

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

General Motors-Lordstown Strike of 1972

Personal Experience

O H 1025

NOEL NEAL

Interviewed

by

Robin Schuler

on

February 21, 1981

NOEL NEAL

Noel Neal was born December 7, 1933 in St. Louis, Missouri. Noel graduated from Normandy High School and went on to attend Southeast Missouri State University and also the University of Missouri at St. Louis. He served in the U.S. Army during the Korean conflict from 1953-1955. Mr. Neal has been with General Motors 25 years as a salaried employee, coming to Lordstown in 1970 from the St. Louis Assembly Plant. Noel is currently the Supervisor of Labor Relations for Lordstown. Noel, his wife Janet, and his daughter Elizabeth live in Canfield, Ohio. Noel has a few more hours needed to complete a B.A. in history at Youngstown State University.

-- Robin Schuler

S This is an interview with Mr Noel Neal for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the G M Lordstown strike of 1972, by Robin Schuler, on February 21, 1981, at 10 00 a m

We are going to talk about the labor unrest at the General Motors Lordstown Plant and, more specifically, the radical problems of 1971 and 1972 First of all, could you give me a little bit of your own personal background?

N Well, you want my work background or my personal background?

S Personal background first

N Well, I have been going to Youngstown State actually, for the last two years, and I am very near to having a degree there, about eight hours away I am 47 years old and I have been to school several times in my life, but have had those things interrupted by the Korean War, for example, and some transfers with General Motors I worked with General Motors for over 25 years, the last sixteen years in the personnel department and the last ten years in the industrial relations or labor relations department, in which I currently work I have two children one son, ten years old, and one daughter, whom you will hear occasionally in the tape, eight months old My wife is a housewife, and that should pretty well bring you up to date

S Where are you from originally?

N: Where was I born?

S Yes

N Well, actually in Missouri, but I have lived in probably seven states I moved to Ohio in 1970 with General Motors, I came here from the St Louis Assembly Plant

S We have just about covered your work background You have not always been in management at General Motors, then?

N Yes I have been a salary person from the time I was hired. At one period in my life, I was a non-bargaining unit clerk, but I hired in as a salary person I did not initially start in on the assembly line However, I have supervised the assembly line at one point in my life while working for the company for almost a year, but I have never been in the bargaining unit, per se, with General Motors

S If you could pick one general point of friction out at G.M. -- you know, the Lordstown plant -- which you think caused most of the tension, what would it be?

simplification, even if you are speaking about the period we discussed prior to the recording, in the early 1970's, out in Lordstown

S Maybe something that has carried through since the place opened up?

N I would say, trying to narrow it in line with your initial question, I would say the pressures of production.

S Really? On everyone?

N As manifested in both managerial attitudes and hourly workers attitudes Each one looks at the imperatives placed upon them by the fact that business is there to generate a product that makes money for General Motors, and that is what I mean by the pressures of production We have to see that a product is produced and produced efficiently and with quality and the employees from their point of view, feel in many cases, that some of the managerial imperatives are causing them hardships, and I would say that would be, in brief, one of the things, if not the key thing, which has led to the problems

S From what I have gathered, there is a great deal of blame as far as the workers were concerned, where they were directing a lot of their hostilities And 1971 and 1972 were pinned on General Motors Assembly Division, better known as GMAD Do you find this to be the case?

N The hostility directed at GMAD?

S Was it in late 1971 when they came out there?

N: Yes, the plant was, initially, half Fisher Body and the other half Chevrolet The GMAD division idea is really nothing new In fact, the predecessor of the GMAD, the General Motors Assembly Division, actually occurred in the late 1930's as a BOP plant -- Buick, Oldsmobile, and Pontiac -- and they ran three cars off the same assembly line, which was new at that time And because they had one staff, they were able to produce more competitively cost-wise By GMAD taking over the Lordstown plant, which in the early 1970's was not run too well, they were able to eliminate, not half of their staff, but certainly 30 to 40 percent For example, of the old set up, there was a Chevrolet plant manager, personnel director, comptroller, et cetera Under the Fisher Body Division, which was housed in the same building and geographically no more than, in some cases, 50 feet away, you have the Fisher Body plant manager, controller and personnel director with their attendant staff

With respect to the way they run the plant, GMAD's methodology in setting up jobs, for example, was not that much different than Fisher Body or Chevrolet, but perhaps they were more strict about seeing that the criteria was followed There was less possibility and less chance for a scape goat In other

words, one division blaming on the other something that was not done. So as a result, GMAD in effect, tolerated less foolishness. This was directly translated into worker hostilities and aimed at the GMAD division

S: I think I read in the paper that the union claimed GMAD was there to cut the fat out of the system.

N: I think probably that was an accurate statement, not necessarily to go in and have wholesale layoffs, but in the automobile industry and especially with the absenteeism that is still prevalent in many industries today. Wherever possible, human nature being whatever it is, some of the management people would one way or another find a way to have a little extra man power, whether it be assemblers or supervisors. The bottom line really is that every extra person, and that may sound hard to justify, but every extra person, even back then was probably worth eighteen thousand dollars a year and today it is near twenty-eight thousand dollars a year. So, multiply that by ten or a hundred people, and it is not hard to hide one hundred people when you have 9,000 people, there is an extra person here and an extra person there. There are a lot of ways to do that and it really adds greatly to the overhead and to the cost of doing business, and GMAD did not and will not really set up jobs beyond the capabilities of the individual operators. However, when some of the extra people were either transferred out or not replaced through normal attrition and some of the inefficient practices were stopped, people had gotten used to the good life and immediately resisted.

