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# A Heart of Glass: Women, Work Culture, and Resistance In Huntington, West Virginia's Glass Industry

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A Heart of Glass:  
Women, Work Culture, and Resistance  
In Huntington, West Virginia's Glass Industry

Thesis submitted to  
The Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
The requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study analyzes women in Huntington, West Virginia's glass industry through an examination of interviews with retired selectors of the Owens-Illinois plant that operated on Huntington's west end for nearly eighty years. It explores the particular ways in which those selectors formed their own work culture and a collective identity of themselves as a group in the years prior to their being organized into the Glass Bottle Blowers Association Local 256. This project argues that the work culture of selecting acted as an "informal organization" through which selectors at Owens-Illinois could act together and separately to resist gender discrimination in the plant. Furthermore, it demonstrates how work culture was not replaced by Local 256 as the primary organizational force for workplace resistance; instead, work culture remained a key factor for selectors at Owens-Illinois, and, in fact, enhanced selectors' experiences within the union.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Donna Young, who has been the most influential person in my life. My mother taught me many things, sometimes through words and just as often by example. Through my mother, I have learned to believe in my ability to accomplish anything, to never let age determine whether I should pursue my dreams, and to be proud of who I am. She was always proud of me, and I will always be proud of her.

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## INTRODUCTION

The craft of glassmaking has historically been a male stronghold with men always performing the jobs that actually produced the finished product while young boys were employed in large numbers not only to assist the glassmaker but also to learn the “craft” of glassmaking. As mechanization entered the glassmaking process in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, glass manufacturers began to employ women to perform the most unskilled and lowest paying jobs within the glass houses.<sup>1</sup>

Because of its riverfront location and abundant natural resources, Huntington, West Virginia attracted many glass manufacturers in the earliest years of the twentieth century. Huntington’s first glass houses employed large numbers of people, but “glassworker” was a term reserved for white men only. White women also found work in Huntington’s glass houses, but they were relegated to the most unskilled positions in glass manufacturing. Among the earliest glass manufacturers in Huntington was the Charles Boldt Glass Manufacturing Company, a successful glassmaker with headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio. Fifteen years later, Charles Boldt had become Owens-Illinois, a glassmaker that employed large numbers of women to select and pack the finished product. While gender segregation was the norm in the glass industry in general and at Owens-Illinois in particular, resistance to that segregation occurred almost from the beginning of glass making in Huntington.

Historians of working class women have examined at length resistance to gender segregation within the framework of labor organizations, with more recent research

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Beardsley Butler, *Women and the Trades: Pittsburgh, 1907-1908* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1909); Pearce Davis, *The Development of the American Glass Industry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949).

focusing on the presence of resistance outside formal organizations. While historians such as Ruth Milkman and Patricia Cooper have studied electrical workers, autoworkers, and cigar makers, almost no attention has been paid to resistance in the glass industry. Through an examination of the glass industry we can better understand the pervasiveness of gender segregation and the different ways in which women resisted workplace discrimination.

When production and maintenance workers at Owens-Illinois' Huntington, West Virginia facility were unionized in the 1940s by the Glass Bottle Blowers of America (GBBA), the women were organized into Local 256. Over the next twenty years the women of Owens-Illinois worked within their union to improve working conditions, increase wages, and eventually end gender segregation in Huntington's most successful glass factory. But resistance to gender segregation in Huntington's glass factories did not occur only within traditional labor organizations. In the years prior to the arrival of the GBBA in Huntington, selectors at Owens-Illinois had their work culture, which acted as an informal organization through which they could resist the gender segregation and discrimination they endured day after day. Selectors at Owens-Illinois were experts in the art of resistance under the surface, actions that were not necessarily recognized as being resistance because they occurred outside the realm of formal labor organizations. Selectors fought gender segregation in ways that historians of working class women have only recently begun to address. These acts of resistance under the surface were separate and distinct from traditional acts of resistance that occurred within labor organizations,

but they must be included in any discussion of resistance in the glass industry and how that resistance helped to end gender segregation in Huntington's glass industry.<sup>2</sup>

This study explores the different ways in which women resisted the patriarchal culture of the glass industry through an examination of Huntington's most successful glass manufacturer, Owens-Illinois. It addresses the question of resistance outside the structure of formal labor organizations. In other words, how did women in the glass industry resist discriminatory practices when they had no labor union to work on their behalf? Was there some type of "informal" collective effort between women in selecting prior to the mid-1940s that allowed them to resist their subordinate status in the plant? If there was some type of collective effort among the women at Owens, did it impact their effectiveness within the union after the formation of Local 256 in any way?

Popular understandings of workplace resistance are often associated with labor unions or large-scale social movements, but resistance can take many forms. When scholars limit their study of women's workplace resistance only to that which takes place within labor unions, they neglect part of the larger story of women's resistance in the workplace in general and in the glass industry in particular. Examining selectors at Owens-Illinois and how work culture aids in resistance fills in the gap that exists in the historiography of women in the glass industry and lends a better understanding of the different ways in which women workers battled gender segregation and discrimination. In doing so, it becomes apparent that these different methods of resistance were closely connected by the work culture itself. This thesis argues that the beginning of union

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<sup>2</sup> While the "official" policy of gender segregation at Owens-Illinois ended with the Opal Mann decision that eliminated the practice of labeling jobs "male" or "female," old seniority lists still existed. These lists made it very difficult for women at Owens to get jobs outside the selecting department for years afterward. It was not until the method of calculating seniority was revised in the 1970s that women began moving into jobs in other areas of the plant in greater numbers.

involvement was not the beginning of resistance for the women of Owens-Illinois; the women of Owens created a unified community, a work culture, among themselves that enabled them to resist the patriarchal culture of the glass industry and exert some control over their own work experiences even before they had access to union representation.

Historians provide us with ample literature on the use of gender segregation in the workplace, why it was so pervasive in the glass industry, and why it took so long for the practice to end even after increasing numbers of women held “male” jobs during World War II. Alice Kessler-Harris’ analysis of gender discrimination in the workplace provides a clear understanding of the concept of “women’s work” that is rooted in traditional notions of women being best suited for marriage and housework.<sup>3</sup> Kessler-Harris argues that the patriarchal concept of certain jobs being more suited to women arrived in the colonies with the earliest English and European settlers who perceived women as only wives and mothers who were meant to perform domestic tasks or jobs requiring manual dexterity. According to Kessler-Harris, the domestic label attached to women’s abilities led to the same types of jobs for women outside the home. Jobs that required manual dexterity or attention to detail were believed to be better suited for women than men, and placing women only in traditionally female jobs meant that all other jobs were to be set aside for men. This rationale about what constituted women’s work was used in the glass industry to relegate women to jobs that required the same domestic qualities, such as cleaning and packing the finished product.

While the image of Rosie the Riveter conjures up a sense that gender segregation ended during World War II, historians point out that the practice of labeling jobs by sex

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<sup>3</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford, 2003).

continued for decades after the war ended. Ruth Milkman's analysis of gender segregation examines why the practice remained so pervasive in the workplace well into the twentieth century. Recognizing that many women performed "male" jobs during World War II, Milkman argues that the reasons jobs continued to be labeled as "male" or "female" are much more complicated than historians had previously considered. Milkman contends that designating certain jobs by sex "reflects the economic, political, and social constraints that are operative when that industry's labor market is initially formed."<sup>4</sup> This early conception of sex typing is the basis for Milkman's contention that segregation by sex becomes part of the culture of an organization, thereby making it not only difficult to end but also generally accepted by men and by women. Milkman's theories allow us to understand why gender segregation remained so pervasive in the workplace, even after many women held "male" jobs during World War II.

More recent scholarship on the sexual division of labor focuses on the period following WWII when more women not only entered the bastion of male work but also became members of labor unions. Dennis Deslippe asserts that gender segregation and other forms of discrimination continued until passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which, under Title VII of the Act, banned sex discrimination in employment. Even then women unionists often had to force employers and national unions into compliance with lawsuits.<sup>5</sup> This same situation existed at Owens-Illinois where selectors were involved

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis A. Deslippe, *Rights Not Roses: Unions and the Rise of Working-Class Feminism, 1945-1980* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 2.

with a union and an employer who did little to end gender segregation until a lawsuit forced them to comply with Federal law.

For centuries, the craft of glassmaking was a strictly male endeavor. Warren C. Scoville illustrates how, by the early twentieth century, glassmaking remained a craft industry that operated primarily within family owned facilities and, despite the introduction of mechanization into the glassmaking process, was still “a handicraft industry employing large numbers of highly skilled workmen.”<sup>6</sup> It is not just coincidental that employees of glass houses were referred to as “workmen.” While glass houses occasionally employed women, their jobs consisted only of working with the finished product performing tasks such as cleaning, polishing, and packing. Although increased mechanization in the twentieth century eliminated much of the skill from the glassmaking process, women were never considered by their employer to be glassmakers; only men who were highly skilled in the craft were referred to as glassmakers.<sup>7</sup> Scoville’s analysis allows a better understanding of the glass industry’s use of gender segregation and why the practice remained well into the twentieth century even after much of the “craft” was beginning to leave the glassmaking process.

Resistance to gender segregation began to occur almost from the moment that segregation was instituted in the workplace. Most working class historians have focused their studies of resistance in the workplace only in terms of what has been accomplished within the labor movement. Ruth Milkman claims “virtually all of the protests against managerial sex discrimination in the postwar [World War II] transition emanated from

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<sup>6</sup> Warren C. Scoville, *Revolution in Glassmaking* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), vii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

the labor movement.”<sup>8</sup> In her analysis of postwar women in the auto and electrical industries, Milkman studies resistance to gender segregation only in terms of the women’s participation in the United Auto Workers and the United Electrical Workers. But did women resist gender segregation, or any other form of discrimination, only within the structure of formal labor organizations? A theory that places resistance to gender segregation only within labor unions eliminates the likelihood that women found other ways to resist, whether they belonged to a union or not, and it excludes any subordinate groups who did not have access to formal organizations.

Faced with a workplace that consigned women to second-class status and in the absence of any formal organization, such as a union, to help them, work culture served women workers as an informal organization of strength. Historian Susan Porter Benson forms her concept of work culture by comparing it to her definition of culture as a resource of aid for individuals, and, in doing so, sees work culture as that same type of helpful and supportive framework.<sup>9</sup> In her examination of the cigar industry, Patricia Cooper illustrates how the patriarchal structure of the workplace helped women workers create their own distinct work culture apart from their male co-workers. Cooper argues that work culture is not just “a collection of interesting traditions,” but is also “a coherent system of ideas and practices . . . through which workers modified, mediated, and resisted the limits of their jobs.”<sup>10</sup> This work culture enabled women to challenge traditional patriarchal structures in the workplace. In defiance of the separate spheres that relegate

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<sup>8</sup> Milkman, *Gender at Work*, 128.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 2.

women to subordinate roles, the women of Cooper's study formed a sense of "solidarity out of separateness," and they were able to exercise some control over their jobs.<sup>11</sup> The work culture in Cooper's analysis was not created within a formal organization but among women who had no union to work on their behalf. Cooper's study provides a framework within which to examine the work culture created by the women of Owens-Illinois.

Recent scholarship on resistance demonstrates that much of it has gone unnoticed by previous scholars as actual workplace resistance. James C. Scott asserts that much of what constitutes resistance is seen as seemingly harmless actions that result in no apparent gain.<sup>12</sup> Scott's use of the concepts of "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts" illustrates how public acknowledgement is not necessarily needed for resistance to be effective.<sup>13</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley uses Scott's theory to challenge working class scholars who have asserted that resistance occurs only within formal organizations. Kelley asserts that many acts of resistance happen in the "so-called margins of struggle, whether it is the unorganized, often spontaneous battles with authority or social movements thought to be inauthentic or unrepresentative of the 'community's interests.'"<sup>14</sup> Through his analysis of the black working class, Kelley demonstrates that resistance "on the margins" is just as valuable to a subordinate group in their struggle for fairness as resistance from within formal labor organizations. Kelley challenges working

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>12</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>14</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 4.

class historians to consider the importance of organized and unorganized resistance because they are “two sides of the same coin that make up the history of working-class resistance.”<sup>15</sup> The theories of Scott and Kelley help us recognize how acts of resistance take many different forms.

By using the theories of Robin Kelley and James C. Scott, this thesis builds upon the work of Ruth Milkman and Pat Cooper to demonstrate that resistance to gender segregation occurred not only within the constraints of traditional labor organizations but also outside of these labor organizations. By examining the women of Owens-Illinois, this thesis demonstrates that resistance under the surface was a way of life for the women in selecting years before they were organized into Local 256. Women at Owens-Illinois were experts at improving their daily work lives because they had created a work culture that fostered defiance of the status quo.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, America experienced a long period of substantial economic growth. The Industrial Revolution transformed America from an agrarian society into an economy that focused on machines and manufacturing. As large cities grew even larger, products that previously were produced in the home could now be purchased from merchants, and new products were developed through the use of new tools and machines. Textiles, steel, and glass were just a few of the industries that enjoyed sustained growth, and as more people purchased the products made in America’s factories industrial expansion worked its way into smaller towns.

One such town was Huntington, West Virginia. Founded in 1871 by Collis P. Huntington, an executive for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, Huntington experienced rapid growth following the turn of the twentieth century. The presence of the C&O

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.

