

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

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O.H. 1938

Richard Zampini
Interview
By
Robert Thomas
On
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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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O.H. 1937

INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD J. ZAMPINI

INTERVIEWER: Robert Thomas

SUBJECT: The G.M. Lordstown Plant

DATE: 4-23-01

This interview with Mr. Richard Zampini is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on G.M. Lordstown. This interview took place 7:00pm April 23, 2001. The interview was conducted at Mr. Zampini's home at 6918 Waterloo, Atwater, Ohio. My name is Robert Thomas. The time is 7:00pm. This project is being funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

T: ...A little bit about your background. Where were you born, where did you grow up at?

Z: Grew up mostly all over. I was born up in Painesville. And I moved around through High School, graduated High School in Geneva in 1955. Went in the service and came out, started working in '58. Worked for a company that I traveled pretty much from Chicago East, worked for a service company. And I come into Portage County I think it was 1964. Worked there for a while, worked in Ravenna for a while. In 1970, August 1970 I went down to work for General Motors Lordstown.

T: What brought you to Lordstown?

Z: Friend of mine was working there and he said they were going to start hiring. So when they had that big hire in '70 ... for the Vega, we started that up and the rest of my life I worked there.

T: What did you start out doing? What was your main job?

Z: First year I worked there, I worked as a receiving inspector. When they had problems with parts, it was our job to check the parts that were on the line, or if we had a bad part then we would have to go out on the receiving dock and check three shipments I believe it was to make sure that they were finally getting good parts in. We would do what we called red tagged 'em and couldn't use them.

T: Send 'em back?

Z: Send 'em back.

T: Did you get a lot of that?

Z: Back then we did.

T: Did it get better over the years?

Z: Yeah. I only worked there a year then they were starting to cut back in that department so I went out to the line. Plus I wanted to go daylight. I was working second shift. We were working 11 and a half hours a day, six days a week. And if you had to work overtime then seven.

T: That's a lot of time at work. Did you have a family then?

Z: No. I was single.

T: So it probably wasn't as bad.

Z: No, just seemed like all your hours gone, a lot of guys said the same thing. You go to work; you go home. You go to bed; you get up and you go to work. Unless you just said "To heck with it. I'm going to take tomorrow off. You know, I need a mental health day."

T: Was all that overtime mandatory, could you get out of it?

Z: Most of it was scheduled.

T: That's it. You just were there.

Z: You could make arrangements, talk to the foreman and get out of it. But for the most part, those guys at the time... I think we were making \$5.00 an hour back then. We were working all those hours and for a lot of those guys that was the most money they had ever seen. It was the most I'd even seen. I had never worked for that kind of money before.

T: Yeah, back then the minimum wage was probably what, \$1.35 or \$1.50?

Z: Somewhere back in there.

T: They lived on less then...

Z: Went to work in August of 1970, and then it was September 14th or 15th whatever that contract date is, that is when we went on that long 10 or 11 week strike.

(Brief interruption)

Z: That's when we were on that long strike.

T: What was that, '72?

Z: '70. 1970. I think it was eleven or twelve week strike.

T: What do you remember about that?

Z: It was probably the biggest pay raise we got, at the time. That's when we started making \$5.00/hour and over. I think we got, I don't know, whatever, 50 cents the first year and 25 and 25 the next two years and that pushed us almost up to \$6.00/hour, over \$5 at least.

T: That was some real money back then.

Z: Yeah. Especially when you're working all the hours and the overtime. All the overtime was time and a half, Saturdays time and a half, Sundays double time. We were working most of the time 11 and a half to 12 hours a day.

T: You were building the Vega back then?

Z: Yeah. Building the Vega back then.

T: There's a lot of bad press about the Vega. What do you take from it?

Z: It was right.

T: Problems with the car?

Z: Yeah. When we quit building it, I think and the guys that I talked to said the same thing, we were starting to build a good car, but by then it has such a bad name that nobody would buy it. Back then, everybody's comment was you could tell 'em you had a bad part and they'd say, "Well, use it if you can."

T: Make it work, try to make it work.

Z: Yeah, make it work. And you just ... their main concern was you had cars off the end of the line. 'Cause at one time they told us there was about a six-month waiting list.

T: For the Vega?

Z: For the Vega.

T: They wanted to get a small car out on the market.

Z: Yeah, and I think it was selling for what - \$1,200 or something like that was all they were charging for it. \$1,300, \$1,400 , somewhere back in there.

T: Do you keep in touch with a lot of people that you worked with?

Z: Uh, not too much. I only went back to the plant one. I've been to a couple of retiree's meetings, seen a few people I worked with. I don't know, never seemed to get back into it.

T: Did you make a lot of friends when you worked there?

Z: Oh, yeah.

T: Socialize with them much?

