

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown Project

Personal Experiences
O.H. 1927

JOHN CHRISTY

Interviewed

On

March 11, 2001

By

Tray Drenzo

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM Lordstown Project
O.H. 1927

INTERVIEWEE: John Christy

INTERVIEWER: Tray Direnzo

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown Project

DATE: March 11, 2001

D: This is an interview with John Christy for the Youngstown State University Oral History General Motors Lordstown Project by Tray Direnzo at my home in Austintown Ohio on March 11, 2001 at 3:00pm. First let me say thank you for coming and allowing me to use your knowledge about the GM Lordstown Plant. My intent is to give the workers of the plant a chance to tell their stories and opinions about GM Lordstown. I hope this will be a positive and informative experience for both of us. Start off by telling me a little bit about yourself and your family.

C: I've lived in this area all my life and my family is from this area. My mother lives in Illinois and a son of mine lives in Illinois. My mother taught school at the Choffin Career Center, was a school nurse for the Youngstown School system and also taught at Youngstown State University. My father was a design engineer and worked for Youngstown Steel Door Company. My sister is an assistant principle at Downer's Grove South around the Chicago Illinois area and I taught school in Austintown, Fitch, and at Mahoning County Joint Vocational School and now I'm

working in skilled trades as a pipe fitter at the fab plant at General Motors Lordstown.

D: What about your grandparents were they from this area?

C: My grandparents were originally from Italy and they later resided in Campbell where they owned a store.

D: What kind of store?

C: A general goods store like a grocery store. They had thirteen children. They went to school, worked in the store and made deliveries and things like that.

D: Tell me about where you grew up and what the neighborhood was like.

C: I was raised in Boardman until the second grade and then I moved to Austintown in 1957. There I attended St. Christine's School until the eighth grade and then I attended Austintown Fitch from ninth through twelfth grade and later went on to attend Youngstown University and Kent State University.

D: What year was that?

C: In 1966 I graduated from high school and I went in September of 1966 to Youngstown University until 1971 then I attended Kent State until 1978.

D: Did you get your degree?

C: Yes I got a degree from Youngstown University and Kent State.

D: What were your degrees in?

C: Bachelor of Science of Education and a Trade and Industrial at Kent State. I needed a Trade and Industrial Degree to teach at the vocational school.

D: Did you go past the Bachelor of Arts degree?

C: No.

D: What were your first jobs like?

C: I started out at as a carpenter and did aluminum siding and construction work. Then I worked for McNicklas Transfer Company in Youngstown as a mechanic and I drove semi-trucks for Lowbrows on the weekends delivering meat. My first job as a teacher was for McKinley Technical Institute in Canton where I worked for a year, and then I taught at Austintown Fitch for a year. Then from 1972-1979 I taught auto mechanics at Mahoning County Joint Vocational School.

D: Did you like that work?

C: Yes I enjoyed teaching. Then I worked as summer help at General Motors as security for a couple of years. I was trying to get into the energy division out there, which handles all their gas wells 477 in all. I worked in the energy division with the gas wells from 1982-1996 basically doing pipe fitter and electronics work. They monitor the wells electronically and can turn them on and off with a main frame computer and I was responsible for wiring the first two that they put up. I ran their injection facility, and I also took care of their injection turbines that they use to pull the gas from the field. I was also responsible for running and moth balling them every year. Plus I did calibration and operation for 144 roots meters, which are used to determine how much gas is being pulled from a specific well or a specific area. I helped set them up and operated it. The injection facility is where they inject salt water into the ground about a mile down and also I was responsible for filtering all their fracture water that they use for their filtering programs. Right now I'm working over in the fab plant as a pipe fitter. Basically we take care of presses, all the air and water feeds to the presses and any new

construction that goes on that is related to hydraulics or pneumatics we take care of that. We put the air and water supply line into the robots and then the weamers take care of calibrating the robots from there and their pneumatics.

D: When you were at energy were you by yourself a lot?

