

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown Project

Personal Experiences

O.H. 2077

Scott Infante

Interviewed By

Heidi Scott

On

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INTERVIEWEE: SCOTT INFANTE

INTERVIEWER: Heidi Scott

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

DATE: March 31, 2003

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S: This is an interview with Scott Infante for the Youngstown State University Oral History GM Lordstown Plant project by Heidi Scott at Maag Library at YSU on March 31, 2003 at approximately 11:15 a.m. Scott, thanks for doing this interview. First, before I go into questions about your work, I'd like to get some background information. So first, where and when were you born?

I: November 4, 1980 in Youngstown, Ohio.

S: Could you tell me about your family?

I: My parents are Sam and Sharon. They've been married twenty-nine years.

S: You've been married twenty-nine years?

I: They've been married twenty-nine years.

S: [Laughs]

I: [Laughs] I'm sorry. I have one younger brother, Brad, who is five years younger than I am. He's a senior in high school now and he'll be starting college next year.

S: What was it like growing up in your community?

I: Our community. Very diverse I would imagine. It wasn't really irregular. I mean, nothing really happens here too catastrophic. You know what I mean. Your life

just kind of went along, but just the way people are around here it's very easy to make friends and stay close to those people throughout school and in college.

S: You live in Youngstown.

I: I live in Austintown. It's a suburb of Youngstown.

S: What did your parents do or what do they do?

I: My mom has not worked since she found out she was pregnant with me. Before that she was a purchaser at a department store in downtown Youngstown during its heyday I would imagine. My father works at General Motors and has been doing so ever since he was eighteen and has held a variety of positions there.

S: And what is your educational background?

I: I went Austintown Fitch High School and graduated from there in 1999 and went on to college at Youngstown State.

S: What were your work experiences prior to Lordstown?

I: Prior to Lordstown, I only had one job and got it when I was sixteen. I was a stock boy at Giant Eagle in Austintown and that was the only job I ever had.

S: How did you get your job at Lordstown?

I: I was made aware of the position opening by my father. Submitted a resume, went through interviews, simulations on what would happen if I were to get the position. I was selected. They never told me of how many people applied for it. We were never told that.

S: Why did you seek employment there?

I: I felt with my education in college and what I've learned here just as far as business perspectives even though I went through political science, you know, theory and management perspectives. I felt like it came with the position and everything that came along with it, so I went forward with the application process.

S: Can you describe what your job is? What the position was?

I: I'm the system administrator in the body shop.

S: So you are not on the line.

I: No.

S: You are in office work.

I: Yeah. It's basically...I'm from an administrative standpoint as far as I come. I present all of our production data to the staff at the plant and we have a technical support team. I would say the people that are actually on the production floor and those people range everything from people on the line to dimensional engineers, skill trades, electricians, millwrights, basically all the way down the line. Everyone kind of plays into it and I just basically gather feedback from them and present to the staff and answer any questions from there.

S: When were you hired?

I: August of 2002.

S: And how is the hiring process... Well this may not apply to you, but has the hiring process changed since you were hired?

I: For my position, for a salary position, no, but for other positions it has.

S: Do you know in what way?

I: Yeah. I think beginning the first...the week following shutdown for Christmas, so we'd be back the first week of January 2003. From that point on, given the inclusion of all this technology to the plant, they will require at least a two year associate degree for any job on the line. Two-year associate...I mean at least a two year degree. It's not specific to any major, just so you have education beyond high school and in certain cases if you don't then special circumstances... I'm not sure what those are. We're not really told that because the union handles most of that, but General Motors will send those individuals to training for their education.

S: The people who are already there who don't have that education, are they going to pay for them?

I: They won't be affected by the new policy. Yeah. Their training, if they seek to have it, will be done at Kent State University [and] YSU. It's on a voluntary basis. If they think they need it or if they think they would want to pursue it. Now, like I said, it is free to them, so I would imagine a lot of people given if they have time, family situation, will partake in it.

S: I know you're in the office, so they may not apply. Are there periodic drug tests for you?

I: For me, yes.

S: Yes. How often?

I: They are unannounced. We do have executive physicals, though, probably two to three times a year as they see needed and I think that's based on age and medical history. So far I've only had one since I've started. Following my initial one, I've only had one follow-up.

S: How do you feel about this?

I: About the drug testing?

S: Yeah.

I: If you've got nothing to hide it's really not a big deal. I mean it's not a big deal to me, you know. I schedule it, I go down there, we take it and it's over in five or ten minutes so...

