

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1946

Raymond DeCapito
Interviewed

By

Ruth Billcheck

On

March 6, 2001

Youngstown State University

Oral History Program

GM Lordstown

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Interviewee: RAYMOND DECAPITO

Interviewer: Ruth Billcheck

Subject: GM Lordstown

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RB: This is an interview with Mr. Ray DeCapito for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project interviewing Lordstown General Motor's employees. It is March 6th the year 2001. We are at Mr. DeCapito's residence in Champion, Ohio. Mr. DeCapito did I say your name correctly?

RD: You did a pretty good job of it, yes.

RB: Can you tell me about your family background, where you were born, when you were born?

RD: I was born right here in Trumbull County on Woodland Ave. I was born in a home, my Aunt's house. I guess my mother was afraid of hospitals, because she had lost two children going to the hospital so; myself and my sister were both born at home. My father was in the service he was a deceased missing in action World War II veteran, I was raised in a single parent home. Managed to move around a lot every time my mother found a cheaper house to live in we moved. I think during a period of time I went to six schools in one year. Managed to settle down in the High School years and graduated from Warren G. Harding High School. Got involved in a work program in high school so I got out of high school a half a day and worked at a job until I graduated.

RB: What year did you graduate from high school?

RD: I graduated in 1957. Went to work for an Auto Company back then it was called Wilt Pontiac. Worked there for several years and then I got a better job, one of my customers that came in the garage got me a job working at Van Huffell Tube, which is now out of business they were bought by Sheet and Tube some time along the way and

Sheet and Tube went out of business when they went out of business I had obtained a job at GM Lordstown as an electrician. Actually, severed the apprenticeship at Van Huffell Tube and the electrician trade. So, in '68 GM was hiring tradesman and I applied for a job at General Motor's Lordstown and I got a job as an electrician. I worked there for thirty-two years I retired this past April of 2000, enjoying life quiet well.

RB: What did you do when you were working at Wilt Pontiac as you were still in High School?

RD: No, I said that was my first job after I graduated from high school I was greasing cars and then I started working as a Costumer Service Rep. that's the new title as costumers came in I wrote their requisitions up, their orders they wanted done on their cars.

RB: Were there any benefits involved at Wilt Pontiac, hospitalization?

RD: No, they had no benefits what so ever and that was one of the reasons I choose to go to Van Huffell, like I said one of my costumers came in, man by the name of Lou Smelko he was a general foremen at Van Huffell Tube. I was talking to him one day about I didn't have no benefits I had one child on the way and I thought maybe I should get something a little bit better in life and he said he would see what he could do for me. Two weeks later he got me a job there.

RB: As a mechanic?

RD: No, I worked as a tool helper, I worked as a weld mill helper, I worked as a press operator, press cutter, press packer, just all sort of minimum jobs. I got a chance to get into the electrician as a helper and we had a lot of construction work and they actually put us into a state approve apprenticeship program. At which time I served a four-year journeyman for electrician apprenticeship there.

RB: So this was in the nineteen-sixties?

RD: Nineteen-sixties, I graduated from my apprenticeship program in '67. I think I worked as a journeyman electrician one year, and then I went to Lordstown. When I went to Lordstown I was really pretty young in the trade really.

RB: How long where you married at that point?

RD: I got married in 1957, the year I graduated. So, we had already had two babies and the third one was on the way when I went to GM Lordstown, no we had the third baby. My boy was born in '66. He had three children two girls and one boy, six grandchildren.

RB: Congratulations.

RD: The oldest is 18 and the youngest is 9.

RB: Christmas is exciting?

RD: Quiet exciting!

RB: During those early years when your children were little did your wife work?

RD: My wife started working when our boy went to first grade. So, the first six years our children were born she did not work. When we moved to Lake View School District I think in '73, we moved to Lake View School District. No it was later then that, because my boy went to kindergarten in Lake View School District that was the year we moved.

RB: Going back to your early, early childhood you said your mother was a single mother since your father was missing in action.

RD: He was killed during World War II.

RB: What were some of the neighborhoods in Warren you lived in?

RD: We lived in Warren. My father had actually built a house on route 46 and we lived there and then my mother sold the house and then we moved into the farm on Cole brook. We lived in William's Field and then we moved back down to Niles area and lived with my grandmother and my uncle built a little house behind my grandmother, actually converted a chicken coupe into a house. For my mother and us two lived there for a few years.

RB: Where about in Niles was that?

RD: Off of Deforest Rd. off of Niles Rd. it was the borderline between Howland and Niles. So, when I lived with her I actually went to Niles school. I went to Howland schools early in life. One time we moved back to Howland somewhere in fourth or fifth grade I went to Howland first and second grade and I went to Howland schools in fifth and sixth grade. Fifth and sixth grade I think. St. Mary's High School went to Niles Roosevelt Elementary School; I went to a lot of schools.

RB: What was your mother doing at that time?