S: It seems like GMAD coming out to Lordstown and the Vega being introduced there correlated. Is that true or is that just coincidental?

N: It was probably coincidental rather than one or the other being the causing factor. GMAD came to Lordstown primarily because, not only at Lordstown but at many other plants throughout the circuit, wherever General Motors had this dual staff set up, they realized it was very inefficient. Therefore other plants, such as St. Louis and Kansas City had a GMAD staff take over. It was not just at Lordstown. We got the Vega plant here, or the Vega car out here simply because the models that were being built prior to that were not selling that well and GM wanted a large modern plant to turn out the Vega, that is why they picked Lordstown.

S: Was there actually a speed up in the line prior to these problems in 1971 or has that been something that has just evolved over there in the late 1960's and early 1970's?

N: What does speed up mean?

S: They had said they increased production from sixty cars an hour to one hundred

cars an hour.

N The jobs per hour, certainly. When GMAD came in they did in fact run the Vega line at one hundred jobs per hour for a couple of years, but on the surface that sounds like possibly something atrocious in happening. You must realize that jobs are set up within GM if the line runs one hundred jobs per hour you have about 38 seconds or forty seconds to do your work. You cannot do as much as you can in one minute, and, for example, today the van plant is running 23 jobs per hour, which in fact translates to about two and a half minutes, so in two and a half minutes, you can do a lot more items because you have more time to work on the vehicle. So the one hundred jobs per hour, while much ado was made on it, is really a fallacious argument because the work content has to diminish. At one hundred jobs per hour, for example, you may be able to shoot three or four screws, putting on one part. At two and a half minutes per job, you can put on five, six, seven, eight parts and shoot a dozen screws or bolts. It just depends. So the line speed is really not the point. It sounds good to the press. The work time should be properly set up.

S So you do not think it was as much the speed of the line that caused a lot of these problems but the layoffs of workers that ultimately came about. Was that one of the major issues that cropped up?

N Well, possibly one of the issues, but not necessarily the major issue.

S It seems like they try and correlate line speed up and lay off of workers as being ultimately ripped off.

N That really almost precipitates another whole discussion concerning what did occur out there, because inefficiencies by any business can not be tolerated. There was an awful lot of, misdirection is the best word to use, applied by people who were getting the news medias here. In other words, blame General Motors for reducing jobs. Blame General Motors for high line speed, a hundred jobs per hour. Most everyone in the country has been conditioned to know that the assembly line is boring, tedious and that people are looked at inhumanely. However, I would question that particular stereotype that we have been led to believe because, while assembly line jobs most assuredly do not require any great amount of creativity or even concentration, the work performed by the people certainly has no analogy in some of the industries in this particular Mahoning Valley, such as steel or the coal mining industries. Even farmers who have come to our plant would candidly tell you that the work at the plant, while it may be monotonous and in no way compares to the labors they did before they were hired at General Motors, the benefits are a lot better.

Many of the younger people who really do not care about the good old Calvinistic work ethics will tell how inhumane and horrible the assembly line is, but then that is their philosophy and opinion and they are certainly entitled to it.

We have had at Lordstown, and still do, many shrewd, intelligent union people who are able to say the things that they feel the media wants to hear. And also to say the things which people will pick up on and if you make a clever mixture of people's preconceived stereotyped notions and mix that with some of the truths that some of the younger people feel and feed it to the media, you can generally get an acceptable story. I do not really know and I would not go along with the philosophy that the line speed or the laying off of people were one of the prime reasons for the unrest out there. As I said before when I was talking to you, I do not know the one main reason that could be put down.

S. You mentioned something about the young people. I was going to ask you what you thought about the problems at the plant at that time, tying in with the seemingly prevalent young work force? I guess a lot of younger people were hired in the mid or late 1960's and they would still be young in the early 1970's.

N. Well, I have my own thoughts on the composition of work force. I think anywhere in our country today there are more young workers, and of course now we are getting on the other end of the spectrum, a lot of people are working into their late sixties or seventies. They have found out that they are not totally senile or useless and, of course, that is near and dear to my heart at my age. In any case, the young work force people today are better educated and they have more expectations earlier in life, and I do not believe that many young people are quite as easily lulled into accepting the trend milly-type existence, waiting for their turn and their rise to the top because they are beginning to realize the pyramid follows to a very narrow opening and everybody cannot be president of GM or of the country, so they are a little bit restless.

