

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
G.M. Lordstown Plant

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O.H. 1936

Joseph Hayes
Interview
By
Robert Thomas
On
May 10, 2001

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INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH HAYES

INTERVIEWER: Robert Thomas

SUBJECT: The G.M. Lordstown Plant

DATE: May 10, 2001

This interview with Mr. Joseph Hayes is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on G. M. Lordstown. The interview is conducted at Mr. Hayes' home at 1383 Melbourne Drive in Vienna, Ohio. The date is May 10th; the time is 7:00 pm. My name is Robert Thomas.

T: Ok, first of all, where were you born?

H: In Youngstown, Ohio. Right here in town, though my parents weren't from Youngstown, they were from Northwestern Pennsylvania.

T: Ok. What brought 'em over here?

H: My dad worked for Ohio Edison and shortly after I was born they transferred to a sub-division in Andover Ohio up in Ashtabula County.

T: OK, did you grow up in Youngstown?

H: No, I grew up in Kinsman. Kinsman in the Wayne, Williamsfield area.

T: OK. Went to High School there?

H: Yeah.

T: OK. Any college?

H: I went a little bit to Youngstown State. Just enough to find out that I couldn't really handle it.

T: Wasn't your bag.

H: No.

T: Ok. Well, what about employment before Lordstown? Where did you -?

H: Before Lordstown I used to work for Republic Steel in Niles, Ohio. I worked there for 23 years and the plant pretty much was going downhill. I was laid off there a lot and at that time I was in - so I got a job with Babcock and Wilcox and I worked down there for seven years. And then they folded up so I came back to the area and I got a job at GF.

T: General Fireproof?

H: General Fireproof. And then they folded up and then I got a job in Cleveland for a couple of months and while I was working in Cleveland, well, I guess a little bit before that, I got a job at Copperweld. Then they had a slow time and they laid me off. Then, I got a job in Cleveland, at a small plant, and during the time I was working there I was looking for another job in my half of the world. I interviewed at Lordstown and I got in there.

T: What year would that have been?

H: That was in 1985.

T: Ok. What brought you to Lordstown? Was it reputation of a good job, or friends, or...

H: Just that I heard they were hiring. It was closer to home than Cleveland and working on the east side of Cleveland I thought that Lordstown sounded a whole lot closer and better to me.

T: Sure. What were your main jobs at the steel mills before Lordstown?

H: Well, initially I started out in the shipping department, but then I had an opportunity with getting in a electro department, and I got in there and I was in there ever since. I was laid off a lot during my working years.

T: Did any of those skills carry over in the -

H: Oh yeah, well they carried over all the way down the line. In fact you know I went to Babcock and worked on a ... there and I did really learn an awful lot.... We did a lot of construction and maintenance so it really helped me a lot. Seven years there and then I went to work for GF... All those experiences helped me, contributed to work experience.

T: Sure. What was your job at GM?

H: I was a WEMR (Welder, Electrical Maintenance, Repair).

T: Ok, did you repair the line?

H: Well, at first it started out with weld guns then welder repair kit guns and weld scheduling and stuff like that. Well, ... since '85 they've been bringing in more and more robots to do the work. So now it was like, when I left, it was more like robot repair.

T: Some of the other people I've interviewed said those welding guns were mammoth and you really had to – (work hard)

H: Oh, definitely. And some of them weighed a lot. We had guns that weighed 100lbs. But they were all balanced so that if you knew how to operate the guns, and with a little bit of physical ability, ... you could handle them very easily – surprisingly easily.

T: Was there a certain amount of spot welds each piece should get?

H: It depends on the time that the unit's going by... There is a maximum that you could put on with one gun. Say, you know, like 40 would be a maximum, depending upon how hot the gun is and several other contributing factors. But if you go over a certain limit, say in a 60 second cycle, you could burn the gun up. So they were limited to so many they could do on a particular unit. And then also takes in account where did this gun have to go to do this weld. Getting the gun in and getting it out while the unit is moving down the line. So consequently, you might only do 6 welds and then somebody else down there might do another 6. And you would complete that unit.

T: What else was a description of your job? Did you repair the guns?