RD: She worked at the old Green Cross Hospital on Mahoning Ave, which is now a community health care nursing home. She ended up working at St. Joe's Hospital. She retired from St. Joe's Hospital she worked twenty-four or twenty-six years at St. Joe's.

RB: What did she do?

RD: Worked in the purchasing department, she worked in the front office of administration. She eventually got a job in the purchasing department at the St. Joe's where she retired from.

RB: How many children were in your family?

RD: Just myself and my sister she's two years younger than me.

RB: Is she still in the area?

RD: No, My sister went to YSU for two years and then she relocated to Kirksville, Missouri and she graduated from one of the Missouri's teachers college I think. Her education is in teaching. She went out there because actually they offered a better program at the time than what YSU had in teaching. So, she went there and that's where she graduated from and married in that area and she's always been in that area.

RB: As you were growing up your mom had support of her parents?

RD: My grandmother for a while, but my grandmother died when I was like ten or twelve years old I think. After that she was pretty much on her own.

RB: Wow!

RD: She got a little pension check for us children, because like I said my father was killed in the service. She got a social security check and we got. I think she said that the government only gave her twenty-five dollars a month for each one of us kids to raise and every year they wanted an exact statement of what you did with that twenty-five dollars, every month. Once a year she had to send them a list, when I graduated and turned twenty-one, we bought our first home; she gave me eighteen hundred dollars in twenty-five dollar saving bonds. She had squirreled away that's what we made our down payment on our first house with.

RB: Oh my!

RD: In Warren.

RB: Is your mother still alive?

RD: Yeah, my mother is still alive she's eighty-two years old.

RB: And does she live in the area?

RD: Yes, my mother lives in a subsidized senior citizen complex over on Elm Road. Right on Elm Road Plaza, that high rise right there.

RB: In the apartments. Now let me think we've got you working at Wilt Pontiac and then you went to Van Huffell, you had an apprenticeship at Van Huffell, you worked for a year as a journeyman electrician.

RD: Yes, I put a full year apprenticeship and then I worked one year as a journeyman.

RB: What did they make at Van Huffell?

RD: I think at that time I was making \$3.50 an hour in 1968. That was one of the things that attracted me to going into the Auto Industry, because I went there they paid a dollar an hour more. Actually when I started at Lordstown I only started at about \$4.50 an hour and that was 1968.

RB: I really wanted to know what kind of manufacturing did they do at Van Huffell?

RD: Van Huffell Tube was actually just what it says it was Van Huffell Tube, they made all sorts of tubing, used welding resistance a welding process, plus we were one of the first plants to install several high frequency tube welding mills. I think Van Huffell Tube was probably the pioneer in high frequency welding. In the area and actually world wide they were one of the first ones to use it. They also had to manufactured rolled shapes for like at that time galvanized storm windows were a big thing and galvanized storm doors, they actually manufactured various rolled shapes to make those types of products plus a lot of the tubing went into the lawn chair business and picnic table business and that type of stuff. They were a big company when I was hired in there they had a thirteen hundred employees. When I left in '68 they were still working good in 1968. They actually went out of business in '73 or '74 somewhere in that area. But they were still working good when I left there. But we had just been bought out by Sheet and Tube like the year before that.

RB: Did you have any idea that Van Huffell was eventually going to?

RD: No I had no idea I actually like Van Huffell Tube I learned more about my trade as an electrician probably working there. Then I did when I went to GM Lordstown, because we had so many different types of electrical things to work on there.

RB: So going to General Motors was really a monetary consideration?

RD: It was a monetary basically, because I had a good job, it was strictly monetary that's what made me move. Because Van Huffell Tube we was working good when I left there.

RB: Was there over time involved at Van Huffell?

RD: We worked a six-day workweek all the time. Once I got into the trade. As a press operator or rolling operator we worked five-days a week. That was one of the reasons that I applied for the apprenticeship so I could a make a little bit more money, work one more day a week. Plus better myself, I always wanted to be an electrician in high school. I was actually going to go to school to do an electrical job, because being an orphan from a war veteran I was entitled to schooling paid by the VA and I was going to go to a school in Chicago, but then we decided while we were waiting for the government to give me answers I decided to marry my childhood sweetheart. I think I've known my wife since I was thirteen years old. Her and my sister used to play together as little girls.

RB: Oh how sweet. Can you tell me, before we get on into Lordstown, can you tell me about your ethnic background. Do you identify with an ethnic group?

RD: No, not really. I don't identify with my ethnic background. I am of Italian heritage, but with my father being killed in the service and one time my mother did remarry so my Italian side of my family kind of outcast my mother, which meant it outcast me and my sister both. So, one of the things I always wanted to do was learn how to speak Italian, but I never did. The marriage didn't last very long, but by that time my fathers brothers and sisters were all upset with my mother. My mother was a widow at twenty-five years old; I can't hold it against her that she remarried. But the old family genes probably did with their ethnic background. They thought she should have been a widow for the rest of her life I think. So, they more or less, my aunt, which was my fathers oldest sister she seen that, she took me to the catholic church and made sure I got my first communion and made my confirmation. She was my God Mother and she looked after me like a God Mother, but the rest of my aunt's and uncle's from that side of the family didn't have much to do with us really.