I think, also, a lot of expectations were generated by various groups, peer groups. They country knew that the youth was restless, at least that is what we were all told. And in some cases they most assuredly were a result of the Vietnamese conflict, and they had to fulfill those expectations, whether it be in the industry or in private or public life. The people today that we have are a little older than they were ten years ago, but we have a lot of young employees, a lot of very capable and challenging employees. I think their role with the supervisor in industry today, whether it be the automobile industry, aircraft, or any industry, it is very difficult because the people you are dealing with have to be handled confidently and not misled, but they are a challenge from the supervisors point of view because psychologically and emotionally, their expectations are greater and they are not just merely content to be thankful that they have a job that pays them money and take anything that comes their way. Therefore, you have to approach them differently. For example, when you get back into the 1940's

S. You do not think Lordstown hired any more young people than most places were hiring at the time?

N. I do not really. I have read studies of what most places did at the time. I know

the competition of our work force within GM was one of the youngest, if not the youngest. Back in the early 1970's, I do not think we hired any more young people at that time, it just turned out that way because of possibly the baby boom after World War II. It just hit at such a time as the labor market had the people in it to be taken. We were not excluding any particular groups here, as you are well aware of, due to General Motors' conformance with the various regulations. It just turned out that way with the young people.

S: You would not say that they were the primary reason for a great deal of militancy out there?

N: I would say that the young people, well, certainly I do not know that they were the primary reason, but certainly the young people in today's world can get militant. Militancy, as far as I can tell, by an exposure to history, is nothing new in this country, and in fact, nothing new in the world. It is just that perhaps today, with instant coverage by television and press, for example, it is more easy to get your point recognized and possibly to gather a following. That is about all I would say about it. The young people, I think, are probably less restrained than a generation ago, and as such, are less likely to take whatever manner they feel management may hand out. They will speak up if they feel an injustice has occurred, but then I can relate back to the mid 1960's in St. Louis at a particular plant that I was in. We also had problems with the work force there, so I do not really think it is anything new. I do not think it is inventive for General Motors, either.

S: I had some thoughts of my own, also. I read later that young people like you say, do not feel quite restrained. Do you think it may be due to the fact that they have not been exposed to the harshness of earlier economic realities, have been more or less cushioned from some of the pre-1950's type-things?

N: I think there will be some interesting studies made someday on the attitudes of the 1950's and the 1970's. I do not know if my, I certainly lived through that period of time, but I do not know if my information is such that I can really give a good opinion of it. I try to be open-minded concerning people's attitudes at work, and frequently I am convinced and say that the bulk of our work force are good people, whether they be young or old, and by that I nearly mean 85 to 95 percent of our people come to work and do us a pretty good job and are responsible citizens. I think that was probably the case back in the early 1970's; however, once again if only percent of our work force on a 9,000 man work force is kicking up their heels, you are still looking at approximately, well not approximately, exactly 450 and I see just 450 people can stir up a lot of trouble.

S: Do you think that was the case?

N: I would say that five percent of the people gave us the bulk of the trouble back

then and it still exists today. I am not too far from the mark

S Those are just figures you are always looking at, as far as people in general

N You know, I have never compelled anything, but it is from my experience within General Motors that the bulk of the people are just the same as we are. They have a job, whatever it may be, and they do it. Some days it is not the best thing in the world, but by and large they do it with minimal problem and complaint or stress. There are a few people that blow hot and cold and occasionally kick up their heels, and then there is a small element that are just not satisfied with whatever you give them or do or how you do it and are bold enough to cause problems. That element is probably prevalent in society. Fortunately for us in this country and wherever else most of the people live within the prescriptions put on us by society.

S. Is it true that the Lordstown plant was the fastest assembly plant in the world in the early 1970's?

N By fastest you mean line speed jobs per hour? I think so, but I do not know. I do not know about some of the European plants. I think it would be a true statement to say it was the highest line speed of any automobile assembly plant in our country.

S: How about automation at the time, you know, naturally? It was a highly automated plant, but how about the robot thing? Was that happening back then?

N Well, we had the unimates when the Vegas were introduced at the plant and, of course, the new J- car, which is forthcoming, we have probably twice the amount of unimates, but they do, probably, one unimate may replace two people, but a unimate's cost, it would probably take from the current costs. Now, I am just trying to think. I heard the figures. It would probably take, I would say, about two to three years just on the cost basis alone to justify the cost of the unimate over the manual workers replaced, but really, it does save us money over the long run because we jokingly say that they do not miss work, they do not complain and they never file a grievance.

But in reality, one of the big plus for us is, wherever we need to ensure weld spacing and whether we like it or not, human beings on the end of the weld gun, occasionally, whether it be looking at the latest issue of Playboy or reading or whatever they may do -- and sometimes that goes on on the assembly line -- they miss a spot weld here and there. And where we want to, because of Federal standards and quality reasons, ensure that, within mechanical capabilities, every spot weld is placed within an inch or three quarters of an inch and in the portions and areas that we want, then we have the unimate, and that really helps us in that line. It does save us money as far as people go, but they

were not put in just to cold-heartedly eliminate people, because that was not the idea, although they do do that. But that was not the prime reason. There is quite a number, not as many operators, but there are a number of skilled tradesman who are required to maintain these robot welders. It is just a catchy phrase to say GMAD speeds up the line and puts in robot welders to displace humans. You can get anybody's interest if you write an article and say that

S Well, they can also do jobs that human beings cannot really contend with, as far as temperatures, heat and so forth. I think that is one of the reasons they were introduced

N They could, but the jobs they are doing at Lordstown are not because of environment prohibited to human applications. The reasons I have just given you pretty well hold true

S This one kid explained that he thought the problems at the time were man against automation. That is why I thought maybe I would ask that question about the robots. That was not any of the case back then? People feeling jobs being jeopardized by automation?

