

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 2061

Jim Graham
Interview
By
Monica Mastran-Czopor
On
April 3, 2002

ARCHIVE
Oral
History
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INTERVIEWER: Monica L. Mastran-Czopor

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

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This Project is Funded by the Ford Foundation and The Center for Working Class Studies.

MC: This is an interview with Jim Graham, President of the UAW, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project Lordstown, by Monica Lynn Mastran-Czopor at the Union Hall in Lordstown on April 3 at approximately 9:30 A.M.. Okay, Jim let's begin. First, what can you tell me about your background?

JG: I was born in Pireaus, Greece 1947. My family moved here in 1951 to Warren, Ohio. My dad was a steelworker, and my mom was a homemaker. I've got one sister. I got married in 1970, one son who is an assistant prosecutor in Warren. I've got a grandson.

MC: Great, what can you tell me about your first job?

JG: I was a caddy. I was eleven years old. I caddied at Trumbull Country Club, we needed the money obviously so that's why I worked.

MC: Now when did you get hired at Lordstown?

JG: 1968 in September.

MC: And how did you get your job?

JB: I applied, I was in college and I applied, and I was fortunate enough to get a job.

MC: Do you recall what your first job was at Lordstown?

JB: Yes, I made seats for the old Chevrolets. I helped put the seats together.

MC: So it was on the assembly line?

JG: Yes.

MC: Now if I wanted to get hired at Lordstown now, what would I need to do?

JG: Somebody from within the plant would have to refer your name, that would go to a computer in Detroit and it randomly picks as to who would interview

_____.

MC: Now how has hiring changed since you were originally hired?

JG: Originally they would go through the unemployment office in Warren or Youngstown and they would pick names as to who would come out here and get interviewed.

MC: Are there periodical drug tests after the initial hire?

JG: No, unless somebody has proven that they had a drug or alcohol related problem. The membership does not check. People who have had a problem or continue to have a problem have been discharged a lot of times for that problem after they have been checked.

MC: How do you feel about that testing for those people?

JG: I agree with it one hundred percent. Our goal is to keep people off any type of drug, alcohol. There are enough things to worry about without getting involved with drugs and alcohol.

MC: Now describe what you do at present.

JG: I am in charge of the administrative part of the union and a variety of other things. Politics, education, inside and outside the plant, a variety of things. Too many to list right here.

MC: Understandable. What positions did you have in the hierarchy to your present position?

JG: In 1976, I was first elected as Alternate Committeeman. In 1980, I was elected committeeman. In 1985, I was elected as zone man, who represents 1500 people. (telephone call) In '95 I was elected President.

MC: Is that typical hierarchy to get to the position where you are, I mean does anyone just come right off, right in and say I want to be President. You have to work your way up?

JG: You can. We have had people in the past that have done that. They have had success coming right off the line. You almost have to work your way up to the position of President or, chairman.

MC: What can you tell me about the people you work with?

JG: As far as which people, the people on the floor?

MC: Either, or.

JG: That's the most important part of this job. You have to deal with everyone in the plant, obviously, I enjoy that. My favorite pastime is walking on the floor and just talking to the people. I think that has to do a lot with my success, because I do enjoy that. And that's something that you can't fake. If you are talking to somebody, and they know you are talking to them because you have to they can pick up on it real quick. I enjoy doing it.

MC: Now what various parts of the plant did, if you know, did other people you work with in the union leadership come from? I mean did they come from one particular part, did they come from all areas?

JG: All areas.

MC: Now can you explain the structure of union the union leadership? I mean who reports to management? How does that work?

JG: The top two union leaders are the President and the Chairman. The Chairman has the bargaining aspect inside the plant, the President has everyone thing else. So that's why I would say it's a huge job. We both deal with management on different occasions for other purposes. But we are primarily the two top people that deal with management directly. Higher management.

MC: Now who reports to you guys? I mean do you have committeemen that report to you? How does that work?