Railroad and the proximity of the Ohio River made it an easy decision for many businesses to locate their operations in Huntington. Garment makers, cigar factories, and steel manufacturers were among the industries that employed large numbers of Huntington's citizens in the early twentieth century.

One early Huntington industry that employed relatively large numbers of people was glassmaking. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries glassmaking experienced a period of growth. The "craft" of glassmaking remained one that was performed primarily in family-owned glass factories, and many steps in the process of making glass products still required little in the way of substantial manufacturing equipment. This allowed glass manufacturers to move their operations from one location to another with relative ease in order to gain access to cheaper and more abundant fuel and resources necessary to make the finished product. With its readily available rail transportation and an abundant supply of natural gas and other raw materials necessary for making glass, Huntington became an attractive location for glass manufacturers.

In 1891 the West Virginia Flint Bottle Company, one of the first glass factories to locate in the area, began operations in a nearby town called Central City, which was incorporated into Huntington in 1909. Owner Forbes Holton sold the factory to German immigrant Anton Zihlman who reopened it as the Huntington Tumbler Company in 1900.<sup>16</sup> Over the next two decades various glass manufacturers moved into and out of Huntington. Camp Glass, which moved its operations from Mount Vernon, Ohio to Huntington, opened in December 1913.<sup>17</sup> The Charles Boldt Glass Manufacturing

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<sup>16</sup> Lola Roush Miller, *Images of America: Central City* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 23.

<sup>17</sup> "Glass Works Opens," *The Huntington (WV) Herald Dispatch*, 2 December 1913.

Company, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, began operations in Huntington in October 1914 with nearly three hundred workers.<sup>18</sup> By 1921, Huntington boasted five glass manufacturers with the addition of Interstate Window Glass Company and West Virginia Glass Manufacturing.<sup>19</sup> Through the decade of the 1920s, as other glass factories closed their doors and left Huntington, the Charles Boldt Glass Company stayed, and by 1929 it had become the Owens-Illinois Glass Company.<sup>20</sup> Owens-Illinois remained a vital element in Huntington's economy until 1993.

Charles Boldt began its operations with a workforce comprised entirely of men who were skilled in the craft of glassmaking.<sup>21</sup> By 1929, however, Owens-Illinois began using women to select and pack the glassware for shipment. Like other glass manufacturers of the era, Owens-Illinois instituted an official policy of occupational sex typing to label the job of selecting a "female" job and all other jobs in the plant as "male" jobs. Thus, the sexual division of labor became officially entrenched into the glass industry for decades, but while it was common for men who were skilled in the "craft" of glassmaking to belong to a union, women were not afforded the same organizational opportunities.

Glass factories became widely unionized in the late nineteenth century. One of the first large glassmaker's unions was the Window Glass Worker's Assembly L.A. 300 of the Knights of Labor. After the demise of the Knights of Labor, glassworkers

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<sup>18</sup> "Glass Bottles to be Made Here Next Monday," *The Huntington (WV) Advertiser*, 5 October 1914.

<sup>19</sup> R.L. Polk and Company, *Huntington, WV City Directory* (Pittsburgh: R.L. Polk and Company Publishing, 1921-1922).

<sup>20</sup> James R. Haworth, *The Huntington (WV) Advertiser*, 26 June 1954.

<sup>21</sup> "Huntington Gets Huge Glass Plant," *The Huntington (WV) Herald Dispatch*, 16 October 1913.

organized under the umbrella of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which was established in 1886 under the leadership of Samuel Gompers. The AFL was very successful at organizing glass workers. Just days after beginning their operations in Huntington, the Mold Repair Department at the Charles Boldt Glass Company was organized into Local 75 of the American Flint Glass Workers Union, and in 1934 the men in the Machine Department at Owens-Illinois formed Local 116 of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association (GBBA).<sup>22</sup>

The AFL made some attempts to organize women in glass factories prior to the 1940s, but many of these attempts were unsuccessful. Over a two-year period from 1934 to 1936, one of the largest glass unions, the Glass Bottle Blowers Association (GBBA), organized twenty-three new unions, but only one included women.<sup>23</sup> Without any recognized union working on their behalf women remained in “unskilled” jobs, working with the finished product and receiving very low wages. It was not until World War II that efforts to organize women in the glass industry began in earnest. Selectors at Owens-Illinois were organized into Local 256 of the GBBA in 1945, but prior to that they were still able to find ways to fight discrimination. Selectors at Owens-Illinois relied instead on their work culture as a means through which to struggle against their subordinate status.

But why concentrate on women’s resistance in one glass manufacturer in one Appalachian town? First, Huntington was typical of the small to medium towns in the

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<sup>22</sup> Owens-Brockway, “Seventy-fifth Anniversary Informational Pamphlet of Owens-Brockway Glass,” October 1989, The Owens-Illinois Collection, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, WV, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lee W. Minton, *Flame and Heart: A History of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association of the United States and Canada* (Merkle Press, 1961), 100.

Appalachian region that were so attractive to glass manufacturers during this time period. As a result, many glass companies chose to begin new glass factories or move their existing operations to Huntington. Second, Owens-Illinois was in operation from 1914 until it closed in December of 1993, and at the height of its production in the 1950s it employed nearly 2,500 workers while infusing \$7.5 million in annual payroll into Huntington's economy, making it not only the town's most successful glass manufacturer but also a major force in Huntington's economy for decades.<sup>24</sup> Third, the fact that Owens-Illinois operated for nearly eighty years allows for an examination of gender segregation and resistance over a long period of time, from the Depression through the 1960s, decades that were central to the history of Owens-Illinois and the city of Huntington. This time period also resonates on a much larger scale from which we can draw implications about glass manufacturers in other cities.

Given its nearly eighty years of operation, a great deal of information exists concerning Owens-Illinois. The most helpful source is a series of interviews conducted with retired selectors from Owens-Illinois. In these interviews, which are found at Marshall University's Morrow Library, women and men recall their years at the glass plant and discuss specific topics related to this research. These topics include company employment practices, gender segregation, and labor unions. In addition, many of the women interviewed discuss their relationships with each other and their feelings about the jobs they performed at Owens. Women such as Opal Mann and Mabel Adkins address ways in which they and others took steps to make their tedious and strenuous jobs more enjoyable. These interviews provide specific examples of how the women at

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<sup>24</sup> Tim R. Massey, "Shutdown Coming by Year's End," *The Huntington (WV) Herald Dispatch*, 1 October 1993.

Owens-Illinois formed a work culture that allowed them to help each other through difficult circumstances, aid each other to make their jobs easier, and work together inside and outside the plant to forge a sense of “community” among themselves.

In addition, records from the former West Virginia Labor History Association contain information concerning the women of Owens-Illinois and their participation in their union, Local #256 of the Glass Bottle Blowers of America (GBBA), and the Huntington District Labor Council (HDLC). Through examining minutes from the meetings of the HDLC it is apparent that the work culture of selecting enhanced women’s involvement in Local 256. Selectors were prepared to assume positions of leadership within their union from years spent working together within their work culture as evidenced by the fact that Local 256 was much more involved in the Huntington labor community than either of the men’s unions at Owens-Illinois. These minutes demonstrate that selectors were active participants in union business and in the local labor community. Experiences such as these instilled in the women of Owens an understanding of how to work within the system to bring about change while also encouraging them to work together as a cohesive group.

The women of Owens-Illinois were experts at resistance under the surface because they were able to create Patricia Cooper’s notion of “solidarity out of separateness.” For the women of Owens, these acts of resistance took many forms. Friendly conversations and jokes while standing on the selecting line helped to pass the time more quickly. Sneaking outside for a few minutes to smoke a cigarette or eating a snack while standing on the selecting line may have been against the rules, but that did not stop women from doing it or from helping others to do the same. Sharing brief

opportunities to sit down on the job was a way that selectors helped each other to beat the fatigue that inevitably affected them each day. It was a way for them to show their support for each other, because they were all segregated into one specific area of the plant. Historians must examine efforts of resistance that were not part of the “official” record, because those acts of resistance were just as important to the success of working class women as their efforts within labor organizations.

The formation of the work culture of selecting is the focus of Chapter One. Using the theories of Susan Porter Benson and Patricia Cooper this chapter defines work culture and examines how and where it is created. At Owens-Illinois, selectors’ work culture was formed both in the workplace and outside the plant. In the workplace, work culture was formed in places such as the selecting line or the women’s lounge. Work culture also resulted from moments selectors shared with each other away from the job whether in each other’s homes or during together. Gender segregation and the separate spaces that segregation creates may have been used as a way to place women into subordinate positions, but selectors at Owens-Illinois used those spaces to create their own strong and vibrant work culture.

Chapter Two examines the ways in which women at Owens-Illinois used their work culture to resist both official policies and unofficial practices they perceived to be unfair. Using the theories of Robin Kelley and James C. Scott, this chapter shows how eating on the selecting line or adding a few minutes to the length of their breaks were methods used by selectors to gain autonomy over their jobs. Through these examples, this chapter argues that selectors did not need a labor union or any other formal

organization to improve their daily work experiences; instead, selectors called upon their work culture to resist the limits of their jobs.

The years following the formation of Local 256 are the subject of Chapter Three, and it is here that we see the cumulative benefit of fifteen years of work culture on selectors' experiences in the union. By examining records of the Huntington District Labor Council, we understand that selectors at Owens-Illinois were much more active and important members of the local labor community than either of the men's unions at Owens. Furthermore, Chapter Three demonstrates how selectors continued to use their work culture to address issues of importance to them that their national union did not. The beginning of Local 256 did not signal the end of work culture as an important force for selectors at Owens-Illinois; instead, work culture enhanced the effectiveness of Local 256 and continued to positively impact selectors for decades.

The conclusion recounts the end of the official policy of gender segregation at Owens-Illinois. Through an examination of a lawsuit brought against Owens under Section VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, questions that inevitably arise from this thesis are examined. Here it becomes clear that not all women in selecting were necessarily opposed to gender segregation. In addition, long range effects of the end of the sexual division of labor at Owens-Illinois come into view as we see the merging of Local 256 with the men's GBBA union, Local 255, and the beginning of a more diverse workforce at Owens-Illinois. Furthermore, the conclusion raises additional questions for future consideration.

My original purpose for this research was to examine how the women of Owens-Illinois resisted, and ultimately ended, the "official" practice of gender segregation in

Huntington's most successful glass manufacturer. It was my contention that it was their involvement in the GBBA Local #256 that made their efforts successful. However, it eventually became apparent that there were many other things the women of Owens did that made a difference in their daily jobs. All throughout the interviews with Owens retirees were stories of how the women worked together to make their jobs a little easier and their lives a little happier while they worked on the "lehr."<sup>25</sup>

Those stories are not part of the "official" history of the women of Owens-Illinois. Those stories are part of the "hidden transcripts" that make up the rest of their story. Those "hidden transcripts" provide details of other forms of resistance at Owens-Illinois, and they offer us a look at the work culture the women of Owens created for themselves. The separate spheres that had been used to subordinate them into weaker positions fostered an environment that allowed the women of Owens-Illinois to create their own work culture. Just like the women Patricia Cooper studied in America's cigar factories, the women of Owens-Illinois had created "solidarity out of separateness," because they all experienced the same poor treatment on the job. They were all "watched" by management from the walkway perched high above their workstation. They were all paid much lower wages relative to the wages that the men at Owens made. They were all made to feel that their contributions were somehow worth less simply because they were female.

The actions they took were more than just a way to "thumb their noses" at their white male bosses and co-workers. Their actions were a way to resist their gender-defined roles within the plant that had, for decades, been used to separate them into jobs

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<sup>25</sup> "Lehr" is the name of the annealing oven through which finished glassware travels so it will cool off slowly. It is also a term that women at Owens-Illinois used to refer to the conveyor that carried the finished product to them after the annealing process.

that were perceived to be less important than the jobs that men held. They were acts of resistance just as much as any actions taken within the union and were just as instrumental in ending gender segregation at Owens-Illinois.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE WORK CULTURE OF SELECTING

I went to the selecting department  
where you work in glass and I took  
part in their way of working.

--Mary Carmichael, Owens-Illinois

Being segregated into only one area of the plant was “business as usual” for women at Owens-Illinois. When a new woman was hired to work in the production area of the plant it was expected, and accepted, that she would spend her shifts on the selecting line. In 1961, after eighteen years spent working in a non-production area of the plant, Mary Carmichael’s job was eliminated, and she transferred into the only production job available to women at Owens, the selecting line, where she “took part in their way of working.”<sup>1</sup> As an eighteen-year employee, there were many facets of the Owens-Illinois operation Mary Carmichael must have been aware of, and among these was a distinct awareness that women in selecting had their own way of working together as a group.

Just as other glass manufacturers had done for decades, Owens-Illinois employed an official policy of designating one particular job within the plant as “female,” selecting the finished product, while all other jobs in the production end of the plant were officially “male.” In addition, men held all supervisory jobs in the plant, including supervision of selectors. Women were in jobs that paid less and that had less status because of their

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Carmichael, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” interview by Jennifer Stock, *The Oral History of Appalachia Program*, Barbara E. Smith, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia, 1994, 2.