RB: What ethnic background is your mother?

RD: She's of English background, Welsh background. But there was no ethnic with her.

RB: Has she been from this part of Northeastern Ohio?

RD: Yes, she was born right in Warren, Ohio too.

RB: Her parents, her grandparents?

RD: Yes.

RB: So, she might be a Yankee?

RD: Probably yeah.

RB: Okay.

RD: She actually came from a broken household too. She was the only child born to my grandfather, and then shortly afterwards my grandmother divorced. My mother was raised by her older brother, because her mother and father divorced and she never knew her father. She was raised actually as a single child too. My aunt and uncle raised her through her younger years.

RB: Are you close to that uncle and aunt?

RD: There since now deceased and but during that time that uncle always kept track of us. He was the one that built the chicken coup into the house for us when we were youngsters.

RB: So, now you're a young man in the 1967?

RD: '68 I went to Lordstown.

RB: In Lordstown. And you hired into Lordstown as a Journeyman electrician?

RD: Yes.

RB: So, you were always in the trades at Lordstown?

RD: Yes at GM Lordstown I was always in the trades.

RB: Do you remember the kind of car they were building at the time in Lordstown?

RD: Chevrolet's. Chevy Impala's, Pontiac Firebirds. The only plant that built the Pontiac Firebirds at that time. That was the year we started building them, '68 Pontiac Firebird was the first Firebird they built and we built them at Lordstown.

RB: Okay.

RD: Plus we built the Chevy Impala's.

RB: What did you do those early years as a journeyman electrician, what did your job entail?

RD: Well, various constructions jobs, but during the week while the plant run there was always an electrician in certain areas. I worked in mostly the body shop area. Where they did the welding and the basic building of the car. All the welders and their various equipment that was in there. Equipment that picked parts up and put them on conveyers and electricians maintained the conveyers, and the equipment that put the sides on the cars, the equipment that put the roof's on the cars, put the floor panel's on. Everything was built on a platform and there's machinery that put the parts on the platform and then other machinery that welded it together, it was the electrician's responsibility to take care of all the machinery, make sure it kept running. When it broke down you had to get there as quick as you possible could and get it running again.

RB: Maintenance.

RD: Maintenance, they used to say every time the lines stopped it cost General Motors a thousand dollars a minute. So, we had to hurry as fast as you could to get the line running again, building more cars.

RB: At the time, this was 1968, did you every have any concerns you were older with a family, you had no worry about going to Vietnam, you were working?

RD: I was excluded from the service I was actually in the Navy Reserves and because I was the only son of a World War II Veteran I think there's a Sullivan Act or something that said that they could not draft me, but I could volunteer to go to the Service if I wanted to, but by that time I had three children. So, it never even entered my mind really.

RB: Did you work with people that were coming back from Vietnam?

RD: Oh I worked with a lot of people that came home from Vietnam.

RB: How was it working with them, the Vietnam Veterans?

RD: Well, all the ones I ever associated with I had no problems with. They were all older type of a person, my age probably, they didn't seem like they got into the problems like some of the younger ones. The ones that went in the sixties came back I think pretty good. Seems like some of the later ones had more problems, emotional problems. One of the fellows I worked with is like fifteen years younger than me, but he's an electrician, he has problems even today yet. That he still goes to the VA Hospital periodically for check ups because of the things that he done while he was there, he was a U.S. Marine.

RB: Yes.

RD: But most of the fellows that I work with they did go there are a lot of my best friends.

RB: In Lordstown you were responsible for maintaining the equipment on the line, were you working in any specific department?

RD: Well, like I said I worked in the body shop area for probably seven or eight years. I worked in an area, as you change shifts you always seem to go to different departments. When you changed shifts you always wondered, I was the youngest man for several years so you always got bumped, but I probably worked in almost every area in the car assembly plant. In the thirty-two years that I was there.

RB: Did you work in the cushion room?

RD: At one time I worked in the area that serves the cushion room, yes. Which was the final line repair and I worked in the area for a couple of years. The cushion room was our area of responsibility. Compared to us they had platform conveyors in there that assembled the seats.

RB: So, when you hired in did you work on specific shift or did you swing?

RD: No, when I hired in I worked midnight shift for probably six months and then I went on afternoon turn, which seem an eternity seven or eight years.

RB: Afternoon turn?

RD: Afternoon turn, I finally got on the day shift probably in '78 I think.

RB: So, by this time your children are older, did you miss any of their school activities?

RD: Oh I missed a lot of their school activities. I went to work every day at three o'clock. In fact I set the alarm everyday at six thirty to get up to see the kids. Generally I didn't see them, except on Saturday's and Sunday's. I worked seven days a week. So, you would do things with the kids on Saturday or Sunday morning. My wife had a very big responsibility to raise and care for three children.

