

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown Project

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1931

Dave Ruby

Interviewed

On

April 5, 2001

By

Tray Direnzo

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
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INTERVIEWEE: DAVE RUBY

INTERVIEWER: Tray Direnzo

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown Project

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T: This is an interview with Dave Ruby for the Youngstown State University Oral History General Motors Lordstown Project by Tray Direnzo at Dave's home in Austintown Ohio on April 5, 2001 at 4:00pm. Dave let me begin by saying thank you for coming and allowing me to use your knowledge about General Motors Lordstown. My intent is to give the workers of the plant a chance to tell their stories and opinions about General Motors Lordstown and I hope it's a positive and informative experience for both of us. First of all can you tell me a little bit about your family history?

R: I'm forty-nine years old. I was born in Pennsylvania in 1952, I moved to Ohio in 1965 and have been there ever since. I'm married and have two children. My daughter is attending YSU and she'll graduate in May. My son is eleven years old and he attends Frank-Ohl Middle School.

T: What were your parent's origins and occupations?

R: Both were born in Pennsylvania. My father was a coal miner and got a job at Youngstown Steel Door building railroad cars. My mother never worked until we

came to Ohio, after which she was a nurse's aid in a nursing home. They're both retired now.

T: So he retired from Steel Door?

R: No he got laid off there and went to Austintown Tool and Dye and he worked there until he retired.

T: What was your neighborhood like?

R: I grew up in the Austintown area. My parents lived and still live on Four Mile Run Road. It was a typical neighborhood. We had a housing development above us. We weren't in the development but we were just outside it.

T: Were there a lot of kids?

R: Yes, all the kids from the development went to school with us. When I was in school Frank-Ohl at that time was a junior high school. The current AMS building was the high school when I started there. My freshman and sophomore years were in the old Fitch building which was the high school and they built the new building in 1968 my junior year.

T: So you got to graduate from the new Fitch?

R: Yes I was in the second graduating class from the new Fitch.

T: Can you tell me a little bit about your religious background?

R: I've been a Nazarene since we moved to Ohio in 1965. We started going to the Grace Church of the Nazarene, which at that time was called Wickcliff Church of the Nazarene. I started there in 1965 and I'm still a member there today.

T: What about your educational background?

R: I graduated from Austintown Fitch in 1970. After graduation I went into the US Navy and spent four years there. When I got out of the service I started working for General Motors and we got laid off. My wife and I had just been married a few months so I went and got an Associates Degree from ITT Technical Institute in Industrial Drafting.

T: When you went into the service did you go to war? Were you in Vietnam?

R: No, but I was enlisted during Vietnam. Vietnam ended in 1973 and I was in the Navy from 1970 to 1974. The reason I chose the navy was because I didn't want to go to Vietnam.

T: Where were you stationed?

R: I was home ported in Norfolk Virginia. We basically did Mediterranean Cruises and went to the Mediterranean for six months and then we'd do a few Caribbean Cruises and spent about a month and a half in the Caribbean.

T: Did you like that?

R: I loved it! If I hadn't planned on getting married I would have stayed. It's no life if you're married because nine months out of the year you were out at sea.

T: What about your occupational history before General Motors. Did you have a lot of jobs before that?

R: While I was in high school I worked at a gas station and right after graduation I went into the navy and when I came out of the navy I started working at General Motors. There was probably a four-year period where work was scarce. I'd work for a little while at General Motors and get laid off. Between the times getting laid

off I worked at B&M Auto Wrecking in Youngstown and did carpet installation for a while.

T: Did you like those jobs?

R: Yes. I even thought about staying there if B&M Auto Wrecking would match the pay and benefits at GM.

T: Why did you start working at General Motors?

R: When I got out of the service I was able to collect on unemployment. So I went to the unemployment office to sign up after I got out and they asked me if I wanted a job at General Motors and I said yes.

T: So that's how you got there?

R: Yes.

T: So what year did you start there?

R: In June of 1974.

T: What department did you start in?

R: The Body Shop

T: Take me through a typical day at General Motors when you first started.

R: The job as you know is very boring because you're constantly doing the same thing over and over. At that time I was working in the Body Shop and I spot-welded the back posts to the quarter panel. There were about seventeen different spot welds that I had to put on with one gun. I did the same thing over and over. We were building the Vega at that time and we built about a hundred an hour.

T: How did you feel about the Vega?