S: Could you describe your job at Lordstown? You kind of did but...

I: Yeah. When I first started it was more along the lines of just being in the offices and as I was getting used to the processes I'd go on there in my particular department. I would say getting into three months after I was hired around the end of 2002 I was assigned to production a lot more and I've been so since then. But again, it's just taking everything that has to do with how technology ties into building the car. I interact with everyone from people on the line to the plant manager and we do presentations and we do reporting and we do everything, you know, maintenance on the robots and everything there that is automated that isn't done by a person.

S: Considering you're fairly young, twenty-two, twenty-three...

I: Twenty-two, yeah.

S: Twenty-two. When people who have been there on the assembly for say twenty, thirty years, how did they respond to you coming around?

I: I think given that my father has been there for such a long time and he's just progressed through the promotional ladder following high school and through college. He's known and got to know a great deal of people out there and I think that helped me. Like these people weren't gonna, you know, stereotype me because if they know my father, they know my father's work ethic. Then, I think they'd assume that I would be the same, but they did take it with a grain of salt. I was under twenty-two and I didn't go to school for mechanical engineering and I didn't go to GMI or MIT like some of the other individuals out there. All in all, I was accepted better than I thought I was going to be. A lot of that has to do with just like, you know, your communication ability. You can't look upon someone on the line... you can't form paternalistic relationships with somebody, you know, just because you went to college and they may not have. You do have to take into account, like you said, these people have been out there for thirty years. Some of them more and regardless of what school you go to or how many textbooks you

read nothing compensates for actually doing it for thirty years. I respect everyone that has done that and I will never, ever think for one second that I know more than them because I'm... Again you just can't substitute thirty years of experience, especially everything they've gone through for four years in a classroom.

S: Could you describe a typical workday?

I: A typical workday usually begins when I get there from school, which is somewhere between 11 and 12:30 depending on the day. When I get there, I'm handed my schedule for the day as far as meetings, any group responsibilities, any people I have to see on the line that don't necessarily come into the office part of the plant for meetings. I'll meet with them on the line. From there anything that is brought up in the meetings, I'll go back to my office and if anybody needs to be called or any follow-up meetings. Your update meetings have to be scheduled. I try to do that immediately after the initial meeting. From there we just take it as an occurrence basis, you know, as things occur on the line and they always do. We handle them at that point rather than keep the line going, which we do, but rather than putting it off until like -- okay I'll address this issue that happened on Monday on Thursday. It's just my personal preference to address it as it happens and I have people there and the resources there and draw them into the situation as it happens.

S: So part of your daily routine is even dealing with daily problems out on the line?

I: Yeah. Everything's basically... I mean, for lack of a better word, spontaneous. Once those two or three hours of meetings are taken care of that are preset weekly or even daily at some points, then it's kind of like as you're doing stuff or as you're going over what happened at the meetings. In the beginning of the day situations will occur and I address those as they happen and call in the necessary resources and personnel to help me with that so we can have an efficient resolution to the problem so it doesn't transcend down to other days and hurt our productivity.

S: You said depending on... you start usually around noon give or take... What time do you end your work day?

I: Again that's based on what happens at work. I think this is the only drawback of not being hourly. I could be there for seven hours or I could be there for ten hours and I only get paid for eight or something like that. There are days given if I have stuff at school, they're very good about keeping my education as the primary focus of my life right now. The ending of my workday is pretty much based on like what else I have going on with school first, but if not, it's a typical eight-hour day until 7:30 at night or 8 o'clock at night.

S: Although you don't work actually in the plant on the line, you may observe some of the issues of... Are there race and gender issues that you notice in the plant?

I: I don't... Race issues, no. That can be, you know, I mean if it happens, I'm sure it doesn't happen in a situation exposed to people that could witness it. Gender issues I would say in the past maybe there were, but now that our plant manager is a female marine I think the inclusion of females in the industrial setting is much more accepted now because, you know, by far she is the most educated, most intelligent person at that plant that I know of and there are a lot of women who have been put into supervisory roles on the line, production supervisors. A lot of engineers are women and they too come out of college or whatever training they've had very knowledgeable, because they know that they're going to be – I don't what to say looked down upon – but their actions are going to be documented much more thoroughly than that of a man and I think they work very hard to make sure nobody ever takes them as subordinate to anything else and they do a very good job of it. I mean, everyone I've met on the line, females are extremely capable of doing their job.

S: Would you ever be affected by the layoffs?