C: Yes, pretty much. It depended upon what you were doing. Sometimes you'd have someone work with you because of the kind of work it was. Basically you were your own business unit. You handled your own scheduling checking wells or doing maintenance on the pipeline. You worked with someone if you're going to be tearing something down due to the safety factor. IF something would break or explode due to the corrosion from the salt water it might knock you out or hurt you and you'd be laying out there for eight hours so it's better to have someone with you.

D: Where was the energy division located?

C: It was based in Detroit and it was located in Lordstown on Hallock-Young Road. That was their field division. The energy division of General Motors also has a gas brokerage section and they deal with the energy problems in all the plants but their field division was located at Lordstown.

D: Was it at the plant itself?

C: No it was a separate building across from the anchor motor freight section.

D: Did you ever work on the line at all?

C: I worked on the line after they closed the energy section down. I did work on the line for about six months.

D: How did you like that?

- C: I'm not the type of person that likes repetitious work so I didn't really care for the line that much. Over the years I've been used to fixing a problem and moving on but you didn't usually work on the same problem repetitively.
- D: You work in the Fab plant now right?
- C: Yes that's correct but I did work on the line in both plants. I worked on the line in the fab plant welding motors mounts and in the car plant I worked in paint.
- D: At energy and at the fab plant it's not line work?
- C: No, energy was a maintenance type operation and preventative maintenance.
- D: Which job did like better?
- C: I liked the energy division better because it was a much more independent operation. I had a boss I had to answer to but it was more for discussion. If you were having a problem you could team up to solve problems. I was a sixth level technician so I went out and helped people with their problems a lot.
- D: So you didn't have a whole lot of interaction with other workers?
- C: No there were only fifteen of us. Nine of us were tied directly to the field everyone else was more or less supervision so they didn't have a specific area that they had to be in. I had to be in the field and on top of that I was responsible for certain things throughout the field which few other people had.
- D: Why did you leave teaching to go to General Motors?
- C: At that time the money in teaching was really low so it was basically monetary. In retrospect I wish I would have remained in teaching.
- D: How did you get into GM?

- C: I had worked on one of the Lieutenants cars and he had asked me if I was looking for a summer job and I said yes. Then they asked me if I wanted a permanent position out there and I've been there ever since.
- D: That was in 1982?
- C: No that was in 1979. I started energy in 1982 I started at the plant in 1979.
- D: At energy if you had to describe your job in one word or phrase how would you describe it?
- C: It was a very rewarding job.
- D: Why was it rewarding?
- C: It was rewarding because of the innovations that GM was using in pumping gas wells. It was state of the art. There were problems that came up that you couldn't call anybody to help you with so you had to work your way through it and it made you feel good that you worked it out on your own.
- D: How did technology affect your job over the years?
- C: When I first started teaching school the point ignition was the thing. At that time electronic ignitions were just being developed so I was able to see technology change from point ignitions to electronic ignitions. Now they've developed distributorless ignitions. So I had to opportunity to teach that and see it progress. In the gas well program most gas wells are operated manually and the person that pumps the well has to go out there and wind the production and intermitter clocks by hand. Ours was run by electric through a computer system. We went from hand winding clocks, to electronic chart clocks, to electronic intermitter clocks and finally to an actual program that worked from a computer that printed out

how much the well produced, what the run cycles were, if it missed a run cycle, to see if the plunger inside that pulled the fluid out tripped, the tank level, etc..... Physically you probably didn't need to even go to the well if you didn't want to. If you had a standard pumper on a well you would have to take a ride out just to see what was going on.

D: Did it make your job a lot easier once technology got better?

C: Yes, probably 90% of the time because it was battery powered and it was solar panel charged. The increase in technology definitely helped. When wells were handled manually only thirty wells were used. When they went to high tech wells where they could read from a computer they handled sixty-five, seventy wells.

D: Why did they do away with the energy section around here?