“unskilled” nature. However, the fact that the women of Owens-Illinois were figuratively and literally separated from and subordinate to the men of the plant did not leave them powerless to improve their situation. The women of Owens created a community among themselves that imbued in them a sense of togetherness and strength. Despite being segregated into one area of the plant women in the selecting department at Owens-Illinois identified themselves not as a large number of individuals who just happened to work together in the same department. Instead, selectors saw themselves as a group of women who shared many common experiences and as an organization of workers who faced the same problems and difficulties on the job. These common experiences bonded selectors together in a way that helped them create an informal organization, or “work culture,” through which they could help themselves and each other on and off the job.

Work culture formed by any group is distinct and individual to a particular set of circumstances in the workplace. To understand the ways in which the women at Owens-Illinois formed their particular work culture it is necessary to formulate a definition of work culture and position it within the specific circumstances of the women in selecting. In her examination of work culture among early twentieth century sales clerks, historian Susan Porter Benson began with an analysis of the term “culture,” which, she argues, is a resource, or a useful set of situations individuals can use to their advantage. According to Benson, culture is a “set of frameworks, attitudes, and accepted standards of behavior that one draws upon in dealing with society, the real-world circumstances in which people live their lives.”<sup>2</sup> Benson asserts work culture is analogous to her idea of culture in that workers call upon those same concepts of ideas, attitudes, and standards of behavior to

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, 3.

carve out their own self-directed sphere of action in the workplace.<sup>3</sup> Benson also makes the connection that sex segregation pervasive in workplaces, schools, and homes may have created a situation that limited women's choices, but it also provided a safe and cloistered space within which to work together more freely with each other rather than with men. It is these safe spaces, Benson argues, which allow workers to develop beliefs and common practices and therefore carve out their own independent, and self-governing, space within the workplace, and it is through Benson's arguments that we can provide evidence of those same types of safe spaces for women at Owens-Illinois.

Historian Patricia Cooper expands Benson's ideas of work to culture center on the issue of masculinity and men's attempts to maintain their own workplace autonomy. Cooper argues that craft industries, such as cigar making, maintained that autonomy by physically separating women into their own workspaces. For women who are physically separated into their own workspace, segregation can result in a level of self-sufficiency, which promotes acknowledgment of their collective interests both as workers and as women.<sup>4</sup> These collective interests, according to Cooper, produce "solidarity out of separateness" for segregated women that both creates, and is created by, their work culture.<sup>5</sup> According to Cooper, despite society's traditionally "masculine" labor market, women have always been able to create a work culture that has helped them attempt to protect their own interests in the workplace. This same type of male dominated structure

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

was present at Owens-Illinois, and selectors were able to carve out their own vibrant work culture through which they protected their own interests.

Understanding the concept of work culture has not been easily accomplished due to the informal nature of sources concerning the subject. Susan Porter Benson points out, “traditional historical sources focus on the written and the formal, and the very essence of work culture is that it is oral and informal.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it can be difficult to define work culture, both what it is and how it is formed. Like the types of work culture examined by Benson and Cooper, the selectors’ work culture at Owens-Illinois was both oral and informal. No “official record” exists with which to prove the existence of any type of organization between women in the selecting department, but through an analysis of interviews with retired selectors it becomes apparent that work culture was an important part of the daily existence for women at Owens-Illinois.

According to Benson, women’s work culture can emerge within the workplace in myriad forms, but all varieties contain three elements, which not only describe the formation of women’s work culture but also distinguish it from the work culture of men.<sup>7</sup> These include a consciousness of distinct physical and psychic spaces for women, socialization that cultivates supportive and considerate behavior, and nearly identical experiences of domestic and family life.<sup>8</sup> All three elements were present in the experiences of the women at Owens-Illinois, but the selectors’ circumstances also contained a fourth element—an awareness of policies and procedures, both official and

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<sup>6</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 229.

<sup>7</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

unofficial, on the part of management that favored the men in the plant and served to discriminate against women. Selectors' perception of unequal treatment fueled their discontent and helped bond them more closely in opposition to a management style that, in the minds of many selectors, saw women not as co-workers but as expendable hirelings. For selectors, work culture was a separate and distinct set of beliefs and practices, and work culture was also a feeling of solidarity with each other. But more than that, work culture for the women in selecting was also an informal organization through which they could act together, and individually, to resist the limits of their jobs and improve their daily work lives in the absence of any other organization or group in the workplace that might do the same.

Selectors at Owens-Illinois were cognizant of separateness because they faced the reality of separation each day as they entered the plant. The gendered ideology of work in the 1930s contributed to a consensus that women should remain at home, and those that did venture outside the home and into the labor market were subject to a "sex-segregated labor market [that] resembled the division of labor in the family."<sup>9</sup> Like many other glass manufacturers, Owens-Illinois was forced to respond to increasing mechanization of the glass making process in the early twentieth century, which eroded much of the "craft" aspect of glassmaking. Automation led to a decreased need for the actual skills that had been the hallmark of the glass making process for hundreds of years. Recognizing they could make glass more cheaply by hiring women and paying them lower wages, Owens-Illinois designated the job of selecting to be an "unskilled" job, and by 1930 all selectors in the Huntington plant were women. All other jobs in the

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<sup>9</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 19.

manufacturing end of the plant were officially “skilled” jobs that could only be performed by men. Limiting women to only one particular job portrayed women as unable to perform any other job in the plant, and selectors recognized how this policy separated them figuratively from all other who worked in the plant.

Selectors were not only separated from men by their job status, they were physically separated as well. In selecting, women were stationed alongside conveyors that moved along at a steady pace, bringing rows and rows of newly-made bottles and jars in front of each selector. As the last station in the process of production, the selecting department was physically separated from the entire manufacturing end of the plant, and the only men present were supervisors of the selecting department. This physical division could not only imply that the contribution of women was less important, but it also elevated the status of males within the plant, who were able to work in all other areas of the plant based upon their level of seniority, ability, and skill.

While segregation emphasized the fact that men were the central characters in the work process at Owens, the line provided selectors with their own space within which they could bond together as workers and as women. In her examination of early twentieth century cigar workers, Patricia Cooper argues that “in shops where all the workers were women and all the managers were men, the sexual division could simply reinforce male dominance, yet it could also bond women together in their own form of sexual solidarity.”<sup>10</sup> Like the women studied by Cooper, selectors at Owens-Illinois had a segregated workspace, the selecting line, which they could, and did, use to their advantage instead of their disadvantage. While on the line, selectors could talk with each

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<sup>10</sup> Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker*, 239.

other about many topics, including work and home life, discussing the events of the day, problems at home, or even supervisors who were difficult to work for. The selecting line brought women together day after day for hours at a time. While this segregated space was devised as a method of keeping women in a subordinate position, the selecting line provided them with something they used to their advantage—a separate space that was their own. The selecting line was one of many places at Owens-Illinois within which selectors could bond together and form their sense of identity as a group.

Another sexual division of physical space existed at Owens-Illinois as well, one that the women both could enjoy and use to their advantage in creating their work culture—a separate women’s lounge. The women’s lounge was a refuge for selectors, and they considered it to be a place that was theirs alone; it was a place that men could not encroach upon. Sadie Page fondly recalled the feelings of freedom and camaraderie the lounge provided selectors. “We had our own lounge, and it was wonderful. It was so private and nice . . . it was just great. We enjoyed our lounge, and we could go in there and kick our legs up and throw our shoes off and we could do what we wanted to.”<sup>11</sup> In their lounge, women could relax and be themselves, and they could also enjoy a few moments with each other and not have to concern themselves with the men in the plant or their male supervisors. Like the sales clerks in Susan Porter Benson’s study, the women’s lounge at Owens-Illinois was a tangible space where men were not allowed.<sup>12</sup> The lounge afforded selectors the opportunity to form bonds and to share their

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<sup>11</sup> Sadie Page, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” interview by Jennifer Stock, *The Oral History in Appalachia Program*, Barbara E. Smith, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, WV, 1994, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 3.

experiences at work and at home in a way the selecting line could not. On the selecting line women had to come in contact with men because men supervised women, but the lounge was a place where men were not allowed to enter and where selectors could spend time only with other women. The women's lounge was a "females only" space that emphasized the positive aspects of segregation.

Work culture among selectors at Owens-Illinois was also a product of socialization between women, which, as with Susan Porter Benson's sales clerks, ultimately "fostered cooperative and sympathetic traits and the ability to function through influence rather than authority."<sup>13</sup> Benson argues that segregation of workers often produces tension between departments but that within a department that outside tension can create a collegial atmosphere between workers reinforce a propensity for workers to associate almost entirely with members of their sector.<sup>14</sup> Benson's department store clerks would eat their lunch together, spend their break time together, and would even use their time away from the job to go on short weekend trips or entire vacations together.<sup>15</sup> These same types of socialization, both on and off the job, were commonplace at Owens-Illinois as well.

Socialization on the job could be used to make new selectors feel like part of a group. Laughing at daily occurrences and teasing each other was a common form of socializing between selectors at Owens-Illinois, and they could also be used as a way to indoctrinate a new worker into the selecting department. Opal Mann remembered how

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 242-243.

there was no formal training during her first days at Owens in February 1931, but she vividly recalled how, after causing a pile-up on the selecting line, another selector laughed at her misfortune. “There was a woman working on a “lehr” a little bit [away] from where I was. She was looking down there, and she just died laughing at me.”<sup>16</sup> The reaction of the women told Mann they had all experienced the same type of problem their first days. Mann was somewhat embarrassed by the laughter, but she quickly came to realize that such teasing was a sign she was being accepted into the culture of selecting.

Selectors were able to create opportunities for socialization in many different areas of the plant where they could gather together in groups of two or more. Susan Porter Benson asserts “huddling, or gathering together and talking, [is] the most universally remarked feature of saleswomen’s work culture,” and selectors at Owens-Illinois found many places in which to gather.<sup>17</sup> While socialization was officially discouraged on the selecting line, selectors were expert at creating opportunities to talk while packing the glassware. The employee cafeteria was a also frequent scene of discussions between selectors. The women’s lounge was a place for friendly conversations between selectors as well, and in the lounge women could talk about any subject without the possibility of any men in the plant hearing them. Simple conversations in which they shared a laugh over work that had piled up at home helped to alleviate the stress and make each feel as if she were not the only one experiencing difficulties. The workplace provided women in selecting with numerous places and

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<sup>16</sup> Opal Mann, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 5.

<sup>17</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 245.

occasions for socializing, and they took advantage of the chance to socialize as often as possible.

Opportunities for socializing both on and off the job made for real friendships between selectors. Patricia Cooper argues that friendships between workers are “fundamental to women’s culture... and instill in the participants a strong sense of themselves as a group.”<sup>18</sup> Building friendships was a significant part of the work culture of selecting at Owens-Illinois and led to other ways of socializing with each other. All the women interviewed expressed feelings of deep friendship toward their co-workers in selecting, particularly those on the same work shift. References to their fellow selectors as friends and as family were commonplace for women at Owens. Opal Mann fondly remembered those friendships. “I made a lot of awfully good friends over the years... they just seemed like family to you.”<sup>19</sup> Friendships were formed partly because they stood alongside each other for eight hours each day, and a feeling of being more like a family than just co-workers resulted from spending more time each week with selectors that they could with their own families. The camaraderie they formed was long lasting and was welcome in good times and difficult ones. Geneva Shepard described her friendship with Opal Mann and how, despite pressure from some in management, she stood by Mann during the lawsuit she filed against the company. Asked by a supervisor why she was talking to the person who was responsible for a lawsuit against the company, Shepard replied “because she [is] a real good friend of mine.”<sup>20</sup> Faced with

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<sup>18</sup> Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker*, 237.

<sup>19</sup> Opal Mann, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 28.

<sup>20</sup> Geneva Shepard, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 4.

potential difficulties from plant management because of her close friendship with Mann, Geneva Shepard chose to rely on her relationships with women in the plant as a source of strength. The friendships between selectors at Owens-Illinois contributed to recognition of selectors as a group, not simply as individuals who worked alongside each other, and it was within this collective identity of themselves as a group that selectors formed their work culture.

The work culture of selecting was also formed through socialization away from the job. Women in the selecting line had their own unofficial club, the “Owenettes,” and being a member meant that you could take part in many planned activities away from the job. These activities represented more than just a fun way to spend a day off; they were also ways to strengthen their bonds of solidarity and their work culture. Selectors recalled how they would take trips together on their days off in order to get away from the stresses of work and home. As an “Owenette,” Mary Carmichael took many of those trips and fondly remembered spending some of her free time with other women on her shift. “I belonged to the ‘Owenettes.’ I baked cakes and [raised] money for many of the trips [we took] together on our days off.”<sup>21</sup> For the women at Owens-Illinois, it was not just the trips but also the opportunity to work together in making the trip happen that was part of their work culture. Referring to themselves as the “Owenettes” was a name that signified a unity between selectors, and it also demonstrates that selectors saw themselves as a group of women and as an organization of workers.

Selectors also planned frequent social gatherings at each other’s homes. As friends who worked closely alongside each other, these social get-togethers were another

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Carmichael, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 2.

way in which work culture was created and reinforced. Many of these parties took place at the home of Mary Carmichael, whose house on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue was just a few blocks away from Owens-Illinois' plant and was within walking distance for many women who lived in the same neighborhood. Carmichael recalled in her interview how the parties could take many forms. "We'd have cake and ice cream or something like that. Or maybe I'd fix a covered dish and let each one bring something. I did that when I lived [in a] big house . . . it had a big dining room and a big kitchen. And I never did have men [at the parties]." <sup>22</sup> No matter the menu or purpose, though, they all provided the same opportunities for socializing and solidarity among the women of selecting, with men decidedly absent from these gatherings. It was no accident that men did not attend, for women were intent on providing each other with a means through which they could support and encourage each other. Time spent socializing together and away from men helped reinforce the separate spaces that women created for themselves at Owens-Illinois.