JG: The committeemen report to the chairman, the executive board reports to me, the committees report to me. I've got, probably eleven or twelve committees, anywhere from education, community services, recreation committees, CAP counsel, which deals with the political organization.

MC: Now how do you feel about the misconceptions concerning autoworkers?

JG: The reason I ran for this job is because of that misconception. A lot of people out there think they are paid not to work, unfortunately a lot of people on the outside have not had the opportunity to come in the plant and try some of those jobs. If they

would, they would know exactly why the autoworkers get twenty-four dollars an hour, because those are very strenuous jobs, not physically, mentally. Just imagine if you are working on a job that you screw ten screws per car, eighty cars per hour, eight hours a day.

MC: Monotonous.

JG: Forty years, thirty years, I mean it is a monotonous job. But, we have a membership that is just fantastic. Ninety-eight percent of our membership, just want to come here, do their jobs, and go home to their families, and that's why I like this job so much because I am the same type of person. A lot of times, unfortunately, I have had to carry my job to the house. There are a lot of things I have to do after I go home, meetings with educators, politicians, and they are all for the betterment of our plant and our people.

MC: Now, at present, could you describe what a typical day for you is at work? What's a typical day for you?

JG: I come into the plant at about four-thirty in the morning, we have three shifts as you know. I check on the people on the third shift. I'm in the plant from four-thirty until about nine-thirty, then I got to the union hall from then until one, two o'clock sometimes. I go home, take a shower, and start going to meetings.

MC: So you have meetings pretty much most of the day?

JG: Yes I have a lot of meetings, and on weekends.

MC: Now, from a union official point of view, would do you think about the union? Do you feel it is effective?

JG: Oh absolutely. The union is very effective. You always have problems _____, I don't care what union you belong to. There are problems in the plant that deal with production standards, if it wasn't for the union you would have a lot of issues, like child labor laws, minimum wage. The quality of life in the Valley would be taken down, many many steps if it wasn't for the unions in the Valley bringing the quality of life up. As far as pay rate, living conditions, again we deal with a variety of things, education, politicians know they are accountable to us, as labor, and they have to be accountable to someone, because they know if they don't do their jobs for the people in the Valley, the people in my plant, people won't vote for them. We have a huge, huge voting block in our plant. I have forty-five hundred people in the plant, and thirty-nine hundred retirees, that I am responsible for. So these people know, even as far as higher education I could tell you, I know nothing matters in this Valley their main purpose is..... education, politics,..... dedication., everything sooner or later comes to this issue.

MC: Have you always been active in the union, since, I know you mentioned you

got hired in 1968?

JG: I became fairly active in 1976 when I first ran for office.

MC: So you were here for a few years then before?

JG: Yes, prior to that I was just going to college, working, and trying to survive.

MC: How do you think the union has changed over the years, I mean from the point you were hired, or when rather you got involvement to now?

JG: Initially, years ago, it was an adversary role between union and management. Back in the 1980's somebody came to the realization that both sides were going after one thing; job security. You couldn't get there by fighting all the time, you had to join forces, because the enemy was no longer within the plant. It wasn't union or management it was Korea, Japan, and Europe, and unless we joined forces and helped fight that enemy we were going to lose.

MC: Do you think the closing of the steel mills impacted how the UAW had to operate?

JG: Absolutely. It made the UAW even more powerful, because when the steel mills closed that was when our plant was just opening up, just getting on its feet and the impact of the steel mills closing would have been ten fold had Lordstown not been there. Ten fold, this Valley would have literally imploded had our plant not been here, because we were, along with Packard Electric, the only game in town. East Chicago, Indianan had steel mill closings and their economy just went to pieces. Thank God we had Lordstown here, because at that time it picked up a lot of the weight caused by the steel mills closing.

MC: What do you think about the trend to more conceptions by the union?