- R: At the time it was a good car. When they first came out with it there were some problems with the design. Right before they phased it out they'd corrected the problem. So when they got rid of the Vega it was a pretty decent car.
- T: What was the majority of the workers' opinions on the Vega at that time because I've heard that there were a lot of conflicts between the management and workers about that?
- R: Back at that time the body shop was Fischer Body and rest of the plant was Chevrolet so we actually worked for two divisions. That would cause strife between the two divisions because Chevrolet would blame a problem on Fischer Body and vice versa.
- T: So it was more between the two divisions then between management and employees.
- R: Yes.
- T: How did you deal with the boredom of working on an assembly line?
- R: Since I've been out there steady since 1978 the way I've combated the boredom is through my ARO job which is an Absentee Replacement Operator. If somebody doesn't come to work then I do their job. So I'm on a different job every night. In my area we have five ARO and between the five of us we rotate to a different job every half hour through the night so it's not as boring.
- T: Are you able to read at work?
- R: Lately I've been reading I didn't used to. To be honest with you there are nights that I don't do a whole lot. If everybody comes to work they really don't need me to do a job so I pick up if a person has to go to the bathroom or something. There

are people that do woodworking between jobs and read and all kinds of different things in the plant.

T: Does it cause you to have bitter feelings against the company that you lost work and seniority between 1974 and 1978?

R: It's just happened, they couldn't control the economy at the time in 1976. Under the new contract I wouldn't have lost my seniority but overall General Motors has provided me with a good income for my family.

T: How many different jobs would you say you've had there?

R: Basically my main job has been the ARO job. There have been a few times that I've taken a supervisor's job and a foreman's job. I've probably been a supervisor on and off for about two and a half to three years. Right now we get a sixteen-minute break in the morning, twenty-four minutes at lunchtime and then at the end of the shift we get a twenty-four minute break. So while you're driving home at seven o'clock your still getting paid until seven twenty four. Before we went into that system we had what we called a relief person. That person had seven different individuals that would go around and give people breaks. I did that for a while. Then I had a sub assembly job where I built up the tires. That consisted of mounting the spare tire on the wheel and putting air in it. It was a big machine that put the air. Other than those jobs I've always been in ARO.

T: How did it differ being on the other side going from being a laborer to being a foreman?

- R: It really wasn't that different. I'd tell the guys that I wasn't there because I was pro management I was there because they're going to pay me more money to do it. It was three dollars more to be a supervisor.
- T: How did relationships with workers change over that or did they?
- R: They really didn't. I always tried to be fair with people and got along with them. I really didn't have any problems.
- T: How did technology affect your job over the years or the plant for that matter?
- R: It's affected the plant in that we've lost some jobs to technology especially in the body shop. We lost a lot of jobs that people used to do that robots do now. You don't have to pay robots salary or benefits but they've also made a better product. It's cut costs but it's also made some jobs more difficult. Every car for example has a computer in it so it makes the maintenance end of it a little harder. I used to enjoy working on cars but now I don't even attempt it.
- T: Describe social relations at work. Is there a lot of social interaction at work?
- R: The social interaction at work is like in any community. You have people that don't like you because you have a better job or more seniority or you have people that would never talk to each other outside the plant but because they work together they've become friends.
- T: So is there an opportunity for a lot of socialization on the job?
- R: Yes. I'm working on the motor line right now and we have fifty-four different jobs on the motor line and they are all about five feet apart so you have time to talk. Two guys there set up a back gammon board and play back gammon between cars.

- T: Is it that different as far as socialization goes from today as opposed to the seventies? Was it frowned upon back then?
- R: When I first started out there in 1974 they didn't like you to read and would even take your book or paper off of you. They pretty much did away with that now. I guess they figured that if there is a diversion that makes the employee happy and it doesn't effect that workers performance then it's ok.
- T: Do you socialize that much with coworkers outside of work?
- R: No. I spend time with my family and we spend most of our time together when I'm not at work. No there are groups that golf and fish together but I don't.
- T: How do you feel that your work has impacted your family life?
- R: Sometimes it can be rough. Like the situation with my eleven year old son. My wife works as well so I have to work midnights to be home with him. I get off at seven twenty-four in the morning. That's rough; your body is not programmed to work that way.
- T: How long have you been on that shift?
- R: About three years.
- T: What has been your favorite shift?
- R: I prefer daylight. It starts at seven in the morning and you get off at two thirty-six in the afternoon. There's still plenty of day light to do your chores and then you're able to relax at night and get a decent sleep. When I work midnights I get off at seven in the morning and I'm home at seven thirty and normally I go to bed as soon as I get home. I get up about one o'clock and then take another nap before I go to work. That takes time away from the family but it has to be done.

T: If you could do it over would you choose General Motors again?

R: Yes.

T: Why?

R: It's provided a good living for my family. The benefits are goods and it's done an all around good job.

T: If there was another job and you could get identical benefits and pay and the same shift. Is there something else you would have liked to do?

