

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown

Personal Experiences

O.H. 2043

Wilford Culler

Interviewed By

Sue Covert

On

April 2, 2002

ARCHIVE
Oral
History
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Youngstown State University

Oral History Program

GM Lordstown

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Interviewee: WILFORD CULLER

Interviewer: Sue Covert

Subject: GM Lordstown

Date: April 2, 2002

SC: This is an interview with Wilford Culler in Lisbon, Ohio for the GM Lordstown Project at Youngstown State. The date is April 2nd, 2002. First thing I wanted to ask you is could you tell me a little about the town where you grew up?

WC: I was born in Sebring and we moved out to the country when I was four. We lived out there three years then down to Minerva. And then we went down to Columbiana. I got married in '52. We moved into Columbiana and lived there a couple of years and then we moved out here and have lived here for forty some years.

SC: And you have children?

WC: Five.

SC: Oh okay.

WC: Three boys and two girls.

SC: And they all live around here?

WC: My oldest son lives in Columbus, is president of the Ackerman Credit Union; and my next son lives in New Middletown and he works for American Standard in Salem. And the one daughter lives in Pleasant Plain Ohio near Midwest children's home just this side of Cincinnati. The last son lives up the street and works at the post office and my youngest daughter lives here and works at Home Savings and Loan.

SC: Oh, okay. The next thing I wanted to ask you was how did you get your job at Lordstown? What lead you to get your job there?

WC: I went and got an application and got an interview.

SC: This is when it first opened?

WC: Yes.

SC: So you were one of the first ones?

WC: I was one of the first ones in the trim department. I started March 21st, 1966.

SC: And the plant was still real new then?

WC: They were still working on it.

SC: Did you get to wear the hard hat when you were in there?

WC: Yeah.

SC: Cause they were still doing construction?

WC: The first car didn't even come down the line until April 14th, in the trim department.

SC: And that's putting the trim pieces?

WC: Putting the inside pieces in and on the doors, where I was working at. Putting the glass in and stuff like that.

SC: Okay, so how long did you work in the trim department?

WC: Twenty-six years.

SC: So, the whole time you worked there you were pretty much

WC: Other than final process, but I did trim work there most of the time while I was down there.

SC: Did it start to get real monotonous after the cars started coming through?

WC: No.

SC: Because you were kind of doing different things?

WC: You had a certain job you had to do and you do have to remember where you're. I worked brickyard a couple of years and your doing the same thing all the time, tossing bricks.

SC: Yeah, I am sure. So you liked working the trim department very much?

WC: Yeah.

SC: Okay.

WC: It's a nice place to work, some people complained.

SC: Yeah.

WC: It could have been a lot worse.

SC: Well, it really was supposed to be a model plant when it opened wasn't it?

WC: Yeah.

SC: So, it was new for everybody. Did you have to do anything special beside just interview, you just go in an interview and they called you?

WC: Yeah.

SC: Okay.

WC: Back then they took what they could get. A lot of people started some of the relief men would say they sent them on break and they'd never come back. The young people that were just out of high school, I was one of the oldest when I started up there, I think I was thirty-eight when I started.

SC: So most of the work force was pretty young?

WC: Yeah, a group that didn't want to work.

SC: Yeah, I understand.

WC: You still get that.

SC: Yes, very defiantly get that. Okay. So, what did you think about when you learned how much training you had to go through?

WC: We would go look at movies for a while and we'd go out in the shop and they had doors you would build them up and tear them down. But the regulators samples of trim

and glass all that stuff. Tear them down and start all over again. They had bodies there had to put headliners in.

SC: Oh so you put the headliners in too. That seems like that's a lot, you had to do the doors and the glass and the headliners.

WC: Yeah. One of my main jobs was building up the tailgates on the station wagons, one of the first after I started.

SC: Is it really complex to put that glass in?

WC: Not if you know how to do it.

SC: Okay cause I had to take one apart once because it kept falling down in the door.

WC: There's a certain way if you know how to do it, it will slip right in.

SC: Oh okay.

WC: If you don't know it could be a problem.

SC: Well it was a learning process for me to take it apart for me. It would slide out of that little track that little piece. I learned.

WC: Its rough to put it back in.

SC: Did they have managers that came in and helped train you?

WC: They hired the foreman from different plants a lot of them. They helped out.

SC: Did those guys stick around after they got the plant running or did they go back to where they came from?

WC: Some stayed here the whole time.

SC: That's what I never asked anyone that.

WC: The foreman I had was from Jamesville Wisconsin. He went back up there then, but he was here quite awhile.

SC: In that time that you worked in the trim department did it pretty much stay to be the same guys you worked with all the time or was there a high turnover?

WC: Yes. It was pretty much the same.

SC: So you were with those guys a long time?

WC: Yes.