JG: I don't like it. It's necessary with the global economy right now any income _____ . We don't need that to happen. We have to work together with management, sort of a win, win, because if it's a win, lose operation the entire plant loses, the Valley loses, the country loses. Because, they will pick up and go to Mexico, and we have been very fortunate, here at Lordstown, because we have a tremendous workforce. And I'm not saying that because I am the President, because I have been there for years and I see what we have here, and I've been to many other plants. We have a tremendous workforce, and because of that workforce we have survived all these years, and because of the workforce our union members will be getting a new product. That's going to help the Valley.

MC: Great, I agree, one hundred and one percent. Who, among past union reps, do you think was particularly effective and why?

JG: They were effective in their time, Al Alli, had a big impact on the plant. When he passed away it was like a piece of the union passed away. Ryan Price had a tremendous impact on the union, and when he left, again it was a small piece of the UAW leaving with him. They were great for their time. I think Al survived today, because he had that type of mindset. Al was a guy that respected the membership, he knew how to get jobs for the membership, and he would do anything that he had to, to get those jobs.

MC: Now during the 70's what did you think of Whitey Ford as a union leader?

JG: Whitey Ford was very effective. Whitey Ford was very politically oriented, and I took some bits and pieces from just about every President that was in office. Whitey Ford politics, very hands on. I sort of put everything together with my experience, and my family background, and I think I became a prototype job as far as President of the union. I may be wrong, but I'm looking at it from my point of view. I don't think any other President, as a whole as I have, in ever aspect. Every aspect. In meetings I attend, on a weekly basis, show that.

MC: Now during the 80's, there were off site meetings between union leaders and Management. What did you think of these meetings?

JG: The off site meetings?

MC: Yes.

JG: I didn't particularly like them. I felt negotiations should be conducted within the plant, with the people, but that's a two edged sword. If you are in the plant, you get distracted a lot of time by issues in the plant. I really didn't like meeting off site. Today, I don't like traveling that much. I love traveling, with my family, but as far as traveling with the union I think a lot of those trips aren't necessary. If a trip is essential I will go to it, if it's not I don't. If it's for the well being of the plant I will be there.

MC: Were you ever involved with any strikes?

JG: Yes.

MC: Which ones?

JG: A lot of them. We had strikes, we had walk out strikes years ago. Again, it was a different mind set, the last time we went out on strike was when they fired Al Alli, and the whole plant walked out. We had a strike that was caused by another plant, I think it was in 1998, '97, the Flint Strike, had our plant down for seven weeks. It was my job to help try to gather food, because we have many members in the plant that were suffering for their families. It was my job to get my committees together and gather food, we fed thirty-five hundred people,

and I'm not talking about once or twice, I'm talking every week. We fed thirty-five hundred people, I had to meet with Chamber to get with the financial institutions to give us breaks on phones, home loans, car loans, and I think we did a fantastic job, as a union, as that point, supporting out membership.

MC: Now you had mentioned the Wild Cat Strikes, in 1972 the infamous Wild Cat Strike did occur at Lordstown. What do you remember about that one?

JG: I believe that was over the cushion room. They had a huge problem in the cushion room, I think that's the strike you're referring to. They sort of tossed some people, that's when GMAD was here, General Motors Automotive Division, those people were like concentration camp guards. They came in and said look, when you come in the plant leave your brain at the door, just bring your body in here, because we don't need any other part. Leave your brain at the door, we'll tell you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, when to eat, when to drink coffee, and at that time our membership was very young. A lot of our membership had just come back from Vietnam, all they wanted was to be left alone with the car, and go home with their families. We walked out, no correction I was not at the van plant, I was still at the car plant. I didn't go to the van plant until 1975. It was just a mess, it was a mess. Was it needed at that time? Yes, because the people we were dealing with were very authoritative. I mean if you had seen some of the people _____. At that time there was a need for a strike, and that's what you had.

MC: What were your specific responsibilities for that particular strike? I mean, I know you mentioned you got involved with the union in 1970.

JG: '76.

MC: Oh I'm sorry '76.

JG: Basically, picketing in front of the plant. The hourly guys can't get more involved than picketing. I had picket duty in front of the plant. We got our strike benefits, at that time, the union hall was located in Newton Falls. After we report out there, and get assigned picket duty, come back to the plant, and just stand guard at the plant. Make sure no one came in, or left it was a lot of fun back then.

