

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown

Personal Experiences

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Joseph Michael Scott

Interviewed By

Heidi Scott

On

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INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH MICHAEL SCOTT

INTERVIEWER: Heidi Scott

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

DATE: February 22, 2003

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H.S.: This is an interview with Joe Scott for the Youngstown State University Oral History Lordstown project by Heidi Scott at 758 Thornton Avenue, Sharon, PA on February 22, 2003 at approximately 10:15 a.m. We're going to start with just some basic background information. First, where and when were you born?

J.M.S.: November the 20th of 1939 in Sharon, Pennsylvania.

H.S.: Could you tell me about your family?

J.M.S.: What do you want to know?

H.S.: Just basic information. What was your childhood like? Do you have siblings? Spouse? Children?

J.M.S.: I have two brothers and one sister. We grew up on Penn Avenue in Sharon, which was referred to as the flats area. My father was in the wholesale produce business with three of his brothers. My mother was a housewife. When I was fourteen years old, my parents built a house on Yankee Run Road and we moved out there. I graduated from Brookfield High School. I attended Youngstown State University for two years. I married and I have three kids. I'd have to count how many grandkids because I can't keep that straight in my head.

H.S.: [Laughs] Thank you. What was your work experience prior to working at Lordstown?

J.M.S.: I worked in the family business. Then at one point, I worked for nine days at General American Transportation Corporation, which built railcars. At that time, I had an application at the new General Motors plant in Lordstown. When I was called there, I quit the job at General American.

H.S.: Why did you seek employment at the Lordstown plant?

J.M.S.: My father asked me, "Why are you going that far to work?" and I told him, "It's the newest plant. It's the least likely to have a layoff." I never regret that because General American went out of business a few years after I was called to General Motors for an interview. I was also called to Sharon Steel and I didn't even go to that interview, because I was hired at General Motors already.

H.S.: When were you hired?

J.M.S.: March the 24th of 1966.

H.S.: Have you since retired?

J.M.S.: Yes, I retired approximately five and one-half years ago.

H.S.: You're retired right now, but as to your knowledge when you left, how has the hiring process changed since when you were hired?

J.M.S.: The hiring was, when I was last there, was done by an outside agency who interviewed the applicants, I believe, three different times. Then they recommended to General Motors who they should hire.

H.S.: Were there, when you were there, periodic drug tests after the initial hire?

J.M.S.: No, there are no drug tests after the hire. There were no drug tests after the hire that I know of.

H.S.: Describe your first job at Lordstown, such as the area you worked in, your responsibilities.

J.M.S.: I was hired in to the material department as a hand man. A hand man hand unloaded trailers and boxcars. That was my first experience. When they found out I knew how to drive a high lift, then I started driving a high lift or fork truck however you want to refer to it.

H.S.: How did your responsibilities change over time? Did you have different positions and job duties?

J.M.S.: I was a lift truck driver for a very short period of time. I don't remember how long. On my application I put I knew how to type. I was approached by a man who interviewed

me, and when he found out I could type, I went into what was called a non-bargaining group. Non-bargaining meant you weren't in the union. The non-bargaining group was referred to in the plant as the scheduling department and we were involved with the making of the serial plates and the body plates. We generated all the build documents for every vehicle. We assigned the keys and recorded the key numbers to all vehicles. We were responsible for all deletions and insertions of the actual bodies themselves throughout the plant, because on an assembly line the bodies have to be in the build order that they're supposed to be and at times they were pulled for damage or repairs and you had to notify the entire plant. Okay, sequence job number two is deleted and it could come back in within the hour or it might take a week. When it finally came back in, you have to notify the plant that sequence number two is now between sequence 199 and 200. That was our responsibility in the scheduling department.

H.S.: So, you never actually worked on the assembly line?

J.M.S.: No.

H.S.: What kind of car was being produced when you first started working at Lordstown?

J.M.S.: The full-size Chevrolet Caprice. It was a two-door, four-door or a station wagon and somewhere in there we built the Camaro and the Firebird, but I don't recall when, but those were the first vehicles that we built.

H.S.: Could you please describe a typical day at work?

J.M.S.: [Laughs] Typical day being the... Okay, when they put on the second shift, I became the supervisor of the second shift scheduling group. Do you want that or when there was only one shift what we did?

