

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 2037

Dean Tedrow  
Interview  
By  
Tray Drenzo  
On  
April 9, 2002

ARCHIVE  
Oral  
History  
2037

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INTERVIEWEE: Dean Tedrow  
INTERVIEWER: Tray Dizenzo  
SUBJECT: GM Lordstown  
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TD: This is an interview with Dean Tedrow concerning the General Motors Lordstown Project for Youngstown State University's Oral History Program. This interview is conducted by Tracy Dizenzo on April 9, 2002. Dean I would like to start by thanking you for doing this with me today. Basically I'm going to start with personal history. Tell me where you grew up.

DT: A small town in Pennsylvania, a small coal mining area, in south central Pennsylvania.

TD: What was it like there?

DT: It was just a rural community. Farms, coalmines, and what have you.

TD: Where did you go to school?

DT: I graduated from high school in Saxton, Pennsylvania. It was Tussey Mountain High School.

TD: How would you rate their schools there?

DT: Very good as far as being the only school I ever attended. It was a good experience.

TD: Throughout your young life, did you basically stay in the same area or did you move around a lot?

DT: Basically the same area, there's just a bunch of small communities there. But primarily in the same area most of the time.

TD: What did your parents do for a living?

DT: My dad worked at several jobs. He worked at the power company, he was a mechanic, he inspected Pontiac's in Saxton. My mom, she was just a housewife. That's what they were back then.

TD: When did you move to this area?

DT: I came to Youngstown in 1968 after I completed my military service. I came out here for work, where I grew up there was no work. Coalmines and that's it.

TD: So what year did you graduate?

DT: I graduated in 1965.

TD: What was your first job?

DT: Probably after high school I went into the military right away, then after that I worked for two weeks in Maryland at a power company doing power towers. I found out that wasn't my type of work, I didn't want it. So that's when I came to Ohio.

TD: What branch of the military were you in?

DT: I was in the Navy from 1965-1968.

TD: That was Vietnam era. Did you have to serve in Vietnam?

DT: Yes I spent eleven months in the Gulf of Tonkin, Western Pacific area.

TD: What were some jobs you held after military and after your first job?

DT: I worked at Steel Door, here in Youngstown, for approximately a year and a half. Then I went to General Motors and I've been at General Motors ever since really. I ran a service station in Warren for a short time.

TD: How did you like Steel Door?

DT: It was a new experience. I was young. It was work, that's the way it goes in life, I guess. You have to work.

TD: What were some of the things you did there?

DT: I did a lot of riveting, they trained me as a welder there, I did a lot of welding, just general construction of the railroad cars.

TD: Is it a job you would have considered doing as a career?

DT: Maybe, it's just something. I think you have to be comfortable in what you're doing. At the time I was comfortable doing that, but then later on in life I wouldn't like that heavy lifting and all that.

TD: How long did you work there?

DT: About a year and a half.

TD: Did you leave because of the General Motors position?

DT: Yes, I was very fortunate. I was laid off at the Steel Door on a Friday evening and that same day I took a physical for General Motors and started work at General Motors during the day. So I was very fortunate never being without a job.

TD: What year was this?

DT: It was in 1970.

TD: How did you find out about getting a job at GM?

DT: Well really after I did get out of the service my uncle got me a job at Steel Door, and I came out with him touching base with General Motors. The plant was fairly new at that time. It started in '66, so that's really my first encounter with it.

TD: Did you have to go apply there or how did that work?

DT: Yes, put quite a few applications in. At that time they had you go right to the door and the security guard would give you an application, you'd fill it out and hand it back to him. So it was a lot different than it is today.

TD: Was it difficult to get a job there?

DT: I won't say difficult, there was just a lot of people applying at that time. I probably put in seven, eight, ten application on file there before I was finally called.

TD: What was your first job at General Motors?

DT: I was very fortunate. I went into the cushion room. I built seats. I did that for the first five years I was there.

TD: Oh really?

DT: Yeah.

TD: What did you have to do?

DT: Well we built them from the ground up actually. The spring, the frame, put the foam on, put the covers on, do the hog ringing. Complete the seat and back. The whole process of building the seat.

TD: Did you think of it as a difficult job?

