

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 2060

L. Mike Schill  
Interview  
By  
Monica Mastran-Czopor  
On  
March 17, 2002

ARCHIVE  
Oral  
History  
2060

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INTERVIEWEE: L. Mike Schill

INTERVIEWER: Monica L. Mastran-Czopor

SUBJECT: G.M. Lordstown

DATE: March 17, 2002

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Working Class Studies

MC: This is an interview with Michael Schill for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project, Lordstown, by Monica Lyn Mastran-Czopor, at the home of the interviewer in Hubbard, on March 17, at approximately 3:15 P.M. in the afternoon. Okay Mike, we are going to get started. First, can you tell me a little bit about your background?

MS: I was born in Hanover, Germany in 1954, came over to the United States, 1956. Had the usual childhood, grew up on the East Side of Youngstown, eventually graduated from Austintown Fitch High School. Attended Youngstown State, graduated from Youngstown State. Became an Auxiliary Patrol Officer in Austintown Township, then eventually moved on and became employed at General Motors in 1978 until present.

MC: What can you tell me about your family, now?

MS: My immediate family?

MC: Yes.

MS: I'm married to my wife Lonnie and I have two children, Tyler my sixteen year old son and Sara my seventeen year old daughter, and a dog, Molly.

MC: Now you had mentioned obviously about Lordstown, when did you get hired at Lordstown exactly?

MS: March 30 of 1978.

MC: Do you recall how you got your job?

MS: Well I put my application in right after I graduated from YSU, and they were hiring at that time. We took assessment tests, and since I couldn't get in, in data processing, which is what my degree was in, I was able to get in on the ground floor on the assembly line, where I have been ever since. I think that was a great move.

MC: Now if I wanted to get hired, what would I have to do to get hired?

MS: Well there are various ways to get hired out there. If they are hiring they have a referral list, and people that are employed there right now get to refer a name, being a friend or close family member. They fill out the background information, which makes it available to General Motors or you can go through the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services. In specialized cases, like skilled trades you need your journeyman papers. There are certain instances where they would go that route also.

MC: How has the hiring changed since you were hired in 1978?

MS: There is not very much of it being done. Jobs are tougher to get now. You have to possess people skills. They are trying to emphasize that General Motors now, especially the Lordstown Complex, would like you to have some sort of technical or college degree. Because we are very technical now, and will become more in the future.

MC: Now are there periodical drug tests, after the initial hire?

MS: No.

MC: But when you initially get hired there is?

MS: Yes.

MC: Okay, how do you feel about this testing?

MS: I think the testing should be done all the time. It should be done randomly.

MC: How so?

MS: Because, people get bad habits. I think that to make the place a safe place to work it should be done, and if you don't do drugs you shouldn't have a problem.

MC: Now approximately how far from the plant do you live?

MS: Approximately twelve miles. Berlin Township is twelve miles southwest of

Lordstown.

MC: Can you describe what you do?

MS: Right now I am an elected union official. Committee man Hard Trim B-side day turn, and I have been one for the past two years.

MC: What did you do prior to that?

MS: I was an assembler for twenty-two and a half years, working various jobs from installing carpets to putting rear windows in, and being an ARO.

MC: Do you recall your very first assembly line job?

MS: Yes, picking up rear axels, because the hoist overhead broke. So they took the biggest guys they could find, and I just walked in the door, and they made us pick up axels. I said, oh Lord if this is what this job is going to be I'll never make it. But things have progressed quite a lot.

MC: Now what can you tell me about some of the people you work with?

MS: Diversified backgrounds, very intelligent, quite a few ex-teachers. Eighty percent of the people possess college degrees, and they chose to have a low pressure, no hassle job. That's why they came out to Lordstown, even though it is monotonous work.

MC: Now on that same note, funny that you mentioned monotonous, many non-assembly line workers view the assembly line work, that you had done prior, as monotonous. What do you think about that, about when people come in and say, God, it's got to be so monotonous. How do you feel about that?

MS: It is, but you have to have a mind set. You have a job to do, and you do it. The way Lordstown is set up now, they have team meetings and safety meetings. They stop the line sometimes and you communicate with your supervisors how to implement new changes if they are coming, what new changes do you think could be incorporated to make your job more efficient. They get people more involved.

MC: Now I guess on that same note, how do you feel about some of the misconceptions regarding autoworkers in general, particularly American auto workers?