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

JG: As far as?

MC: Relations between union, management, the workers?

JG: Like I said initially, years ago the relationship was absolutely confrontational, it was us against them until the light went on, and we realized it wasn't us against them, it was all of us against the foreign markets. And that's when everything started coming together, there was more communications in the plant, there were

more things together. It was what we had to do. You have to change with the times.

MC: Now in the '80's, the union negotiated the J-car production, how did the workers feel about this?

JG: Well it was security they loved it, they loved it. It was job security, again it was job security caused by the membership, because regardless who the President is (received a telephone call), what were we talking about?

MC: About the J-car production.

JG: The J-car production, again regardless who the President was, regardless who the Chairman was, if you don't have a good workforce you don't have job security. Our workforce got us the Vega, our workforce got us the J-car, and our workforce is going to get us a new car. Everything is predicated on our membership. If our membership is bad we don't get a product. You could have Jesus Christ sitting here and you are not going to get a product. Our membership is a very work oriented membership. You can have Slappy the Clown sitting here and get a product. So it's not up to Jim Graham, it's not up to John Molhan for a new product. It's the plant. Everything that is centered around getting a new product happens within the four walls of that plant.

MC: Now you had mentioned before that management and the workers, everybody started working together because of the common enemy of Japan and so forth. So you definitely think that the influx of the small imports impacted the plant?

JG: Absolutely.

MC: Make the workers work better for quality or, I mean how did it impact it?

JG: You're losing market share, you have plants being shut down, you have massive layoffs, so you finally realize, hey management is not your enemy, Japan is the enemy, Korea is the enemy, Germany is the enemy. Now you have all these other small countries starting to produce cars. They are the enemy, literally the enemy, because if they win the war we lose here. Not just in Lordstown, all over the country. The economy of this country will suffer drastically. So we have to get together, union and management, when I say union I'm not referring to Jim Graham and John Molhan, union meaning membership and fight the common enemy which is other countries.

MC: Now after Whitey Ford left in the 80's did the union still seem to support the quality of work life programs?

JG: There were three or four different names put on quality of work life. The union has always supported quality of work life, but back then management did not. They

talked a good show, but that's all they did, they talked a good show. We were all in favor of quality of work life because it benefited our membership. Management in closed door meetings was all for it, but by the time the quality of work life theory got to the floor it was lost as far as management. Middle and lower, but after the 80's, again with the realization the thought that, hey the bad guys aren't in the plant, the bad guys are across the ocean. I think some of that started coming back, some of that came back.

MC: Now do you feel that these quality of work life programs changed people's jobs any?

JG: It was a mindset, quality of work life was a mindset. If you are working on the line and a light fixture goes bad, the most important thing on your mind all day is that light. We had a system put into place where if somebody on the line had a problem there was a response to it and the problem was changed. We did that so it wasn't part of your problem the entire day. That's what quality work life was, again that was a small example. But there were bigger examples, somebody walks into a restroom it was filthy, the whole day you were thinking about that restroom. Under quality of work life, and some of the newer things we've got going now, there's a response to it, go down and clean the restroom, fix the problem get the guy the tool he needs to do his job. Get his input on the job. We still have our problems in the plant. You are never going to get away from that, you're never going to find a utopia in the plant. There are always going to be problems, I don't care what plant your in. The idea is to work together to solve these problems. That way you can make everybody happy.

MC: Now were you affected at all by the unemployment during the 80's?

JG: Our plant?

MC: Either, or, I mean as...

JG: We lost some shifts in the 80's, nothing bad because fortunately we're producing small cars.

MC: Right.