RB: Can you tell me what a typical day was like as an electrician as Lordstown? Just from the very beginning. You parked the car, where did you park the car?

RD: Well, I parked far away because I never wanted my doors to get banged up. So, I figured it was easier to walk five minutes longer and you never had other people parked beside you. By the time you got to work, I always like my jobs. I worked with guys that hated General Motors, they hated their job, I always wanted to be an electrician and I still love my job. I still tinker around doing electrical things now. But I always like my job, I never hated going to work, except in the summer time when it was 80 degrees outside, boy I wished I could sit at home on the back porch or something. I always figured I had a responsibility or something and I always tried doing my job to the best of my abilities. I was always happy with being an electrician I enjoyed it. So, I never hated going to work.

RB: Did you have a badge to badge in or was there a guard at the door?

RD: At one time we had cards, time cards that you went in and out on, one time we went to the badges. I can't remember when we went to badges. When I retired they were still using the badge system to get in and out of the plant.

RB: And you clocked in or rang in and then what did you do?

RD: Clocked in and then you went and changed and put your coveralls on, because the plant was dirty so the company did supply us with work coveralls. Work uniforms.

RB: How often were they changed, everyday?

RD: I had a clean pair of coveralls everyday. Cause you usually got that dirty everyday doing your job, climbing over equipment, say when you worked on the line it was just make sure the area you were responsible for kept running. Walked around looked at equipment, if you'd seen if you seen a switch that was on during lunch time you'd go fix it and you'd take your lunch some other time. Try loose screws in the panel, or switches would be bad, or relays falling apart or something like that. Look at them and try and make those changes. At lunchtime before the shift started, because I started sometimes, we actually started a little bit before the shift started. So, the guy on day shift could give you a list of things that needed to be done.

RB: Did you have a foreman that had a list of things for you to do, maintenance things?

RD: Not during the week, no they would try to get you to do other jobs, but your worked around another job and if the line stopped you'd have to look up at the bingo board and see what piece of equipment was down and sometimes you had to walk maybe a quarter of a mile to get to it. So, they more or less backed off that for a while especially when we started building the Vega's. I think the body shop used to build cars at a hundred and twelve jobs an hour that's almost two cars every minute.

RB: Wow!

RD: So, a lot of the operations they had to build the car that was a lot of responsibilities.

RB: Tell me about this Bingo Board?

RD: Well, it was a big number board and we called it Bingo Boards because every piece of equipment had a number and so when a piece of equipment would break we'd stop the line, the number would come up on the Bingo Board and you would look at the number and you would know if it was your machine to go worry about. So, you'd put your tool belt on gather up all your tools and try and get to the area as soon as you could do this and get the line going.

RB: Even if it wasn't your area? Were there any times when you might go to help a buddy of yours who had a different area?

RD: In our area we always did, me and the fellow I always worked with. We usually tried to go to what they called the break downs together. We always did, I always worked with a bunch of good guys and we always tried to cooperate and get a long, help one another.

RB: Tell me when did the Vegas start to get built?

RD: We started building Vegas some time in the late '70's because we shut down and went through extensive retooling project for building a full size car to building the Vega we worked and we down three or four months, the plant was down.

RB: What did the line workers do, the assembly line workers?

RD: They were laid off.

RB: So, was that a stressful time for the assembly line workers?

RD: Well, actually I don't think it was because it was during the summer time. I think they shut the plant down sometime in early spring and they were laid off most of the summer time. So, I don't think it was too stressful for too many line workers, because at that time once you got your wages you got unemployment. So, most employees didn't get

too bent out of shape about being off collecting eighty-five percent of their pay during the summer time.

RB: How did you feel?

RD: Well, I missed out on, but at the same time I was working twelve hours a day and I made a lot of money. Having three children there was always some place for it to go. I never complained about working, because of working there I think I've lived a good life and right now I am enjoying a good retirement, very comfortable. The over time a lot of people complained about the over time, but I benefited from it, because of the over time.

RB: So, the Vega was being built around 1970?

RD: 1970 until 1977 I think. We retooled the plant and we actually built four cars that time. We built Moza, Pontiac Astro I think, and a little Buick Skylark and we built an Oldsmobile. I don't remember what the Oldsmobile was. We was the only plant at that time building four cars.

RB: Wow!

RD: They were basically all the same car, the floor plan, they would put a different bumper or a different grill, and some had different motors in them.

RB: Did they ever build the Pontiac one thousand?

RD: No. The Pontiac one thousand is a Cheverly Chevett, the Pontiac one thousand was the same thing as a Cheverly Chevett everything that was GM, just had another name plate on the same car, basically like when we built the Ford Models there, still basically the same floor plan the same doors and some of the same part, with different bumpers and different grills on them.

RB: When they were building the Vega was there a change in moral from the pervious car to building the Vega. The Vega had a reputation for not being a good car.