Writing about these frequent social gatherings in the monthly employee newsletter, *The Huntingtonizer*, ensured that plant management and the other men in the plant were well aware of the friendships between women in selecting. Everyone in the plant knew about the "Owenettes" because selectors used this name as the title of their monthly column in the employee newsletter, and each edition contained stories about their activities off the job as well as on. Margaret Tomlin's reminder to the Owenettes of "a big dinner and a good time at the Colonial Inn tonight" or a report that "Kathleen Tooley had Emma Auxier, Ruth McCallister, and Ruth Pittman over for breakfast last week" were the types of recurrent news that showed up in every edition of the employee

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<sup>22</sup> Mary Carmichael, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 13.

newsletter.<sup>23</sup> These get-togethers could happen at any time of day, such as breakfast for those working the midnight shift or dinners at a local restaurant for selectors who had the day off. No matter the circumstances surrounding these opportunities to socialize, selectors were friends both on the job and away from the plant, and everyone in the plant was cognizant of that fact.

The closeness and friendship between women in selecting was not a secret within the plant. Men in the plant were very much aware that women at Owens-Illinois were a tight-knit group and that they routinely socialized together in their off hours. Carl Dial's mother worked in the plant in the 1930s when he was young and still in school, and he was quite aware of time away from the job his mother would spend with co-workers from the "lehr." Dial recalled in his interview how "mom would go out with the girls she worked with. They would go out to a restaurant and have dinner or whatever, and she would come home and tell us all about it. It was the same thing all down through the years."<sup>24</sup> Work culture was formed early among the women of Owens-Illinois, and it remained alive and well long after Carl Dial's mother left the selecting line. Like female cigar makers who spent time together off the job because they belonged to the same church, women's alliance, or community organization, women at Owens-Illinois chose to be friends with each other on and away from the selecting line. These many opportunities to socialize helped create and maintain the work culture of selecting.

The third element inherent in the formation of women's work culture, near identical experiences of domestic and family life, were ever-present for women at

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<sup>23</sup> Owens-Illinois, "The Huntingtonizer," Employee Newsletter, May 14, 1954, Owens-Illinois Employee Newsletter Collection on loan from Emma Chapman, Huntington, WV.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Dial, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 26.

Owens-Illinois.<sup>25</sup> In the 1930s and '40s, society reinforced very strict social and cultural norms upon women regarding their specific "role." Increasing numbers of women worked outside the home, but they were still expected to fulfill the nurturing roles of wife, mother, or daughter.<sup>26</sup> The daily reality for most women at Owens-Illinois was no different. Not only did selectors at Owens-Illinois work outside the home, but they also worked inside the home, and these competing spheres of job and home were common experiences for selectors. When most men in the factory finished their shift they returned home to a living space that was taken care of by their wife. Selectors could not enjoy that luxury as they were the ones returning to a home and family they had to care for. Difficulties associated with the dual responsibilities of work and home were experienced by all selectors, and the knowledge that women they stood alongside day after day fostered an empathetic environment between selectors.

The issue of childcare was a domestic duty that affected the vast majority of selectors and often caused more problems than others for women at Owens-Illinois. Regardless of whether a woman was a married or single parent, the burden of taking care of children fell upon mothers. Shift work required women at Owens to rotate the hours they were scheduled to work on a weekly basis. Married and unmarried mothers had to rely upon family members, friends, and neighbors to watch the children while they were at work, and others had to hire paid babysitters. When the sitter was unavailable due to illness or other commitments, it meant that the mother had to miss work, thus losing a day or more of pay. Geneva Shepard recalled how missing work for lack of a babysitter

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<sup>25</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 18-19.

could cause problems with plant management. “One time I had to take off on a midnight shift. There was a death in my family, and my mother took care of my little girl while I worked at night. [My mother] went to Kentucky, so I didn’t have anything else to do but take off.”<sup>27</sup> Like men, the necessity of working full time required that women be on the job. Because the responsibility of childcare was usually placed solely on women, it was common for problems with babysitters to impact women at Owens much more than the men in the plant. Geneva Shepard remembered having problems with her shift supervisor for missing that midnight shift, but then many selectors faced the same problems. While challenges associated with finding adequate child care options could result in lost work time, lost earnings, and strained relations with supervisors, raising children caused other problems for selectors as well.

Many selectors could not afford childcare while they were at work, which raised the prospect of additional strains for selectors. Therefore, many married women in selecting were forced to work shifts opposite their husbands in order that one could be home to take care of the children. Polly Brown recalled how she and her husband could not afford a babysitter when their children were young. “We worked different shifts. When he was [going] to work I was always getting off from work. We wanted to stay on the same shift, but times got so hard [paying a babysitter] we just couldn’t do it. We did that for several years.”<sup>28</sup> Problems with childcare were something that almost all women at Owens-Illinois had in common, and they often would discuss these shared difficulties while at work. Whether a selector was married or single, problems associated with

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<sup>27</sup> Geneva Shepard, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 6.

<sup>28</sup> Polly Brown, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 8.

working full-time and taking care of a home and family were shared experiences that never seemed to go away. Talking about domestic problems with co-workers who were also friends not only helped lighten the burden, but it also made selectors aware that they all shared similar experiences.

Like the work cultures studied by Benson and Cooper, the work culture of selecting included, and was shaped by, all three elements intrinsic to any work culture. But circumstances surrounding the formation of work culture in the selecting department at Owens-Illinois included a fourth element: the realization by selectors that Owens-Illinois had policies, both official and unofficial, that blatantly favored men and discriminated against women. Women at Owens-Illinois faced such inequality each day they stepped onto the selecting line.

Official policies of discrimination against women at Owens-Illinois took many forms. Men at Owens-Illinois did not have to work in the lowest paying department in the plant, the selecting line. Instead they had the opportunity to work in areas of the plant that contained jobs classified as “skilled,” which not only brought better pay but an opportunity to move into other departments in the plant and join a labor union. Women performed the job of selector, but they could not become supervisors in their own department until after the formation of the women’s union local in 1944 and then only on a fill-in basis.<sup>29</sup> Only men could be supervisors in the selecting department. Selectors at Owens-Illinois were well aware of the patriarchal culture that existed within the company and how that culture negatively affected them.

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<sup>29</sup> Geneva Shepard, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 2.

Selectors faced unfair practices in the hiring process as well. Polly Brown recalled in her interviews how bad discrimination was against women in the plant. “When I was a little girl [I] was taught it was a man’s world. I just believed it was a man’s world, and that’s really the way it was at Owens too.”<sup>30</sup> Polly Brown’s first attempt to get a job at Owens-Illinois in 1953 was unsuccessful because she had a child less than a year old. Brown was told she could not have a job at the glass plant because mothers with young children miss too much work. Owens-Illinois did hire Polly Brown after her baby was older, but Brown was keenly aware that the hiring rule regarding young children did not apply to men, only women.<sup>31</sup> Once hired into selecting, women could expect poor treatment if they were unmarried and became pregnant. Polly Brown remembered such an instance. “I remember well . . . a girl had two illegitimate children, and she was fired. [But] the man that fathered both those children did not get fired. He was still there when the factory closed [in 1993].”<sup>32</sup> Discrimination against women at Owens-Illinois occurred as early as the hiring process, and even after women were hired they experienced unfair policies that favored men in many more ways. These occurrences reinforced the perception that women were not as valuable as men in the plant.

The long hours spent standing on a concrete floor picking bottles or jars off a conveyor belt could be physically demanding, but women in selecting were also subject to a procedure they perceived as psychologically demanding and unfair—selectors were

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<sup>30</sup> Polly Brown, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5.

watched during their shift by plant management who often stood on a walkway above the selecting line. The facility that housed Owens-Illinois was vast and contained several selecting lines to handle the large amount of finished product the plant produced each day. Supervisors would routinely stand above the selecting department on a walkway high above the plant floor to look down on the women as they did their jobs, looking for any sign that they might not be working fast enough. Geneva Shepard recalled, “I had one supervisor [who] would get up on the walkway and look down. He’d go tell our foreman, ‘Those two girls are talking instead of working,’ and things [like that].”<sup>33</sup> Even talking to your co-worker on the selecting line during a lull in the manufacturing process could draw the ire of a supervisor or would result in an additional task being assigned to keep selectors from standing idle. “If they saw a woman who had time to wipe her nose or get a deep breath they would say ‘grab that broom and sweep.’”<sup>34</sup> Not only were women at Owens-Illinois paid like they were second-class citizens, but they had reasons to feel that they were treated as such as well. Having the watchful eye of management overhead to ensure that selectors were not wasting time or not being allowed to enjoy a spare moment when the pace of work slowed down momentarily reinforced a sense of unfair treatment. This unequal treatment pointed out to selectors their subordinate status in the plant, but it also served to bring them closer together and strengthened the bonds formed on the selecting line.

In addition to official policies and procedures that discriminated against women, there were also unofficial procedures in the plant that favored men. Management

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<sup>33</sup> Geneva Shepard, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

frowned upon excess socializing while on the job, but many selectors recalled in their interviews how men were given more leeway to socialize and often did so alongside their supervisors. Geneva Shepard recalled “there [was a] difference that was made between men and women. If there was a special ballgame going on the [supervisors] would let men stand around with their little radios and listen.”<sup>35</sup> Selectors were not given such freedom to enjoy idle moments while at work, and the differing treatment men were afforded made selectors well aware of their subordinate position in the plant.

Women in selecting were also routinely subjected to harassment from their male co-workers. Opal Mann also recalled how she, and many others, were subject to profanity and sexual harassment. Mann remembered an incident not long after she was hired in 1931 when “one of the bosses I had loved to talk dirty to me. It used to embarrass me to death. I had to stand there and take it because I was scared to sass him. [I was] afraid I’d lose my job.”<sup>36</sup> Young, naïve, and afraid of losing her job during the Depression, Opal Mann was fearful of standing up to this cruel treatment and instead she said nothing. Patricia Cooper argues that for female cigar makers in her study the reaction to harassment from men was much the same. Faced with sexual harassment from their male counterparts, “fear of dismissal was ever present” for female cigar makers.<sup>37</sup> It was difficult, at best, for a young working class woman in her early twenties to ignore sexual taunts, but Mann recalled how she believed she had no other choice. Her need to keep her job during the Depression meant that she had to withstand sexual harassment from the men around her, and a workplace that did nothing to stop this type

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<sup>35</sup> Geneva Shepard, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 2.

<sup>36</sup> Opal Mann, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 8.

<sup>37</sup> Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker*, 233.

of abuse was seen by many women as very unfair toward selectors. Harassing words could turn the work environment of selecting into a hostile environment, and such hostility made it difficult for young women like Opal Mann to return to work each day. However, those same words that embarrassed and distressed selectors like Opal Mann also reinforced the perception of the selectors' work culture as a safe space, positioned women in opposition to men in the plant, and brought selectors closer together as a group.

The physical separation that kept the women in selecting also meant that they were physically tied to their job in a way that men were not. While men in the plant had their own specific jobs that they did each day, they were able to move about in ways that women were not. The physical performance of a job on the selecting line required that women stand in the same exact spot for hours at a time. In order to pick bottles and jars off the conveyor belt, women had to stand where their workstation was; otherwise, they could not physically perform their job. The repetitiveness of the selecting job made for boring work with no mental challenge. Opal Mann remembered how mentally draining the selecting line could be. "That work to me was just brain destroying. It was monotonous."<sup>38</sup> Men, on the other hand, were able to move about in the shipping department, mold repair, and machine departments and even enjoy a baseball game on the radio with their supervisors. While they certainly could not walk off and leave their jobs unauthorized, men were not required to stand in the same spot for hours to perform their job, thus giving the perception that men had more freedom in their jobs at Owens-

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<sup>38</sup> Opal Mann, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 6.

Illinois and reinforcing the unfair policies and procedures to which women in selecting were subjected.

It was no accident that Mary Carmichael felt that there was a way in which women in selecting worked because there was. Women in selecting had a definite way of working that could conflict with the official policies and procedures of Owens-Illinois. Selectors indoctrinated new women into life on the “lehr,” and they also provided a framework within which to help each other adjust to difficulties on the job and at home.<sup>39</sup> While there were unions present at Owens-Illinois, only men were union members until the mid-1940s. Even though selectors had no union for nearly fifteen years, they did have their work culture, their way of working together, which served to assist them in solving problems, making their monotonous jobs in selecting less tedious, and making their interactions with men in the plant more equal.

The work culture of selecting was not a “formal” organization like a labor union, but it was no less real or visible for the women who worked within it and depended upon it for strength and guidance. Work culture was “informal,” and yet it is apparent in the oral evidence left behind by the selectors of Owens-Illinois and is proven through the actions of the women who belonged to it. Work culture acted as an “informal organization” for women in selecting and helped selectors resist the limits of their jobs, and it was their work culture that became the common thread joining all acts of resistance by the women in the plant. Chapter Two examines those acts of resistance.