Z: Not so much outside the plant. Everybody, I'm one of the few people that worked in the Portage County, Summit County area. Most of the work force come out of Trumbull, Mahoning and Columbiana Counties. Pennsylvania, along the edge... We had a few that come out of Cleveland. There were very few of us that worked from over in this Western half, so to speak, whatever you want to call the Western side.

T: Probably be a pretty good drive from here. You're out here a ways.

Z: Used to take me just about 40 minutes. That was from the time the whistle blew until I walked in the door. Just about 40 minutes. It wasn't too bad, but it was enough.

T: It was worth the drive.

Z: Oh, yeah. Made good money there. Made some good friends while I was working there.

T: Were you involved in the union at all?

Z: Not really, no. I figured working, and the other things I had, that was enough. Maybe I should have been more involved but I wasn't. I am probably ashamed to say it but out of the thirty years I worked I only went to two union meetings. And those were after hours. All the union meetings were on Sunday and I thought, things are going pretty good. Unless it was some kind of special meeting, like an information meeting. I could always find something else to do on a Sunday, on a Sunday afternoon.

T: Yeah, especially working those kind of hours. Well back in 1970 when you started working there, the steel mills were still going good and... what caused you not to go to the steel mills?

Z: Company I worked for, I used to be a contractor, we used to do sub-contracting for the steel mills. It, basically I liked the job I was doing at the time. I really didn't have any desire to go anyplace else. Until 1969, the company I was working for, things started to change over there and I started looking for another job. And a friend of mine, like I said, he was working down there and he started in '66. He said "we're going to have a hiring" and asked me if I wanted to fill out an application. So he got me an application and I started working down there.

T: Did you have any special training that made you qualified for a job? Any trade school?

Z: When I hired in, I'd been used to working with testing equipment. And that's one of the qualifications you had to have. You know, like calipers....

T: Micrometers and things like that.

Z: Yeah, we had to use things like that. Used to call 'em "Go" and "No-Go" pages...

T: Check it and don't check it, yeah...

Z: It's "Go" and "No-Go". Working with those, we used to work with those. I used to work with chemicals before... testing chemicals, where we didn't have to do anything down there but testing. We had to check oil, and I don't know if we had to check the antifreeze or not. I know we had to check the oil. So that was part of our...

T: What do you mean check the oil? Viscosity?

Z: Yeah, everything. We had to heat it up and see if it was the right viscosity. I think we had to also check the brake fluid, but I never had to do any of that.

T: Did you do that job the whole time you were there?

Z: No, I only worked in that department a year. Then they started cutting back in that department. Actually I was one of the youngest people hired so I would be one of the first people out. So I asked to go out, you know, I volunteered to go. First shift. I wanted to go to first shift anyway and I said well, this is as good a time as any. So I went first shift and started working on the line.

T: How'd you like working on the line?

Z: It was different. I never had to work anything like that, the repetition. At the time, I was working on the engine line – Engine 2, they called it. And I think the car line was running 100 units an hour, our engine line was running 105 an hour. We only had however many seconds...

T: Were you putting the engines on the cars?

Z: No, I was putting motor mounts on, securing the mount to the block. Then further on down the line, then when we finished up ... We got 'em from Engine 1 where they take it out of the cargo rack and they put on the transmission and I don't know what all parts they put on over there.

T: They did that at Lordstown, too?

Z: Yeah.

T: Where were the motors from, do you remember?

Z: Buffalo. All our engines came from Buffalo.

T: So it got repetitious working on the line, doing the same thing over and over. How did you deal the...

Z: I just got the mindset it was a job... just do it.

T: Some guys I interviewed told me they were able to read a magazine...

Z: A lot of guys did. I mean they worked fast enough to read. I worked fast enough not to get in the hole.

T: Keep 'em ahead of yourself.

Z: I just made sure my job was done, that's all. 'Cause to me, I always felt, they see you taking time to read they're going to find something else to put on your job.

T: You're not busy enough... not doing your job...

Z: Right. But we had a lot more time to do our job back then. I don't know what the line speed is now, if they have changed the rate or not, but back then you had 47 seconds to do your job.

T: What year did you retire from there?

Z: 2000. July 1, 2000.

T: Working on the Cavalier.

Z: Yeah, Cavalier and Sunfire, Sunbird – whatever they call it.

T: They come off the same line?

Z: Yeah. One right behind the other, doesn't make any difference. You just picked up whatever part you needed.

T: Different trim part?

Z: Yeah. I was lucky. When I finished, I was putting speakers in the door. At the time, we had four different speakers. They - three of them could be used interchangeably. We had one, called the Monsoon system, and it only went onto the Pontiac GT.

T: It was a premium sound system?

Z: It was a big boom box style...

T: Real loud. The kids would love it.

Z: Yeah, that's what it was.

T: Did the... when the steel mills were shutting down in the late '70's did that affect you at all? Did you feel any repercussions?

Z: No, didn't bother us.