RD: Oh it had a reputation for not being a good car but it wasn't the autoworkers. At the time several years later they found out that all the fenders rusted off of them, it wasn't because of something we did at Lordstown actually they found out that were the fenders were stamped something was wrong with the stamping process. GM came out with a new motor that year that little four cylinder aluminum motor, I think it had some kind of silicone spread on the seal of the walls, well the motors went bad, because the silicone wasn't a very good process. They didn't have steal sleeves in them, it was just an aluminum motor with silicone in them, and the motors started going bad. Actually the last year we built them in '77 was one of the best motor and car we every built.

RB: Oh really?

RD: They probably were. I had a 1976.

RB: Vega?

RD: Vega that I drove for probably five or six years. Actually my son let his girlfriend drive it and she totaled it out, otherwise I'd probably still be driving it. It was a good car. By the time they finally started building the car good they quite building them.

RB: Does that say something about General Motors?

RD: They had a lot of problems at that time; a lot of Japanese Cars were starting to invade America. I remember one supervisor said our biggest competitor before it would be over would be Toyota. Toyota had invaded America and Honda was coming on, but Honda didn't have a good name like Toyota did. We always said that would be one of our biggest competitors and I think last year it was the number one car in America. I hate to say. I think the moral was, when they built the four different cars there was a lot of moral, because it was tough trying to keep track of them. We still built them cars at a pretty fast pace. I think we built them cars like eighty jobs an hour and when you're building four cars it's awful easy to grab the wrong grill or grab the wrong door handle or the wrong seat. Since then they have improved the building technology because of the computer era. When I left I'd seen the plant from like a little kid come crawl up past. It's unbelievable the improvement that have been made in the car building process.

RB: What happened if the wrong door handle or the wrong grill was put on?

RD: Somebody got in trouble. At that time we were always on strike or there was always a labor management problem. I don't know if it was because we were building so many different types of cars contributed to some of it or what I don't really know.

RB: Were you ever involved in a strike?

RD: Well, I've been on several. I think about every other day we were on strike or something. In one year we most have had six or seven strikes, because of labor problems. We had enough people for discipline for not doing their job correctly or properly.

RB: The union was supportive of the workers?

RD: Most of the time. The union couldn't tell you to go on strike; well we had a lot of wildcat strikes at that time.

RB: What happened with those? Did they last long?

RD: No wildcat strikes never last long because you are wrong and then you have the company and the union telling to go back to work.

RB: Okay.

RD: You just hope nobody gets fired from it that's all.

RB: Did anybody ever get fired?

RD: I think people got fired, but they were eventually called back.

RB: Okay.

RD: I don't really know of anybody that got fired permanently and lasted, except for some kids that got fired for theft. They always looked down upon theft. At one time several people got fired because of taking things home, which you shouldn't do. If they give you a good job you shouldn't have to steal from them too.

RB: What did they take?

RD: Car parts.

RB: Maybe they were fixing their cars at home.

RD: Fixing their cars at home, probably most of the time.

RB: Oh my goodness! Okay. Your lunch hour at your typical day at work, did you take your own lunch, were there lunch facilities there, was there a place to eat?

RD: In the early days there was no place to eat. Every autoworker that had a job most of the time they sat at their little workstation area. In the trade we always had a toolbox in there so; we just sat on our toolboxes and had out lunch in there. Like I said before usually the tradesman would take his lunch at his connivance or when you had time, because usually when the line stopped for lunch the tradesmen had to go fix something or repair something. So, you never had a set lunchtime that you would take your lunch. It was always eat when you found time, sometimes you had a thirty-minute lunchtime and sometimes you had a ten-minute lunchtime. It was never the same; the tradesmen never had an assigned lunchtime really, when you take your lunch and when you came back from lunch.

RB: Did you feel that you had adequate breaks that were your due? Or did you feel...

RD: As a tradesmen I always had adamant breaks, I can't complain about that. I know guys on the line would have to wait twenty-five or maybe a half hour for a relief man just so they could go to the bathroom. The place never did have a lot of restroom facilities for as big a place as that is, even today. Well, they only have about half the workforce now so they probably have enough restroom facilities, but I never did think they had enough restroom facilities in that plant.

RB: So, you had to walk a distance even just to go to the bathroom?

RD: You probably had to walk seven or eight hundred feet just to get to the restroom. And when I first worked there, there wasn't women there so there was just one restroom facility. When they started hiring women then they took the restroom facility and cut it in half, they might have only had three women working in the area, but they had five hundred men working in the area. So, you had half the facilities. It was some time in the late '80 when they finally started building some more restroom facilities in the place. It's a shame, but it's a human thing. Some people would have to go stand in line to use the restroom facilities.

RB: Usually it's the women standing in line.

RD: Yes, usually. As they hired more women in the mid seventies.

RB: What was life like with women so to speak, since it had been an all male facility? What was it like working with women?

RD: I always said I wanted to open a law business right across the street.

RB: Why?

RD: Because of the great amount of divorce rate increase. If you look at the Lordstown history once the women came into the plant, if you would look at the employees and the amount of how the divorce rate increased.