DT: Not difficult, but it was something new to me in a way, assembly line you don't take your time doing this job, because the next job was right behind you. So it was a new experience, and it was a learning time.

TD: How did you cope with, I'm assuming this is your first assembly line job?

DT: Yes.

TD: How did you cope with learning to adjust to an assembly line type of job?

DT: It just something where you adjust, because that's what you know have to do, to provide for your family. I didn't have any problems as far as adjusting to it. I'm pretty active all the time.

TD: So it wasn't that difficult for you?

DT: No, I didn't find it that difficult.

TD: What were you allowed to do? Were you allowed to read on the line, or were you allowed to socialize?

DT: Well at that time there was quite a few people in the plant, and as far as, you worked almost elbow-to-elbow with the next guy so you did a lot of talking. As far as newspapers, at that time I wasn't in to newspapers being a young guy. I had better interest over reading a newspaper. After a while, if you worked around the same bunch of guys for a while, it came to be almost like a family type thing.

TD: Was there a lot of interaction with coworkers outside of work?

DT: Yeah, we had softball teams, and we had other interests. Some of us would fish, it was a good time.

TD: Were there a lot of different activities sponsored either by GM or the UAW?

DT: The UAW, at that time was just forming their softball leagues and stuff. It was primarily a new plant, so that's pretty much all they had back then was softball and stuff like that.

TD: What was a typical day like back then at General Motors?

DT: Well back then, usually whenever you go to work you got on the line, then it was a lot of different type breaks than we have now. You have a break in the morning then you go right back on the line, work until your lunchtime. Then after you ate your lunch, you would go back and the line would run and you would work until your next break, and after that you would go home. At that time, we worked, there was no stipulation on how many hours you could work, sometimes they ran that line twelve hours a day. It makes for a long day.

TD: Did you know that day, when you went in, how long you were going to work or was it announced?

DT: That was something you never knew. You had to wait until the last minute to know if you were going home at quitting time, or if you were going to work another hour, another two hours, or whatever.

TD: I think that would be tough to adjust to.

DT: It was hard on the families sometimes, especially if you worked on afternoon shift and you weren't getting home until four, five o'clock in the morning, and you wanted to sleep all day, because you knew the next day at five o'clock you would be out there doing it again.

TD: Did you start on second shift?

DT: I primarily worked day turn my entire career out there. Probably in the first thirty years that I was there, I probably made four and a half, five years being on second shift. So I was pretty fortunate to be in the departments where I could hold my seniority to keep me working day turn, because that was my shift of preference at that time.

TD: What was the line speed like?

DT: Well when I first started we were building Vega's, and we were building a lot of them, one hundred of them an hour. Being in the cushion room we would run anywhere from one hundred five to one ten an hour, because we had a bank where we kept seats so the seats would be ready for the cars. When I went over to the van plant the lines were dropped down to about thirty-five an hour. But line speeds, they've varied since I've been there.

TD: So when you started, you started in the car plant?

DT: Yes I started, back then it used to be Chevrolet and Fischer Body. It was right before they joined forces with, I worked for Chevrolet.

TD: Did you work at all three plants? Did you work at the fabricating plant?

DT: I've never even been in the fab plant. But I worked the van plant up until the time I closed, transferred back over to the car assembly.

TD: Do you happen to remember the year it closed?

DT: 1992, that's the year it closed. There were some things happening in my life at that time that makes it notable for me to remember that year.

TD: Do you wish that plant would have stayed open?

DT: In a sense yes, for the simple reason that the economy of the area was a big boost. We didn't really lose a lot of people by the closing, since the van plant has left we have lost quite a few members that went to other plants where there are openings. A lot of them just retired and they're not replacing them.

TD: Which plant did you like better?

DT: I liked working in the van plant because the line speed. It was a lot slower, you had more work to do though, you were required to do more work, but I worked all the areas in the van plant except for paint. I've never worked in paint in either plant. I kind of enjoyed the body shop, there was a lot of welding and stuff like that.

TD: How have safety issues changed over the years? What was it like when you first went there, as far as the emphasis on safety?

