Christmas. They use to give us about three or four weeks shut-down. We like it, but then after awhile you get bored being home. After working so many years, being in the factory most of your life. I like that time we had down, shut-down. Now, I think we've been getting more business, so we don't have that many shut-downs like we use to. Before green season we use to have two or three weeks shut-down too. No more. This year we're going to have more business. I tell my friends, "Forget about shut-down." [laughter] "No more shut-down for us!" They say, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, they say they're going to get more products coming in. What do you think that means?" That's right. Maybe this year we won't have nothing. Who knows. They may give us the week for Christmas, a couple of days. It depends how things are. Like I said, we're having more lines, getting bigger. A lot of people working now.

AH: What do you think have been the biggest triumphs that Heinz has experienced, or the best things that have happened for the factory while you've been here?

GG: Like what?

AH: Was there any new additions or new products that boomed business up or anything like that?

GG: Well, we had the sandwich slices. That's really something. We've been having a lot

of business. We've got now, I forgot to mention, we've got the pouch line. The pouch line is, they get the pickles in a plastic bag. They put it in a plastic bag, seal it, they we pack them up in boxes. We get that from, quite a few business from Wendy's. We do some for Heinz too. We just started that up a couple of years back I think.

AH: That's mostly to restaurants?

GG: Yes, that's right.

AH: I suppose that's a lot easier than glass jars or something for them.

GG: Yes, it is. With that line up, it's eliminated some people to what we use to do. We use to do it by hand. We use to work it out. Then they brought that machine in. That eliminated a few people. There are times when they run three shifts, keep busy. Now with the sandwich slices that's going pretty good too.

AH: Who are your biggest competitors?

GG: I don't know. That's one thing I don't even... Before it was ...I don't remember. I don't know who was the biggest one.

AH: What do you think about the business climate in Holland? Is it a good place for business?

GG: I think so. I think it depends on the person, if they like the business they keep on going, if not they go to another one. It's kind of hard. Is that what you were trying to tell me? I didn't get that question.

AH: It seems like there's a lot of business in Holland lately and it just keeps growing and growing.

GG: Yes.

AH: People talk about the work ethic in Holland, do you think that has a lot to do with the success?

GG: I have seen a lot of people come into town because of the jobs. I've seen that a lot. I know a lot of people that come from other towns, to come here to work. They come over here and then they find a job for themselves and then they, with their friends, "Why don't you come over here? They got a lot of jobs here. You can come and _____." You got family or relations and you tell them how the work is here so they decide to come and give it a try. They like it, then they stay.

AH: It seems like a lot of people in this area aren't afraid to work hard.

GG: No. There's a lot of work in this town, if they really want to work. If they really, really want to work, they can get a job. There are a lot of different jobs around that you can get. Like I know a lot of people, we have a lot of Spanish people around here. When I moved here was hardly about six or seven families here. It's multiplying now. Every time you turn, I say to my husband, "Look at it!" This town, we got too many Spanish people around here. It's time for us to move [laughter] I said, "No, I like it here." I had a lot of friends that come over and visit us. They like the town. It's kind of quiet. They say, "You've got a lot of jobs around here." I say, "Yes, we do. If you want to, you looking for a job you can come and look for one here. You can find one doing something you like. You don't like it, move to another one. Something that you think is better for you. There's a lot of opportunities here, if you really want to." Where are you from, may I ask?

AH: Middle of the state. Kind of between Flint and Lansing.

GG: A lot of people from there come over here.

AH: Yes. Everyone seems to be moving to the west side of the state.

GG: I know quite a few people from Lansing, Saginaw. My husband got quite a few people over there in Saginaw, Owosso, in there.

AH: I'm from right by Owosso, Corunna actually.

GG: Really? He's got relations there in Owosso. Renu's?

AH: I don't think I know... Just one last question. What do you expect for the future here at the factory? What kinds of things do you see up-and-coming?

GG: There's more coming, I know that. I don't know if I'll be here to see it. [laughter] I hope not! I'm not planning on staying here too long no more. It's going to be up to the people who stay here. We've got quite a few people, young people, coming in and staying now. They apply and they still like it. I think there's probably going to be more yet, to come. I think that's what they need, new people, young people. Some of the old ones are getting out. They have to get quite a few more young people coming in. They seem to like it. I hope they can stick with it, like I did.

AH: Do you think there's going to be any new products?

GG: We've got a few coming in this coming year. I don't know how many more. Who knows? A lot of things can happen. You never know. Things can go well and before you know it... I hope they keep on going, doing something new as the years to come to get the factory going. It would be good for the people around here, instead of losing their jobs. We only hope.

AH: OK, well thank you very much.

GG: Thank you.