H: Well, the job was kinda funny because you were more or less a people service person because these people came in every day and they had a really hard job. Very difficult job. They had to put so many welds in each vehicle and so if this particular gun didn't run right and was giving them trouble, well then you were the first one they wanted to see. And they weren't satisfied until this gun particularly was running the way that it should be. It could be a real headache. If a person really wanted to do their job then it was no problem, but if a person really didn't want to work, then you were the first one they saw. It was up to you to decide which way the shift was going to go.

T: Would you have to shut the line down to fix it?

H: No. Well, I won't say no, but in most cases no. Very rarely you would shut the line down. They always had what they called backups. The person would push that gun out of the way and use the backup. Or, if either one of those failed, they would have another place on the line where they would pick that weld up so they didn't have to stop. Now there were times where that wasn't possible to do and so then the line would have to stop. But that was very rare. They didn't like to do that. Didn't like to stop.

T: No. Was that a dangerous job?

H: Naw, there could be an element of danger but generally no.

T: Because of the voltage?

H: Well, it was very low voltage, but maybe the hazard of pinching, oh there were people hurt, I don't like to say that there wasn't. I wouldn't call it dangerous at all. When I worked on the mill we used to climb on the trains and it was much more dangerous operation than GM. GM is very mild as far as danger goes.

T: All in all it was generally safe?

H: Yeah. Very safe.

T: Did you do that the whole time you were there? When you retired, were you doing pretty much the same thing?

H: I was doing pretty much the same thing. But I say the equipment we worked with switched over from manual to automatic. For my job it was a little bit easier because the robots didn't really care how the gun worked, all they cared – they just worked whether it leaked, or operated or not. The gun had to operate but I mean, if the gun wasn't firing just right, or something... the robots really didn't care. They didn't care about getting wet. We had water going through these guns all time and occasionally they would leak. And of course people didn't like getting wet. But the robots didn't really care.

T: Was that to cool the gun?

H: Yeah. That's to cool the gun. And also, the gun is air operated, too. And if you had a leak with the air, a lot of times the gun will run perfectly all right with that air leak – its just noisy and very annoying if you happen to be an operator. But of course the robot really wouldn't care whether it's leaking or not. Noise didn't bother then at all. So in a lot of respects the robots were a lot easier for us to work with, but they eliminated a lot of people.

T: What was an average day like for you? Or was there an average day, or was every day different?

H: Well that's one thing about the job – every day was a little different. You could go into work and you might have 40 calls and never have a chance to sit down and another day you might have one call. And you never know how it's going to go. So it was very unpredictable.

T: Was there a lot of overtime involved?

H: Overtime was available if you wanted it and I did work a lot when I first started but after I got older I didn't really care to work overtime. And it could be in a situation where it was mandatory. If the line's running and they're working overtime, they expect you to work overtime. Which wasn't a good situation.

T: You were stuck there whether you liked it or not.... What about the co-workers? Was that a tight bond since you were kinda like a small group?

H: Oh, yeah. Definitely. We were in some respects small, but the overall picture was that there were 100 in the department. Spread over three shifts. In one respect there was kind of a large, but directly you only worked with a very few people.

T: Did you maintain a friendship with these people after work?

H: Oh, yeah. In fact, we still go out to lunch and hash over what's happening at the plant, how it's going to go.

T: What year did you retire?

H: I retired in '99... two years ago this fall.

T: Back when you started out there I guess the steel mills had already closed, most of 'em, so that didn't really affect you at all... you didn't feel any repercussions from that?

H: Well, the steel mills in the area were pretty much closed. So really it didn't affect me then. It did previously, when I was looking for work, but not when I was working at G.M.

T: What about union experiences?

H: Well, I didn't really involve too much with the union. Most of it was favorable, what little I did involve in – we had really good union representation. We were kind of a little bit different. We were represented in a different area and had our own rep, and although it was still connected to the.... It is kind of difficult to explain.

T: You were kind of like a little separate wing, rather than the whole building.

H: Right, exactly.

T: What did you most enjoy about you job?

H: Well, probably the biggest thing about my job is that I felt absolutely no pressure. I didn't feel any pressure to go out and do... if I had any pressure it wasn't because of the work. And you had a lot of extra time that you could do what you want. There was absolutely no direct supervision.