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<sup>39</sup> The term “lehr” is defined in the introduction of the thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WORK CULTURE AND RESISTANCE

Prior to 1944, selectors at Owens-Illinois did not have a collective bargaining agreement, nor did they have any formal organization working on their behalf to address issues of importance to them. Like many other women employed in traditionally male craft industries, women at Owens were not afforded the opportunity to join a labor union until the mid 1940s. While union solidarity for women at Owens-Illinois would have to wait until 1944, for selectors, work culture acted as an informal organization that allowed them to resist the limits of their jobs.

Just as no formal record of the work culture of selecting exists, neither does any official documentation exist concerning many of the ways selectors resisted. Instead, resistance to the discriminatory environment at Owens-Illinois is found primarily in alternative sources such as the interviews taken of retired selectors. In the stories told by the selectors themselves it is obvious that women at Owens-Illinois ignored official policies that forbade eating on the selecting line and mandated the length of breaks. It is also evident that selectors challenged unofficial practices that pressured them to work longer hours or perform tasks unrelated to their job. By examining these actions it becomes obvious that a formal record is not needed to understand that because selectors had a strong work culture, they stood together many times and chose not to acquiesce to the procedural norms at Owens-Illinois.

Not all acts of resistance are well known or widely publicized such as labor union conflicts or large social movements. Many acts of resistance go unrecognized and can

occur on a very small scale. Historians argue that some acts of resistance, like those that emerged from within the oral and informal work culture of selectors at Owens-Illinois, are found within hidden transcripts. In his study of the English working class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, E.P. Thompson recognized that while there may have been outward signs of deference to the ruling body in the public transcript, other hidden transcripts existed that contained various types of unknown aggression.<sup>1</sup> Thompson argued “hidden transcripts,” the unofficial record, were formed away from the spaces controlled by the ruling classes of English society. Instead, the working class had “the chapel, the tavern, and the home” within which they could congregate and share common ideas and experiences.<sup>2</sup> It is upon Thompson’s concept of unpatrolled public spaces as places where dissatisfied citizens could share their collective dissent that the concept of resistance through the work culture of selecting begins to take shape. Dissatisfied with a workplace that subordinated women in every aspect of employment, selectors at Owens-Illinois used their own spaces of the “lehr,” the women’s lounge, and their homes to share their discontent, and together they formulated varied methods of resistance in response.

Furthering E.P. Thompson’s theory of hidden transcripts, James C. Scott argues that different types of resistance, both “material and symbolic,” are each part of the same set of reciprocally sustaining practices.<sup>3</sup> Scott asserts that even symbolic resistance is useful despite the fact that it may often go unrecognized as resistant acts by those in

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<sup>1</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183-184.

control. Scott labels these unknown struggles “infrapolitics” or challenges by a subordinate group that are not necessarily detected by the dominant class as such. Scott’s use of the term “infrapolitics” denotes an almost purposely hidden aspect to these struggles because, according to Scott, “that [they] should be invisible... is in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.”<sup>4</sup> That some acts of resistance go unrecognized does not make them less effective. Indeed, Scott argues that “infrapolitics” challenges the power of those in control, whether the challenges are obvious or concealed. Selectors at Owens-Illinois engaged in acts of resistance that were obvious and concealed. Many of these resistant acts produced no tangible results such as higher pay or a change in discriminatory policies and practices, and more can be viewed as symbolic rather than material, yet all were valuable and significant to the selectors who resisted.

Robin Kelley demonstrates that some of the most successful and vibrant forms of resistance occurred without the benefit of formal organizations.<sup>5</sup> That women at Owens-Illinois used their work culture to create forms of resistance to their particular workplace circumstances illustrates how incomplete public transcripts often are, and in turn allows us to better understand the ways in which subordinate and formally unorganized groups have been able to exert some level of control over their daily work lives.

Kelley’s theory of hidden transcripts argues that acts of resistance such as singing songs while working or slowing down the pace of work, “have a cumulative effect on

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 6-7.

power relations,” even as they go unrecognized by those in positions of power.<sup>6</sup> Kelley draws a clear correlation between politics and the lived experiences of subordinate groups. Kelley argues that politics consists of unrecognized acts of resistance, however benign they may appear to those in power, and that these seemingly benign acts allow workers to exert some control over their work lives.<sup>7</sup> Women at Owens-Illinois were adept at resistance. Refusing to work a double shift, eating while standing on the selecting line, and stretching the length of their break time may now be easily recognized as resistant acts, yet at the time they occurred these actions may have been unrecognizable to their male co-workers and supervisors as resistant acts.

Why did selectors resist the limits of their jobs with actions that might not necessarily result in any substantial and material outcome? In other words, if acts of resistance did not bring about positive changes in the workplace such as ending gender segregation or other discriminatory policies, why undertake them? Robin Kelley argues that the worker often sees the results of these types of resistant actions, such as taking a few extra moments for oneself, or being able to eat on the job as “just compensation” for working in an atmosphere that allows and encourages inequity, both real and perceived.<sup>8</sup> That such acts of resistance could have gone unnoticed by their supervisors did not diminish their cumulative effect on the daily work lives of women on the “lehr.” While some of these acts of resistance were covert by nature, many of them were not. Some were necessarily kept secret and even required assistance from other selectors to ensure success, such as taking extra break time. Many acts of resistance, like refusing to work a

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<sup>6</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

double shift despite negative repercussions, happened right in front of management personnel and other men in the plant and were done in such a way as to openly declare women's autonomy over certain decisions or aspects of their job. Whether done openly or in secret, these acts of resistance happened because selectors were aware that they could exert some power over their daily work lives.

Many acts of resistance were in response to official policies at Owens-Illinois that were perceived as unfair to selectors such as the policy that prohibited eating while standing along the selecting line. All selectors understood that eating while performing their job was expressly forbidden and that they had to wait for their pre-approved break to enjoy a snack, but waiting until break time could prove difficult. Mabel Adkins remembered how difficult it could be to wait until her break. "The worst thing [was] a lot of times we'd get so busy [with] nobody to relieve you. If you got to eat somebody had to take your place on the lehrs. And sometimes it was hard to get somebody. So [we'd get] some doughnuts and coffee... while we were working [and] eat standing up."<sup>9</sup> Selectors recalled in their interviews that sometimes this defiance of the policy against eating on the selecting line was done secretly, but it was still an act of resistance to an official policy deemed unfair by selectors. James Scott argues these types of everyday resistance, despite their hidden and secretive status, are still actions in opposition to domination. Scott argues that if we only acknowledge resistance that occurs from open declaration then we "miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt that . . . is the political environment of the subject classes."<sup>10</sup> Eating on the

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<sup>9</sup> Mabel Adkins, "The Owens-Illinois Project," *The Oral History of Appalachia Program*, Barbara E. Smith, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, WV, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 199.

selecting line was sometimes hidden from supervisors and plant management, but it was an action through which selectors exerted some level of control over how they spent their time at work and allowed them to defy an official policy they considered unfair.

Selectors devised inventive and amusing ways to break the no food rule, which served to both satisfy and entertain each other. Selectors would place their contraband snacks on the conveyor and send them down the line to share with co-workers. Virginia Plumley recalled in her interview how this was accomplished. “In those days we would get a package of potato chips and put it on this conveyor. [The conveyor would] go around [to everyone] and I’d just stick the bag of chips in the middle. I’d have something to drink over here. We’d amuse ourselves.”<sup>11</sup> Like young black workers at McDonald’s studied by Robin Kelley who would grab some fries during their shift, eating on the job was more than just a way for selectors to avoid waiting for a break; it was a way to assure that part of their work day was spent doing those things that provided a better work experience and some amusement as well.<sup>12</sup> That other women on the selecting line saw the snacks traveling along on the conveyor belt with the finished glassware provided amusement and much needed relief from the stresses of the job and some laughter that was just between the women of selecting. They had the control to enjoy their time on the selecting line, and they used that control in creative ways, which helped selectors defy a policy they saw as unnecessary and helped them understand the power they could exert over daily circumstances.

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia Plumley, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 9.

<sup>12</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 2.

The length of break time selectors could take, twenty minutes at a time, was an official policy at Owens-Illinois that selectors often rebelled against. James Scott asserts that in any form of domination the elite class extracts material gains from those they subordinate, and the natural response of the subordinate class is to mitigate material exploitation through appropriation of something the subordinate class deems valuable.<sup>13</sup> For many workers who punch a time clock, their time is the most valuable commodity of all. Using an example of young black workers at a McDonald's who stretch the length of their breaks regularly, Robin Kelley argues that those workers, who often "turned fifteen minutes into twenty-five," did not insist they be given longer rest periods; they took back time that should have been theirs as reimbursement for being overworked and underpaid.<sup>14</sup> Selectors at Owens-Illinois frequently took back small amounts of time they believed to be theirs and not their employers.

Selectors viewed their time as a valuable commodity, and a policy that mandated the number of minutes they could have to rest or visit the restroom was seen as punitive and unacceptable so they did what they could to defy that policy. Geneva Shepard remembered how selectors rebelled against this policy by stretching the length of their breaks. "We had twenty minute breaks [but] we'd stay over. In a situation like that three or four minutes was a big help to stay over. They weren't quite able to stop it."<sup>15</sup> Challenging the allowable length of breaks was a way to defy the decisions of plant management, and declare that they could leave the selecting line for longer than twenty

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<sup>13</sup> Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Geneva Shepard, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 2.

minutes if they chose to. It was also a form of resistance in which selectors had to help each other, because to remain away from the line longer than was allowed often required the assistance of other selectors. Like the young black workers at McDonald's studied by Robin Kelley who operated on their own time during breaks, selectors at Owens-Illinois had their own way of keeping track of personal time away from the line. The amount of extra time selectors took back for themselves was miniscule in relation to the hours they spent on the selecting line each day, but the cumulative benefits garnered from taking more time for themselves in defiance of company policy provided selectors with at least part of what they considered just compensation. Furthermore, working in concert with each other to make their plane happen reinforced the solidarity that existed between selectors at Owens-Illinois.

Selectors worked together in other ways to resist official policies they viewed as unfair. They were required to stand alongside their line as they packed the finished product, but one specific job allowed a selector to sit down at the beginning of the line and look for physical defects. The male supervisor designated this lone selector, but selectors worked together to openly challenge the decision of their supervisor by devising a system of "sharing" the seated job with each other so more selectors could take turns sitting down each day. Susan Porter Benson describes sharing this type of job benefit with your co-workers as "administer[ing] collectively what was designed to be an individualistic system."<sup>16</sup> In her examination of acts of resistance among early twentieth century sales clerks, Benson illustrates how clerks with no hope of meeting their weekly sales quota would turn their sales over to another clerk who had made theirs so the two

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<sup>16</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 257.

could split the commission.<sup>17</sup> Done as a way to outwit managers who saw the commission system as preferable to hourly wages, there was often no additional benefit for the department store clerk who had already made her quota, yet one clerk gained an unearned commission. This type of benefit distribution in defiance of company management was employed at Owens-Illinois with the sharing of a seat. Sharing the seated job made more selectors' jobs less physically demanding and also allowed them to exert some control over who performed an easier job each day.

Like department store clerks who combined and shared their sales quotas, selectors at Owens-Illinois shared the benefits of a less physically demanding job. Polly Brown recalled in her interview how selectors shared the seat. Brown stated, "You stood up all day. You stood and you stood. Well, there was a certain job though that you got to sit down to select your ware. Say, like I'd sit for fifteen minutes and then another person would relieve me in fifteen minutes."<sup>18</sup> Selectors had no control over who was chosen to have the seated job of selecting defects from the finished product, but they often took control over who actually performed the job of selecting defects each day and therefore was allowed to sit down. Sharing the only job in selecting that allowed a worker to be seated was a carefully thought out and considered plan, and it was a way for selectors to exert some control and power over the jobs they performed each day as well as disregarding a decision made by their supervisor.

Selectors also challenged an official policy that allowed management to place selectors temporarily into another department. Susan Porter Benson explained how

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Polly Brown, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 13.

women's work culture in department stores resulted in "pride and identification with [their] merchandise," to the extent that sales clerks would refuse to move even temporarily into another department of the store.<sup>19</sup> Despite threats of discipline, Benson's department store clerks continued to refuse these temporary moves. Like Benson's clerks, selectors at Owens-Illinois also resisted official policies that could force them to work temporarily in other areas of the plant, but resisting this policy could be a subtle exercise in resistance. Geneva Shepard recalled in her interview her displeasure at having to fill in temporarily in the balcony where shipping cartons were assembled and how she creatively avoided such work.

Up in what we called the balcony . . . I worked part of the day up there one day. They didn't have their regular girl that did a lot of the relieving and they sent me up there. I pretended I thought I was finishing, you know and I went and ate [lunch]. They had to find somebody else. So I guess they thought, well, there was no use in sending me up there anymore. I didn't know what I was doing.<sup>20</sup>

Laughter punctuated the interview as Geneva Shepard described how she was able to get out of working in the carton department that day and even make sure that she would not return to the balcony any time soon. To give the appearance of incompetence was preferable to working in a job she did not enjoy, but while her supervisors believed she lacked the ability to perform the job properly this woman lacked nothing. In fact, Geneva Shepard's knowledge of Owens-Illinois and the individuals who worked there allowed her to use the appearance of incompetence as a method of resistance. It was not necessarily her way of seeing to it that she did not have to do a job that was unpleasant. Working on the selecting line could be an unpleasant experience as well. It was, in reality, a way of choosing what job she wanted to do. Geneva Shepard wanted to work

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<sup>19</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 257.