N Well, what people felt -- once again we are dealing with perceptions and I do not really care for that buzz word, but that is one of the things you hear today -- people's perceptions, many people somewhat less today possibly than back in the early 1970's. But back in the early 1970's for one reason or another, the committeeman's word was gospel and many people were led to believe some of the stories about automation and what it would do to the man. I think back in the 1970's automation was more suspect by people than it is today, and many industries are still undergoing further automation. And as you pointed out, there are areas where automation can perform where manual methods cannot. For example, in the nuclear industry. But it is just something that, if there is unrest, it is something else to be worried about or concerned with. I do not know that because of the variances that it would be quite some time. I do not really know how we would ever have a totally automotive assembly plant

The concepts of our assembly plants here in this country, in many cases, are really only elaborations of Henry Ford's early plant, because we still have assembly lines, floor-mounted conveyors that operate in portions of our Lordstown plant, and that is straight from Henry Ford's plant in the early 1900's. It is no innovations there, we may have different carriers or we may have animates, but until such time as you would build the car in a different manner than we do now, there are more similarities I would suggest, even though there has been changes and updates and methods. Obviously everything is not black now -- we use colors and different paints and so forth -- but there are many more similarities to Mr. Ford's early mass production techniques than we might

believe But at the beginning of the 1970's, no one really wanted to point that out They wanted to talk about the things that get people's attention

S What did you think was the general underlying problem in production pressure? What about this in the context with tension on the line among the workers at the time? What do you think the real tension was?

N Well, that is a difficult question because, individually, people come to our plant with certain pressures that they have in their private lives When you put them on an assembly line where, literally, their physical movement is restricted or, at very best, governed by certain parameters, and they the production pressure to assemble each unit as well as they can, combined with possible peer pressure, pressure from their union representative, pressure from their supervisor It is almost an individual thing, except there are some generalities that come up I do not know that I can really explain or answer your question anymore than I already have

S How about racial or geographic tension out at the plant at the time? There were a lot of people from southern Ohio, Kentucky and so forth being brought up and conflicting with the people from the Youngstown-Warren area

N Well, you do have different philosophies in different parts of the country There is not question that you have, in addition to the areas that you mentioned, we also have our West Virginians at the plant. You have a number of ethnic groups at the plant and these things, in any industry, have the potential for conflict I would say that, generally, we handle those sorts of disparities, on the whole, rather well at GM We go out of our way to keep differences that we feel would be detrimental to our plant atmosphere We extend a lot of effort toward stopping problems before they start because we are just like a small city The J-car plant is down, but when that gets back into operation, we will have about 7,000 people from all walks of life We have functional illiterates and, as I think I told you earlier, I know we have several people with masters degrees, some people who were teachers, one fellow I know was a math teacher

S That is out on the line?

N On the assembly line I am not talking about in management We have Vietnamese refugees working at the plant We have almost any group that you can find anywhere Male, female, young, old We have handicapped people at the plant, we have even some, not only physically, but mentally handicapped people working We have just almost any condition that you can describe and whenever we find -- either through prejudices or ignorance or rumors, or whatever possible explosive or tense situation developing, we spare no effort to find out what the problem is and resolve it, because we just cannot let things get out of hand And I do not mean by that, that we come down with an iron fist on

people You just address the situation and use whatever common sense and logic dictates to resolve and take care of the problem

S How about women out there now and back then? Do you think that contributes to tension, say sexual harassment, women causing problems themselves because they have been brought into such an alien atmosphere?

N Well, back in the early 1970's, there were relatively few women at the plant I do not really have my statistics hand, but there have been quite a few women who have been hired in the late 1970's -- 1976, 1977, 1978, and 1979 Some of them are currently on layoff, a number of them have come back recently I am sure they have created some tension because frankly, some of the male employees, especially with the fall-out from the E R A. movement, are not thrilled with the fact that women can get the same rate of pay that they can get, and in some cases, whether we like it or not

A good example, I cannot have a female employee do some jobs that men do It is just impossible. For example, at the van plant, one ton truck tire weighs eight pounds On the rift, one of our operations requires that this tire is rolled into the back of the van and then in some cases, will lay flat on the floor of the van The operator that installs it on the spare tire bracket in the back of the van has to reach in and pick the tire up I could not put a one hundred or one hundred and five pound woman on that job and expect her over the course of eight hours to reach in and pick up those or at least tilt the tires up and install them I have to have a man on that job There are other jobs in our van plant that require a large or tall person, but absent those physical differences wherever possible we do have the ladies on jobs that they can do Well, not wherever possible You do have the ladies on jobs they can do, but there is a certain amount of tension from some of the older men that we have who feel that the ladies are not perhaps pulling their own, but physically they just cannot Just as a small man cannot do it Some where we put a six foot four, two hundred and twenty pound guy and we have a one hundred and forty pound man that is smaller, we cannot put him there either But I think the men sometimes are a little reluctant to realize that