DT: I think we have seen a big improvement in the safety. Back then we had, just for example, we had glue cans and all this flammable stuff that was readily right out there on the line, well now we see it pretty well secured. The lines, like I said, a lot of people, a lot of congestion, well now we're more spread out. We're not tripping on hoses as we did back then, because we had hoses running everywhere. Now they have hoses secured in an area where you are not tripping on them. There has been a lot of improvements.

TD: Who would you attribute that improvement to?

DT: I think that goes working hand in hand. The company doesn't want to see people injured. The union doesn't want to see people injured. I think that was the primary reason, there was always controversy. I think it comes from working hand and hand with union and management.

TD: Right about the time you were hired, in what 1970 you said?

DT: Yes.

TD: I think, from what I heard, that was the year that a lot of women came into the plant. How do you feel about, especially at that time it was considered a factory job was more a man's job, how was that looked upon by employees?

DT: Well I think all the male personal was kind of skeptical at first, they kind of looked at the females, not a partnership in this work, they kind of sized them up to, well they can't do what I'm doing. I've worked with a lot of females out there, around a lot of females, I've worked with some that work and some that don't work. On the other hand I've worked with some males that don't work and some that do work. So I feel that if you take the gender out of it, you're a factory worker if you can do the job and you're qualified to do the job, you should have the job.

TD: So you have no problem with that?

DT: No, I have no problem with women working.

TD: Have you ever witnessed issues of harassment?

DT: Not real sexual type harassment, but I've seen where some people men and women, and even some line workers who try to intimidate another worker who wasn't quite like them. Where they wanted to get into another type of department or something like that, but I've never really been involved in it first hand. I feel I've been very fortunate with the people I've worked with.

TD: Do you think it's changed as far as, I mean do you think there is preference given to female workers or male workers?

DT: Maybe in some instances, but I myself, with the job I'm doing right now, we have a female and she does it, well probably sometimes better than me, so I don't think there's a preference there. Like I said, if you can do the job, and you're qualified and you're in line for it, then you should have it.

TD: What are some of the jobs you've held over the years, I guess describe some of the jobs.

DT: Whenever I was in the cushion room it was building the seats. I've probably done every facet of that, the assembly of the seat, then it was moved out of the plant. When I went to the van plant I worked in trim. I did a lot of the headlight harness, wiring system installation, wiper motor installation stuff like that, window installation. At the body shop I learned spot weld guns, I've done all welding. I've laid what they call rails, just a complete assembly of the frame. Right now I am very fortunate to be where I am at. I'm in a position where I just do the dynamic vehicle testing of the cars, where I drive cars on roll tests and let the computer do a checking of it. I enjoy it.



TD: What is the best job you've had there?

DT: Probably right now, as far as the testing I'm doing right now. I've never had a job I didn't really enjoy, I really disliked it, but I've never been put in a situation where. Like I said, with my seniority I was right on the borderline getting bumped from plant to plant, but it seemed like they took care of me and put me in the place where I could do the job, and I didn't have to worry about not liking the job. You can do an easy job and not like it. I've been very fortunate.

TD: Do you like a job that keeps you more busy or do you like a job where you have more free time?

DT: Well I think you have to have a happy medium there. If you have a lot of off time, I think you kind of get complacent in what you are doing, towards some of the safety the job that you're doing might slip a little bit. On the assembly line or anywhere in the assembly part I think you have to pretty well stay on your toes. I think you have to have happy medium. You know what you can do and what you can't do.

TD: What area are you in now?

DT: I'm in the final process care section of it. We primarily are just about the last physical touch of the car prior to the shipment of it. Like I said we get into the car and take it to D.V.T booth, plug it into a computer that protects the dynamics of the car.

TD: Being at the very end of the line, you basically see the car just about or if not totally completed. How do you feel about the quality of the vehicle that's leaving that plant?

DT: That's a tough question, because there's things, I think everyone puts the car a different way. Where I may look at the car and see a decade in art, exactly the way it should be, where another person wouldn't see that and they would see something else I wouldn't see. But I think on a whole we are probably producing the best quality that we've probably ever produced right now.

TD: Do you feel that the quality of the vehicles, of the Caviler and Sunfires of today, how do you feel they rate as compared to the quality of the first vehicle you worked on, the Vega?