RB: Just from the influence of women workers?

RD: I would say yes. I know I made it through thirty-two years with the same wife, but I know a lot of guys that are on their third and fourth wife. That's why their still working they can't afford to retire after they've been there thirty some years. Anybody that's worked there are thirty years should be able to retire. With the wages we made and the benefits that we have there, because of family life changes their still there working.

RB: What was it like actually working with women? Did women pull their fair share of work or did you have to care?

RD: I remember in my trade we sort of stayed single sex probably until some time in the eighties I think. I think our first women apprentice was in '78 or '79 I think was apprentice electrician. She was one of the first tradesmen at the time.

RB: How did she get a job as apprentice electrician?

RD: Well, applying they had an application period and you just signed up for it.

RB: Did she come from within the plant or did she come from the outside?

RD: She was working within the plant. All the first original ones were from within the plant.

RB: Did you ever work with other people from other General Motor facilities from around the country who kind of bumped in was there any kind of bump in process?

RD: Well, one time we had some people come down from another plant that was laid off during one of our down time periods and we need extra help. There are several people in the plant now that came from, right now there's a lot in the last five or six years, there's more of an influx of people coming from other plants, because we've had so many people retire. That's brought people down from Cleveland. I worked with several of them at different times; they were all steady pace workers.

RB: If you could describe your job in one word what would it be?

RD: Great.

RB: That's wonderful.

RD: I am proud to be an electrician. I love my job I still love my job. I retired because I was just tired of working. I've enjoyed my job from day one always did.

RB: Your view of people working the line, how do you think an assemble worker would feel about his job?

RD: I think for the most part they enjoyed their work. Really if you look at the people there are a whole lot of people that better improved themselves in the last since '78 when the apprenticeship opened up within the plant. A lot of people on the line applied for the apprenticeships to better themselves. A tremendous amount of people, YSU probably has statistics on the amount of people that got bachelor degrees and there still working on the line mostly because you can build a car and make more money here then you can as a school teacher. And to me a schoolteacher should be paid more money because they educate our people and they are the ones that coddle and guide our children through school. I believe I live in a school district that just gave all our schoolteachers a big raise and it's costing me more money in taxes, but I hope we get better-educated children.

RB: Did you ever socialize with any of your co-workers?

RD: Mostly people stay to themselves. We socialized with numerous electricians we just went in the last two months; to two different dances our Union had a Valentines Dance and six of us, four retirees and two current electricians we went to that dance together as a group. Usually at Christmas time we have a Christmas dinner with several of them. Several production workers one of my best friends was a production worker. We went to the same school and we were life long friends until he passed away several years ago. It seemed like most of the people stay to themselves though.

RB: Any when they did get together it was as a family or a couple?

RD: As a couple cause at our ages our families are mostly gone and raised.

RB: How important is the union in your work life and in your social life?

RD: In my work life it helped provide me with a better job I think. I am a firm believe in Unionism. I actively go to the retiree's union meetings. I like to see what's going on. The president is always there and keeps us abreast of what's going into the plant. The union also points out various benefits that are available for retirees to participate in. I might say at one time I was actually worked as a committee member back in the early seventies I ran for election and worked as a committeeman, I was an alternate committeeman. During the strike, I can't remember what year it was, but the year that we were off for almost ninety days I was an alternate. So, I had to participate on all our on going meetings with the company. After that I went back to work I went on day turn so I got disinvolved in it.

RB: What else did a committeeman do besides go to meeting, was it part of negotiations?

RD: Well, the committeeman would negotiate work problems with your supervisors, the supervisors of that area.

RB: How long was a term of office for committeeman?

RD: At one time I think it was two years I think they just increased it to three years. I am pretty sure that its three years now.

RB: Were you ever personally involved in a grievance process yourself?

RD: Yes.

RB: Can you talk about that?

RD: That was during the negotiations. I dealt with the grievances myself.

RB: What were the grievances about?

RD: I can't even remember they were so long ago.

RB: General things.

RD: Generally things. Most of the time they had what they called dual supervision or you would check management doing your work. Sometimes management would get to the break down before the electrician did and he would be trying to get the piece of equipment running without consulting with the tradesman in the area. So, we would always write grievances on that. It seemed like they always got to the breakdowns first.

Most of the time they messed up and made the breakdown more complicated, by not knowing and pushing the wrong buttons or something and getting things out of sequence.

RB: Were these people engineers by education?

RD: No. They were just supervisors.

RB: Did they have an electrician background?

RD: No, most of the supervisors hired in there was who you knew in the early days and they got on because they knew somebody, they required no education. I was glade to see here just a couple of weeks ago in the paper that how management had improved they now required a bachelors degree to be a supervisor, which makes a much more educated person. It's probably why the plant is running a lot more efficient right now.

RB: Lordstown has be the area were labor management issue have been worked out or tried out. Do you have any stories about labor management philosophies that you lived through that were tried out at Lordstown?