C: General Motors thought that it was non-core operation so they sold the field division. It had nothing to do with producing cars and that's what they called a non-core operation so they got rid of it. In my own opinion I think they shot themselves in the foot. They went from paying a \$1.22 to \$1.29 per thousand cubic feet of gas to paying around \$3.32 to \$4.80 per thousand. Right now with the prices of gas going up I have no idea what they're paying. I'm sure it's astronomical. If they kept those gas wells they could have kept their cost down. The car, fab and van plant used to use over 4 billion cubic feet of gas a year. We used East Ohio and Columbia Gas transmission lines to move 3.8 billion cubic feet of gas. East Ohio had a contract where they were allowed to put 1 billion cubic feet in for use of their lines. So we supplied 3 billion cubic feet of gas. We used East Ohio storage field for wintertime use. The Lordstown area is called the

key way. You could drill a gas well anywhere and probably hit it. GM drilled 476 and had 474 good ones. That key way extends south to Ellsworth, north to Champion, probably west to the east side of Lake Milton, and east to the west side of Lake Meander.

D: So they used that for their fueling operation in Lordstown?

C: Yes they used it for their gas supply in Lordstown. They fired their turbines in the powerhouse for all the compressed air and they also had gas heaters on the roof. There were two separate gas houses in the complex that controlled what was going in the plant. They are still buying gas from a company called Eastern Group but I don't know at what price. I know they took a substantial beating when they sold it. They gave them a one-year credit and after that the plant was

D: When they did away with the energy section did you go right into the Lordstown plant?

C: No I had a thirty-day temporary assignment and then I was off for a year.

D: How did that make you feel?

C: Pretty bad because we were kind of an elite group. Even when they held one of their synchronous workshops we'd save around \$4.30 for every car produced in Lordstown.

D: Did it make you feel resentful towards them?

C: Sure because we did the job for them. They came down and said you guys did a great job but you're done.

D: They didn't feel that they should place you anywhere else?

C: They were supposed to be working on that but our personnel department out of Detroit was a poor excuse for a personnel department. We basically went out and tried to get ourselves in the plant. Only two of us myself and another employee went hourly because only one person was ever replaced in salary since it all happened from our field group. They did take care of our supervisors. One of them is in charge of payroll at the fab plant and one is in charge of maintenance at one of the buildings that GM has in the area that is closed down. Pretty much a third of the group retired immediately. So four guys retired and one died.

D: Were you a part of the union when you were there?

C: No that was strictly salary.

D: Describe how it's different in the fab plant compared to your original job with energy.

C: First of all, there was freedom of movement. I'd go to work get in the company vehicle and then I was on my own time schedule for eight hours. Whereas in the fab plant once you clocked in you're locked into a specific job in the plant. My job is called the outpost, which is a job in the pressroom. I am on the radio dispatch and given twenty minutes to fix a press. If we can't fix it then another crew is called to the shop and sent in to work on it. So I try to fix specific things.

D: As far as the fab plant how are social relations with other workers?

C: Compared to the group I came from this group is all right. There are good and bad people. There are very few people that I don't like to work with.

D: What's your job title?

C: Pipe fitter

- D: Take me through a typical day at your job.
- C: I punch in, put my coveralls on, I go downstairs open up my tool box and get my radio out then I get my buggy out. It's actually a two-man team. Most skilled trades are paired off into a minimum of two man teams for safety. I put my tools on the buggy and I usually set up my desk for the shift and work on standby. I basically wait for a call to come in. It usually averages out to maybe ten calls a night. For example broken hoses, broken pipes, truck drivers running into things, things like that. It's basically the same thing; I work from two to ten.
- D: How do you pass the time if you don't get any calls?
- C: There is always a conversation going on. You can read, there's a television set you can watch and you can work out too. There are two work out areas where we work. Myself I'm too old for that.
- D: As far as down time do the foremans' or line workers' who have to keep working give you a hard time about it?
- C: No if we get a call the people who are working there have to step out of the way which gives them a break. Usually the foreman is helpful too and assists you with your job.
- D: How have relations with management and laborers changed over time?
- C: From direct management to labor I think it's gotten better. In the late seventies to early eighties management used to fire all the employees it could. Now it's a team effort to work together at least on improving the conditions in the plant. As far as negotiations go I think the people on the corporate level need to get their heads out of their asses. All they do is threaten people with losing the plant and

their jobs. They make the employees insecure. Local management on the other hand doesn't do that. I've been on both sides and I can say that the way they're going about it is totally wrong. There is no reason for it. J.D. Powers rates us number one over everybody. No other cars compare to the quality of our cars even in the foreign market. They compare amongst themselves but they don't compare themselves to American automobiles.

