

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1932

Jerry Butcher
Interviewed

By

Robert Thomas

On

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Youngstown State University

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Interviewee: JERRY BUTCHER

Interviewer: Robert Thomas

Subject: GM Lordstown

Date: February 15 2001

RT: Okay where were you born?

JB: West Virginia.

RT: West Virginia. When did you move to the area?

JB: 1966.

RT: Okay. That takes us to the third question how did you come about being employed at GM Lordstown?

JB: Well, my brother had applications. I was still in the service. One of the guys didn't want the application so he gave it to me and I was the sixteenth person hired out there.

RT: Really?

JB: Yes. They called me and I came.

RT: Wow and you moved up here? Just you yourself or?

JB: Just me.

RT: Okay.

JB: I had a sister here and a brother here. It wasn't strange to me, because I had visited before.

RT: You knew the area.

JB: Yeah. I knew Lordstown, it was all farm out there.

RT: Yeah.

JB: My job, I worked at the plant twenty years, started out as a relief man, a utility man, and then I was a sweeper as a janitor the last thirteen years. That's quite a few jobs. As a janitor I worked in the administration building, up in the offices. I cleaned the administration building, dumped trash, scrubbed carpets, and bathrooms.

RT: Little bit of everything. When you worked on the line was monotonous? Did you find it to be?

JB: No not to me, because I never had a steady job on the line. I relieved people to go to the hospital, go to the bathroom.

RT: Take a break.

JB: Take a break. I had seven guys one time go on break for sixteen minutes.

RT: Okay, so you weren't crazy doing the same thing constantly.

JB: No, no.

RT: Okay how about the people that did that, did it stress them out?

JB: Work the line, I don't know, well maybe in '66 when they started a lot of guy's weren't cut out for that. I don't how many applications they went through 100,000 people maybe. They fired a lot of them and a lot of them just quit and walked off. A lot of the people stayed, there's a lot a people that have been there for thirty-five years, I've still got a brother out there and he started in June of '66. He's still working; I don't know when he's going to retire. But, that's about it for the job. We put on door handles, and regulators that the thing that the window rides up and down on, trim pads, door pads, headliners, we built the whole car as far as trim went, except the bumper that went to the Chevy side. That's when GM made Fisher Body, I worked Fisher Body. On one side of the track was Fisher Body and on the other side of the track was Chevy. We did all those jobs. Then I was a utility man that was I think we only had seven utility men in trim at that time. We had over 500 guys so that meant we had to learn 507 that's how many jobs we had to learn, but eventually we finally got about 25 guys. So, you didn't have to learn so many jobs. That's just about what it was. Then being a janitor that was a good job. Worked seven days a week most of the time. Where I worked up in the offices we started at six in the morning and quit at two. Then at times we went in at two o'clock in the morning and quit at four in the afternoon.

TR: Did you like working those crazy hours and the long hours?

JB: I didn't like that long hours.

TR: No.

JB: But I didn't like working past two o'clock. We had to clean the offices, and shine the railings, and bathrooms and everything for it so the place would look good. And we went out on the floor and clean the plant also, because they always had a tour route. They had foot prints down where the tour would be. We didn't have to clean the whole plant, it was a clean plant though, I thought. We kept it pretty clean.

TR: Being that when it opened up it was such a, I don't want to say automated the most automated, the most ergonomically correct plant of the time it probably got a lot of tours?

JB: Oh yeah, or course. Almost everyday they had a tour. People coming in by the bus loads of folks, grade school kids.

TR: I went through on the grade school.

JB: Did you?

TR: Yeah, years ago.

JB: It was nice. I guess they still have tours out there. It was a good job, I made a good living. I put the kids through college, I've got everything I want.

TR: Yeah, so you'd do it again probably?

JB: Oh yeah defiantly.

TR: Yeah.

JB: At that time in '66 they told us, we had maybe hundred guys working, that we were the smartest group of autoworkers in the country.

TR: Yeah, I remember reading that.