The tensions, I guess, are there because some of the men still visualize themselves as breadwinners and they feel some of the women are taking that role away We have a number of former secretaries and office workers who are working at the assembly plant and they find that transition a little rough When you talk to them and ask them why they are in an assembly plant, they very simply will say, in many cases, they have children they have to support and they are there for the money and the benefits, which is candid and, I am sure, quite true

S When all this information compounded, it seems like there was a lot of friction out there between ethnic groups, geographical-type friction You have different people, culturally, not that much racial problem back then, but the problems with

women Do you think that some of these wild-cat strikes and some of the major labor problems might be a steam valve The people are just blowing off and it is being directed against the plant and management, because that seems like the most practical thing for them to do, when they are actually bringing problems from home and everything else to work?

N It could be what you say, but I think in this country, it is just an extension of beating the President up for whatever goes wrong in the country If something happens, blame the President If you work for General Motors and something happens that you do not like, blame GM. If you have tension that you spoke of, I suppose GM is ready and it is easy to transfer your hostilities or your frustrations to a father figure I think that probably goes along with it Think about it a little bit I think that is a safe analogy

S Okay. You mentioned sick leave Was that highly abused back then? For whatever reasons, do you think people used it to cope with their problems with the job?

N. I will try to restrain myself when I answer that. Sick leave is one of my personal peeves It sounds like I should be on sick leave now Sick leave is one of my more personal peeves because it is a negotiated benefit and no effective method has, by that I mean the international union of the corporation negotiate the amount of money paid to people on sick leave and it varies according to their hourly rate, and unfortunately in today's world, there is no real way to police it properly To have the benefit generous enough to take care of a family man with children who is legitimately sick inherently means that those people who wish to abuse it can enjoy the time away from work when they are not really as sick as they might indicate I do not really want to get into a discussion of medical ethics or anything else I think occasionally some things come out in the paper concerning sick leave, but I would only say that it is a temptation to some people to use it when they do not really need it That is pretty well an individual thing, but it is a temptation

s, How about relating that to mental illness out at the plant. A lot of people think time off they claim mental disturbances go along with working at the plant, you know, go to the doctor get prescribed Valium or whatever

N I really think that you can answer your question by doing a small study on the psychiatric illnesses prevalent in our society today or some things I have read lately about the abuses of Valium Certainly we have people at the plant with mental disturbances about the abuses of Valium. I am not convinced that merely working at the assembly plant, under, as I call it, production pressure, is sufficient to cause some of the aberrations which are attributed to working in the assembly plant I think, and it is just an opinion, that psychiatrists are rather

liberal sometimes in their ascribing causing factors to the industrial part of it, which I am familiar with

S: Okay There was a lot of claims at the time when a lot of this trouble started, that there was ruthless discipline handed down from the top Do you think there was any of that in retribution to what the people on the line were doing at the time?

N: I am certain there was a cause and effect relationship and it is almost like the chicken and the egg argument, which came first Ruthless discipline, I guess you could get into a philosophic discussion of what constitutes discipline The adjective ruthless, I am not really, since my end of the business happens to be to assess that ruthless discipline that you do speak of I am not sure that I think ruthlessness is a good word When you really get down to the disciplinary procedure, I would say that incorrectly applied discipline creates a short-term hardship for the recipient And simplified that means because of the grievance procedure, the aggressive intelligent UAW representation at our plant, if we assess discipline that is not merited, and occasionally that happens, the responsibilities of my job and my department are to minimize that within human error, but if we assess discipline that cannot be supported through this procedure either because of evidentiary problems or technical difficulties, then very simply, the people who lost time from work get paid for it, so in effect, although it happens after the fact, they get time off from work and get paid for it as a paid vacation, however, it was not intended to be that way. If you do not do it right then they get their pay and that is something less than ruthless, however, ruthless discipline, a lot of discipline was assessed during the early seventies and it just sounded better to say ruthless discipline

S: You are talking mostly about people being sent home for not doing their jobs?

N: Yes, disciplinary layoff Well, it could be that or whatever reasons. There are about 40 or 42 shop rules and they run the gamut of whatever infractions could be I am speaking of where people are disciplined Our procedure at General Motors, for example, has seven steps to get you to discharge People are not, there are a few capital offenses similar to the public sector Within GM, sabotage or an assault on someone with a deadly weapon or theft, for example Right off the top of my head are capital offenses as it were, that would result in discharge the first time, but most other infractions progress up through the seven steps and you literally have to get as it were, as an analogy, seven speeding tickets before you were finally put in the jail or, in our case, discharged That is something short of, once again, ruthless, and if you are getting in trouble with the law, you are certainly going to get the message before you are out the door, but then that does not sound too good It sounds less dramatic to say it that way, but that is really the way it goes. Discipline was assessed from this, and it consisted of tying off I would also say that when the parties out there were more

antagonistic then they are today, that I am sure there was cause and effect retribution, whatever you want to call it, from both sides and that really, from my point of view, an adversarial relationship is a waste of both parties' time and effort

S. you were talking about offenses out at the plant. Do you think there is a lot of drinking and drugs going through the plant?