D: What do you attribute that quality too?

C: I'd say the purchases that General Motors makes like Hughes Aircraft Corporation who gave them the electronic technology that is second to none in the world. Also purchasing certain auto groups that gave them solar technology second to none. Not to mention the technology they already have and the race technology they supply.

D: Are you upset with the way that Detroit handles the Lordstown plant or do they handle all their plants that way?

C: I believe they look at a production group not just one plant. For example Chevrolet Pontiac.

D: You started in 1979? In the early eighties I was told that there was a lot of conflict between management and hourly employees is that correct? What do you think caused that?

C: The zero tolerance policy they had.

D: Did that come from GMAD?

C: Yes that and some of the mill foreman that they brought in. There were certain things that they should have disciplined for but there were other things like the

way they assigned work that got people upset. At the plant level now there is more teamwork because everybody wants to keep their jobs. Detroit is where the problem is.

D: I've also heard that in the sixties GM was the most technologically advanced plant in the world. Being that the sixties was a controversial time in our history how do think that came into play as far as labor relations?

C: When the plant was built I believe there was a contingency plan that they could start producing their own war materials within forty-eight hours. The plant is still versatile. They can gut that plant and be back in operation within thirty days.

D: There were a lot of Vietnam Veterans that were hired there right?

C: Right a lot of them were there, went to Vietnam and came back to work.

D: Being a Vietnam Veteran how do you feel the war changed their attitudes as far as their jobs?

C: I think anybody that went and came back aged. They couldn't relate to their friends it's like they were in a different world. That's why they had some of the strikes they had because some of these guys wouldn't take anything from anyone. I think that's why it was so radical out there for a while. Right now we're bringing young kids in again but it's pretty mellow now.

D: What are your feelings about the Vega?

C: It was the most mass produced car ever made. In the beginning the quality wasn't there but in the last runs it wasn't that bad. They had the motor straightened out and squared away the electrical problems. Even today it's one of the most

powerful four cylinders ever put out. It was one of the first tries at an economy car.

D: How do you feel the plant has changed with the regards to the number of women working there now compared to the sixties?

C:

D: Do you think it's changed the atmosphere of the plant?

C: Yes it's probably toned down some of the guys. Most men tend to be a little more careful with their choice of words but then some women are more hard core then some of the guys. People from different states look at things differently too. For the most part there are good and bad workers just like men.

D: Have you seen a change as far as sexism then compared to now?

C: Yes, guys used to make comments to girls or girls used to made comments to guys but that's gone down the tubes now because you can lose your job over it now.

D: How do think race relations are at the plant?

C: I think that it's a factor. It's hard to say. Minorities do carry a lot of weight in today's job market because the government sees to it.

D: How do you feel that the UAW has affected your life?

C: I really never had to use the union for anything major myself. I think it's a necessary thing as far as benefits, hourly wage and job security and I think they help the overall group but I also think they help individuals which isn't really right. One of my pet peeves is when the union gives up some of its grievances to bring back a bad employee. I don't want to work with that kind of worker but

since they're in the union and they pay their dues than it's the union's job.

Overall I feel it's necessary especially on the national level.

D: Do you think the 1714 have done their jobs?

C: Overall yes. We have good wages; benefits and our working conditions are getting better all the time.

D: Do you always agree with the things they do?

C: No not always but I think nine out of ten things I agree with. I think some of the officials we have are good as well. They try to do their job to the best of their ability.

D: Have you experienced many strikes with your job?

C: I've never been involved with a strike I was salary.

D: I don't think there has been a strike in the last five years except at Flint.