JB: And the highest educated. Of course now they've got guys working out there with college degrees.

TR: That's true, sure.

JB: Working the line just for the benefits.

TR: Yeah.

JB: I worked with Joe Hyne and he graduated from YSU. He was smart, he was a foremen. One boy just retired last year and he's teaching school now. He went to night school college, he washed cars out there.

TR: Did he wash them when they were all complete?

JB: No, he washed the company cars.

TR: Okay.

TR: Well, going down what was the best thing and what would you say is the worst thing about GM Lordstown working there?

JB: Well, contract time was probably was the worst thing.

TR: Okay.

JB: No socializing with the people. Usually the foremen would stop and get a couple of kegs of beer and they wouldn't let him do that. Whenever it was time for a new contract.

TR: Right.

JB: But that was about the only thing I didn't like was contract, because they stood around with a stop watch and they'd watch you work, with a hand screw driver to see how long it took you to put the screws in something, like a headlight you were repairing. That was the only thing about that. That was when we were getting ready to build the Vega, in '70. That was the only bad time; I always hated to see contract time. They were going to try to stick it to you. Well, you had to see who could out maneuver who. The company always had the newspapers. You probably read a lot in the newspaper. Trying to negotiate the newspaper, that's not so bad anymore. That's like if I had a fight with my wife I wouldn't go and tell the newspaper, that's what I always said. That was bad. We did not have a strike out there for twenty-two years. So, we had peace for a long, long time.

TR: Was the union a big part of your life there or was it just a by product of working there? Were you involved a lot with the union?

JB: Yeah, I certainly wouldn't have wanted to go in work there without the union. But we tried that the first, well, we did before we signed the card for the union. It was pretty tough. When we were starting they'd just tell you to go home.

TR: Yeah, there wasn't any recourse. Just go home.

JB: Yeah, just go home, we don't need you, don't come back. And they did that to a lot of people. They probably got rid of a whole lot better workers than some of the ones they have up there now. That was tough to see a lot of guys get fired. They'd say they were sabotaging something, which they weren't. But without the union they didn't have a leg to stand on. No, I wouldn't want to work without a union. I know a lot of places don't need unions.

TR: Yeah.

JB: That's how unions work.

TR: Okay protects him.

JB: That's how a union works, of course the company wants something's on the table to negotiate with, see that's power. More grievances they have the more power they have to negotiate something with. Don't you think?

TR: Yes, absolutely.

JB: Here's pictures of cars we worked on.

TR: I saw that.

JB: I got that, old Al gave me that, remember him? He was our shop chairman. They were passing out rolled up pictures and they had one there in a frame and I said give me that. He said "You want that, take it."

TR: I've seen that picture before, it has all the different cars that were made there.

JB: Yeah, I forget what year that goes up to, but those were cars we made.

TR: What was the best car you made out there, do you think?

JB: Probably the one they make today.

TR: The cavalier.

JB: The one they produce today is probably the best, the cavalier.

TR: What are your thoughts about the Vega?

JB: So much plastic, it all snapped together. You can't snap metal and plastic together. They were busting out. It wasn't the fault of the guys working the line. It was an engineer problem.

TR: True.

JB: But no they had to get that car off the line, because of the gas prices, the oil shortage so they say. And they hurried it and they made a small car. I think we built in like a hundred and three cars an hour.

TR: Really?

JB: That's a lot of cars coming off that line.

TR: True.

JB: A hundred and three cars an hour.

TR: Yeah. I think its under sixty now.

JB: Probably between sixty and sixty-five. I really don't know what their making.

TR: Did you have much chance for a break?

JB: No.

TR: Did you get a chance to talk to your buddy across from you?

JB: Not too much.

TR: You're just working.

JB: Just working.

TR: Yeah.

JB: But the Vega was a bad car, but at the end it was a descent car. I don't know how many years we did that car. Never would fit and you had to make it fit. Pound on it, put extra screws where there wasn't supposed to be screws to hold something in the door panel, quarter panel, and stuff like that. That was in trim. I know they had to get them on the line and get the small cars out on the road.