H.S.: Anything you'd like to say. If it's the second shift that's fine. Whatever you'd like to share.

J.M.S.: A typical day as a supervisor, naturally you are the first one there. Your concern is everybody going to show up for work, because the responsibilities were throughout the plant in the body shop, at the end of the line, and two operations in the middle of the plant, plus, our office, which was on the second floor. Your concern was everybody is here, okay, now is everything working, all the machinery that was required to run our group. The machines were keypunch readers, IBM keypunch readers. We had two different machines, one read tape that we punched and I can't tell you, I don't remember what it was called, but then that tape was fed into another reader and actually typed out a body plate, which had serial numbers, sequence numbers, paint codes, that kind of information on it. That was your typical day. Then worrying about everything working. What else can I tell you?

H.S.: Then next question was what problems might you encounter in a typical day? You went over that, mainly call offs and making sure things are working.

J.M.S.: Machinery breaking down. That's it.

H.S.: At the time you were there, how safe did you think the plant was?

J.M.S.: Safety was always like General Motors number one concern. Very safe, at all times.

H.S.: Do you believe there are health risks in the plant? What are the health risks in the plant?

J.M.S.: Health risks? Yes, there were because when I first started in the body shop they actually melted lead to fill in the gaps in the bodies where they were needed in the body shop and I don't believe anybody at that time was aware of the dangers of lead, lead fumes, because that was rectified down the road. It went to body putties of some sort that actually hardened as hard as metal.

H.S.: What did you feel about the quality of life programs that they instituted?

J.M.S.: I don't know what you mean by quality of life.

H.S.: Since I haven't been there or worked there, I read articles that when it had to do with the unions stuff that they had different programs that people would come in and have meetings about and discuss the problems. Just like, some stuff with education they had.

J.M.S.: Not being in the union, I don't know how to answer that question other than the safety features which were always drummed into us about everything from safety glasses to steel toed shoes to ear plugs in the noisy areas, that kind of thing. Quality of life in the later years, ergonomics became an issue because of continuous movements and carpal tunnel and things like that.

H.S.: How do you feel about race and gender relations in the plant? Did you consider it an issue?

J.M.S.: When I started there, no. I guess we never realized that it was an issue to the government and people outside of the plant and when the government passed a law, and I can't recall what it was called, it became necessary then to hire women and non-whites. I don't know if that is the correct term I want to use or not.

H.S.: Is that like when the Equal Opportunity Act or law or something like?

J.M.S.: Yes, yeah, equal opportunity.

H.S.: So, prior to that was it mostly white males?

J.M.S.: It was mostly white males, yes.

H.S.: What are your thoughts concerning a woman general manager?

J.M.S.: My thoughts are as long as she's capable and can handle the job, God bless her. I've got a daughter who I tried to bring up as equal as her brothers.

H.S.: Were you affected by unemployment during the 1980s?

J.M.S.: No, being on salary I was never laid off or without a job.

H.S.: How do you feel about how the company handled layoffs? It doesn't affect you, but...

J.M.S.: They handled the layoffs, basically, under the union guidelines of seniority. The union called the shots on that and as far as salary layoffs, I don't recall there ever being any.

H.S.: What do you or did you think of the GM employee benefits package?

J.M.S.: It's probably as good as it can be. I thought it was number one. Now, in the later years, the salary benefits started losing ground. The hourly benefits to this day are still better than the salary benefits, because of their union.

H.S.: How has the closing of the steel mills impacted the plant?

J.M.S.: It hasn't.

H.S.: No?

J.M.S.: No.

H.S.: How has the influx of imported vehicles impacted the plant?

J.M.S.: At Lordstown, we were always fortunate to build a product that was either in demand by the public or necessary for General Motors to maintain their fuel average because the government requires them to maintain a certain number, which I don't know what it is and you can average your entire fleet as it is referred to, their entire car line over what is required by the government. We always produced a small car that got a very high gas mileage. We did have elimination of one shift at one point, but I don't recall what year that was and what that was caused by I don't know.

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

J.M.S.: Contrary to what General Motors tried to drum into all our heads, that product in Mexico was never supposed to be shipped into the United States, but it was and it probably did affect Lordstown to some degree.

H.S.: During the 1990s, the van plant closed. Describe how you felt about this.

