

'Brass Valley' historian visits New Zealand, finds similarities

BY JEREMY BRECHER

For the past eight years I have been studying the experience of working people in the Waterbury area. I've often wondered whether work was similar or different in other countries. This year, thanks to a Fulbright fellowship, I got a chance to spend six months in Dunedin, New Zealand, to try to find out.

If you look in the tourist guides for Dunedin, you'll find pictures of Scottish Baronial churches, splendid hills and beaches and a fine university. You are not so likely to learn that Dunedin was once the center of New Zealand's metalworking industry — it is a factory city much like Waterbury.

Early in my visit as I was walking past an old, neatly painted factory building, I saw a spectacle I recognized from Waterbury: glowing molten metal being poured from a large vat into rows of flat molds. I had stumbled upon a foundry.

One of the men noticed me, looked back to his work, eyed me again. I explained that I came from a foundry town in the United States, and that I was interested in how factory life in New Zealand compared to that at home.

The foundry, I learned, was part of the Hillside Railway Workshop which had repaired and built locomotives for a century. Like the rest of the New Zealand railway system, it was always government-owned.

After this encounter I decided to focus in on the Hillside Workshop, and I began to track down old timers who could tell me what work was like in Hillside years ago.

One of the first I talked with was W.J. Pimley, who was apprenticed in Hillside in 1915 and ultimately became a foreman. He explained to me one of the biggest differences from factories I knew at home: as railway employees, the Hillside workers were in effect civil servants, with full job security and promotion all the way to the top, based principally on seniority.

"Hillside in those days was looked upon as a very good job. There was security. The wages weren't big, but I know my mother was glad to get me into the railways. If we built an engine or overhauled it, and we took her out and gave her a bit of a run and everything was running cool, you got a certain amount of satisfaction from it. They knew they were working for the government, working for the country."

Another contrast between Hillside and factories I knew in the U.S. had to do with the division of labor. In early metalworking factories everywhere, much of the work was done by so-called "all-round craftsmen,"

workers who had served apprenticeships in which they learned all aspects of a trade.

But in the United States, Great Britain and elsewhere in the early 20th century, craftsmen's jobs were often subdivided into narrower tasks performed by workers who only needed one specialized skill. The skilled craftsmen often opposed what they called "skill dilution," but in most places their efforts were defeated.

I was fascinated to learn that at Hillside the system based on all-round craftsmen has never been abandoned. A former Hillside worker who started his apprenticeship as boilermaker in 1915 recalled the difference between his all-round training and the more limited, specialized skills possessed by workers coming in from factories in England and Scotland:

"One man from Scotland, he'd be a riveter. But he wouldn't do any caulking or he wouldn't know how to shape a job, to make a job, to roll a boiler in or anything like that. He was purely and simply a riveter, drove rivets. And then another man would be a caulker. He would do the caulking on the seams. And he did nothing else but caulking. They weren't trained actually as boilermakers, no."

Time and motion study, using stop watches to analyze jobs into small components to find out exactly how quickly each segment can be done, has been a standard feature of most American factories since the early years of the century.

David Fenby, who started at Hillside in 1924 and spent many years there as instructor of apprentices, told me that when top railway managers tried to introduce time and motion study at Hillside, the workers, the union and the foremen all opposed it so intensely that management ultimately abandoned it.

"(Time-study men) timed the different operations. The men resented that. They thought they were doing a fair enough day's work. The foremen didn't like the time study. They couldn't see that being an advantage to the shop or the work. The union kicked about it. It just faded out." The time-study men were withdrawn.

That was in the 1920s. Resistance to time and motion study remains strong in New Zealand today. A current Hillside crane operator told me that when a man with a meter appeared in the shop recently, the entire workforce was ready to walk out until they found out he was not timing jobs at all but just testing noise levels.

The fact that there was no time study didn't mean there was no shop discipline. One retired worker ex-

plained to me what happened in the World War I era when workers tried to take a "smoko," the New Zealand term for a coffee break.

They had a nasty little piece of paper they used to call a please-explain-it. On a Saturday morning we used to get pies and have an unofficial smoko in behind the furnace. We got caught two or three times. You'd get this note from the foreman's office: 'Please explain why you were in back of the furnace at such and such a time and such and such a date.' (You) had to write a written reply to that."

The Hillside Railway Workshop gives a historian plenty of food for thought. In some ways it seems backward, retaining forms of apprenticeship and craft production that elsewhere passed with the 19th century. But in other ways it seems modern, with lots of computers and other up-to-date technology and management based on an integrated national system.

Some of its features, such as life-time job security, promotion based largely on seniority, and a strong stress on the skills, knowledge and responsibility of those who do the work, seem oddly similar to Japanese work organization — regarded by many American managers as the wave of the future.

Whether Hillside represents the past, the future or simply its own unique development, it made one thing clear to me. A factory in one country may use the same machines and produce the same product as factories elsewhere — and yet organize the work in a very different way.

Jeremy Brecher helped compile the book "Brass Valley" and prepare the video of the same name, in which Naugatuck Valley brass workers and their families tell their own story. He is currently helping to record and present the history and music of Waterbury's ethnic communities.