<sup>20</sup> Geneva Shepard, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 5.

on the selecting line where her friends were, and she did not want to work in the balcony. By appearing to be incompetent, Geneva Shepard was able to choose where she worked, thus removing some of the power her supervisors and managers had over her job at Owens-Illinois and taking that power for herself.

Resistance by women at Owens-Illinois could also be in response to unofficial practices that selectors perceived as unfair. A common theme in most of the interviews with selectors was how differently women in the plant were treated in relation to men. This difference was obvious in the wider variety of jobs and higher wages men could expect at Owens-Illinois, but it was also blatantly obvious in the special latitude given men to socialize with each other on the job. Geneva Shepard's recollection that women were discouraged from talking with each other while working but that men could stand around listening to a baseball game on the radio with consent from their supervisors was a source of resentment among selectors at Owens.<sup>21</sup> Sadie Page also recalled that while men could congregate together and have fun, women were discouraged from such distractions. Page remembered "they didn't want us talking to each other while we worked."<sup>22</sup> Despite unofficial practices that discouraged talking between women on the line, selectors refuse to accept the preferential treatment given to men, and they found many opportunities to talk and laugh with each other while packing bottles.

In his study of the black working class, Robin Kelley describes ways in which workers at a McDonald's "signified each other" by "talking loudly about each other's [families] . . . or describing in hilarious detail the peculiarities of customers standing on

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<sup>21</sup> Geneva Shepard, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 2.

<sup>22</sup> Sadie Page, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 5.

the other side of the counter.”<sup>23</sup> Despite being told by managers to refrain from talking and laughing on the job, Kelley’s workers rebelled and openly carried on conversations with each other every day. The same type of rebellions took place on the selecting line at Owens-Illinois. Sadie Page fondly recalled how, despite possible repercussions, “we were all friendly to each other down there [in selecting]. We all talked and we all had a good time.”<sup>24</sup> The subjects of these conversations could simply be about their families or a recipe for a particular dish, but they could also discuss supervisors, management, or workplace issues of importance to them. While conversations among workers in any job might be perceived as harmless to the existing power structure of an organization these ever-present and ongoing discussions were as much acts of resistance designed to exert some control over eight hours on the selecting line as they were attempts to relieve the monotony experienced while packing finished glassware. Like the boredom-relieving chatter among young African American workers described by Robin Kelley, women at Owens-Illinois were constantly having conversations with co-workers on the selecting line in an effort to relieve the sheer tedium of their jobs and in an effort to challenge an unofficial policy that continued to produce inequity between women and men in the plant.

Selectors often challenged a workplace that encouraged men to control small amounts of idle time selectors felt was theirs. Susan Porter Benson demonstrated how department store clerks were fiercely protective of any small amount of idle time and undermined “managers’ attempts to give them extra housekeeping duties or use them for

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<sup>23</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sadie Page, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 5.

low-status chores.”<sup>25</sup> The same can be said for selectors at Owens-Illinois who were also protective of any time they did not have to spend tied to the line. In those rare moments when the selecting line would slow and women could take a minute to catch their breath, supervisors instructed them to perform other tasks around the area in an effort to keep women from being idle for even a brief period of time. Geneva Shepard recalled how she and the other selectors might sneak away. “If they saw a woman had time to wipe her nose or get a deep breath they would say, ‘Grab that broom and sweep . . . clean that glass up over there. She needs some help [so] swing over there every so often and help her catch up.’ So we took an extra moment or two [for ourselves] . . . we managed to go in the [break] room and smoke.”<sup>26</sup> Working on the selecting line was tedious and laborious work for an eight-hour shift. Having a few moments when the selecting line was not bringing wave upon wave of glassware to be packed was rare, and women in selecting believed it was only fair that they should be able to enjoy a moment of rest when they could catch their breath. Catching a few extra moments to sneak off to the lounge for a cigarette, unbeknownst to their supervisors, was a common way for selectors to claim free time they felt belonged to them.

Selectors were hesitant to give any more of their time to Owens-Illinois than required, and any appeal from management or supervisors that would lengthen their workday could be met with resistance. Historians provide much evidence of the value women workers place on their time away from the job, and their studies illustrate that many early twentieth century women valued their time more than the opportunity to earn

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<sup>25</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 245.

<sup>26</sup> Geneva Shepard, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 2.

higher wages. According to Patricia Cooper, it was not uncommon for early twentieth century female cigar makers who were paid by the piece to resist working longer hours or at a breakneck pace because “women did not always place maximum earnings as the first priority.”<sup>27</sup> Telephone operators at the turn of the twentieth century protested angrily when they were made to work an extra long day with a much longer break or lunch period after the morning hours, commonly known as a split shift, because it lengthened the overall workday.<sup>28</sup> Responsibilities of home life where women were the primary domestic worker at home made it unmanageable for many selectors to spend additional hours on the selecting line. While opportunities to work extra shifts could be welcomed as a way to make extra money for most men, women at Owens-Illinois were not excited at the prospect of working sixteen hours and often refused their bosses entreaties to work double shifts.

Many selectors found it difficult to work extra shifts in selecting and still be able to take care of their other jobs at home. One selector, Mary Carmichael, remembered, “I went there to make a living and I made a living there. I worked my days, [but] I never did work a lot of doubles because I was just the type of person that . . . I worked at home and I worked there and everything. I never did work very many doubles.”<sup>29</sup> Mary Carmichael was not alone in her refusal to work longer hours; other selectors chose to say no, and they were aware that to decline could bring unpleasant results from their supervisors. Mabel Adkins refused to work sixteen hours, despite the inevitable bad

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<sup>27</sup> Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900-1919* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 223.

<sup>28</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 197.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Carmichael, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 12.

response from her boss. “No, I didn’t work [a] double shift, I wouldn’t do it. It was just too much. Sixteen hours on your feet . . . I just wouldn’t do it. They used to get real mad at me, but they couldn’t make me work [a double shift]. [I] couldn’t be made to work sixteen hours.”<sup>30</sup> Turning down a supervisor’s request to work overtime meant that women could often be met with anger from supervisors, yet women in selecting would often do just that.

Selectors were left to their own strategies in order to deal with requests for more hours and the resulting upset bosses and supervisors, but their work culture served them well. Men in the plant were much more likely to work overtime and resisting longer hours in a workplace that encouraged compliance was difficult. However, like the ways in which women chose not to perform a job they did not like, selectors also exercised some power and discretion over the number of hours they worked. In his analysis of the myriad ways black workers have historically resisted in the workplace, Robin Kelley asserts, “The most pervasive form of black protest was simply to leave [the workplace].”<sup>31</sup> Kelley allows that to leave a job did not always lead to better circumstances for black workers, but he emphasizes that a person’s ability to move, or, in other words, to decide whether to walk away from a job or remain signifies a “crucial step toward empowerment and self-determination.”<sup>32</sup> Can one equate refusing to work overtime with quitting one’s job? While selectors could and did refuse to work longer hours when they did not want to, refusing more hours seemingly did not result in them

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<sup>30</sup> Mabel Adkins, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 12.

<sup>31</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

losing their jobs. Refusing to work overtime was not the same as quitting their job, but it was a way that selectors chose to defy their supervisors and managers and a way to declare their own autonomy. Like black workers who chose to quit so they could determine the number of hours they wanted to work, selectors who refused overtime despite the possibility of an angry supervisor resisted the pressure to conform and felt empowered to be able to choose not to work.

While popular understandings of workplace resistance are often associated with labor unions or large-scale social movements, the examples discussed here illustrate that acts of resistance in the workplace can take many forms. The women at Owens-Illinois worked in segregated, low-wage jobs with no union to bargain on their behalf until 1944. Nonetheless, through their capitalization of gender-segregated workspaces, socialization in and out of the workplace, sharing of common experiences, and awareness of discriminatory practices, selectors created a cohesive work culture through which they were able to resistance the limits of their jobs. Taken individually, these acts of resistance may appear to be unimportant events that resulted in no tangible benefit such as higher wages or upward mobility. Taken collectively, however, these acts of resistance demonstrate the ways that selectors at Owens-Illinois were able to resist official policies and unofficial practices that forced them into subordinate roles and, in turn, elevate the quality of their daily work environment.

While selectors were finally able to join a union in 1944, the work culture they had long since formed together was still in evidence. In fact, even though selectors belonged to Local 256 of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association, they still called upon their work culture to address issues that were important to them. Local 256 did not

replace the work culture of selecting; the work culture of selecting enhanced the effectiveness of Local 256 and continued to assist selectors in challenging the limits of their jobs. Chapter Three examines the continuation of selectors' work culture after the formation of Local 256 and the ways that work culture augmented the union.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**WORK CULTURE AND**  
**LOCAL 256**

On February 19, 1945, an agreement was signed between the production and maintenance employees of the Owens-Illinois bottle manufacturing plant in Huntington, West Virginia and the Glass Bottle Blowers of America (GBBA), an affiliated union of the American Federation of Labor (AFL).<sup>1</sup> The agreement organized the largest segment of employees at Owens-Illinois into two separate union locals, one male and the other female. Now, not only would the jobs at Owens-Illinois be divided into “male” and “female,” but also the unions would be as well with men represented by Local 255 and the women in selecting represented by Local 256 of the GBBA. However, Local 256 was not the beginning of solidarity for women on the “lehr.” By February 1945, the women of Owens-Illinois were already experts at banding together and had become skilled in acts of resistance through their work culture. Work culture also enabled selectors at Owens-Illinois to make the most of their opportunities within the union even though their national union, the Glass Bottle Blowers of America, did little to end sex segregation and discrimination in the glass industry. In fact, Local 256 did not replace work culture as a key means of resistance; instead, the work culture of selecting enhanced the effectiveness of selectors’ work within the union and continued to help them attempt to solve issues of importance that their national union failed to address.

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<sup>1</sup> Owens-Brockway, “Seventy-fifth Anniversary Informational Pamphlet of Owens-Brockway Glass,” October 1989, The Owens-Illinois Collection, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, WV, 2.

While women workers joined labor unions in increasing numbers in the period during and after World War II, the history of that period is one of general under representation of women in unions, particularly craft unions such as the GBBA. Scholars of working class history provide ample evidence that most unions were reluctant to bring women into their rank and file in substantial numbers, and those that did offered little tangible support for issues that were important to women workers such as equal pay and equal opportunity.<sup>2</sup> The situation was no different for women at Owens-Illinois after World War II. Selectors were finally members of a union, but the GBBA did little to change the circumstances of women at Owens-Illinois. Women were still limited to the selecting department and had no hope of moving into other areas of the plant where they could make higher wages. However, selectors did have a strong and vibrant work culture that continued to be a source of assistance for selectors at Owens-Illinois in many different ways after they joined a labor union. The work culture of selecting enhanced selectors' experiences within Local 256 and at times supplemented the possible benefits the union could provide. In addition, selectors' work culture continued to help women at Owens-Illinois resist the limits of their job even with a national union that often failed them.

Even though labor unions increased their efforts to organize women workers following World War II, women held a disproportionately smaller percentage of offices within those unions. In fact, the Women's Bureau found that, of the sixty-nine unions

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 38; Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1982), 64; Maureen Honey, *The Making of Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 4; Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From World War I to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 300-301.

examined one year after the end of the war, less than twenty percent contained women who held a local office.<sup>3</sup> Local 256 was an all female union, which meant that women held all local offices. While Local 256 provided selectors with the opportunity to hold offices within their affiliate of the GBBA, it was the work culture of selecting that cemented their affiliation with the GBBA, propelled selectors into leadership positions within Local 256, and made Local 256 more active in the Huntington labor community than men's unions at Owens-Illinois.

The work culture of selecting was in evidence during the formation of Local 256 when women such as Opal Mann worked to bring selectors together on the issue of union representation. In 1944, both the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and their rival union, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), were making efforts to unionize the production and maintenance workers at Owens-Illinois. By the time the production and maintenance workers were to vote on whether to join the AFL or the CIO in early 1945, Mann was sought out by an AFL official who encouraged her to convince the women in selecting to choose an AFL affiliate, the Glass Bottle Blower's Association (GBBA), over the CIO. Mann recalled in her interview the conversation she had with the union representative. "I helped organize [the union]. It was before the AFL and CIO merged. Homer came down and talked to me. He was one of [the AFL's] union officials back on the machine line. He asked me if I would talk to the girls and [persuade] them to vote for the AFL instead of the CIO. And he didn't have to talk to me very much about

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<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 368.

it.”<sup>4</sup> Opal Mann was known not only within the segregated work spaces of selecting as a strong member of the tight-knit work culture but also by men throughout the plant as a take-charge person in selecting.

Mann wanted the selectors to join the AFL, and she called upon her years of experience as a woman heavily involved in the work culture of the “lehr” to try to influence the vote. “The CIO was for automobile workers . . . heavy machinery and heavy industry. The AFL was more for traditional crafts . . . more traditional trades. I had been noticing that the CIO was out on [more] strikes and everything than the AFL.”<sup>5</sup> Fear of lost wages due to strikes and the AFL’s long history of affiliation with craft unions surely played a role in the decision of selectors to join the GBBA. Still, for selectors at Owens-Illinois the larger issue was that a member of the work culture in selecting voiced those concerns to them. The AFL may have made a compelling case to women at Owens-Illinois, but even the AFL’s representative recognized the power of selectors’ work culture. When an AFL union official approached Opal Mann about speaking to the other selectors, he acknowledged the reality of the situation in the selecting department; the work culture of selecting and those who belonged to it wielded much more influence with women at Owens-Illinois than did union officials.

