

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM LORDSTOWN PROJECT

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O.H. 1928

Sam Dowdell
Interviewed
By
Tray Drenzo
On
April 29, 2001

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INTERVIEWEE: SAM DOWDELL

INTERVIEWER: Tray Drenzo

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Di: This is an interview with Sam Dowdell for the Youngstown State University Oral History General Motors Lordstown Project by Tray Drenzo at his home in Austintown Ohio on April 29th 2001 at twelve pm. Sam let me begin by saying thank you for allowing me to come over and use your knowledge about General Motors Lordstown. My intent is to give the personnel at General Motors a chance to tell their stories and their opinions about General Motors Lordstown. I hope it will be a positive and informative experience for both of us. First of all tell me a little about your family history. Where did your parents come from?

Do: Both of my parents Van and Millie Dowdell were born in Auburn Alabama. My father was born February 1st 1914, my mother was born July 7, 1917. They came to the Warren Ohio area around 1945. That's where I was subsequently born in Warren Ohio. I have four siblings, three brothers and one sister. I'm the youngest of the five and we were all born in Warren Ohio.

Di: What were your parent's occupations?

Do: Both of my parents were high school graduates. In terms of work my mother did all of her work in the home raising five children. My father retired from Republic Steel now LTV as a crane operator in 1976.

Di: What did your grandparents do?

Do: My fathers mother died when he was a year old in a fire so I don't have a lot of history there and his father died at age 39 through some unknown disease. My mother's mother died when she was twelve. At that point she was living with an older sister so I don't have a lot of history relative to my grandparents because of their early deaths.

Di: What about your brothers and sisters?

Do: As I indicated I have three brothers and one sister. I'm the youngest. My oldest brother Joe graduated from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio around 1959. Another brother James attended Kentucky State after he came out of the army. He came out of the army in 1959 and graduated from Kentucky State in 1963-1964. My other brother Mickey is a School Administrator in Newark New Jersey. He graduated from Central State University with a degree in Math in 1969. My sister graduated from Central State with a degree in English in 1970 and has worked a variety of jobs teaching, administrative and now she's at Connecticut Wesleyan as Dean of Students. I graduated from Central State University in 1974 with a degree in Business Administration and a concentration in Management. My oldest brother has two daughters Jennifer and Jacqueline. Jennifer graduated from Perdue in 1984 with a degree in Electrical Engineering and works for one of the dot com's between the east and west coast. Her sister graduated from

Michigan State in 1988 and got an advanced degree from Cornell in 1999 and is working for the Schumberg Foundation in New York City. My brother Jim has two sons and a daughter. His daughter went to Kent State University and his son went to Bowling Green. My brother Mickey has a daughter that went to the University of Virginia and is currently trying to pursue a career in acting. She's also been accepted to law school at Rutgers. My sister has one daughter who went to undergraduate school at Harvard and is currently working on her PhD in Anthropology at the University of Chicago. She studied in South Africa for eighteen months and is now in Chicago trying to complete her dissertation so hopefully she have her PhD soon. I'm the youngest. I have two daughters Kendra and Ashley. Ashley will graduate from Ursuline at the end of May and she'll start at the University of Toledo on the 23rd of August. I'm quite proud of everyone in the family they've done very well. My two older brothers are now retired. Joe retired from Wright Patterson Airforce Base. He officially retired from the government three years ago. He lives in Yellow Springs Ohio where Antioch College is located. Also he was the Mayor of Yellow Springs and he held that position for about eight years. My family is very close. I talk to everyone in the family every couple of weeks. They're all over Connecticut, New Jersey, Dayton Ohio and Cleveland Ohio. That's pretty much my family history.

Di: I noticed a lot of degrees and a lot of universities mentioned. Did your parents stress education?