T: Did you often have a lot of time to kill, there wasn't any... (breaks)

H: Oh, yeah. We did that. We usually read the paper.

T: I hear there are a lot of newspaper machines right at the door when you walk in.

H: Oh, yeah. All kinds of newspaper machines. I had more time to read the paper then than I do now. But you know you always had to be available, in case they needed you.

T: Sure. When you were there, did you ever experience any unfavorable safety conditions in the plant? Something that should have been addressed?

H: Hmmmm. Can't think of anything, right off hand. We always had safety glasses and they would give you information in case anything came up. There were some accidents that happened, that I can recall. One of our men in our department stepped in front of a tow motor and the guy backed over him.

T: That could happen anywhere, though.

H: Right. That could happen anywhere. That was kind of tragic. Basically, there was nothing serious otherwise.

T: What do you think was your least favorable memories about the plant?

H: I dunno... Probably the time schedule, it could screw you up.

T: The shifts, you mean?

H: Right. At one point, for two years, we worked 12 hours straight. And four days a week, which wasn't a good schedule. That sounds really good, but you're getting three days off – but you're really not getting three days off. You're getting two and a half days off and then you're paying for it for the other four. The time, and the scheduling was probably the least of the job. I did work a lot of afternoons when I started and that wasn't bad at all. But the kids were all gone and so it worked for me. I didn't have little kids at home. It would have been bad if I had been on afternoons then.

T: Did you have trouble getting on day shift? Did you retire from day shift?

H: I retired from day shift and I pretty much went to day shift when the van plant closed. I transferred to the car plant – everybody had to transfer – and at that time I went to day shift. Except for the period when we worked 12-hour shifts; then I worked 7 at night to 7 in the morning. But other than that it was day shift.

T: Did you float around between the van plant and the car plant?

H: No, I did not. In fact I started out in the van plant and stayed right there until it closed. I was sorry to see it close, because it was a slower pace. We didn't build as many units and I was familiar with it. And when you're familiar with something, you hate to see it change.

T: I heard that that was such a big seller for G.M., and then they were going, going, going, and all of a sudden --

H: It was a decision made in Detroit, for some crazy reason, that they wanted to get that van out of there. And I'll never understand it. The way I understand it, they moved it somewhere up near Detroit. Which wasn't going to be the original home. They couldn't wait to get it out of Lordstown, for some reason. Then, after they got it up there, they built it there for a year or so. And moved it to where the original home was to be... Kansas or something, I don't know. But they moved it twice, instead of leaving it where it was. Which we had all the facilities to build it right there, but for some reason Detroit did not want that van in Lordstown for whatever reason.

T: Did the car plant absorb the jobs?

H: They did, they did absorb the jobs and a lot of people retired. They offered them some good incentives to retire. I think at that time they went to another shift or something that absorbed most of the production people. Plus the retirements and everything, they kept the same numbers.

T: What do you think about the Saturn project? Did that affect you at all?

H: That didn't really affect us all that much. Several of our people went there and after they were gone, if they transferred to Saturn, then they had to relinquish all their seniority rights. And so if they came back, if they decided they didn't like it there and came back, they had to go start at the bottom again and they had to go start all over again with the seniority. And there was a couple came from Saturn, too. They are still out there today, they didn't think Saturn was all that great a place to work. So I really don't know -- one thing I do know that they did which I thought was kind of strange is they -- how did they do that? They took money out of their paycheck, - no that's not - They gave 'em a bonus every month -- every paycheck, then they held it from them and paid it to them two and a half months later, or something. It was screwy. In other words, they're paying you this money and G.M.'s holding it in a escrow account and then, three months later they're going to give it to you. So they've always got some kind of an escrow from salary, sitting someplace, doing something, which you're not getting any advantage out of. Seemed very strange to me.

T: Why would they do that, do you have any idea?

H: I have no idea why they did that. What was the purpose of that I don't know. It was a bonus that they said they were going to get but why they didn't pay it to them right away I don't know -- it was really strange.

T: You came in after GMAD, I don't think that affected you at all. General Motors Assembly Division.

H: I don't recall that at – you mean when they had a split from the Fisher Body Division? Yeah, that was years ago.