N. I think I can be more specific than that. I can tell you that it does go on. What a lot is to you and a lot is to me and a lot is to an electronics man is indefinable at this point. Things do go on and I can only tell you that it is against the shop rules to drink and/or use marijuana at the plant and if people are caught, they are punished. I am sure, as you are aware, it is just as hard to catch people, it is not hard to catch somebody that is drunk if they pass out and they have a bottle on them. Likewise, sometimes you can catch someone who is smoking marijuana, but just as it is out in society out of the plant, it is difficult, unless you are either tipped off or you have a lucky break to catch people. The doors are wide open to it if that is what you are saying.

S. People that work out there told me that there are a lot of people going out and drinking on their lunches and out in the parking the lot.

N. Well, there are establishments in Lordstown that sell beer and I can only tell you at past plants where I have worked at other cities, for example, there were hard liquor stores approximately five hundred feet from the plant and there was no way you could prevent our employees from going out and drinking whatever. They were old enough and had enough money to buy and walk back in the plant. They were not supposed to drink in the parking lot, but I am not naive enough to think it does not go on.

S. Can you remember instances of people getting pretty rowdy out there that might be attributed to drugs or alcohol?

N. Not really.

S. Really?

N. No. Individual cases, but then once again, we were a small city and so individual rowdyism I just discount, based more on individual frailties as it were than mass groups of drug-crazed people storming the bastion. We do not have that around here.

S. Do you think people who work on the line out there, actually become trapped in a lifestyle due to the money they are making and the security of the job and would actually like to be working somewhere else? You know I have had several

people tell me that it is like a bit of a drug itself, you know, the job

N Well, I guess that is an individual thing with people, but it is my opinion that whatever you do for General Motors, if you do work for them, you do not have to hang your head in the community and I guess whether you are trapped into a, "lifestyle" and would depend upon how you manage your finances and funds and how you view your life. If you are a frustrated leader in medicine, astronomy or want to be a president of something or some country, I suppose, in effect, you might feel trapped at General Motors. I think it is really an individual thing. Again, I guess anybody, any worker, would spend more than they made. I have known an awful lot of people who have worked for General Motors for a long time, and they all, if they manage their personal lives, they generally have nice families and nice material possessions and can send their kids to college, and I guess that is pretty close to the American dream, if you do not go there yourself.

S The thing I am thinking about is people say that they are unhappy enough with their jobs, you know whatever the cause of that is, that they supplement their lives with these material possessions that General Motors offers them.

N Well, what creates unhappiness with your life or your job are, we perhaps conditioned in our educational system to believe that each and everyone of us is going to find an extremely challenging job that offers us all of the career paths that we want, all of the enumeration and the excitement that lasts for eight hours a day each and every day. I question that myth. I think that is something that if we are creating that somewhere along the line, I think the cold hard facts are that many jobs have a certain amount of drudgery attached with them. Most of us are not satisfied with our advancement and few of us get to do something that fulfills very many of our aesthetic sensibilities. That is just my opinion. I am sure even educators, and they look at their droopy-eyed, sneezing students, are not thrilled. Occasionally there is a bright spark in the class, but to the best of my knowledge, all of our idealism, most of us have our idealism somewhat tempered by the realities of life. That was a bit of philosophy you did not ask for.

I just, I think it is easy to complain about something and we are probably, I would have to say that the assembly line job is one of the lesser challenging jobs, there is no question of that. You certainly do not have any responsibility. You clock in and clock out and you do not have any woes on your back. You do not have to worry about hiring, firing, planning, or purchasing, or how in the hell you are going to meet next year's budget because all of that is taken care of for you by General Motors, so it does not have a lot of challenge. I just do not know that it is, as I said, I am sure almost any position has its bleary, dreary moments. That is a thought I have, perhaps it is a rationalization. I do not know.

S I do not know if I forgot to ask you or if you have mentioned. What is your title out there?

- N: You did not ask me. It is supervisor of labor relations
- S So, you get to experience a whole lot of this. You are probably as qualified as anybody?
- N Yes We do experience a lot of things As I said, we have all types of people from all walks of life We have literally some people who have been devastated by their emotional experiences from the Vietnam war and are barely functioning, in and out of hospitals, and we have handicapped people, as I said before, who physically have debilities We have mentally handicapped people, we have people with substance abuse problems, personal problems, and just about any type of problem employee We also have just about any type of great employee, and we have a few mansas out there, too, so we have a spectrum from, I guess, the ridiculous to the sublime
- S In September, 1971, there was a wildcat strike at the fabricating plant. Can you remember any of your experiences there?
- N. Truthfully, very limited I am sorry, but that is another union local 1714 and I do not have very much to offer with that
- S What I had read was they had a few guys go out with hoods so they could not be identified and there were some guns
- N Hooded pickets, well, the hooded pickets and one of the hooded picketers, or one of the pickets were found with a gun, that was in front of our assembly plant.
- S. This was also the wildcat strike, this was not the sanction strike
- N Yes
- S. One of the many wildcats Okay, we can move on to December, 1971 This is when the sabotage started, when all that tension started. Was that the main thing that the line workers were doing that created a lot of tension that made management come back down, then started a back and forth type thing?
- N Well, sabotage per se, really did not I would disagree that it caused us to come down because, frankly, if you catch someone in an act of sabotage, they are discharged, but by its very nature you normally do not catch those who throw the wooden shoe and the cause the shamerly because it is done overtly and there by gets its name There was a lot of destructiveness done and we were not able to catch people. The discipline that was assessed around that time was really not retaliation for that because, once again, getting back to the disciplinary procedure that I spoke of, you would not make that stick, but more specifically what people were refusing to follow proper order, not a capricious order, but