Do: Yes. Even though my dad didn't have the opportunity to go to college he was extremely bright. He was virtually a jack of all trades relative to fixing things and

thinking through problems. I was always exposed to my brothers and sisters going to college. I was the black sheep of the family and I resented that I was compared to my siblings. I pretty much just assumed that I was going to college too since all my siblings went. Education was stressed by my father and my mother supported that activity and it carried through to our kids and hopefully continues to the grandkids as well.

Di: Did you want to tell me anymore about yourself? Your education, religion any significant events in your life?

Do: I came out of Warren G. Harding High School in 1970 and out of Central State University in June 1974. I grew up in the church. I'm not a real religious person. My mother has been in the church since about 1953. Certainly I believe in the man upstairs but I'm not a regular churchgoer. I have had a series of jobs since I came out of Central State. My first job was with Xerox in Webster New York. I originally hired in as a personnel representative for that plant. Shortly thereafter they went to a centralized function and the job was eliminated. So I worked as a supervisor for eighteen months. I left that job and went to Ford Motor in Livonia Michigan outside of Detroit. I started with Ford in July of 1976 and while there I worked as a Production Supervisor and Quality Control Supervisor up until the time I started at Lordstown Assembly on May 1 of 1979. I hired into Lordstown as a Quality Control Supervisor and I worked that job five years as a supervisor. I got bored with that and moved to Manufacturing. In 1987 I interviewed for a position in Michigan, was accepted and began working as an auditor. The work we did was referred to as TFE or Targets for Excellence where we evaluated our

supplier base in the areas of quality, engineering and material delivery systems. I did that audit function for General Motors probably three or four years. At that point the program ended and we got involved with Picos Workshops. This was another type of evaluation but they were designed to look for waste and elimination of waste within our supplier base. The intent was to show where they were wasting money and ultimately get some cost savings on our products. Waste in this case came in the form of inventory, scrap or poor production systems. I did those workshops probably three or four years. I've traveled all over the country from border towns in Mexico to Mexico City, upstate New York through to California, wherever GM has suppliers. I work for the purchasing organization, which is a large organization that purchases all the component parts. For instance seats, mirrors, floors, windows, glass, carpets, dashes basically everything inside the car excluding the engine and transmission, tires, wheels and the major metal which consists of doors and fenders and those things. I worked at Picos for three or four years then transferred to Lordstown around March 1 1995. At that time I was a senior engineer in supplier quality. I transferred to GM as a plant liaison working as a link between the purchasing organization and the plant which received the parts that we were responsible for. I tried to make sure that we addressed all the part quality and purchasing concerns that they had. A few years later we formed a group of quality engineers and I interviewed people for those positions. When we put the group together originally there were two then five and now we're up to about fourteen people. After we started that group we got a manager on sight. There is a manager and a team leader. I was the team leader of

that group around 1997. The manager was promoted to Group Manager and was responsible for four or five assembly plants. Then I was promoted to his job as Manager of Supplier Quality. I don't really work for Lordstown I work for the purchasing organization up north, which makes me a dotted line to the assembly plant. One Group Manager Martin Wald is responsible for Lordstown, three or four plants in Lansing in the Wilmington Facility, the Saturn SUV and Ramos Arzipe which produces several cars one of which is the J Car. I'm responsible for the Lordstown plant. I have counter parts at all of the other assembly plants including Bowling Green which produces the Corvette, Lansing which produces the Grand AM Alero, and now the Malibu and all the assembly plants both car and truck What I'm grabbing now is actually a listing of all of my counterparts.

Various managers are Doraville Orion, Orient, Lordstown, Oshawa, which builds the Monte Carlo and several other car lines. Also there is Oklahoma City, Detroit Hamtramik, Ste Therese, which has the Firebird and Camaro, Lansing Craft which is going to be producing a new product for General Motors and Wilmington which is currently building the Malibu which will eventually change to Saturn. This is some of the executive staff, the group directors and directors. That's basically what I do, how I do it in a nutshell.

Di: Where is your home base?