DT: Good quality, simply the fact I think because things we have learned from the Vega Era, how to incorporate a better idea as far as building a younger car. I think we are building a quality product, there's some area I think need looked at, but as far as the overall quality I think it's very good.

TD: I've heard, during these interviews, and before I've heard a lot of negative comments about the Vega. What are your feeling towards that, what's your take on

that whole era?

DT: I think that was a new experience for General Motors, prior to that the small car was probably the small car was the Corvair, very poor set up in a Corvair. I think this was just a learning process for the corporation as well as every one else on how to build a small car. If you look back during the '50's and '60's they were all very large machines. I think the downsizing, putting smaller parts in, I think it was a longing era. I think it met the needs of the time, but it was not a car of the future.

TD: So the Vega was just considered a small car, it wasn't a sports car or anything like that?

DT: We did build a version of the sports car. It had a Cosworth engine in it. My own opinion is, it was an introductory car for General Motors. It was not a family car, it was transportation. It fit the need for economical real priced car.

TD: What are some other vehicles that have been built there over the last thirty years?

DT: I can probably remember most, of course the Vega, the Caviler and the Sunfire. The small Buick, the small Oldsmobile, and the small Chevrolet at that time, the Monza, the Pontiac Astra, of course we had the van which was, I thought probably the best quality product they ever put out in the era of GM.

TD: I didn't realize they built anything besides Pontiac or Chevy there ever.

DT: Oh yeah, they had the Buick Skyhawk I think was the name of it back then, and the Oldsmobile was a little omega type thing. That was primarily in the early 80's, late 70's, early 80's, that was being built. We ran all four cars down the same line.

TD: All four different cars?

DT: They all went down the same line, just different parts. So you can imagine the extent of area you would need for different door pads, all different trim.

TD: But the basic, I would assume the basic shape of the car was about the same?

DT: Yeah, it was a basic platform car.

TD: How do you feel about the increased role over the years of robots in the plant?

DT: Well of course I think nobody ever likes change. Now that's a major change of bringing in robots. It displaced a lot of workers. But I guess the management point of view is if they don't have the robots we'll lose the workers anyways, because we're not going to be able to compete with the other car manufacturers. I think, like I said, change is hard and sometimes it's real hard.

TD: Do you feel there was a lot of resentment on the side of labor?

DT: I think so. I think a lot of people took it as saying, take maybe just a welder you know, well I've done that job for five years now and I think I do a pretty good job now they're going to put a machine in there and that machine is going to break down and it's not going to do what I could have done. So I think there was resentment there, yes.

TD: Do you feel that General Motors is justified in doing those moves?

DT: Well I think the bottom line is, General Motors has not out there to please us, it's out there to make money. It's just like any other corporation. If you don't make the money you are not going to exist. I think we are seeing that a lot right now. I think General Motors has thought long and hard before they make a change. Is it going to hurt us, is it going to help us? So I don't think anything is done overnight. I think it is well thought out before it is actually done.

TD: Speaking on those terms, do you think that this big decision now about the future Product, do you think that decision has already been made?

DT: I don't know. Times I do and times I don't. I think you're sitting on eggshells. I think it's particularly harder for younger workers, this is going to be their future. Are they going to have a future there, or are they going to have to go somewhere else? Leave the area or what? Guys my age pretty close to retirement, almost could retire. I think it still affects the economy of the whole area. Even the guys that are retired, they're a bit concerned, because you get a new product in out there.

TD: Why do you think that's so important?

DT: Just for the simple fact that if we don't have no place for the younger generation to come in and work there are going to be leaving the area and we're going to be just another ghost town like we almost were when the steel mills left. There was a real downsizing of school districts. I think we are seeing that in the Lordstown area right now, bad thing is they thought they had a goose lay a golden egg out there for them, and reality has finally set in that hey we need some help. So I definitely think we need the there, not just for the assembly line workers, but we have engineers, clerical workers, office workers. Everybody needs to eat. That's what it comes down to.

TD: Do you feel the laborers at GM deserve the wages they get? Let me give you an example. I hear a lot of people say, well I have a college degree and somebody who only completed high school is making more money than me. That's not fair. What is your take on that?