proper order. Or people were, because of the inflamed feelings at the time, were not performing their job properly and where we could establish through times and serial numbers of vehicles what operator was doing the work those people would have been disciplined because they are paid to do their job, but that is not really per se for sabotage, so there is a distinction there and a difference in response to the question

S Okay, what do you think were the main events leading up to the strike itself, or that led to the sabotage?

N The main events, that is a very broad question

S. Some of the gripes I think the union had come up with the outside of the layoffs, I think they laid off 750 to 800 people They were complaining about inter-plant transfers, shift transfers Were these some of the things?

N Well, there was a laundry list of items and the inter-plant transfers was one of them and from the vantage point of the years that have passed the inter-plant transfers issue simply is an administrative function that any business, whether it be General Motors of the ABC corporation, any businesses dealing with the union have a written contract You realize that the employees wish to have certain transfer rights but you restrict them with the idea in mind to not impairing you efficiency, as opposed to the union or working man optimal transfer rights, which are wall to wall In other words anybody can transfer anywhere to any job, and from management's point of view, that would cause chaos because the people would not know the jobs and be able to do them, and from the worker's point of view, they want the widest possible transfer rights

At the time when these other things were going on, we were trying to, before GMAD's agreements were signed, trying to not have the transfer rights Expand into something that is administratively almost impossible to deal with. That was one aspect of the problems Obviously the line speed that everyone we spoke of earlier, and the one hundred jobs an hour That is a problem, the layoff of people was a problem, the discipline was a problem, the image that was projected about GMAD was a problem, the blue collar blues -- whatever that might have been, was a problems The people's own perception of themselves was a problem, and candidly, some of our ineptness in handling these situations was a problem. When you put it all together, why the results are pretty well history now Some of the renditions were not as accurate as possibly they could have been, but we are pretty well past that and know what happened, and I am very pleased that things have taken a great change for the better and we still, in my opinion, those things that people do are some measure short of perfection and a ways to go yet, but things are considerably different than they were

S So you think that all these things had preceded the strike and I do not know if there was anything you wanted to add to that, or the strike itself

N Not really.

S It seems like the interesting thing about this is the conditions at the time, you know, the relationships with the plant and the union rather than the strike itself. I do not know if there is anything that you know of that in particular made that strike special.

N I do not really think it was special. Somewhere back in that period, I do not even remember where, time flies, there was a lock in. They union members would not let the members of management leave the plant, and I was in the plant at that time. I was in there for a couple of days. That was not violent. That was an inconvenience and that was dealt with, I believe we got an injunction. General Motors has a very basic philosophy whenever there is a picket line, whether it be sanctioned or unsanctioned by the international union, all members of management are instructed to conduct themselves with prudence because the idea of crashing through a picket line is just something entertained in minds. Those people do not even really know what has happened can cause more troubles.

S Okay. The very recent decline in the American auto industry is often blamed on unions and worker productivity, and I read recently where the union said they were keeping an eye on the company out at Lordstown now. They want to make sure company productivity is up to par and they do not encounter any major boo-boo's, like the Corvair and the Vega, which gave General Motors a bad name. What are your feelings on this? Do you think the union is justified at all?

N Well, I read Whitey Ford's article, too, and of course, I have known Whitey for probably eight or nine years. I think worker concern is the ultimate answer. You will always have opinions on items just as if I build something for you and you go over it, then you laid out your hard-earned money, and you go over it and examine it. What I consider an acceptable finish and/or fit may not. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak, and you may not agree with me, but I know that with our new car coming out, we are going to do the best that we can engineering-wise and managerially to build the best product we can, and after Whitey's comments, I know that some of that was honestly the right thing to say. What we need to do to change whatever residue is left from the Vega and the early 1970's days, in the public eye.

Basically, the people that build the car have to be entrusted. You have to build, there is an old saying that it is almost an accident, you have to build quality in the vehicle, you cannot repair it in the vehicle. What we mean simply by that is, the first time the body goes through the paint system if it is sanded and painted properly, you have a sealed unit. The pain is primed and baked on and all systems are functioning properly' it is the proper mill thickness. It is much better than if the job has to go down, although we have expensive and extensive paint repair ovens. It is better the first time around than if it has to go to the

repair area and be sanded and then resprayed and baked on again

We certainly are capable in our repair areas of giving the customer a good, properly assembled product that meets specifications in every area. But the first time around by the base operator is the best way to do it because he knows the job probably better than anyone else, and he knows how to do it. He can insure that the assembly quality is there from the beginning. And I think the union is today taking a very responsible position. I know personally that sabotage today, even though we had a lot of it years ago, I would say is for all practical purposes, non-existent. You just do not have to worry about it. I know their union official readily disclaimed, and not just for word of mouth, but readily, totally disavow any acts of irresponsibility in that area on the part of their membership. I think they can help a lot on a quality product and the attitudes that people on the finished product are very positive and should help us to prevent future problems from the lines that we had in the past. I like the lines, "Those who do not learn from the past are destined to repeat it." I think we have learned from the past at Lordstown.

