

As Seen In

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E A S T E N D

Quigley looks back, remembers a different time

By JEFF MILLER

The big, crumbling pile of bricks in the heart of Sag Harbor is many things to many people. To some it's an ivy-covered piece of the past, with a place of honor on the National Register of Historic Places. To others it's an eyesore and a Superfund site contaminated by heavy metals. Still others see it as the future home of 65 luxury apartments.

But some local residents have a more intimate relationship with the structure that once housed the Bulova Watch Case factory. They worked there.

"I was 17," recalled Theresa Quigley. The year was 1973. She and other workers, all women, were "marshaled upstairs to a landing. There was an entry sealed by a metal gate. We were smooshed up against it. Then a bell went off and ... we were pushed along into a room with rows and rows of long tables."

Quigley had recently graduated from East Hampton High School. She had been accepted by every college to which she applied, and chose New York Institute of Technology because she wanted to study the new field of computer science. She'd been offered a full scholarship there, but when she arrived that fall, it turned out that housing wasn't included. She came home.

"I called all the colleges I'd rejected," Quigley said in a recent interview. "Yes, I could come, but not until January."

So she started looking for work.

"It's a sign of what the Hamptons were like then," she said. "Jobs were hard to come by."

But one place that was hiring was Bulova, the last and the biggest of the factories that Sag Harbor, once the blue-collar Hampton, was known for.

A foreman directed Quigley to her work station in the middle of one of the rows. Each station had a soldering iron and boxes of watch parts. Her job was to attach tiny metal joints, which would later hold watch bands, to metal circles that would later hold the watch works.

The women weren't permitted to talk, just work.

"At some point a foreman would come along and empty the box [of her finished pieces]. If you didn't do enough he yelled at you." At noon the bell rang again and "we were allowed to stand up. The gate opened and we went outside" where she ate lunch standing up. "Then the bell rang and we were ushered, lemming-like, back inside."

Once, while leaving her station (one bathroom break per shift) a girl at the end of Quigley's row whispered something to her. "I said, 'What?' And the monitor started screaming at me, 'Don't you ever disturb my workers!' I thought, 'Holy cow. I'm 17. I'm supposed to be in college.' I was scared out of my mind." She later learned that the girl had asked if she wanted to meet for lunch.

"One day I left for lunch, got on my bike and ... stopped at Swamp Road," Quigley recalled. "I was surrounded by the woods and the stream. Such solace." She never went back to the factory.

Instead, she found another job, and then did go to college, graduating cum laude, earning a law degree and becoming a partner in the firm Farrell Fritz P.C. Among many other things, she has served as East Hampton's Town Attorney, chair of the East End Committee of the Suffolk County Bar Association and a member of the East Hampton Board of Education.

Was it Bulova that turned Quigley into such an achiever? That distinction probably goes to her father, she said, "But it absolutely had a huge influence on me." Among other things, "It taught me real life, and to have compassion." Quigley worked at Bulova about two weeks. For many of her fellow workers, "It was their lives."

How does she feel about the building now that it's a relic, possibly to be reborn as a luxury apartment complex?

"I drive past and I think it's gorgeous," she said. "I do think it should be converted. I don't carry around bad feelings."

In fact, she said, if the resurrection does come to pass, "I wouldn't mind living there."

Got a hot tip about East End business? Tell Jeff Miller all about it at jdmiller49@yahoo.com.