MS: We're not lazy, we're very industrialistic. They come up with some great ideas. I don't think it's the American autoworkers, as much as it is the management part of it. The way American management runs the auto industry is a lot different than the foreign ones. Management has a lot of red tape, and it's frustrating, but the American autoworker, I feel, they give a hundred and ten percent. They are giving to charitable organizations, they are working hard on the line, and all they want is

job security.

MC: I know you have mentioned you are a Committeeman?

MS: Committeeman.

MC: Committeeman. Can you describe what a typical day for you is like? What's an average day for you when you go to work?

MS: I punch in at six-thirty. I review my previous day grievances, for a half hour, of paper work. I log on the computer and I see what my calls are for the day. Then I make it a point, in my district to do a walk-by. I greet everybody, good morning, how are you, take a look at everything, and see what is going on. Then that's the first hour and a half. Then I go back and I answer the calls of individuals that want to see me or that want to have a conference with me. Then I look at the manpower sheet, who's absent, who's not, and see if they are okay. It's like being a dad I guess, you kind of oversee everybody. Then I make sure if there are any moves made in the plant, the individuals are not contractually violated, which that does happen on occasion, that's where my job comes in to play. That's very important. Then I talk to my Chairman, and my Zoneman, and with management. We try to make it work, one cannot work without the other. It's not the mentality of the 60's and 70's. We all have to become one, if we want to survive out there.

MC: I know you said you're involved with the union, but I suppose looking from the outside on the union, what do you think about it, what do you think about the UAW?

MS: I think it is great. The UAW is more than just working at Lordstown, or Fort Wayne, Indiana, or Lansing, Michigan, its more than that. UAW's involved with higher education, scholarships, they work with various junior colleges and colleges around the area. We work with charities, fundraisers, the list goes on and on. It's more than just UAW. It stands for a lot more than that, and we are very proud to be a part of it.

MC: How has the union changed since you were hired in 1978?

MS: I believe that the union has got rid of that mentality of being anti-management. People have a tendency to work things out more instead of having an anti-management look at things. You have to negotiate more. Being that our workforce is better educated, our communication skills are better, and that is what makes the whole thing work out there.

MC: Now what do you think about the trend to more concessions by the union?

MS: I feel you can't get more blood out of a turnip, that's it. You can't compare apples with oranges. You have to see, I understand there is a transition coming with the

new model and they have to get the workforce down to accommodate the numbers that they need to build the new model, but we are still building the old model. You can only make a man do so much.

MC: Now who among your union reps do you think is particularly effective and why?

MS: Well obviously everybody would know Al Ali who passed, was very well liked and was instrumental in forming our union in Lordstown and creating the power that it has to this day. He was well respected not only locally, but nationally all through the UAW and through many political ranks. We have Jim Graham, who is our President right now, and John Mohan, our Chairman, doing a fine job. It was a tough act to follow, Al Ali.

MC: I know you mentioned you got hired in '78, but do you recall during the 70's Whitey Ford as a union leader? What do you recall about him?

MS: Well I was relatively young and very inactive in the union back then. I just remember we went to the meetings at the hall. We were having labor troubles back at that time and he gave us guidance. I felt we had to go through the Whitey Ford Era to get to where we are at now. So obviously he was beneficial to some degree.

MC: During the 80's there were off site meetings between union leaders and management, what did you think about these meetings?

MS: A waste of time.

MC: Did you attend any?

MS: All of them. Unfortunately in the off site meetings, they told us one thing. When you got to the plant and started implementing the new process they changed it back to the same old way. That's why people were discouraged and they did not trust management. Now we are trying to come back again, and hopefully we can make this transition a little bit smoother.

MC: Were you ever active in any strikes, and if so which ones?

MS: We had a few, one walk-out back in '78, which upon we were all disciplined for the balance of three days, but then we were all paid. Other than that no.

MC: The '92 Strike you weren't involved with that one?

MS: We were available for the picket line, but we never were called. That was resolved.

MC: What do you know about the plant's history of labor relations?

MS: If you're referring to labor relations between management and the union, obviously

it was very strong from the Al Ali Era until actually right now, presently. We do have an excellent dialogue between union and upper management right now, even though we are in the process of implementing a shelf agreement, which is a hard pill to swallow by our union workers. They are really apprehensive about the whole thing, but if you see the big picture it's going to work out for all of us for the betterment of the community and the plant.

MC: During the 70's, and I know this may be prior to '78, many of the plant supervisors were called the Gestapo. How, I suppose around the time you got hired, compared to now, do the workers feel about some of their supervisors, particularly in the early time when you first got hired? Did the workers still have the mentality that all the supervisors were Gestapo?