R: I always liked being out doors. That's what I used to do at the salvage yard at B&M Auto Wrecking. That was basically the same job I do now except I was tearing cars apart instead of putting them together. I would have just as soon stayed there if the pay and benefits equaled those at GM. If I could find something that was outdoors that paid the same money and benefits then I would probably go there.

T: Would you want your children to work there?

R: I have a daughter that is twenty-three years old and she's asked a couple of times if I could try and get her in but I don't think I'd want her in there. Maybe this is chauvinistic but I don't believe that type of work is work for a woman. We have a lot of women out there and they do a good job but I think there are better things out there. I wanted her to get her education and she's got that now. Even with jobs like General Motors without the education you're not going to get a job like that. My son maybe if he would want to work there.

T: How do you feel that women are treated out there?

R: Sometimes I think they get preferential treatment. I probably sound chauvinistic but there are some jobs that they have added in the plant that they have labeled a man's job because it's more physical and consists of heavy lifting. I've always thought that if they work for the same company and make the same amount of money then whatever I do that they should do.

T: How do you feel that women coming into the plant played a part at work?

R: When we first started hiring women in 1970 and I think this correlates with court records that the divorce rate sky rocketed. A lot of that was women going in there and finding guys and that stuff happened. I think now women are a whole lot different. Now there are women in there that are twenty-three or so and they are going there because they want a job and it pays good and they aren't looking for guys. As a matter of fact I work with two that bought there own condos and are self-sufficient. I think society as whole is a whole lot different then back then. If you are married and you want the finer things in life then both the husband and wife have to work. Some women I guess have found that they don't need a guy.

T: Are there a lot of tensions between men and women out there?

R: No, basically they get along pretty good. There are some guys on the job that think there are some jobs that a woman can't do but with the new breed of women out there they say if it can be done then I can do it.

T: How do you feel the United Auto Workers has affected your life?

R: If it weren't for the union we wouldn't have the benefits and salary that we have. The company is not going to arbitrarily say that you guys are a bunch of nice guys

so we are going to give you these benefits. It's because the union has demanded that this is what we want. If you want us to build your cars then this is what you're going to pay. In another part I think the daily operation of the union is sometimes for the guy that doesn't want to work. If you go to work, do your job and don't cause any problems then you really don't need the union with the exception of the negotiation for the benefits and salary. If however you are a person that doesn't like to go to work or doesn't like to do your job once you get to work then you're going to need the union. There are a lot of people that wouldn't have a job if it weren't for the union due to absenteeism or whatever. It's a necessary thing, we need the union and they pay good money. The Non union shops that are affiliated with us and by that I mean supply our parts make less than half of what we do.

T: I've heard the plant has had a pretty radical past as far as spontaneous insubordination and at time sabotaging machines. What are your feelings about this?

R: In the late sixties early seventies the majority of the people that came to Lordstown were kids that came out of high school so they were used to that mentality. You know "only the toughest survive" and if they didn't like it they would walk out of the mill. As the plant and people have gotten older however things have changed. No one wants to be out of work with no money because most of us have kids to support and a house to pay for. I think we've all mellowed with age. If you strike you make a hundred dollars a week. If you're working you're going to bring home six or seven hundred a week. It's a matter of

economics. The company has negotiated nono strike clauses in our contract.

So unless it's a health and safety reason then it's really hard for us to walk out.

T: What are the young people like today who are coming into the plant versus those of the sixties and seventies?

R: Sometimes I think they are still in the high school mentality that the company owes them something. Like they think they are doing the company a favor by coming to work everyday. One the other hand I've seen a bunch that have been there since 1990 and since they've been there awhile they've mellowed out. I think it's just some people's nature to want to fight.

T: Can you tell me what is was like at Lordstown during some of the strikes?

R: We really haven't struck at Lordstown. At one time they fired our shop chairman for something and we all walked out over that just for solidarity and they eventually hired him back. I myself have not experience a real strike out. I've heard stories about the early years when they first struck out there. The people on the picket line would fight with the supervisor who was trying to get into the plant while they were striking. At that time it was radical but they were trying to protect their jobs. The twenty-three years that I've been there we really haven't been through a long strike.

T: Do you always agree with the stances that the UAW takes?

R: No I don't but they have provided well for my family so the things that I don't like I have to tolerate for the things that are necessary in my life that I do like.

T: Can you give examples of things that you didn't like that they've done?