DT: Well you know that's probably a hard decision to make. If you attend college then you got a four year degree, do I go to an assembly plant or do I want to do what

I'm trained to do in college, what my major is or anything like that? Me personally, I have a hard time working beside someone who is doing the same job I'm doing but yet not getting paid the same I am. When I worked there we were all paid the same, your seniority. Unless you had a higher paying job. If you are doing the same job I feel you should get the same rate. I guess that's my opinion. Man, woman, black white, whatever color, if you are doing the same job I'm doing and that's the established wage I think you should get that wage.

TD: Do you think that since it is a decent wage job, now at General Motors, do you think they deserve that money?

DT: Yeah, I feel they do, and the sense is, through the years we have seen, well whenever I first started there I made two dollars and ninety cents an hour. Right now minimum wage isn't much more than that. I think throughout the years we've contributed a lot to General Motors, again they work hand in hand. If you do them a good job then they're going to give you a good wage. But if you don't do a good job you're not going to get a wage \_\_\_\_\_. I think you earn what you get.

TD: How do you feel management treats the employees out there, or have treated over the years?

DT: That's another thing that varies too. You could have a good rep with your immediate management, your line foreman or whatever, you could have a good rep with them and not have no difficulty at all. But someone on up you may not see eye to eye with and have trouble with. I think that you have to be yourself, you can't try to be someone else. You have to be yourself. I think people working around you and the people that you are working for, they see that. I think human nature is a big part of it.

TD: I've also heard, the earlier years, early 70's, that Lordstown was a very radical plant as far as union-management relations. What are some experiences you have seen or witnessed about this?

DT: Whenever I hired in, in August of 1970, I was there for twenty-eight, twenty-nine days, and there was a very large strike there. This was all new to me, being able to strike, I came from the military you were very disciplined and you did what they said. Here it was this new thing of hey if I don't want to do this I can go on strike and walk out, and so on. I think we were all young, it was troubling times back then in the 70's, with the war effort and everything going on. We had people who didn't like the war, people who thought we should be there. Veterans coming home who were kind of disappointed at what was going on when they did get home. The lack of support and everything. I think it was just a troubling time. I think that was really a sign of the times. You go on strike and you're radical. The average person out there was probably in their early twenties, 21, 22 years old. This was all a new thing for a lot of people.

TD: Have you ever or would you ever wanted to be a foreman?

DT: No, I think you really need to want to be someone in leadership. It's a big responsibility. Personally I just thought I never wanted to go that route. The added responsibility, that's just not my makeup.

TD: From management's point of view, do you think that they are able to be fair to employees and still be competitive in the market?

DT: Yeah, I don't think as far as disciplinary and all that stuff has to come down, I think if two grown people can sit down across the table and look at each other and sort their things out, I think you're better off. I really think that management needs to do that with the people that work there. I think management knows that too. You know you can work with mules until you're blue in the face but if you don't want to pull along and pull the plow, he's not going to do it. If you come down to his sense of thinking maybe it will work for you. I think the same way about management-employee relationship.

TD: How have union-management relations evolved over the years?

DT: Well that's another hard one here because, you have so many different things. I think it takes a certain person in management to be willing to give a little bit and the same on the other side of the table. Union members have to be willing to give a little bit. I think it's just a situation where you got to realize that, that's what's going to feed your family, that's what is going to send your kids to school, and you have to think hard and long before you do any stupid things. That's for sure.

TD: Do you feel you are well represented by the UAW?

DT: Right now? Yeah, I think they are doing pretty good. You may not consider your committee person at the time as the one you really want to talk to, but we have steps where we can go on up to another area and discuss it, you just don't have to talk to that one person.

TD: How did you feel whenever the GM AD people were brought in early on in the plant's history where they were, from what I hear at least, they were more almost militant when they came in?

DT: Whenever those people came in that's when we lost the separation, Chevrolet and Fischer Body. That was right after I started there. I could see a big difference. There was more of a Gestapo type people running. Again, they were sent there to do a job, and I thought that they way they do it. I think that goes along too with the times. If you don't have a bad experience, you don't know when you are in a good experience. I think that was one of our bad experiences.