RD: Most of my stories would be bad stories. But back in the days you were fighting the company man, they didn't have the mutual respect for one another like they do now. I worked with some of my supervisors electricians that had become my supervisor and suddenly they try you, don't know what your doing I know more then you type of thing. They had no college backgrounds; most of them did not know how to handle people as far as I am concerned.

RB: They didn't have people skills.

RD: They didn't have people skills no. I don't feel that they did. Most of the early maintenance supervisors were they came from... I could have been a supervisor I was approached several times about supervisor. I never thought of that as a possibility, because it seemed like they did the people wrong and I would get upset about it. I didn't think I could go tell somebody something knowing that its wrong and its not right. We had lines of demarcation and I always tried to respect what I was supposed to do, do what I was supposed to do, and when they asked me to do some other tradesmen job I didn't figure it was my job. I didn't think I could ask somebody. I was always proud of being an electrician, if I would have wanted to be another trade that's what I would have been.

RB: Right.

RD: Still today I don't believe in one of the things that they are doing now, they're combining trades. I don't feel its safe or smart. I wouldn't weld something and then go stand under it, because I am not a journeyman welder. Cause the company tells me to weld that's fine I can weld it, but I wouldn't have no faith... (side one of tape ended).

RB: Stress on the job, was there stress on the job?

RD: I would say there was stress on the job, because like I said if you were attached to a line job, every time that conveyor stop moving you had to figure out how to get the piece of equipment going again. At the same time other people were getting in your way, trying to push cars around. I always tried to sit and study the machine. I would sit in front of the machine for maybe a week just watching everything it did. The way it would move in, the way it would move out, when the conveyor hit the switch, what was supposed to activate it, pick part up and putting it on the car. It was on my mind, I'd come home from working thinking about why did this happen. This shouldn't have happened, because I've been watching this thing it happened some other way. Sit around and look at the blue prints on the car. Stress that was drummed into your head, when the line stops it's costing the company we're losing money. So, the part that would be the fact is knowing your responsibility as a tradesman trying to get the line running as fast as you could. Sometimes I'd seen people that made rash decisions make wrong decisions I'd seen several people get hurt. It was mainly because we're losing money we've got to get the line going and people would make bad judgment calls. I always said we're only building cars, people aren't dieing so we don't have to hurry let's get the line running and not worry about an extra minute rather then do something dangerous. I always tried to be very safe at my job.

RB: Was the work that did something unsafe or?

RD: Sometimes it would be the work, sometimes I'd seen several management workers get their fingers cut off at the end. Getting bad cut, getting caught between cars, because they were trying to assist in things they shouldn't be doing. I've seen tradesmen get hurt, body shop was always a real bad area because you always had real sharp stuff that you had to contend with you had to be careful around it. A lot of people got cuts and bad cuts at different times.

RB: Did you ever see anybody become permanently disabled as a result of an injury?

RD: No. I had a very good friend who fell, but I was not working with him at the time he fell. So, I can't pass judgment on that I wasn't in the area when it happened. There's not really as far as tradesmen go we never really had a lot of tradesman end up on disability. Because we were pretty safe and conscientious type of people, I always thought that tradesmen were a cut above, because they worried about themselves and they worried about their jobs. They worked a little bit safer I think. GM was in and got many hours of schooling on walk procedures and safe ways to do things. The majority of guys didn't get that, but they do now.

RB: What was the impotence to make the job safer, was it the company, the government, the union?

RD: Most of it probably came down from the company, but I think OSHA has got a lot to do with it safety standards and work standards.

RB: Did you ever see a manager ask a worker to do something that they knew to be unsafe?

RD: Well, yes and no because I thought they were unsafe as a tradesman the manager didn't think it was unsafe because he was concerned about the thousand dollars a minute. I think some times the management made hasty decisions. As a tradesman I would take my time I never tried to hurry up a break down, I would rather do it right then try to hurry it up; because if you try to hurry up it usually came back to bite you in butt later anyways, because you didn't fix it right the first time.

RB: Did you ever see a worker do something unsafe when a manager wanted him to be more safe?

RD: I never seen any managers want you to be more safe, to be honest. Now a days yes, but in the olden days when we were building cars. Since the ninety's they have become very safe in their practice. The amount of hours of schooling that's afforded to us had increase from probably ten hours to, I bet you the last year I worked I probably had hundred and fifty hours in schooling on safe practices. Which sometimes I thought they were senseless, because I already had been to school. But now every year you go back to school. They spend a lot of time now a days educating on more safe methods. We had several schools on site now.

RB: When was the last year do you think, was it always difficult, let's put it this way, to get a job at General Motors were there always highly sought jobs or what year do you think things got tight and it was difficult to get a job?

RD: I think it's always been difficult to get a job at Lordstown. Back in the early sixties it probably wasn't. They hired the bulk of the people in the seventies when we opened the van plant. Since then jobs are very scarce. I hate to say it, but I tried to get my son a job there for twelve years and he still doesn't work there yet.