SC: Did you guys get together and do things socially after work too?

WC: Not too much.

SC: Well you probably lived quite a ways away?

WC: Twenty-eight miles.

SC: So you didn't have much time when you were working steady to do much.

WC: When I was working in final process I was working ten and twelve hours a day at times and its time to go home then.

SC: I guess. So, when the plant got going in full swing how many cars went through the trim department in an hour let's say?

WC: At first it was sixty.

SC: That's a lot.

WC: Then we got up to doing the J car or the Vega got up to a hundred an hour.

SC: That's amazing. You must not have had time to even think.

WC: You do your job and that's it.

SC: I guess.

WC: Some jobs you did every other car it depends on the job.

SC: Yeah that's what somebody else told me that they had different things. I think that would make it more complicated if you had different things to do on each car.

WC: Well you didn't have time.

SC: So how many guys were in the trim department when you were putting out one hundred cars a day an hour I mean?

WC: I have no idea. They had maybe 10,000 all together up there that's in the three plants. I would think maybe half that.

SC: Really I have not been there so I haven't seen that. I have a guy in my class that works there.

WC: One of the fellows out of the trim department set up a tour one evening. I thought it would be interesting to go up there.

SC: Oh I bet.

WC: After being off for about eight or nine years you wouldn't recognize that place. It's all changed around in there.

SC: Is it sort of consolidated?

WC: Well that newer cars don't take as many parts. Getting a lot of stuff automated doing away with a lot of jobs.

SC: That would be kind of interesting to go through it.

WC: I think I saw two people there I knew.

SC: Wow that's pretty amazing. You would think that you would see more. Were you there when they had any of the strikes? Obviously you were.

WC: I think all of them.

SC: What do you remember about those strikes?

WC: Not too much.

SC: Just, were you in the union?

WC: Yes.

SC: Not too much. I have not heard too much from anybody. Everyone just said that were concessions on both sides.

WC: Yeah.

SC: And nobody really wins.

WC: When I went up for an interview, the interviewer said, he would go home at night; his wife would ask him what was going on out there. She'd hear that every time somebody would pick up something that they were not supposed to that everybody would walk out. They asked him what was going on out there, he was working in the office and he didn't know what was going on out there. She knew more from listening to the radio.

SC: Did that stay true through out the whole time there, were the foremen kind of isolated there?

WC: It wasn't too bad; I always got along with them.

SC: Do you remember any of the foremen that stand out in particular that you admired or that you didn't get along with?

WC: I got along with all of them. Some people didn't but I did. My first one Don Ertz he was from Jamesville. I don't know how many I had all together.

SC: Did it sort of change as you were there? When you were first there were there more guys that had come from plants and had worked at plants and did it change through out the time you worked there?

WC: There were just a few that came from other plants most of them were new people from around here. From around the area. They looked at my resume; they saw that I worked about sixteen years the place before that's why I wanted to change jobs, and he asked me what I was making before and that was the last they asked me about that.

SC: Oh was that when you worked at the brickyard?

WC: No furniture.

SC: So you took a nice increase in pay going to there?

WC: It was nice for me.

SC: And then you had to did you get lots of over time?

WC: Not at first.

SC: Not at first.

WC: I was making \$2.09 and started up there making \$2. 93. So that was a big jump.

SC: Yeah. It really is. Were there times when you had to work a lot of overtime?

WC: Well after we got final process, I don't know if we had to but they wanted you to.

SC: Yeah.

WC: They had a lot of cars there that they wanted to get out. Of course I didn't mind it.

SC: No, I guess usually the money is pretty good.

WC: I did my job and that was it.

SC: Were you in the union?

WC: Yeah.

SC: Were you active; were you a Stuart or whatever?

WC: No.

SC: No were just in.

WC: I was just a member.

SC: No were just in a member.

WC: No they just took my dues out.

SC: Well was there anything, how did you feel about the union?

WC: It was okay. It seem like they stuck up more for the trouble makers then those who did their jobs.

SC: That's valid.

WC: You've probably heard that one before too.

SC: No. Were there any of the union representatives that you had particular feelings for?

WC: No.

SC: Or thought about? You just went and did your job?

WC: Went and did my job and that was it and I came home.

SC: That's okay. Okay, let's see. Did you get involved in any of those quality of life programs when they had those?

WC: Well, they'd have meetings in the mornings for those every once in awhile.

SC: And you went for the donuts uh?

WC: I guess.

SC: Did you think they were useful the meetings?

WC: Sometimes yeah.

SC: Did you get a chance in those meetings to talk about things that you thought would help and make it more efficient?

WC: They gave you time to answer and ask questions about that. I was always quiet.

SC: Well, that's hard to imagine. How many people would come to those meetings?

WC: We would just have the ones in our area.

SC: So, just the guys like in the trim department would come.