MS: They still have that mentality somewhat.

MC: Do they?

MS: Sure, because even though management working now is basically younger people right out of college, they have no idea what happened in the past, and what we are experiencing now. Because, of their inexperience they try to implement some of this Gestapo attitude to this day. Just this last week I have had problems with that. Management is telling us they are going one way, but they are obviously acting a different way. I don't think that Gestapo mentality has totally ever left. Not everybody does that, there are a lot of well-liked supervisors out there, but unfortunately the younger crop that are coming up are trying to revert back to the old ways and we can't go back that way.

MC: Moving ahead just a bit, in the 80's the union negotiated the J-car production, do you recall how the workers felt about this?

MS: Excited, even though some jobs were eliminated, as they will be for this new model we expect to get in 2004, everybody was excited because it was a future for us. Eventually everybody buckled down, like we always have done, and we came through with a world class product that everybody was be proud to have and build.

MC: How did the influx of small imports impact the Lordstown plant, like Honda and Mitsubishi?

MS: Well obviously they took a bite of the small market share that we had. It had to make us more competitive, by that you have less people making cars, making it more cost effective. It all comes from engineering down to the basic line workers. Everyone had to do their best, and sometimes with less to be more productive. To show that we can compete.

MC: So you're saying that for competing, definitely improved working conditions?

MS: Let's put it this way, the working conditions instead of being improved they tried to

make them more efficient.

MC: Do you feel that GM forced the acceptance of the quality of work life programs on the plants?

MS: It was inevitable. I think they gave you an idea of what they expected and it basically fell into place. A lot of its common sense. They had to go that way. Sure there is some resistance to that change, but I think for the betterment of the whole ball of wax. It's going to work, it's needed.

MC: So these programs, did they change people's jobs?

MS: How so?

MC: In any capacity?

MS: Change is inevitable, and to make jobs more efficient. People are creatures of habit and if you try to change something, once they are shown how it can be made more efficient and to save time and energy and money, usually everybody agrees with it. That's the way it's got to be.

MC: Now I know you mentioned during the 80's there was a series of layoffs and some labor problems there. Were you affected by the unemployment of the 80's at all?

MS: Well certainly. I was unemployed almost as much as I was employed there my first six years. But through TRA and unemployment we were able to survive. Unfortunately, a fact of autoworkers, you make good money but you never know when your next check is going to come so you have to prepare for it. That's been a way of life for my father, passed down to myself, and it will go down to my son also.

MC: Jumping ahead just a bit, during the 90's, as you know the van plant closed, how did, and I know you were not working in the van plant, but how did you feel about this, when the van plant closed?

MS: Well we all know that, that was a big political move. The van plant had the top quality in the corporation, bar none. Exceeded, surpassed any expectations through the corporation, and because of politics they were shut down and moved. It was just a big rip off. People are very bitter to this day for that fact.

MC: So that sediment is still among the workers?

MS: Absolutely.

MC: How do you feel about the GM plants in Mexico?



MS: Well I feel that every human being should have an opportunity to make a good living. Unfortunately, I think GM has taken advantage of those people because... the way that we found out, through people who have gone there, from engineers to other people in management . That the cost of living down there is a lot different than up here. They pay them guys dollars a day, compared to what we make, but they charge the same amount for the products, like we make on ours. So somebody is ripping somebody off. I don't feel that they are as well educated as we are, and their productivity is nowhere near as ours, so it's all politics. I would never buy a car from Mexico.

MC: What did the workers think about the NAFTA agreement, on that same note?

MS: We hate it. We like Clinton, but we don't like what he did. That was terrible, that NAFTA just left a big void, and now we are going to pay the price for it coming up.

MC: How so?

MS: Well it's unfair. Mexican drivers can come up here, example, they can actually drive on our interstates, but we have to stop at their border. They have vehicles that are deemed unsafe by our standards, and if they wreck it or run into anybody in our country, what happens, what legal recourse do you have? And product wise also. They can ship stuff up here, but we're limited to what we can do down there. I think it should be looked into a lot more thoroughly.

MC: What do you think about the no ship policy?

MS: In the plant?

MC: Yes.

MS: Well that's a great idea, but it has never been completely followed. Management's idea is, they are under so much pressure right now to produce numbers that, that quality issue takes a back seat. We all agreed on the off-sites when we were talked to, that if a job is not completed correctly, stop it in station. You do not ship anything out of your station unless it is done properly. That's where the quality comes in, but at times they have been doing everything but that. You can't build a car on the fly, it should be done in station.