S. You said something about the changes that have been made at GM. The positive changes. You know one of the things I was going to ask you is what you could say about the General Motors plant of today, compared to that of the early 1970's and, you know, if there was anything more that you wanted to add, positive elements, negative elements.

N Well, I would say that it is more mature, more professional and we, back in the 1970's, because of, I am sure, a lot of extraneous factors, there was a lot of mutual antagonism and adversarial relationships going on. There was management and the union literally combating each other, not with fists of course, but one side taking a stand, almost diametrically opposed to the other. Today I see much more pulling together, as evidenced by Whitey Ford's statement in the paper. Many more of your shop committeemen, in fact they would say most, they realize the importance of putting out a good product. They do not take all of the blame and should not, rightfully, for the demise of the Vega. That is a whole story we will not go into, but all of us at Lordstown do not have to think back very far to the time that we lost a whole shift in the Vega plant because the public was not buying the product and that translated into real terms, was the best part of two thousand people who were laid off. All of us, management and the union at Lordstown, have to take a share of the blame for that, and I think that is the proper word. So that is still printed on the back of our minds. Yes, we will have our differences of opinion, even in management, in the future. The nature of the business is such that, to get back to my productive pressures, we will have differences of opinion. But I am sure that we will not travel the same path again, and we realize that when a product suffers and our image suffers in the public's mind, then we are the ones that lose jobs and we are going to be past that.

I do think that the new spirit of cooperation and not capitulation, but

cooperation alters well for us at the plant and it is a proper progression from where we have been. If we are intelligent people on both sides of the fence, and make no mistake, our work force is not only young, even to this day well educated. Our union is equally young and well educated and we have some talent on our side. If all of us use our abilities in building the type of vehicle that we in America want to build to compete with the imports, we will get there, and I think we realize that has to be done. There are not any alternatives anymore.

S What do you think the future is with the American car industry?

N I would say it is going to be tough. Tough for General Motors. I read an article in, I believe it was Ward's Automotive News, that someone was just doing a thumbnail appraisal of the automobile's industries future and they were saying that GM has about a fifty-fifty chance to survive in the next fifty years, Ford about a 46 percent chance, and Chrysler is doomed. That was just one person's opinion and editorial, but I think for the whole automobile industry, it is going to be tough. I know at General Motors we are doing everything we can to make the product that the people will buy, and so many variables are in it. There are so many discussions that we could take off on. It is going to be a tough business. I think we will survive and I hope that we do. Definitely, the business outlook has changed from what it was eight, nine, ten years ago. It is tougher. More people today are looking. Personally, I used to trade cars every year because I get a discount, I am going to drive my cars for several years and more people are doing that and obviously the fewer people that turn their cars over, the longer they drive them. Those things will have an affect on sales, and with interest rates, gasoline costs, people are going to want economical cars and they are going to drive them long. All of those things will be factors, plus things I cannot foresee. It is going to be tougher in the future for the whole industry.

S Yes, because the Japanese, you know, you read about their productivity and what they think of American industry in general. They have a more naturalized outlook on things. It seems like they think that you just have to let things go as they are supposed to go. You know, like the government propping Chrysler up is ridiculous. They should let them die a natural death, and that is the way things are supposed to be in such a high technology and capitalist society.

N I think the Japanese are pulling together today. I feel in America, sometimes we beat each other up so violently. When we finally get together and all pull the same beat on our paddles and oars, we can do a pretty good job with that canoe, but I think that our differences, I know out here at Lordstown, I think our differences in the automobile industry are going to lessen in the future. Some of the incursions, and I think that is a good word, that the union has made their price, and sooner or later will be seen at the bargaining tables at Ford and GM and I do not really feel that in the future they will be viewed usurping some managerial prerogatives, but the closer that the work force and the management

get, I think the more likely somewhat paternal feelings that the Japanese businesses have, we will be operating more like participatory management. Right now, to some of the old bootstrappers, that is a bit of a stigmatized work, but the more you can get your people involved in your product, then the more motivated they are. Then possibly the less assembly line blues you have, possibly the more interest in the finished product you will have, and ultimately the customer benefits, you can give them something that is a little bit nicer.

S. Is there anything you want to add?

N. No.

S. Okay. Contrary to popular belief, there is sensitive, intelligent management out there at General Motors.

N. We wasted a lot of time and effort back in the early 1970's out there, so I am really not looking, although I said we got to think about the past or we will repeat it, I am not looking so much where we were, but where we can go. That is why I really have not, I am not trying to pin the tail on the donkey. I just want to go from here, so I know I really did not say that much, it has just been kind of my personal impressions we have talked about.

S. Thank you.

End of Interview