RB: What does your son do?

RD: He's just landscaping, and right now with the snow on the ground he's not working. It's never; I don't think it's ever been that easy to get a job there. I think there's a lot of strings that get pulled a lot of times. It seemed like when they hired it was always some supervisors son that got a job or his daughter or niece or nephew, or some real high union official seem to manage to get his children a job there. I am a little upset because one of our greatest shop chairmen we ever had when they opened up the hiring ranks his daughter was the first person to get hired and his son was about the twentieth person to get hire. My son hasn't got a job there yet.

RB: What do you have to do to get a job?

RD: I don't really know. I wish I knew, because I would be willing to do it so my son could get a good job.

RB: Now, the Leer Plant is that a General Motors Plant?

RD: No, Leer is a separate owned company by the Leer Cooperation they just signed a contract to build seats for General Motors. They took our cushion room, we quite building seats in our plant and Leer agreed to take our employees. As our people retired Leer populated their plant I think there's no GM employees working at the Leer Sit Plant, its all Leer people working there now.

RB: Are they United Autoworkers?

RD: They are represented by our local union yes. I think they are a sub unit of our local union.

RB: What are you proudest about from your work experience at Lordstown? Do you have a proud moment?

RD: I feel proud of always being able to do my job. Most of the supervisors that I worked for complemented me when I retired. Several of them came down and complemented me on my retirement, my abilities and we all had stories to tell from the good old days. Seeing some of those supervisors come down and thanking me for doing my job made me feel good.

RB: When you retire what do they do for you at Lordstown, do the workers give you a cake or what happens?

RD: Oh, we had a cake and a very sizable monetary gift upon retirement.

RB: This was your coworker's?

RD: My coworker's yes and a lot of management people contributed to my retirement also. We usually get somebody a card, cake, and pop, and pretty much goof off that day.

RB: What did it feel like the day you went to work for the last day what did it feel like?

RD: It was great because I was looking forward to retirement. Being raised in a single parent home I've worked since I was twelve years old. So, when I got to be sixty-two years old I was ready to retire.

RB: Was it bitter sweet or?

RD: It was sweet; I have no complaints about retirement. I am very happy and I have a good retirement.

RB: Well, you commented on the technology change over the years, is there one thing that stands out about technology, the change of technology particularly note worthy?

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RD: The days of computers, which has always been my hardest thing to master. GM spent a lot of time to teach me about Allen Bradley PLC Computers and Square PLC Computers. I still don't have a home computer, because I am afraid of it. I can't; computers do everything in ones and zeros and I have trouble doing it, I have to use a voltmeter or some type of meter to read things I just can't handle. My biggest problem was trying to grasp the era of computers, which I think made my job a little bit harder in my later years for me as a tradesman. But also as a tradesman my last couple of year I worked as... I took care of buying electrical parts and that. So, that made my last couple of years a little easier for me.

RB: That means you distributed parts?

RD: I took care of the necessary materials in various areas of the plant to keep the plant running. The supervisor had me orders him stuff, the electrician had me order him stuff. So, my last couple of years I worked that type of a job. Up until then I think when the computers started coming in that was a challenge. I almost got to learn them, but then I took this other job so I didn't have to worry about it anymore, which made it easier for me.

RB: So, you've owned General Motors cars?

RD: Always. The only kind I'll drive.

RB: Have you ever owned a car that was actually built at Lordstown?

RD: I had my Vega I had two or three different Vegas I think during a period of time. Those little cars are the only ones that I bought that we ever build.

RB: And the last one...

RD: I had when we built the big Chevy's, I had a big Chevrolets but I don't think it was built in Lordstown. I bought it in 1970 and that was the last year we built the full size Chevy. But I don't think mine came from there I think mine came from some place else. I've owned several Vegas and that's the only car I've ever owned. My granddaughters got a Caviler right now.

RB: That's a General Motors car.

RD: But I've always owned GM. Even as a kid we owned GM cars. I did have a Plymouth once. My mother bought me Plymouth for graduation it was actually out of my uncle's estate. So, that's the only other car I've ever owned.

RB: Is there any question that you thought I would ask and I didn't?

RD: No you pretty much covered everything I figured you'd want to know about.

RB: Okay. Very good.

RD: I don't have any union stories to tell.

RB: Oh just work stories.

RD: Work stories, to me it was always a good place to work. I always like my job; even in some of the nastiest areas I worked in I still always like my job.

RB: What was a nasty area?

RD: Oh the body shop was probably the worst place in the plant to work, because it was so dangerous. If you walked between the cars you had to watch. Your coveralls were always getting torn up from the metal and they even made special sleeves to put on your arm, so that the sheet metal wouldn't cut through.

RB: Did you ever get hurt?

RD: No. I don't think I ever, maybe two or three different times I went to medical for cuts I receive in the body shop.

RB: Well, I think I'd like to thank you for a nice interview.

RD: Your welcome.