Do: I go to Lordstown. We're assigned specifically to the assembly plant. As an example I have a counterpart in Doraville Georgia named Ted Crabtree. Ted goes to that assembly plant everyday with the exception of staff meetings or problems with a supplier. A lot of my work and my team's work involves travel. As I

indicated I've been on conference calls. There were about five over the weekend related to a particular problem at Lordstown and may impact some of our other assembly plants. What we do as it relates to problems is a couple of things. First, we make sure the problem is contained. By that I mean that once we understand that we have a problem that we no longer receive that defect. Whether through a sorting operation, visual inspection or some type of testing. Second, our job is to understand what the root cause of the problem is. We have what we call control plans. That plan is in place to control any potential defect from getting out of a plant and getting to the customer. A defect at aplant means a couple of things. It means that an operator or supervisor circumvented the process and didn't follow that control plan or that the problem was something they didn't anticipate or think about. All potential problems and failures should be on the control plan. Our management is primarily between Warren and Troy Michigan. June Nagle is responsible for all the purchasing and supplier quality in North America. Lordstown is a high volume facility. It produces more vehicles than any other assembly plant that General Motors has in the neighborhood of three hundred and forty thousand a year. They make fifteen hundred plus vehicles a day five days a week. Even so we to improve to maintain the market share that we currently have. We are losing market share and that's no secret. Our intent is to get better to improve. The way you improve and maintain customers is through reliability and quality. Where we fall short is how the vehicle is perceived. If your perception of a Lexus is the top of the line than it's perceived as being better than it really is. Sometimes American vehicles are perceived as being not as

good. So we don't do a real good job in the way we portray our vehicles. From an engine power train standpoint we probably have the best vehicle in the world. So we are working on the quality and reliability of the vehicle as well as how the car is perceived.

Di: What made you decide to go from Ford Motor Company to General Motors Corporation?

Do: A big part of it was being young. I was tired of doing it and I wanted to do something different. I guess it was a combination of my personality, a relationship I was in and the location, my home is here.

Di: Would you ever drive anything other than a General Motors Product?

Do: In my mind I would never drive anything other than a General Motors car for a couple of reasons. First, General Motors has provided me a reasonably good living, and so I have a vested interest in the organization, moreover I hold stock in the company, I'm part of the management team of the company. So even though I have family members that drive foreign cars I constantly try to reinforce and sell them on our products. To do so is beneficial for me, the corporation and our surrounding area.

Di: Have you worked much in the plant itself where the assembly is going on or in the offices?

Do: I'm in the assembly plant. My office is not on the floor but it's about a hundred yards from the floor. I'm at audit everyday. We hold what we call the GCA, which stands for Global Customer Audit. Plus I supervise on the floor in quality and am involved in everyday problem solving.

Di: How do you feel the relationship is between management and the UAW at the plant?

Do: I think it's pretty good on both sides. They realize that they have to work together to produce the best possible product. I also think the local government realizes that they play a part in it. Lordstown just approved the tax breaks for General Motors for a ten year period and have done the same thing for several of GM's suppliers. So I think they all recognize that they need a good working relationship in order to benefit everybody. It didn't used to be that way. Management and the union used to be totally adversarial but those days are over.

Di: On a more personal note how do you feel as an African American that race relations have been in the General Motors corporation from when they opened until now.

Do: Race relations and racism is always going to exist. I still feel things that I experienced twenty-two years ago in May of 1979. Are they better? Yes. Should they be a lot better? Absolutely. I think that the corporation could do more as it relates to being fair. I think there are disparities in the areas of raises, promotional opportunities and developmental opportunities. I think it's evident when you look at our organization. The organizational listing lists all the car assembly centers in North America. There's one African American on that list in a manager's position and that's myself. One might argue that we can't find or there aren't enough blacks with my experience and my response to that is that is not a true statement. There are qualified people all over. Sometimes there is a misconception relative to race allowing people opportunities. Some people are