Because of their work culture, selectors were much more active in the local labor community than men’s unions at Owens-Illinois, and nowhere is this more evident than in the affiliation of Local 256 with the Huntington District Labor Council (HDLC). As

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<sup>4</sup> Opal Mann, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” interview by Jennifer Stock, *The Oral History in Appalachia Program*, Barbara E. Smith, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia, 1994, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 11,12.

the local arm of the West Virginia AFL-CIO, the Huntington District Labor Council welcomed all local AFL-CIO unions with a goal of providing an environment in which unions could work for legislation pertinent to labor as well as assisting in community development and education of members in labor issues.<sup>6</sup> Some of the records of delegate attendance and minutes of weekly meetings still exist, and from a close examination it is apparent that no union in Huntington was more active in the HDLC than Local 256 of the GBBA. The work culture that, for decades, had helped women in selecting work closely together to improve their work experiences also aided them in becoming so active in the local labor community.

Since the late 1920s when selecting became a “female” job, selectors were accustomed to collective action in opposition to policies and procedures they viewed as unfair to women at Owens-Illinois. This collective identity ensured that the selectors of Local 256 were heavily involved in much the same way in the Huntington District Labor Council. From the beginning of selectors’ association with the HDLC their attendance was unflinching. The first official meeting of the Huntington District Labor Council took place March 3, 1958, with sixty-four members in attendance. Among these were five members of Local 256 from Owens-Illinois: Emma Kessick, Louise Allman, Rose Henderson, Ann K. Fowler, and Marie Hunter. The men’s unions at Owens-Illinois, including Local 255 of the GBBA, were not present at the meeting.<sup>7</sup> Active participation in the HDLC became a fact of life for the women of Local 256, as the bi-monthly

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<sup>6</sup> Southwestern District Labor Council Website, [online]; accessed 10 February 2007; available from [www.swdlc.org](http://www.swdlc.org); Internet.

<sup>7</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, “Attendance Record,” 3 March 1958, West Virginia Labor History Association Collection, Box 5, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston, WV.

meetings of the HDLC always contained the names of women from Owens-Illinois. The particular women representing Local 256 may have changed over time, but in the years following the formation of the HDLC, at least one representative of Local 256 attended every meeting, and attendance records indicate that most meetings included four or five women from Owens. There would be no mention of any of the men's unions from Owens-Illinois in attendance books or meeting minutes until six years later.<sup>8</sup> From the beginning, Local 256 was much more active in local labor matters than any of the men's unions from Owens-Illinois. For fifteen years selectors were accustomed to spending time together both at work and away from the workplace. Activities such as sharing meals or planning trips together were different from the actions selectors would share in their new affiliation, but the work culture of selecting made it an easy transition for selectors to immerse themselves as a group into the HDLC.

The work culture of selecting enhanced Local 256 in its affiliation with the labor council in other ways as well. In addition to unfailing attendance, a member of Local 256 held office in the HDLC for years to come. Just one year after the formation of the HDLC, on December 21, 1959, officers were chosen for the coming year and among those elected was Emma Kessick of Local 256, who was voted into the office of Recording Secretary.<sup>9</sup> Now, not only was Local 256 represented in the area's labor organization, they were also included in the running of the group. In fact, records indicate that a member of Local 256 would hold the office of Recording Secretary

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<sup>8</sup> There is no mention of any men from Owens-Illinois participating in the HDLC until May 4, 1964. At this time, Local 255 of the GBBA became an affiliated member of the HDLC. However, Local 255 did not actively participate in the HDLC like Local 256. No other unions from Owens-Illinois were ever mentioned in attendance books or meeting minutes.

<sup>9</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, "Meeting Minutes," 21 December 1959, West Virginia Labor History Association Collection, Box 5, West Virginia State Archives, Charleston, WV.

uninterrupted through 1965.<sup>10</sup> The women of Local 256 had long since been members of the work culture of selecting, and they established themselves early on as active participants in the larger labor community.

Selectors held many other positions within the HDLC as well. Emma Kessick briefly held the position of Director of the Women's Activities Department (WAD), a committee of the HDLC that coordinated the efforts of all affiliated women members in various community projects such as the city's Surplus Food Program. Dorothy Orange of Local 256 took over as WAD Director in January 1961,<sup>11</sup> and Opal Mann assumed the position in September 1964.<sup>12</sup> The HDLC's Committee on Political Education (COPE) could also count on Local 256 for active participation. Through COPE, members of the labor council were informed of various political and labor issues that directly affected them.<sup>13</sup> Local 256 became so synonymous with COPE that by 1961 all five members of the women's Committee on Political Education were selectors from Owens-Illinois: Dorothy Orange, Louise Allman, Opal Mann, Emma Kessick, and Anne Fowler.<sup>14</sup> Opal Mann was selected to chair the Affiliated Attendance Committee, which encouraged local unions to join the HDLC, on January 6, 1964.<sup>15</sup> It was after Mann's movement into the position of leader of the Affiliation Committee that the men's GBBA union at Owens-

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<sup>10</sup> After the book that contains minutes from 1965, the years from 1966 through 1976 are missing. Therefore, records do not exist that indicate who held this position after 1965.

<sup>11</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, "Meeting Minutes," 16 January 1961.

<sup>12</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, "Meeting Minutes," 12 September 1964.

<sup>13</sup> West Virginia AFL-CIO Website, [online]; accessed 9 February 2007; available at [www.wvafclcio.org](http://www.wvafclcio.org); Internet.

<sup>14</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, "Meeting Minutes," 20 February 1961.

<sup>15</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, "Meeting Minutes," 6 January 1964.

Illinois, Local 255, became an affiliated member of the labor council.<sup>16</sup> Records of HDLC meetings indicate that not only were the members of Local 256 more active than any of the men's unions at Owens-Illinois, but they were also more involved than any other group of women affiliated with the HDLC. From their earliest days as affiliated members of the Huntington District Labor Council, the members of Local 256 from Owens-Illinois were active members. The same work culture selectors called upon to resist the limits of their jobs and stake out an autonomous space within the workplace provided them with a collective identity and cohesiveness that enhanced their efforts within the labor community.

The work culture of selecting not only enhanced the effectiveness of Local 256 outside the confines of the plant in its association with the local labor community, but it also did so in selectors' union experiences in the plant as well. The same cohesiveness, organization, and confidence that provided selectors with the necessary traits for assuming early leadership roles within Local 256 also enabled them to make the most of these roles in the workplace. Opal Mann's ability to flourish within the work culture she and others helped create in the 1930s led to many leadership roles within the official structure of Local 256. One of her earliest positions was as a "back-up grievance [person]," which handled any grievances for members of Local 256 when the selector in charge of doing so was off work.<sup>17</sup> It was in this position that Mann recalled confidently standing up to a boss she felt could be unfair toward women in the plant. "Louis Pike was my boss for years, and Louie and I would go around and around every time you

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<sup>16</sup> Huntington District Labor Council, "Meeting Minutes," 4 May 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Opal Mann, "The Owens-Illinois Project," 9.

turned around. Louie called me into the office and he said, ‘Now Opal, you know Ann Fowler and I get along fine, and I hope you and I get along fine.’ I said, ‘As long as you treat [women] right I’ll get along with you.’”<sup>18</sup> Opal Mann let it be known to her boss in the plant that she would work together with him in an equitable manner but that cooperation would come only if he and others were willing to treat the women in the plant fairly. Opal Mann was confident that she could handle any disagreement with her superiors at Owens-Illinois, and she was not afraid to let those in charge know how she felt. There was no official grievance to settle with the company in this instance, but Opal Mann believed there was a need to protect the other selectors from being treated unfairly even though they belonged to a union. Both the confidence to handle disputes and the need to protect other selectors had become part of the routine for selectors and had been formed through years of collective resistance.

In some instances, work culture and union representation worked hand in hand to improve selectors’ experiences in the workplace. Belonging to a union and having a collective bargaining agreement with specific job descriptions could be beneficial for selectors, but it did not always mean selectors at Owens-Illinois had an easier time dealing with supervisors or plant management with respect to their daily job duties. In fact, despite union representation women in selecting continued to be pressured to perform tasks that were the responsibility of other workers in the plant. Treatment such as this had gone on for years, and selectors were accustomed to resisting unfair demands. Years of standing up for themselves and each other in the face of unfair treatment made it

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

an easy transition to apply skills of resistance learned within their work culture to situations occurring after they became members of Local 256.

Opal Mann remembered a particular instance when she came to the aid of another selector who was being pressured to perform extra duties that were not her responsibility. “I was working [one day] and Ruth told me there was an attendant that was trying to make her push a trailer back in after she pulled one out. I said, ‘don’t do it Ruth. I’ve read the job description. All it says is to pull the trailer out. It doesn’t say to put a trailer back in.’”<sup>19</sup> Opal Mann was adamant with her fellow selector that she not perform this additional task, and in doing so she called upon years of experience in handling such matters. The selectors could have left the situation as it was and let the union agreement, which decided specific tasks of each worker, resolve the conflict, but Opal Mann chose not to rely on the union. When the same attendant instructed Mann to perform the same additional task she refused. “Directly here he came, and he said, ‘Opal, put that trailer back in there.’ I said [no] . . . I picked up my pocketbook, and I went on to eat [lunch].” With years of resistance through the work culture of selecting, Mann created an opportunity where she could make a point about the collective strength of selectors at Owens-Illinois. Selectors welcomed the existence of a union contract, but they knew they should not rely solely on a union that continued to allow gender discrimination to solve problems in the workplace. Instead, selectors continued to call upon their work culture to stand up for themselves and each other. Selectors were bolstered by the knowledge they had specific job descriptions and a union agreement that would back

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22.

them up, but they chose not to let the union contract solve the problem. Instead, selectors let their work culture intervene before matters could be taken through union channels.

Joining a labor union did not bring an end to the difficulties and frustrations experienced by women in the workplace. It is incorrect to assume that union inclusion meant that unions actively sought to improve workplace issues that were important to women. Evidence clearly points to a comprehensive lack of action on the part of most unions to address or even acknowledge employment issues that remained important to women.<sup>20</sup> During the years surrounding World War II when so many women not only entered the work force but also were more widely organized by labor unions, “working women still suffered injustices, many of which were either deliberately overlooked or even encouraged by the unions.”<sup>21</sup> With the merger of the AFL and the CIO in February, 1955, some women were hopeful for positive change. The rhetoric of new AFL-CIO President George Meany, who declared, “the merger will mean more effective means to attain a fair employment practices bill on a national scale and in attempts to assure civil rights in other fields,” indicated a possible move toward increased consideration of the interests of working women.<sup>22</sup> But while the new AFL-CIO tried to present an attitude of conciliation toward gender equality, the reality was that, within the leadership of craft unions, traditional attitudes toward women continued to prevail, thus preventing any real movement in the direction of gender equality.<sup>23</sup> Women may have been joining unions in

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<sup>20</sup> Historian Nancy Gabin argued that the United Auto Workers was more willing than most labor unions to recognize the problems inherent in the sexual division of labor to the point that the UAW established an advocate for women within its organization in the 1940s.

<sup>21</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 384.

<sup>22</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 417-418.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

increasing numbers during this period, but men were still making the decisions.<sup>24</sup> The AFL-CIO and the GBBA were reluctant to affect any real change for their female members, including the women of Local 256.

For nearly twenty-five years after the formation of Local 256, the GBBA did little to end gender discrimination at Owens-Illinois. Women at Owens-Illinois continued to be segregated into one area of the plant and had no chance for mobility into higher paying jobs until the late 1960s.<sup>25</sup> While women were occasionally allowed to temporarily fill-in on jobs such as lehr attendant, shift supervisor, shift foreman, and quality inspector, these higher paying jobs were designated as “male” and were off limits to women in any permanent capacity. While women in selecting were members of a union after February 1945, the reality was that the GBBA had little regard for issues of importance to their female members. Without any support from their labor union on issues such as gender segregation, selectors at Owens-Illinois constantly had to rely on each other and their work culture to address issues their union chose to ignore.

Selectors frequently called upon their work culture to assert themselves and ensure that they receive fair treatment in all aspects of their jobs such as in instances where their union contract could not help or where circumstances beyond the control of selectors prevented them from gaining certain benefits. Belonging to Local 256 meant that selectors could benefit from a well-negotiated union contract that specified certain wages and benefits. Selectors’ contracts often contained clauses stipulating a bonus

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*, 65-66.

<sup>25</sup> Following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 Opal Mann filed a lawsuit against Owens-Illinois charging unfair labor practices through the continued division of jobs within the plant as either “male” or “female.” It was not until after the resolution of the Mann case that Owens-Illinois finally ended this official policy of gender segregation.

payment for packing certain amounts each day, but should they fail to reach the predetermined amount no bonus had to be paid by Owens-Illinois. In one particular instance, when a selecting line containing higher than usual defects made it impossible for two selectors to meet their daily bonus quota selectors could not call upon their union contract to receive fair treatment; instead, they had to call upon the strength of their work culture to get what they felt their co-workers deserved.