I: No, I would not. Regardless of what the union situation is, you know, layoffs, strikes. We have a productivity layoff coming up April 7th and I'll be there everyday that week, so it gives a chance to catch up on things on the line that's not right.

S: So you're non-union?

I: Yes, non-union.

S: What do you think of GM's employee benefits package?

I: By far the best in this area I would say and comparable to most other benefit packages in the country and maybe even the world. Very specific medical coverage, very available no matter where you live, you know, most all doctors in the area, at least in this area, because this is the one I know of, are included in General Motors's benefit package. It comes down to GM wants their employees to be healthy, because no matter how many robots we install or whatever, if we don't have people there to fix them or we don't have people there to do the jobs that they can't do, then we can't build cars.

S: To your knowledge, has the closing of steel mills... Did that impact the plant?

I: I think closing the steel mills, especially in Youngstown. I know I was young when this all occurred, but when the steel mills in Youngstown closed the vast amount of people that were left unemployed and put onto the streets, for a lack of a better phrase metaphorically I would say. General Motors has had to rise to the standing of the economic anchor of this area and I think it has done so very well. Although we, General Motors, couldn't reach out and give those thousands of people jobs that left the steel mill, they were able to step up through suppliers, you know, Lear, Packard. They were able to bring other companies into the area that could provide jobs for some of those that were unemployed when the steel mills closed.

S: How has foreign steel [impacted General Motors]?

I: We're never really told where the steel that we use comes from. I would assume that it doesn't come from a foreign country, you know, Japan or something like that because that would definitely detract from the made in America standing General Motors strives to continue. So, I can't really comment on what the impact there has been because, like I said, we're not told as far as what the supply chain is.

S: How has the influx of imported vehicles impacted Lordstown?

I: Imported vehicles, as everyone knows, put a very high quality standard, especially the ones coming from the Asian countries and that's just because the business perspective that they take and the business they partake in. I think GM has had to increase their productivity and quality of standards immensely, since the onset of the import cars. Especially, you know, I think they're at thirty-five to forty percent of the automobile market in the United States right now. You know we're never satisfied with sixty. We wouldn't be satisfied with ninety. It's helped the company as a whole. The influx of import cars has helped us in that we've had an increased quality and increased productivity to keep up with them.

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

I: GM plants in Mexico I think were a great addition for the people of Mexico. This topic has been addressed for a long time at the plant and even in my classrooms. I don't want to say that they were a godsend to Mexico. I know there has some – a lot – of conflict with the autoworkers here as to GM opening plants there. I think trying to make GM a global company and keeping up with this theory of GMS, which is Global Manufacturing System, it did a very, very needed aspect, I guess, to Mexico because once Mexico stabilized the internal condition of their society. You know, GM comes in and right off the bat builds two very productive plants down there that build very popular automobiles that are shipped across the border in mass amounts and purchased here and they are very expensive. The Cadillac Escalade is built there in Mexico and it's one of the highest priced vehicles in our line. It's built there and it's built well there and additionally GM has provided training for those individuals in Mexico that work at those plants in areas that they weren't normally given in engineering and management. You didn't... not so much the cost but just the lack of facilities to teach these people that. The GM plants in Mexico are not in Mexico City or the big cities that you hear about. I mean, there... the ones are Taluca and Ramos and they are very rural societies. Some of these people didn't have a lot of education and GM comes in and builds these plants that these people have never seen before and builds cars that these people have never seen before, but additionally they gave them the training to build these cars in areas that they were never exposed to. I think from a management perspective it was a good thing to do. However, if you talk to people on the line or talk to people that have been in the union for thirty years, they look at this as sort of like a kick them or a decrease in standards, but I don't see it that way and I don't think I ever will.

S: Do you feel your job position is secure?

I: Yes, yes. It's ongoing and nothing will ever be complete in my lifetime, you know, we'll never be able to fix everything so the plant runs errorless.

S: Now, I have a group of questions about the union. Since you're not a part of it, I'm not going to go through and ask every single one considering you're not a part of the union, but do you have anything to comment about, about how you feel about the union, your relations since you're not with union people?