TR: Yeah everybody had the big cars and all of the sudden the gas prices...

JB: Yeah the gas prices went up.

TR: They shot up.

TR: Finally. Yeah. Did the Steel Mills affect you at all when they closed around here?

JB: No.

TR: No?

JB: They didn't affect me any, but a lot of people I hate to say it.

TR: Yeah, it killed a lot of jobs in the area. That's for sure.

JB: Yeah, in a round about way it did put pressure on us at work. Of course they would always hold that over your head, well they shut down and we're going to move out any time. And they were always threatening.

TR: Did that come around a lot, where they'd say they were going to move out?

JB: That was the biggest warehouse they built in the United States in '66. They were going to make it a warehouse. They were saying that since they opened.

TR: I read a lot of that in the paper every other quarter it seems that they have a good quarter that Cavalier is the best selling car then a couple sales go down, oh you know.

JB: You can't keep it up every year; something's got to be off some place.

TR: Not too many people do I think?

JB: No. Not too many companies make millions of dollars every year. And that's the problem we did better last month so now we have to do better this month. Malls, they fall off after Christmas.

TR: True.

JB: Because of sales.

TR: True. They do decline. What year did you retire?

JB: 1998.

TR: Okay, so you were building the Cavalier.

JB: Yeah. I didn't see much, well I went out on the floor to see what was going on, but I worked in the offices then. Up in the Material Offices and Offices and Material Offices.

TR: Okay.

JB: And I have a brother, so I'd drop in and see him and see what was going on. You got guys out back working on the repair line on the repair lot. Because they were getting shipped right to the anchor or however they were going to ship it.

TR: Okay.

JB: They used to have over 5,000 cars out in the repair lot that's how bad they were.

TR: Did they repair them or what did they do?

JB: No, a lot of them were parts not everything was repairable. Like door pads, headlines, headlights might be out, rear bumpers, front bumpers.

TR: The modular piece?

JB: Yeah. The whole thing raps around. It's not a bumper.

TR: I know what you mean.

JB: It will come to me. Usually when we were making those we were having trouble with the paint on them chipping or it might not have been the same color as the rest of the car.

TR: It didn't match the body.

JB: Yeah. They'd have to ship them back. So, they got kind of tight with the quality on that, they'd make sure that the quality of that was as good as the car was.

TR: Okay.

JB: I think they finally got that squared away.

TR: Okay.

JB: Saturn project that's the team concept. They were just getting into that when I was leaving.

TR: Okay.

JB: They talked about it and I guess it's working now, like seven people on a team. I think that's what their doing.

TR: Okay.

JB: I wasn't there for that. So, that's all I know about that.

TR: Okay.

TR: Well, that's pretty much about all those questions is there anything that you'd like to add or anything you think significant?

TR: Probably met a lot of people thousands of people out there.

JB: Yeah. There was like 25,000 between the assembly plant, the truck plant, and the car plant. We were like a small city.

TR: Yeah.

JB: We had baseball and softball teams out there, that was nice.

TR: So, you had a lot of socializing other than just work?

JB: Oh yeah. We still get together.

TR: So, it's kind of like a close knit place to work?

JB: Oh yeah!

TR: Everybody got along with one another?

JB: There weren't many problems there.

TR: Okay.

TR: Were there any factions little groups that were...

JB: Against another group?

TR: Yeah, against one way or another?

JB: You mean as far as likes and dislikes?

TR: Yeah.

JB: No. I didn't see any, even when the guys from West Virginia came up. There was a lot of us out there, if they would have taken us out they would have to shut down the plant. I organized the Christmas Party on the line, bringing all the food, everybody in the area would eat, and they would chip in for the money and help set it up. It was a good place to work. It would be a shame to see it leave.

TR: I agree.

JB: I think they would put a nail in the coffin if they left.

TR: Yeah, Steel Mills first and then that second.

JB: They could just board up the whole town. Because I don't think there are enough McDonalds working to keep places like that running now.