under the impression that African Americans as a whole want someone to give them something. I don't want anybody to give me anything. All I want to do is understand what the rules are. All of us in the North American Vehicle Group since we converged with truck have business plan goals. I should be judged on those goals. If I meet or exceed those goals I should be compensated the same as everyone else. In my estimation that doesn't occur. With me again all I need to know are the rules and then we play the game. Often times you understand the rules but the people that administer the rules change them again. It's kind of a sensitive area with me. People are under the impression that things in the year 2002 have got to be better. There are things that occurred in 1970's thirty-one years ago that occur right now. As a matter of fact in my estimation it hasn't improved a whole lot. We kind of went full circle. In the 1970's there was a huge push for affirmative action and then in the eighties we went through our Regan and Bush years and they said we are not going to show preferential treatment based on race and a lot of those things were reversed. It's important for people to understand that African Americans are not looking for preferential treatment. I'm not; all I want to know is what the rules of the game are going to be and to be judged in accordance with those rules. In one case, I think it was at the University of Michigan, a girl wasn't accepted to law school and her scores were higher than those of some minorities who were. I'm convinced as well that you do need a certain amount of diversity because you could use excuses to make things the same forever. You could say that we have the most qualified people working the jobs but the question should be does one have the qualification to

effectively do the job and not compromise it. You have to have a certain amount of diversity! You can't have white males running everything all the time because it's not how the country is made up. If the country was ninety percent white and ten percent other races then you'd say ok but look around. Very soon whether it be Hispanics or Blacks the white population will be in the minority. Race relations at General Motors are better but it could be much better and people could get along better. I can feel how people feel about me. At twenty-six you may not understand it but at forty-eight I understand it because I've experienced it. You have to live it to understand it. A lot of it is superficial it's not always what it appears to be. I don't know or if it's going to change because frankly if it were reversed human nature is such that African Americans might do the same thing. I'm not suggesting that anybody is wrong only that human nature is such that if you have power that you're going to fight to maintain it. I recognize that it takes time and work and you can't get discouraged or pissed off (and I'm not) but I sometimes get a little emotional because I've lived it. I'll ask you a question. We are neighbors and we get along very well right? When you and your wife moved we came over and told you if you needed anything to come on over and you and your wife said yes and same with us but that's not the whole story, it's more than that! It's evident that if you look throughout the country you still see segregated cities whether it's Cleveland, Detroit, or wherever that's the way it is. It's polarized and it will continue to be that way. I don't have the answers I wish I did. In closing it has to be addressed because you can't have the great divide without any consequences. It doesn't work that way and it won't work that way.

History has shown that things occur when you have more haves than have nots. It can be a problem. So there are a lot of issues surrounding race relationships as well as haves and have nots and the have nots could be white or black but those issues always have to be addressed. People can't move far enough away to ignore them. Enough said on that.

Di: That's alright you're here to voice your opinion.

Do: Race relations is something that can't be ignored.

Di: Last question. What do you feel the future of Lordstown is?

Do: I think it's a bright future. I don't know what product we'll get but I'm confident that we'll get a new product. I think everybody will pitch in to build the best vehicle that we can produce. I think everybody will pitch in to build the best vehicle that we can produce. I think it's in the best interest of the valley that the plant does do well because of the number of people that are employed there and spend money in the community. There are literally thousands of jobs that are related to supporting Lordstown from the cafeteria food and workers to those that buy our cars and go on vacations. I think we do well and that the future holds something good. I think the plant will be around when my daughter finishes school hopefully in the 2005 time frame. I hope if she chooses to work there that there will be work for her as well.

Di: I want to thank you again for taking the time to offer your knowledge about the General Motors Corporation. If you have any questions about this at any time feel free to come over and ask me about it or you can call the Center for Historic Preservation at YSU.

Do: Good I might take you up on that. Thanks again.

Di: Thank you very much.