T: How about, would you want your children to work at Lordstown.

Z: Yeah, if they wanted to go down there and work with me... yeah. I never tried to get my daughter in there. Actually it's pretty tough to get your kids in down there.

T: That's what I've heard. Maybe it was easier years ago.

Z: Yeah. Prior to 1980, there were lots of jobs in the Valley. So there weren't as many people trying to get in there down there.

T: I think you have quite a few more trying to get in than the availability of jobs. What other jobs did you have? Anything else other than putting the speakers in and putting the motor mounts on?

Z: Oh, yeah, well I worked several jobs in there... I put speakers in, trim parts, A-post, rocker trim, sail...., there's a different part goes in there now, but there used to be a part goin' in between the rear corner glass and the rear window. There's a piece of plastic trim going in there covering up the metal; used to put those in.

T: What was the most difficult job out of all of 'em?

Z: Oh, I don't know... Actually the hardest one I ever had to learn was back on the old Vega was putting the instrument panels in.

T: How come that was difficult?

Z: Well, the line speed run a lot faster. Had to reach inside and shoot four or five screws inside the car, make sure the instrument panel was secured to the dash. And then there was a different screw for Pontiacs and Chevys. So just getting the coordination down was, well I got it but I had to work at it. I didn't work on the job long enough to do it.

T: What would happen if you didn't get it done?

Z: Just holler for repair. They were mad. Back then they used to have inspectors and they would look at every car and make sure that everything was on the car. They had a manifest and each inspector had so many pieces to look for on a car.

T: If it wasn't right they would fix it?

Z: Yeah, they'd circle it and have a repairman fix it.

T: Do you think they were running the line too fast back then?

Z: No, because we had several hundred more people working back then. I don't know for sure but I would guess there are probably 2,000 less people working there now than there were back then.

T: That's a big difference.

Z: But those people, even though the line was running faster, you had more people more jobs.

T: What do you think about more recent things, like the Saturn project? Did that affect you at all, when they started building the Saturns and trying to find new ways of building cars?

Z: No, it didn't. They come out and said they were going to change monitors and the ways they were building models. I guess its called modular, they all come pre-assembled, put the _____, the whole dashboard is ready to go in. They did some of that, but nothing on the scale that they were talking about going to. I don't know if they'll ever get to do that.

T: What about back in the 1970's, GMAD? When that came in, did that affect you?

Z: Yeah, that is when they started to push for more work, less people.

T: Could you give me just a brief idea of a average day for you, what it was like?

Z: What, down there at the plant?

T: Yeah, at the plant, at G.M.

Z: I don't know, walk in... I used to get there early enough to sit down and have a cup of coffee and read the newspaper. I used to like to do that. Line starts up and you get your work until you get your break, and then -

T: What, did you get two breaks a day?

Z: Depended. I forget now how many – I guess, two breaks and then you got lunch break.

T: During those breaks did the line actually shut down?

Z: They used to do it both ways. They used to have relief men, which I did for a while. But they called them 'tag relief' where you would go around, for seven people, and you would relieve them. They kept the line running then. But then they found out that they were losing quality and they would actually save money if they would stop the line. So they sent everybody at break at one time and start back up again. I forget how many hundreds of relief men were in there. I agree, 'cause I used to be able to watch it myself when I was working the line because I could tell where the relief man was at and which job he was doing by how the part got to me. How the previous part got to me.

T: Really, they weren't doing as good a job?

Z: No.

T: Is that because they weren't doing it all the time?

Z: Partly, and a lot of the times that's just the way they were.

T: What do you think was the best thing about your experience working out there?

Z: Oh, I don't know, I just, met a lot of good people, I guess. Made good money, met some real nice people.

T: What was the worst thing about working out there?

Z: The hours.

T: Too many hours?

Z: Lot of times it was too many hours.

T: I can't think of a whole lot more. Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't gone over?

Z: No, ...

T: Anything you think of any significance or importance?

Z: No, that's about it, I guess.

T: OK

Z: I didn't get involved a whole lot down there, you know. I just went in there and did my job and went home.

T: Sure, some people did get more involved than others.

Z: I didn't get on any committees, or anything like that. For one thing, I didn't feel like driving an hour a day, or whatever it took to do that.

T: Couldn't blame you. You're a distance from there.

Z: Right, its not like 10 or 15 minutes like a lot of the people who were down there.

T: Right. Like a lot of the people that I interviewed live in Austintown, or on the West side of Youngstown, or Boardman...

Z: Or the South end of Warren....

T: Yeah, they're all 5, 10 minutes away.

Z: 15 minutes is a long drive.

T: Yeah, this is about 40 minutes. You're out here a ways, but... OK, this was pretty good – I think we pretty much touched on everything. I appreciate you spending the time.

Z: I glad to help out, I don't know how much you get out of it, or use it.

T: No, every interview is a good asset.