T: You came in after a lot of the –

H: Yeah, that had already been done – I don't know what year that was, that had to be back in '80, or even before that; late '70's?

T: Yeah. You came in after a lot of the uh – the Vega. You don't probably have too many feelings about the Vega one way or the other.

H: No, I don't know anything about the Vega.

T: They built the Cavalier the whole time you were there.

H: They did build the Cavalier. But it's ironic that one time I was laid off, in fact 1966... 1966 I was laid off from Republic and I went out there and got a job. And I worked there for two months and I was only just starting out. But I didn't work in skilled trades, I worked on the line. Because I had just started in the electrical department at Republic. Anyhow, I worked there for two months and they were building what they called the B body and the Camero. I worked for two months on the line and they called me back at Republic, and I went back because it was crazy. It was really crazy at Lordstown.

T: Working on the line?

H: Oh yeah. It was crazy plus they were just starting out. At that time they fired more people than they hired. Because the union had absolutely no teeth at all. Whatever they wanted to do, they did. So consequently, when I had an opportunity to get out... plus I would've never gotten into skilled trades that way. I was already in, and there I was.

T: You were on the line. So what were you doing then?

H: For that two months? I was working in trim, putting in, doing sub-assembly, stuff like that.

T: When you left there did you ever think you'd be going back?

H: No, I never did. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd go back.

T: When you went back there, almost 20 years later, what did you think of the plant?

H: Totally different. But I was going in on a totally different situation, you know different job. Plus, even the jobs on the line were not done like they did when I was there. I mean you just never got a break. If you didn't get a job done, they wanted to know why. It wasn't a good situation at all. They probably lost more good workers than they kept because people just wouldn't put up with it.

T: The line speed was pretty fast, in the beginning I guess?

H: I don't recall. I know it was fast, but I don't recall how fast, you know. They were just on you all the time. I was fortunate that the job I had was a sub-assembly job.

T: So you weren't on the actual line, you were off to the side?

H: Yeah. Part of it was - 75% of it was sub-assembly and 25% was actually putting something on the car. Some people, like the guy in front of me I remember, put on master cylinders. And guess what, every car gets a master cylinder.

T: Pretty heavy on them old cars, too.

H: Oh, yeah. He put on the master cylinder and you can't miss a master cylinder - gotta have it. So he had a hard job. It was tough.

T: Would you want your children to work at Lordstown?

H: Well, that would be up to them, of course. But I was really fortunate that all our kids did go to college and found good jobs elsewhere.

T: Is there anything that we haven't gone over that you think is important?

H: It was a good place to work. Wasn't anything we could complain about. Now it's totally different.

T: How so?

H: Well, in the mill everybody had their job to do and (and it was that way out there, too) you just did it but I can remember, like when the mill was running... the roller actually would run the mill and you wouldn't see any supervision. Unless you had a problem, you know. And they would run 8 hours like that where you would hardly ever see anybody around. It was more hands-on at Lordstown - you had to be there. And it was more labor intense, too. That's another thing I think that we had up at the mills. To build at the Lordstown plant was a small percentage of what you would do at the steel mill. Because you - build the frame and you just plug in units. Where in the steel mill you bring in huge equipment; it's a huge investment. A great deal money involved. Not as labor intense, to run a steel mill, you see what I mean? At Lordstown, there's 3,600

workers, and to run a big steel mill you only need a thousand. And the investment would be a lot more capital – to build the steel mill.

T: What would you say was the demise of the steel mills in this area?

H: Oh, obviously, foreign steel and cheap labor. I don't think it was anything else - foreign steel and cheap labor. And how they do it on the other side of the ocean, I don't know but it has to be a whole lot cheaper than we were doing it. Because in order for them to ship it – like Japan, for instance, absolutely no raw materials at all. Ship everything out and ship it and ship steel back here cheaper than we can make it here – we've got all the raw materials. So it's gotta be – they've gotta subsidize their industry. No other way.

T: Do you think management played a role at the steel mills? Did they make – was there was something that should have been done?