TD: Do you think the union fought hard against that type of attitude from

management?

DT: Yeah I think, then again, that's two different ways. Management and union workers had to give a little bit there, but I think. We've been well represented since the time I worked there, I feel. There has been some down times, but I think we have been well represented.

TD: How do you feel that union leaders relate to the employees?

DT: If you can track them down. I think just about any of them will talk to you, if you make an effort to speak to them, they will make an effort to answer. They give the time to listen to what your problem is and that's where the steps problems come in. If you're trying to tell your committee man one thing and he doesn't want to hear it, then you can always go to your district person, you can go all the way up to, including, the international union. There is always going to be someone there to listen, as long as you go through the proper channels.

TD: Have you ever had to experience going to high up the ladder or do you feel that the lowest end of leaders has always been sufficient?

DT: I never really had a lot of trouble with disciplinary or anything like that. I've been very fortunate with the representatives I've had, have worked pretty good. Been to the second step some times, but I think they kind of expect that. They're waiting to do that so they don't have to make a real hard decision either, so they can get a kind of gauge as to what's going to happen with a certain individual.

TD: In today's world, with all the government laws that have been passed, OSHAA type requirements, things like that. Do you feel a union is still necessary?

DT: Yeah I really do. I think as we watch jobs leaving, not only the area, but the country we look back at textiles, electronics and so on. We need these unions to stand firm, and they need to stand up and say hey we need these jobs here too. I really think the union needs to be involved.

TD: What are your feelings as far as the future of General Motors Lordstown? Do you feel this plant is going to be here for a long period of time? Do you think its days are numbered?

DT: I think it's going to be here, but I don't think it will be here in the way we see it right now. I think we're going to see smaller groups, maybe even complete dismantling of this plant, and have separate smaller plants. When this plant was designed it was the biggest one in the General Motors Corporation, it was the wave of the future and all this. Now they're saying they don't need this big overhead, as far as having this very large plant and them using half of it. I think that has a lot to do with their thinking. So I think, my own personal opinion, I think General Motors will be a part of this area for quite a while just not as we know it right now.

TD: If you had it all to do over again, would you have worked there again?

DT: Yeah probably, but I think I would have put my twenty years in the military first, and then came here. I'm still fairly young and have been able to get a full pension. Right now with the pension plans and everything that's going on with the economy the way it is in the world. I think a young person has to really plan, because if you don't then you're planning to fail. I think, even more now, than what it was when I was there. I was part of the baby boomers group. We came in, we got the big pension at the end of the rainbow. I think a lot of us just went by that. I think I would have, I liked the assembly line type work. It's in out of the elements. You're not being snowed on, rained on, sleeted on. It does have some disadvantages too. You can't see the sun shine. I feel I've had a good life at General Motors.

TD: Is that the type of place you would want your child to work?

DT: I think that's individual. Some people in our assembly line work, and I'm not one to be out in zero degrees weather climbing a pole either. But there is people that feast on that. I think it's up to the individual, and I think they should be given the opportunity, if that's what they want to do, yeah the opportunity should be there.

TD: Kind of wrap it up is there anything else you feel needs to be said, or anything else you could think of that you would like to...

DT: I think the area has to get behind General Motors. Not so much in the negative Things, we get quite a lot of the negative stuff. People out there do a lot of good things. Just look at the Make A Wish, what's going on with this guy, his car. A lot of donated time, money, and efforts going into individuals. We have Relay for Life for the cancer society, which is very good. Just the blood drives out there, I don't give blood personally, but the blood drives, it's all part of General Motors. If General Motors wasn't here they don't have that big, a lot of those places don't get the blood. So I think the whole community has got to, I relate to being at war, all the negative stuff we got when we came back, and we had that same feeling. Why should I do anything, if I'm not going to be recognized for it. I think that's a lot of what the workers at GM are feeling right now. We stride along with Packard Electric and some of the steel mills, and the smaller corporations around here to build this area after the steel mills had left, and they need a little bit of recognition.

TD: Well Dean I would like to thank you for allowing me to get your perspectives on life at General Motors Lordstown, and wish you the best.

DT: Thank you Trace.