MC: How do you feel about the changes in management since 1996?

MS: Other than being a younger work force, relatively inexperienced. A lot of them are not experienced with the manufacturing aspect at all. They come from all different walks of life. From teachers to ex-military, from management from other plants that didn't involve anything such as assembly. It's just a totally different experience.

MC: Now given the situation with Firestone and Ford, how has the incident impacted the plant, or has it?

MS: Not really?

MC: Not really?

MS: No, not our plant.

MC: Did anybody discuss it, did anybody talk about it?

MS: Sure, everybody talked about it, but it really hasn't impacted our cars, because those tires were not put on our cars. But, unfortunately some of us own those kinds of vehicles. Other than that it didn't impact the plant at all.

MC: What do you think about the responses by both companies? I mean obviously by the second wave of problems Ford dropped Firestone, do you think the responses by both of the companies were...

MS: They did the right thing. It might have taken a little longer than it should have but because of public pressure they had to. I don't know if Ford dropping Firestone entirely was the right move to make, but because of public pressure they did.

MC: Now, more so back on the assembly line. What do you think about the installation of robots in production?

MS: Well the robots, theoretically, are a good idea but you have to keep them up, and technology continues to be improved. An example, in the glass area that's in my district those robots are old, and they always break down. It's cheaper just to have an individual sit there and do the job. In the body shop, robotics have really helped. What they are looking for, is they want a standard to be set and met every time. When you have a human being performing the operation you're not going to get that. So robotics are necessary to an extent.

MC: Had the impacted your job in particular, when you were still working on the line?

MS: I worked with a robot.

MC: You did?

MS: Yes. It was down a lot, it gave me a lot of free time waiting for the line to start back up, but it made my job easier. Definitely made it easier, when it was running right.

MC: What do you think about GM's employee benefit package?

MS: We have one of the best benefit packages in the industry, in all industry. There's room for improvement, but let's face it times are tough and a lot of places are cutting. That's one of the reasons I'm still out here, I think it is a wonderful benefit package.

MC: Has it changed over the years?

MS: Sure, there is more deductibles, but basically, I would say about eighty-five percent of the packages has remained intact from when I got hired here back in '78.

MC: Now sort of bouncing back to the lay-offs, how well do you think the company handled lay-offs? Do you think they handled it well? The ones in the '80's and the ones even there after?

MS: Well the lay-offs are mainly due to the sales, and that's out of their hands. If the public's not buying, they're not making, we're not working. They did what they had to do. Their little movement they had, they tried to keep us working as much as they could. That was inevitable.

MC: I know you mentioned, you said you were on B-crew?

MS: A-crew.

MC: A-crew, okay. What do you do at the end of your shift, when your shift is over with?

MS: I check my computer for any calls for the next day. I put a half an hour of paperwork in. Sometimes we have a productivity, quality meeting with the head of the departments. Then I go home.

MC: Are there any places to gather, that you can gather with your fellow workers socially?

MS: Yes. Union sponsored events, golf outings, car shows, dances, ect.

MC: Did you notice changes in management styles over the years?

MS: In their style no.

MC: Not really?

MS: No, I can't say that happened.

MC: On that same note, what are your thoughts concerning a woman general manager?

MS: Are you talking about Maureen? So far, as being a qualified individual, we have no

problem with it. Lordstown is a tough place, I think she is doing a decent job, but she has to come down on the floor more. She has to see things from our point of view, with the workers. We had some good ones, like Herman Moss, he was a tough old bird, but he was a fair guy. Management used to be involved in a lot of events, charity-wise and community-wise. Now, unfortunately, with the new team we have at Lordstown, they are backing up from all those commitments. That's making us, the UAW pretty angry about that. That reflects upon us, working with us in the plant too. Things aren't as good as they should be, they could be better, and I think it's communication-wise. She has to communicate better with us.

MC: So you think that's one of the main differences between her and her predecessors?

MS: Sure, experience and communication. She's trying to open a communication route, but you get experience through time, and she hasn't been there long enough.

MC: Just a couple more questions and then we are through. If you were in management, if you were one of the main managers, explain how you would do things differently.

MS: I would be more of a people person, they are not. They're just programmed, and they're told this is the way it is, right or wrong, do it. And I disagree with that. You don't have to be that way at all.

MC: One final question and then we are through. Any regrets concerning your work choice, any regrets with Lordstown?

MS: Nope, proud to be there, proud to, hopefully, finish my career from there.

MC: Michael, thank you so much for taking some time with us today.

MS: Thank you.