C: That affected us as far as getting laid off but we didn't go on strike or anything.

D: What do you think the future of Lordstown is?

C: My own personal opinion is that they are going to get another car deal or SUV.

Basically the workforce is pretty highly educated and they work and test well and their quality index is good. The plant is highly adaptable to anything, same thing with the stamping plant. So I think that something is going to come about. I think the stamping plant may strictly stamp instead of assembling under bodies and sending them over. I heard the car plant may send their people to supervise underbody assembly or they may build something were the old van plant was like a paint shop. I would say the future would be good. They've been trying to close these plants for twenty years and they haven't done it yet. Everybody has their

own opinion but if you go by the plants records it will be open for another fifteen or twenty years.

D: Why do you think that?

C: Because they are so versatile. Right now the concept at General Motors is the concept that's at Lordstown where you stamp the parts and send them to the assembly division through a tunnel. They are not trucking them for hundreds of miles and putting them on railroad cars. Plus Lordstown is a central hub. You could be anywhere from New York to the Chicago area and it's six hours from Lordstown, not to mention the railroad, the turnpike and the airports.

D: So you think the location has a lot to do with it?

C: Sure.

D: How do you think General Motors Lordstown affects the Youngstown-Warren area?

C: Right now it's the biggest thing that we have going. I would like to see the government step up and do something with the steel industry and get rid of some of the foreign steel.

D: If that plant were to leave or close down how do you think that would impact the Youngstown-Warren area?

C: It would shut this area down.

D: Do you think the Lordstown plant is what's kept us going since they shut down the steel industry?

C: I'd say it had a lot to do with it but not all.

D: Do you wish you would have stayed in teaching?

- C: Yes, in retrospect I wish I would have stayed in teaching.
- D: So this wouldn't be your ideal job?
- C: No I'd have rather stayed in teaching. This is an excellent job and it pays well and I enjoy doing it but if I had a choice I would have stayed with teaching.
- D: Are you happy that you have family working in the General Motors plant?
- C: Yes I feel that they have a good future. I believe that General Motors will stick around. I think the media is telling too many half-truths about what's really going on in the plant. People are too radical.
- D: Do you feel that the media around here is supportive or non-supportive of GM?
- C: I think that the Vindicator is pretty negative about Lordstown. The Warren Tribune and Plain Dealer are more supportive of GM in general they really don't talk about Lordstown. GM has been downsizing over the past ten years and they are probably down to about where they need to be with the new technology. In certain departments it's ok but in my division I'd say no. They use robotics on the assembly line to spot weld certain areas because a lot of people can't get into those areas and the robots can reach right around and get it. Some people say that a robot can't buy a car but the point is that if the car falls apart it doesn't matter anyway because you're not going to sell it.
- D: Would you recommend GM to someone?
- C: In a plant it's a good place to work. I don't care for the way they stonewall their employees with their upper management. As far as being in the plant itself I think the working conditions are decent and I feel that the majority of the foremen today with their new approach aren't too bad. As far as upper management it's

not going well. They step on their team players. The hourly employees are the ones that are making a profit and making it happen. A lot of feedback comes from them that help the engineers make decisions so they deserve more respect.

D: Do you have any other comments or insights about the plant that you'd like to share?

C: I think their safety program has come a long way.

D: Do you have any pictures, documents or mementos that you'd like to donate to the university as far as memorabilia?

C: I might have some stuff but I'll have to look. One time they made an ashtray for everybody for one of their anniversaries and I may have a book with all the old cars they ever produced.

D: Do you think once you hit thirty years that you'll retire or do you think you'll keep working?

C: I'll retire at thirty. There are other things I'd like to do.

D: Would you ever buy another car other than a General Motors car?

C: Probably not. I feel that the technology is good and they're as good a car as anything built.

D: Well I'd like to thank you again for taking the time and offering your insights about General Motors. If you have any questions or comments feel free to contact me or the Center for Historic Preservation at the Youngstown State University. Thank you very much for coming out.

C: Thank you for the interview.

D: You're welcome.