J.M.S.: Very bad because I was instrumental in starting that plant in the scheduling department from the ground floor and the corporation's always drummed into everybody's head

that quality would maintain the plant and we had the best quality of any truck being built, even though it's called a van, and we still lost the business and it was a political loss because General Motors had to have a product to build in, I believe, it was Flint, Michigan. I may be wrong on that, but whatever it was considered General Motors main city had to have something to build at this plant in, I'm going to say, Flint, Michigan. Even though that plant's quality was the poorest in the corporation, they closed Lordstown and shipped the van there to be built and it didn't last long at that plant because they couldn't build it.

H.S.: Really?

J.M.S.: Really. It was a political move, nothing but.

H.S.: Gets you every time. [Laughs]

J.M.S.: Yep.

H.S.: How did the introduction of robots into the workplace affect your job, if it did?

J.M.S.: It didn't affect my job at all.

H.S.: Did you feel secure in your position when you were there?

J.M.S.: Yes.

H.S.: Now, the next set of questions is all about the union and since you weren't in it, I won't go through question by question, but is there anything you have to say about the union or any comments?

J.M.S.: The union is a necessary part of a large plant, because how else do you control a workforce that at one time was near 12,000 people, okay. Yes, 12,000 people.

H.S.: Wow.

J.M.S.: Something has to be in place to control them. Otherwise, you have chaos. Whether the union is good or bad, it calls the shots and the people follow whatever the union says. Without it, everybody would be going off in their own direction. So, you can call it a necessary evil.

H.S.: Now, you worked there during what they call the Wildcat Strike of 1972. Do you want to comment on that? How you felt about it or what it was like during that time to be there?

J.M.S.: I know crossing the picket lines was a scary thing because you were threatened. We actually got turned away. They wouldn't let us cross the line and we had been instructed to report to, I believe, it was a Holiday Inn to let people know that we tried to

get in and we couldn't cross the lines. At one point, there were people locked into the plant, salary people that the union would not let out. That's about it.

H.S.: Just curious, was there any violence in any of the strikes or anything?

J.M.S.: Physical, no, but there was damage done to the product itself, where somebody in the union would scratch the paint or cut the seats, do things like that. You always have a few radicals. 99.9 percent of the people who work there are good people, but you always have an element that is a little bit whacko, as we all know. [Laughs]

H.S.: [Laughs] I know there were other strikes, do you want to comment on anything you recall about them. I know there was a more recent one in 1992.

J.M.S.: Not being in the union, it was just something that went on. We always had to report to work and you always had to shuffle papers and look like you were doing something, clean something, file something. You had to report to work and had to look busy.

H.S.: Now, looking into the future of the plant, I know you've been retired now for about five and a half years, but if you'd like to comment on some of these questions at least when you were there. What types of renovations were being made to the current assembly line?

J.M.S.: Every year at the model change over, there were renovations throughout the plant to make it more efficient and that was just something that went on every year.

H.S.: So, overall, you think the renovations are always a positive thing because they make things more efficient and a better product?

J.M.S.: Yes.

H.S.: What did you feel about the new paint line?

J.M.S.: There isn't even a paint line there yet. It's going to be built in the very near future. Is that what you are talking about?

H.S.: Yes, that's what I'm talking about. [Laughs]

J.M.S.: They talked about that probably ten years before I retired and it's good to know that it's finally going to happen because it is necessary from an environmental stand point, which I don't know if you know about that or not.

H.S.: No.

J.M.S.: There are a lot of fumes that go off into the air. That's the environmental thing.

H.S.: Do you feel that the reason it's being brought in is because of pressures for...?

J.M.S.: No. That's one of the issues but probably the main issue is the quality that will happen because of the new paint shop.

H.S.: How do you feel about the use of contractors? I know you mention them in the hiring process.

J.M.S.: It's a big issue with the unions. I don't have any problem with it personally.

H.S.: What advice would you give to newcomers to the plant?

J.M.S.: Number one, always be on time. When I first started there, new hires, I saw people come in their first day of work and they came in late. They got fired on the spot. If you can't be to work on time your first day, what are you going to be in the future? Nothing but a problem and the assembly line starts on time every day. You have to be there.

H.S.: Is there any thing else you'd like to add? Any other comments?

J.M.S.: General Motors is a good place to work. My family benefited from it and I still benefit from it. That's about it. [Laughs]

H.S.: Thank you very much for your time.

J.M.S.: You're welcome.