I: Given that my job has a lot of interaction with people in the union and going in as I was young and you hear news about strike after strike after strike. The first thing you hear is the union did it or the union was involved in a strike or it was because of the union. I could see how somebody could have a negative perspective on this. In addition, you're told here are these guys that barely graduated from high school and the next day they're making twenty-some dollars an hour working at General Motors, is this fair to the kids that decided to go on to college and maybe make less income for the next four years of their life and even following that with loan payments and stuff like? I think initially it was very easy for me to have a negative outlook on the union as to like, you know, the steel mill era is over. What is their place in the economy, what is their place in society, and why did they constantly move to these strikes? Because it doesn't hurt anyone but their own numbers, so it's very difficult for me to accept that. But again, that halted immediately, I would say the first time I walked into the plant because you see how hard these people work. Everyone's like, you know, "Oh, the guys on the line sit around and read newspapers or they sit around and sleep and play cards," and that is not true. If it wasn't for the security aspect that we have now, I would invite anyone that thinks that to come down there and walk around with me for an hour and you would quickly dispel that theory. I think the union is a positive addition to the plant, as long as they stay within their means and don't ... and this doesn't really... because when you say union you have to remember that although 6,000 people out there are in the union, if you go on strike you have to remember that although we're going on strike or if they go on strike that doesn't necessarily mean 6,000 people want to go on strike. [The] union is very hierarchical, structured. There is a chairman, there's a president and there's a shop chairman. I think when it comes down to it those people are really the ones that decide what the future of the union is and is really democratic in that, you know, hey if we want to be an all voting body on... There are cases where that's not the instance, but the union is a day-to-day thing. You never know what you're going to run into with them or what you're going to do that's going to make them mad or something like that. So far my relationship with the union has been very positive and my outlook on the union is very positive, and suspect it will stay that way if it continues as they've been.

S: A new car for this coming year?

I: No. Actually, we just started building 2004 Cavaliers as a pilot program to be tested up in Detroit. They don't look much different than the 2003s, which went under a drastic change externally and internally from previous years. The new car will be, as far

as we're told, it's going to be four different models. There is going to be a coupe, a sports coupe, a sedan, and a hatchback. All four will be produced at Lordstown. All four, which is, again, going to be a task in itself to build four... make "different" types of cars, even though it's going to be the same name. Those won't be produced until October of 2004 and they're to be 2005 model year.

S: When will the new paint line be in production? How long will that take?

I: Well, we're going to have to build. For a while, we're going to have to build the new model in the current paint shop that we have, which is located on the second floor of the plant. It's going to be a process called concurrent build and it's going to be as we're building, you know, the new model will be built both upstairs in the paint shop, as well as simultaneously put the new paint shop on the testing process. As far as that goes, we can't really comment on anything as far as the procedure, how this car is going to be built until the company is finalized on how the car is going to be built and the timeline it's going to follow.

S: How do you feel about the use of contractors? Do you think it's a positive thing?

I: Yes, very much so. Again, I think it's provided jobs for the community, stable jobs for the community, stable paychecks for the community. It's really a major corporation, a transnational corporation that bring in these "mom and pop" builders, you know, electricians, bringing them in and having them be able to not only build components of this plant and of the new car indirectly. That this community will be able to feel secure for a long, long time, but also you have to give these contractors the ability in their future to tell customers that "Hey, when you drive past General Motors and you see that brand new paint department, you know, we were a part of building that" So reputation wise it's going to help them in the future. It's going to be ongoing. I think General Motors made a great decision in the ability to bring these local contractors in and have them partake in this, you know, you hate to say historic, but I guess for this area it was historic for them to bring this new car because there was such uncertainty whether they were going to do it or not. I think to not only bring the car in and to give a sense of stability there, but also bring in these local contractors and have them partake in the building of this new car indirectly through the components that they built, I think is a very good decision.

S: Now, a lot of times people... there's been talk about when is the Lordstown plant going to close, is it going to close... Do you think by bringing this new car in that is going to stabilize?

I: I would say yeah. There's no set time on how long this is going to be built. Like I said, no one's even seen the car. I'm sure out there have, but no even knows what this car is going to look like. We're given a price range of how much it's going to cost. We have, even now, we're working everyday to satisfy requirements for this car, you know, and as we're building the cars we currently build. From that perspective, what I've seen,

I think it's pretty secure that you and I will see General Motors live its span of life here in the valley.

S: How many cars do they make there?

I: Currently, we build two models: the Sunfire and the Cavalier. We also put variations on the Cavalier, which would be the two-door coupe and the four-door sedan. We've taken out the four-door sedan of the Sunfire and we are currently only building the two-door coupe. It's the only one available and we're the plant that's building it.

S: Well, that's the end of the questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I: Not at this time.

S: Well, thanks for your time.