R: Yes, the Shelf Agreement that we negotiated at the beginning of this year. The company got the union to renegotiate and when it comes to investing more money into our plant or giving us a new product then it will in effect void the present contract and allow them to go into the new Shelf Agreement which is a new contract that is negotiated and put on a shelf. Once they meet the terms of that agreement as far as either a new product or money invested into the plant then our old contract is out the door and the new one will take effect. If they don't make any investment or make new products then it sits on the shelf until the contract expires in the year 2003. I didn't like the idea of negotiating a new agreement. They've been holding a new paint shop and a new product over our heads since the 1980's and they haven't shown me anything that they actually want to do that. My feeling at the time was give us the new paint shop or new product and then we'll renegotiate a new contract but the company and unions stance was if you don't negotiate the new contract then there is not going to be a new paint shop or car.

T: How do you feel that the union and management work or have worked together?

R: When the union first started and not just at Lordstown all the industries they were fighting sweat shops. We were making twenty-five cents an hour and we were working fifty and sixty hour weeks. We have progressed from that to making a decent living. We work forty hours a week and anything over that we get over time for. That has been good. The union was very necessary to accomplish those goals. Management has finally realized that they can spend all the money they want and try all the technology they want but without the worker behind them to

actually put those things into motion that it won't work. The car won't build itself. We need management for the benefits and the pay and they need us to do the work.

T: Have you noticed many changes over time between the management and the workers?

R: It used to be my way or the highway. You did it the way the company wanted it or you were out of a job. Now when they start having problems with something either in the process of building it or the parts that we use then they go up to the person that is actually doing the job or putting the part on and ask them what the problem is and how to fix it. They're even paying the workers for suggestions and it actually does impact the way we build cars.

T: What do you feel the future of Lordstown is?

R: I don't know. I want to say that we have a good future and that we're going to be there a long time but to be honest I don't know. When we renegotiated our shelf agreement they said the new shop or new product or money investment would be sometime in mid to late January or February and now they're saying they're not going to make any announcements until June or July. Sometimes I think maybe they're going to cut their losses with Lordstown and shut it down because it's an old plant. It's not air-conditioned and stuff like that. It's also one of the few that's in a strategic location as far as the railway to supply parts and the major highways around it. I'm hoping it will be around for another seven years so I can retire. If they close it I will transfer to another plant and work there until I retire but I won't sell my home here or move my family. My son is going into the seventh

grade next year and I don't want to uproot him and start over with him in a new school system. Plus all our friends and family are out here. So I think with only seven years left I would transfer to another plant. This is nothing new my father did that for years before we moved to Ohio. He lived here and we lived in Pennsylvania and we saw him on the weekends. The stress of that finally got to my mother and she moved out there with him. We had seven kids in my family from the ages of eighteen to five. It was rough so I don't think I'd uproot my family like that if the plant were to close.

T: If the GM plant were to close how do you think it would affect the Youngstown-Warren Region?

R: It would be tough on the region like when the steel mills closed. The unemployment rate was astronomical. It took a lot of money out of the valley and we've finally started to recover from that a little bit. I think it would be devastating to the valley for a while but that's life and you have to learn to live with that and either bring new industry in and turn to new technology or else suffer the consequences. I think the area would recover from it but it would be a pretty harsh blow nonetheless.

T: How do you feel that the GM Lordstown Plant has affected this region?

R: It's brought a lot of jobs to this region. There are a lot of small spin off companies that have popped up over the years. The motor line where I work is scheduled to be phased out by the end of September. We'll get the motor and transmission out of a crate and put it into the car and that will eliminate fifty some jobs per shift so we'll lose about a hundred and fifty some jobs doing that.

Unfortunately that's the trend of the corporation now to get smaller as far as the number of workers in order to increase our industries share. Right now General Motors builds about twenty-five percent of the cars sold in the United States but they want to make the company smaller and more efficient by letting someone else do our job and paying them less money. Sixty to seventy-five percent of the people that work at Lordstown right now are eligible to retire and when they retire they won't have to hire new people to replace them. That's the trend right now and that's what they're trying to do.

T: Why do you think there are people that continue to work after they've put in the required amount of time?

R: There are a couple of reasons for that. A lot of them are still there because they have children still in high school or college and they're helping to put them through school. A lot of them are there because they started work at Lordstown when they were eighteen years old and they're only forty-eight years old and if they left Lordstown they wouldn't know what to do. They'd collect retirement but what would they do with that eight-hour void? Some have said that they don't feel that they could afford to retire because they still have homes to pay for. It affects your social security when you get older and retire and go on social security. If you retire when you're too young then that takes away a percentage of social security that you would've collected whenever you turned that age. So a lot of people are doing it for economic reasons.

T: Do you have any other insights or opinions on the plant that you'd like to share?

R: No I think that about covers it.

- T: I'd like to thank you for your time, knowledge and insights regarding General Motors. If you have any questions feel free to contact me or if you need to talk to YSU call the Center for Historic Preservation at Youngstown State University I can give you their number as well. Thank you very much Dave.
- R: You're welcome.