TR: That's one of the problems I think today there isn't any decent manufacturing jobs for the masses to go into.

JB: Right.

TR: The mills are gone.

JB: You can go down on Salts Spring Road and see there's places down there, but they don't pay much more than seven to nine dollars an hour. And a guy raising a family is just not going to do it on that.

TR: No, no.

JB: He isn't going to make it on seven or nine bucks; you won't keep him there.

TR: True, it's tough.

JB: Yeah, I'd like to see them get some industry in here that paid a good wage. It doesn't have to be like GM.

TR: Just something.

JB: For fifteen dollars and benefits. That's a good paying job, if you can get in starting at fifteen.

TR: Sure.

JB: I made it in, but I put a lot of hours in, a lot of hours. In fact I had in just after May of '98 I got a full year before my retirement.

TR: Really? Benefits were pretty good then?

JB: I got a full year after I retired.

TR: Did your wife and family mind you being gone like that?

JB: Well, sometimes especially when I would play ball after work.

TR: On the way home.

JB: Yes.

TR: Okay.

JB: Have a ball game after work.

TR: Okay.

JB: They would come to ball games and then we'd all get together and go out, they never said anything. Go to the ball field and then we'd go out to eat. I never missed much. I coach little league baseball.

TR: Yeah, he just did it.

JB: He just did it.

TR: Yeah.

JB: That's about all.

TR: That's pretty much all the questions. Is there anything special that you think should be put down for posterity about GM Lordstown?

JB: Well, it was a fine place to work, but you had to go to work everyday. I probably missed one, I went to Pittsburgh Pirate Game one night so, and I didn't get up that time.

TR: See, that's the work I take.

JB: I was up and ready to go for that. Only one day unless you were on sick leave or you were hurt, one day was all.

TR: Yeah. Where most of the workers there as good as you about being prompt on the job?

JB: There were some guys that were a couple of minutes late, now if you were a couple minutes late on the line you already missed the first two cars that came down the line, and you missed your first two jobs.

TR: Yeah, somebody else had to fix that up right.

JB: Correct, they had to get somebody there, because you weren't there. Most people do their own work. There were other times when people complained about it.

TR: Was it mandatory?

JB: Some of it was, especially repair. No matter the numbers on Sundays we were out on the lot there'd be fifteen repairmen standing there and there was only one car on the lot. They'd sit around and watch the traffic on the freeway. That's when GM gave them so much money. If you didn't spend it this year they'd cut it next year.

TR: Okay.

JB: That's how that crap works.

TR: Yeah.

JB: You've got a budget.

TR: Right. So you might as well spend it if you have to use it up.

JB: That's right, because next year your not going to get it.

TR: Well, I've got a few other questions just to throw out. What's your proudest moment about working at GM? Are your proud of the automobiles or the friends you made?

JB: Well, probably helping people. I used to at Christmas Time we had the Care and Share. When we first started that I was one of the first guys that collected money for that. We took vans down to Akron, we took fifteen vans filled with food and brought them back.

TR: That's good.

JB: I made a lot of friends. Raise two good kids and put them through college.

JB: Yeah. I always bought them car or gave them a car.

TR: That's good.

TR: Okay.

JB: I told him it would be here when he was ready. He rides the bus to work, which is good. There's no sense in having a car, when you have to pay ten dollars a day for parking in Pittsburgh.

TR: Yeah, or trying to find a place to park in Pittsburgh.

JB: Yeah.

TR: Yeah.

JB: Yeah, she rides the bus to school. She doesn't have to pay anything for that because she's a student down in Pittsburgh and she'll graduate in May. She's already got a job; she got hired by a Pittsburgh law firm.

TR: Really, that's great.

JB: She'll work for them since they already hired her.

TR: Okay. Well, I think we pretty well covered.

INTERUPTION.

JB: Your working trying to do a good job, you can almost work harder trying to screw up then you can then just doing a good job.

TR: I understand. I work too I know.

JB: Are you still recording that?