JG: Small cars are the backbone of GM. That's the entry level car, so somebody coming out of college, a family man with two children just starting out, they are attracted toward our car. We've always been fortunate, since the big Chevy's we were producing back in the early 60's to have these small cars. Starting with the Vega, and fortunately we are working with the small car again as a new product. But as far as the unemployment hitting us big, it never hit us big, because we would lose a shift, get it back on, lose a shift, get it back on. Occasional layoffs. We weren't hit as big as some of the other plants. The other plants that produced larger cars, Cadillac's, the big Chevrolets, the big Buick's, the big Pontiac's. We were very

fortunate.

MC: Now I know you had mentioned you worked in the van plant, now during the 90's the van plant closed of course. How did you feel about this?

JG: Sick, that was my baby in the van plant. I was the zone man in the van plant. I felt it was my personal home. I remember when they told me first the van plant was closing. It was a very emotional time for me. The van plant had a different environment, because it was so small, we were like family. I could walk through my zone at that time, fifteen hundred people, and I knew everybody by their first name. So we were family. When the van plant closed it was very emotional, not just for me. It wasn't rare to see grown men crying when we were told the van plant was closing.

MC: Now we had talked about GM plants moving to Mexico and so forth. How do you feel about the GM plants that are in presently in Mexico?

JG: Don't like it. I think that it's not just GM plants. Those people down there are getting paid, I don't know what their exact hourly rate is but it's nowhere near what we are getting paid, and I don't see a change at the present time.

MC: Is that what pretty much what everybody feels?

JG: Yes, they are taking away jobs, American jobs, and when you take away American jobs you take away from the economy of the area, the state, and the country. You've got guys on the street looking for jobs seven dollars an hour. They could make twenty-four dollars an hour if it was an automobile plant. That's what's so offensive about going to Mexico, and now further down south in South America. Those people down there are making fifty, sixty cents an hour compared to twenty-four dollars an hour, because American Business is greedy.

MC: So how did you feel about the NAFTA agreement then?

JG: Didn't like it, still don't. The fast track is _____, and I'm not the only one. The UAW has taken the position they are totally against NAFTA, totally against fast track. Unfortunately we had a Democratic President that pushed both, and we supported this guy at the time he ran. Personally it was offensive, because when I support you, you are supposed to look out for my well being.

MC: Right, you scratch my back I scratch yours.

JG: My membership's interest in NAFTA and fast track _____.

MC: Now how did you feel about the changes in management in 1996? Do you have any opinions on those?

JG: Changes in management in 1996...

MC: Some of the management positions changing.

JG: In '96?

MC: Yes, or sometime in the 90's, they have '96 down.

JG: I'm trying to think of '96, unless they are talking about Hermon Moss retiring.

MC: I'm thinking that, that is what they are referring to.

JG: Hermon Moss, when he worked in the van plant he and I did not get along. You want to talk about an adversarial position. It was a war. He left (telephone call). When he came back, this was when Al was fired, came back with a different _____ . He came back with the idea of communicating with management, and he did a fantastic job. He and I got along, I mean he wouldn't do anything unless I knew about it. He and I, two years ago, got a joint award from the regional chamber of commerce, and it was a great honor. There was five hundred people there and they presented the award to both of us. I, when he left, left on great terms. To me, Hermon Moss was a great plant manager. He changed the communication within the plant _____. Before there was some communications not much, he came in and said look, I want to tell these guys everything, every aspect of the business. Things, ten years ago management wouldn't even utter in front of us. He changed that, and I think he changed and I changed, and he and I were very good friends when he left. We got the new manager now, she's young, very intelligent. We have our growing pains, but I think she is learning the correct way to do things, and I think she is going to be fine.

MC: Any differences you feel with the new plant manager being a woman versus Hermon Moss?

JG: There's only one Hermon Moss and if fact he's going to be presented as a great communicator coming us some time. They called me and they said, would you be willing to introduce Hermon Moss. I said, it would be my honor. That's never been done before to introduce an ex-plant manager, and I'm looking forward to it. (telephone call) That's how close Hermon and I are.

MC: Now given the recent situation with Firestone and Ford. How had the incident impacted the plant or did it?

JG: No it hasn't.

MC: It hasn't okay.