Opal Mann recalled how bad the quality of the finished ware was on that particular line. “There were two girls working on there, and their [batch] was running real bad. It was hard to handle . . . it had lots of bad ware. It was the kind of defects that were hard to see.”<sup>26</sup> Mann understood that the two unlucky selectors did not pack enough finished product required by the union agreement because having so many defects in the finished product meant they had many more unacceptable pieces than was usual for a finished batch. Mann took issue with a system that penalized selectors who were simply unlucky. “So I went and jumped on Louie and I said, ‘those girls would have made that bonus if they had [better ware]. Well you are going to pay those girls. You’re going to correct this.’”<sup>27</sup> Opal Mann felt that luck should not determine whether a selector was entitled to receive fair treatment at Owens-Illinois. Instead, Mann insisted the women get paid their bonus despite the fact that they had not met the necessary quota. “I walked up to [Louie] in the factory, and one of the guys from the machine line was standing there with him. I shook my finger in his face and said, ‘I’m going to tell you

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<sup>26</sup> Opal Mann, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

something. When I come back [tomorrow] you're going to pay those girls.'"<sup>28</sup> Upon returning to work the next day Mann discovered that her boss' supervisor had instructed him to pay the unlucky selectors.<sup>29</sup> Once again, selectors did not hesitate to voice their opinion about how women should be treated at Owens-Illinois because they were experienced in using their work culture to resist unfair treatment. The parameters of the union agreement did not take into account "unlucky" circumstances. But selectors did not need to necessarily be concerned with a union agreement because their work culture was not based upon any agreement between selectors and plant management. Selectors may have been members of a union local, but it was their work culture that enabled them to help women in selecting when the union could not.

In instances where their union failed to negotiate equitable treatment for women at Owens-Illinois, selectors challenged plant management's continued use of gender segregation on their own by employing the strength of their work culture. Organized labor's post World War II agenda was generally not concerned with issues of importance to women, particularly the sexual division of labor. The AFL's 1944 convention contained rhetoric recommending, "that special attention be given to the organization of women, and that they be aided in obtaining agreements assuring them of equal pay for equal work," but the AFL and its affiliate unions did little in the way of providing women with equal work by continuing the practice of gender segregation.<sup>30</sup> The official policy of labeling jobs either "male" or "female" continued at Owens-Illinois for decades after

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement*, 374, 384.

women in selecting joined the GBBA. The union had done nothing to end that policy of discrimination, but selectors were not satisfied with the status quo.

While their union, the GBBA, refused to end gender segregation selectors decided they would challenge the issue of equal work on their own, and they would again call upon their work culture to do so. Opal Mann recalled in her interview, “There was a job called Chief Quality Inspector, and it was a higher paying job. Management was saying it wasn’t a job for a woman. Ann Fowler and I were arguing that it was, and the [female] president of our union [Local 256] was agreeing with management.”<sup>31</sup> It is unclear who the President of Local 256 was at this time, but it would be incorrect to assume that all women at Owens-Illinois wanted the practice of gender segregation to end. What was clear to Ann Fowler and Opal Mann was that their union had provided little or no help in ending the policy of a gender segregated workplace, and if they were to be given the opportunity to have jobs such as Chief Quality Inspector they would have to work for it on their own. They were fighting not only the hesitance of the GBBA to intervene on their behalf but also deeply held convictions of many at the time--male and female--that some jobs were strictly meant for men and not women, perspectives that continued for decades after the start of Local 256. If anything was to be proven to the management of Owens-Illinois regarding the ability of women to perform the job of Chief Quality Inspector, that responsibility fell to women who had worked for years within a work culture that enabled women in selecting to stand up for themselves.

Ann Fowler and Opal Mann were determined to take a stand for themselves and the other selectors at Owens-Illinois. After much argument on the part of Fowler and Mann, the plant manager agreed to allow the two selectors to attempt the job

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<sup>31</sup> Opal Mann, “The Owens-Illinois Project,” 20.

of Quality Inspector the next day. Mann recalled how the two women made certain that plant management--and their own union local president--understood that they meant business when they stated that a woman could perform the chief inspector job. "So the next day he immediately took us out to the warehouse. They had stacked those cartons clear to the ceiling in the warehouse. He made [Ann and I] climb up on the cartons, one carton after another to the top of that stack of ware. And he said, 'Can you feel those stacks shaking?' I said, 'I sure can. It wouldn't take much of that to put me to sleep. I didn't get much sleep last night.'"<sup>32</sup> Ann Fowler and Opal Mann spent the day inspecting boxes of glassware, and as they did they were determined to not back down in their attempt to prove their point--that women could perform any job in the plant. Mann recalled the confrontation with her supervisor afterward:

When the shift was over that day Louie came up to me and said, "Opal, you surely don't think that's a job for a woman." I said, "Louie, there's not a damned thing about that job that a woman can't do. We did it, and it sure is a good job for a woman." He couldn't say anything [after that]. So I told him, "The only trouble with you is that you are scared to death a woman's going to get some kind of break. You darned men, you just think that you own the world."<sup>33</sup>

Ann Fowler and Opal Mann knew that they had to take it upon themselves to prove their point about job segregation at Owens-Illinois; they strongly believed that it was wrong to continue to deny women at Owens-Illinois the opportunity to hold other jobs within the plant. However, they faced opposition from many sides. Their union, the GBBA, had not negotiated to end gender segregation in the glass industry, plant

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

management at Owens-Illinois continued to deny women the opportunity to perform other jobs in the plant, and the president of Local 256 stood squarely on the side of Owens-Illinois. Belonging to a union had provided them with some benefits such as the opportunity to become union officers, work under a union contract that specified wages, and earn bonus payment for exceeding certain quotas, and it may have provided selectors with some feeling that the union might back them up at some point. However, belonging to Local 256 had done nothing to afford selectors the chance to move permanently into other positions in the plant. Challenging gender segregation was a battle that selectors would have to fight on their own, and it was one they could only fight through their work culture.

Selectors at Owens-Illinois welcomed the beginning of Local 256 and harbored hope that a labor union would equate to more gender equality within the plant. But just like women in other industries, it became apparent to members of Local 256 the union would not address all the issues that were important to them. Selectors may have been able to hold office within their own union local, and they may have been able to receive better wages from their jobs on the selecting line, but Local 256 did not bring an end to job segregation or discrimination at Owens-Illinois. To accomplish those goals, the selectors had to rely on their work culture. It was because of their work culture that women in selecting had been able to confront unfair practices in the workplace, and it was also the work culture that instilled in the members of Local 256 the ability to be one of the most vocal and influential unions in the Huntington District Labor Council, male or female. Because of their solidarity and experience with resisting inequalities in the workplace selectors at Owens-Illinois were immediately able to take on the

responsibilities of the union and become active members of the labor council.

Furthermore, when their needs exceeded the ability of the union to intercede on their behalf they were still able to rely on their work culture as a means through which they worked for equality.

## CONCLUSION

While the 1940s brought increasing numbers of women into formal labor organizations that appeared to provide women workers with representation on issues of importance to them, discriminatory practices such as gender segregation continued in glass factories all across the country. Unions may have used rhetoric that seemed to espouse more equitable treatment for women workers, but few followed through on their promises to end official policies and unofficial practices of unequal treatment of women. Scholars point out that in the post-World War II era, men who had little interest in protecting the rights of women ran national unions, and national unions found little reason to address gender discrimination. According to Ruth Milkman, “in an era when few workers believed that women should have the same job rights as men, sex discrimination seemed perfectly legitimate.”<sup>1</sup> This study demonstrates that women glass workers did not have to accept the failure of labor organizations to address gender discrimination. Women at Owens-Illinois were still members of an informal organization they created together years earlier. One of the most important conclusions drawn from this study is how work culture often remained the most important vehicle through which women workers, like those at Owens-Illinois, fought for equal treatment in the workplace.

In order to understand the importance of work culture to women in the glass industry, this research illustrates how work culture acted as an informal organization that allowed women at Owens-Illinois to resist the limits of their jobs both before and after they formed Local 256 of the Glass Bottle Blowers Association (GBBA). The first

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1987), 128.

chapter demonstrates the formation of that work culture through an examination of how women at Owens transformed separate spaces that were meant to place women into subordinate positions into spaces that were their own. These spaces enabled selectors at Owens-Illinois to form a collective identity of themselves as a strong and vibrant group of workers. The second chapter analyzed how selectors at Owens-Illinois operated within their work culture to carry out acts of resistance to their subordinate status and improve their daily experiences in the workplace. Some of these actions were seemingly covert in nature while others occurred out in the open. However, the cumulative effects of both types of resistance brought positive results for women at Owens-Illinois. Finally, the third chapter examines the years after selectors joined Local 256 of the GBBA and reveals how important work culture remained for selectors at Owens-Illinois even after they became members of a labor union. The collective effect is to reveal how women in the glass industry used work culture as a means through which they could affect power relations in the workplace in the absence of a formal organization that might have done so. In addition, this study brings to the forefront the reality that work culture had a positive effect on women's experiences in labor unions and served to make their efforts in the union more effective than previously believed.

While employers like Owens-Illinois held onto the practice of gender segregation for much of the twentieth century, the decade of the 1960s brought various social movements that eventually provided change on a national level and also intertwined with the lives of women at Owens-Illinois. Resistance to unequal treatment was at the forefront of the debate concerning the Civil Rights Movement, as African American citizens worked tirelessly to gain their rights. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

made it illegal made it illegal for employers to discriminate against women, and while the original purpose of this legislation was to protect African Americans it had a positive impact on many segments of American society, including the women at Owens-Illinois.

Selectors at Owens-Illinois felt the benefits of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The official policy of labeling jobs according to gender continued at Owens-Illinois until the resolution of a 1966 lawsuit filed against the glass manufacturer under Title VII of the Act. With help from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), an agency of the Federal Government created to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Opal Mann filed a lawsuit against Owens-Illinois charging their policy of labeling jobs within the plant according to gender was illegal.<sup>2</sup> Not even the possibility of losing her job could keep her from following through with her case. When asked by the judge assigned to hear Mann's case if she was afraid of losing her job she replied, "Well judge, it's like this. There's nobody that will starve if I lose my job but me. This is one thing I'm willing to starve for."<sup>3</sup> Opal Mann was resolute in her desire to end the policy that had kept women at Owens-Illinois tied to the selecting line, and when the two parties settled the case before it reached Federal court, nearly thirty-five years of gender segregation at Owens-Illinois finally began to end.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roberta M. Campbell, Ph.D., "The Legend of Opal Mann: Resistance to Gender Segregation in the Glass Industry," Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia, Marshall University, Huntington, WV [online]: available from <http://www.marshall.edu/csega/research/thelegendofopalmann>, Internet: accessed 1 September 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Opal Mann, "The Owens-Illinois Project," *The Oral History of Appalachia Program*, Barbara E. Smith, Special Collections, Morrow Library, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia, 1994, 16.

<sup>4</sup> "Labor Hall of Honor-Opal Mann," West Virginia Labor History Collection, West Virginia Cultural Archives, Charleston, West Virginia, Box 1.

That it took a formal lawsuit to bring an end to gender segregation at Owens-Illinois is not surprising. Ruth Milkman argues that the practice of occupational sex-typing was deeply rooted in the formation of industries at their inception, thus making any attempt to end its continuation all the more difficult.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, despite the actions of women such as Mabel Adkins, Mary Carmichael, and Opal Mann, gender segregation continued for decades after they joined Local 256. However, the need for legislation to officially end gender discrimination at Owens-Illinois does not diminish the impact that work culture and the actions it created in opposition to a gender biased workplace had on the experiences of selectors at Owens.

This project examined the particular ways women workers used gender segregated spaces to form their own work culture and how that work culture allowed them to fight workplace discrimination. Much of the struggle took place before selectors at Owens-Illinois joined a labor union, but just as much, if not more, occurred after they joined the ranks of organized labor. This research traces those struggles through arguing that work culture was the common thread through which all acts of resistance occurred for women at Owens-Illinois even after the formation of Local 256. This study reveals how women workers used work culture as an informal organization through which they could affect change in the workplace. In addition, it demonstrates that labor unions did not necessarily replace work culture as the primary means through which women gained advantages over discriminatory practices; instead, the union's effectiveness was enhanced by work culture. Despite living in an era that proscribed women to remain within their gender defined spheres and placed more intrinsic value on formal organizations rather

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<sup>5</sup> Milkman, *Gender at Work*. 157.

than on the power of personal relationships in the workplace, women workers chose to work together in myriad ways to affect change on their behalf.

While popular understandings of workplace resistance are often associated with labor unions or large-scale social movements, this research illustrates that acts of resistance in the workplace can take many forms. Women at Owens-Illinois worked in segregated, low-wage jobs with no union to bargain on their behalf until 1944. Nonetheless, through their capitalization of gender-segregated workspaces, socialization in and out of the workplace, sharing of common experiences, and awareness of discriminatory practices, selectors created a cohesive work culture through which they were able to oppose their gender-defined subordinate status. Furthermore, not only did selectors continue to call upon their work culture after they became members of a labor union, but their efforts and experiences as union members were enhanced by the work culture upon which they had depended for so many years. Understanding these ideas reveals the importance of work culture for working class women who often received inadequate support from either side in their struggle for workplace equality.

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