H: I don't think so. I think it was just a matter of dollars and cents. So much a ton. If they were going to ship it from Japan \$20 a ton cheaper than we can make it right here, then where are they going to buy it? They are going to buy it from Japan. I think it ruined our country, I really do. Of course a lot of other things ruined our country. But I don't understand why they let them do that. You know you pick up a golf set at Sam's Club. And the bag, the clubs, the whole nine yards, made in China. The Chinese don't go golfing. I don't understand; we're killing our own country. We just came back from Italy last week. You cannot find one thing made in Italy that was not 'Made in Italy'. Now why is it that when you go to that country, I don't care if you pick up anything, turn it over, it is made in Italy. They do it all themselves. Somehow we missed the boat. I don't know and I wish I knew the answer.

T: Well, we've gone over just about everything I have to ask. Is there anything you want to talk about the steel mills?

H: I can't really think of anything – can you think of anything I might have missed?
(to wife)

T: Go ahead!

H: She knows as much about it as I do, she hears me come back at night and I'm complaining about it.

Mrs. H: Well, it was just difficult raising 4 children with plants closing constantly, with layoffs constantly. In the years between 1960 and the 1980's he worked four or five places. And not because he didn't want to work, the places closed – closed their doors. So he had to hustle and look for work. He drove school bus, he went down in to Youngstown and painted houses, he worked for a man doing repairs to his rental homes, and he did all kinds of things to keep the family. And then in 1985 he was fortunate to

get into G.M., which brought us a good paycheck, but by then the kids were pretty much raised.

H: Yeah, I used to do a lot of side work like ... you name it. Whatever came up that you could do. If anybody needed a job done, they would call me, and if I wasn't working I would go and do the job.

(Tape interruption)

H: I worked with a lot of them, though. It would be like when I worked at GF, we had guys there from Sheet and Tube, US Steel, Republic. They would – all those guys looking for work because those mills went down. And so they would go there, and then when I worked down at Babcock and Wilcox, we had the same thing. We had guys there that were out of the mills that they wanted skilled people so they would take them wherever they could get them. When you go to G.M. it is the same thing. Of course there are people that come through the apprenticeship, but there's a lot of people that became electricians and pipe-fitters and the like that came out of the mills that were looking for jobs. They're working at G.M. Of course there's less and less all the time because of automation.

Mrs. H: When you asked Joe about what he thought the reason was that the mill failed – the steel mills, and I agree with him about the imports but I think it was also in the '60s and '50s, the management did not put money back into the steel. I don't know – but then, they couldn't compete with the newer factories anymore. I think that had something to do with it.

H: Well, they - That's true. They didn't put a lot of money back in – they might have put spot money back here and there to take care of new equipment, but they didn't put a great deal of money back. I can remember when US Steel had some large number of workers and they were thinking of about an employee's buyout because they wanted to run this mill. So they came up with a figure of \$325 million, and the employees could come up with a million, which wasn't quite enough to get it – you know, for an employee's buyout. So they didn't get it. I don't know if Copperweld's the same way, whether they were short capital, too.

Mrs. H: Before WWII, we were sending all of our expertise and our knowledge over to Japan on how to make steel and how to build airplanes and all of that. And they repaid us by coming and bombing Pearl Harbor. With our expertise. And for some reason, the people in this country didn't really listen, because now we're exporting nothing and importing everything. And I don't know where it is going to lead; I think it's going to be more disaster for young people. Because like Joe said, in Italy, even the hair dryer in the hotel was 'Made in Italy'. I don't think you could find a hair dryer in this whole country that wasn't made in Indonesia or...

H: Our country could never be like that. They have very little frozen food. Everything is done, carried into the town and then you sell it. That's the way it is.

Everything is fresh. If you want fish, some guy on a fish cart'll come around and sell you fish. If you want vegetables, some guy will come around and sell you vegetables. If you want meat, the meat guy will come around and sell you meat. They buy like what they need for that day. It's amazing how much energy they don't use -- they don't use a lot of energy-

T: Electricity, you mean.

H: Electricity -- exactly. They don't have a lot of frozen foods. If you go into a restaurant and you order something to drink most restaurants you cannot get ice.

T: For your Coke or pop...

H: Yes, they are not a throw-away society.

T: Well, I appreciate your time and your effort this evening.

H: Well, I hope we helped you out.