JG: The only thing it's done, it's caused GM to start sneaking up on market share slowly, because Ford had problems, Firestone had problems _____ .

But the bottom line is survival of my membership, and if we can sneak in the market share with a small car, and increase our share, which means more job security for my membership that's where it's at.

MC: Now what do you think about responses by the companies? Their specific responses?

JG: Don't care.

MC: Now what do you think about the installation of robots in production.

JG: Again it goes with new technology and things change, technology changes for the better. I don't like the idea of a robot taking over for a human or the job that the human is doing, but I also know that things change. Ten years from now you better have technology in the plant you've never dreamed of, because things are going can change for the better.

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

JG: I think we have the best insurance, medical coverage. We have, at times, our problems with it as far as member's checks not going out from the insurance company _____. Its primary duties are to _____ insurance problems, benefit problems for the active membership and my thirty-nine hundred retirees.

MC: Now how has the benefit package changed over the years?

JG: Every contract it improves.

MC: It improves.

JG: Every contract.

MC: Now how well do you think the company handled lay offs?

JG: Lay offs?

MC: When they would lay off people.

JG: _____. We had a couple of weeks where the fuel supply was high and we had to shut the plant for a couple weeks, but other than that we haven't had a significant amount of lay offs.

MC: What changes, I know we were talking about management earlier, but what changes in management style over the years, specifically referring to the various divisions, Saturn and Geo, what changes have you noticed within the style itself?

JG: Well the style _ Corporation. Like I told you before, we have access to material now that ten years ago was unheard of. The cost of the car, _____, the profit margin. These are told to us, something ten years ago that had never been done. There was no trust ten years ago. Trust is there now, and it's continues there, and I think Hermon Moss had a lot to do with that.

MC: Now how active are African Americans with other minority groups in the union?

JG: Very active. They have a Civil Rights Committee, I have two Civil Rights reps in the plant. I have a lot of minorities in my committees. We have minorities on, as far as the bargaining section. I think there is a nice cross section of the plant in my committees, and I demanded that when I took office.

MC: Okay, and women are pretty active.

JG: Oh yes, Women's Committee. That's all they do they work with women's problems, women's rights, a variety of things.

MC: Now referring specifically to women, what changes did you notice when women were first introduced into the plant? Did you notice any specific changes?

JG: Yes, when you have an environment of all males and you bring in a female, regardless of what she looks like guys are going to put on the Tom Sawyer act. But now it's just an everyday thing. Women are there, we have a lot of women in our plant and they just work right along next to the men.

MC: Just a couple more questions and then we are through. If you were in management explain how you would do things differently or would you do things differently?

JG: I can't answer that question, because when I got out of college they took me down into a room that was probably fifty by seventy. In that room they had probably two hundred desks and each desk had a telephone on it, and each chair had a person in it, they told me since you have a degree we would like you to _____ for management. We're going to give you one of those desks. I said, are you out of your mind? I couldn't even visualize being in that room. I couldn't because I had no prior knowledge toward it.

MC: Well one last question I guess. Are there any regrets concerning your work choice at Lordstown?

JG: No.

MC: No.

JG: I think, I've worked my way up to this position and a lot of that has to do with membership, because they have faith in me. My last election I was unopposed

which was the first time in history _____ . A lot of that has to do with people I represent. They have faith in me, they trust me. I identify with them because I am probably the best people person. I enjoy talking to people, and I'm not being superficial, I genuinely enjoy it. I've got a very, very strong _____ with the education committee. Dr. Sweet, Dean Allen from Kent State _____ to watch football games. He's invited me to social events. I've got a very good repor with politicians.

_____. But again that is because I enjoy. Being brought up in a great home, you can always tell how I feel by looking at me, I can't hide my emotions, and I'm a genuine person. _____ I just enjoy doing it. I have absolutely no regrets, I would do this all over again if I was just starting out, because it's an enjoyable job that I've been lucky to keep.

MC: Well thank you so much for spending some time with me today.

JG: Your welcome.