WC: Well, not even all them just one area that would be too many.

SC: Whenever they changed cars did you have to learn all new ways to put the trim in or was it pretty much the same?

WC: It was pretty much the same.

SC: Okay. It seems like it might have gotten a little more technical as things went along.

WC: Well put up headliners when we first started they had ribs in the headliners, metal strip. After we got up to the full size Chevy they were all fiberglass and you snapped them up in there.

SC: Oh, okay.

WC: It was a lot easier it wasn't a cloth like the old ones were.

SC: They didn't do the cloth ones or did that go to a different department to put the cloth in? Just the fiberglass snapped in?

WC: Well, the cloth was on it.

SC: Oh, okay it was already preformed and you just snapped it in.

WC: Yeah. Put it up in there and the sun shades and the other trim would hold it up.

SC: I've seen one of those taken out and now I realize what you are saying they are all one piece. What did you think about when all the small, little Japanese cars came out?

WC: Well, the one that we were making was about the same size.

SC: Did it seem to bother other people at the plant?

WC: I don't think so.

SC: Okay. Were you glad that you got the J car, was that the one that came in the 80's that looked like the Japanese car? Is that the one you were thinking was like that or are you thinking of the Vega?

WC: We started in with the Chevy Monza, was that size.

SC: I forgot about that car. Wow.

WC: Along with the Sunbird, Skylark, we had four. Chevy, Pontiac, Buick, and Olds. We made the four different ones.

SC: So there was a Chevy Monza, the Vega and then the Sunbird came latter didn't it?

WC: Well, we made the Firebird for a while.

SC: Oh, okay.

WC: We made that with the full size Chevy for a while.

SC: Well they were all pretty much the same?

WC: No. They were different. There was on piece you would have to go and get to put on it.

SC: And you would have to know the colors too wouldn't you if you were putting in the visors and the headliner. So, did you get a written sheet that came with the car?

WC: There were papers that came on the front of the car or broadcast on the front of the car that would say what party went in it.

SC: And when it got to you was the car all painted and everything?

WC: Yeah.

SC: So you were almost at the end of the line?

WC: Where I worked on the line it first came down out of paint, we were one of the first ones to work on it out of paint.

SC: And they were dry?

WC: Yeah.

SC: And then what had to go on it after that? Did outside trim still have to go on.

WC: Trim put the inside and outside trim on it. The carpets, door pads, putting all the stuff in the doors and the outside trim on the door. Then it went down to Chevrolet, of course when I started it was Chevrolet and then it went all to GM to General Motors assemble. Then they had part, they put the motor and the running parts in.

SC: It sounds like you guys had a lot to do.

WC: Well there were a lot of people there to do it.

SC: It sounds like the trim department would have to be big to put all of that on.

WC: Then we put in everything under the dash, everything under the dash.

SC: Did you have to put in electronic things in?

WC: Yeah.

SC: So, if it had a radio?

WC: It was all part of it.

SC: Just all.

WC: Putting it on when it was supposed to it was easy. But after it went down if something went wrong and we had a repair a lot of times it took a lot longer to fix it. You had to get the other part out before you could put the new one in.

SC: Did you ever like feel you were pressured to keep the line moving?

WC: Well a few times.

SC: Did you ever see anything happen, an accident or something because there just wasn't enough safety?

WC: Not around where I was I didn't see anything. There were a few people that got hurt though out the years, but not that many.

SC: So over all you think that the safety was pretty good?

WC: Yeah.

SC: Well, that's good. Did you ever work with any women when women started working there?

WC: The line we worked on. There were a few. I worked first shift and most of your women were on second shift, there was some on first shift. I never had a problem with any of them.

SC: Did any of them work in the trim department?

WC: Yeah there were a few.

SC: And they got a long okay.

WC: With seniority they just hired men at first, then after the women started coming second shift had a lot more then first shift did.

SC: Just because they came latter so they got put on the second shift.

WC: Yeah seniority.

SC: Yeah, okay. So, you always worked first shift the whole time, unless you were doing over time.

WC: I went onto second shift for four weeks when I went on repair. Rather then that I had enough seniority I got back on first shift. When you had to go where the opening was and when I got thirty days in on the job I went back to first shift.

SC: Did you work with any blacks?

WC: Yeah.

SC: And there were never any problems, nothing?

WC: Uh blacks are the same as whites.

SC: Yeah.

WC: You get some good ones and you get some that aren't. The color of your skin don't have anything to do with it.

SC: You just tried to get a long with everyone didn't you, well that's a good attitude. Did you ever get laid off?

WC: Just for change over.

SC: When they changed the car line from one to another?

WC: Yeah.

SC: And how long would that last?

WC: Some years they would make the models right after the old ones.

SC: So, there was...

WC: I think six weeks was the longest one.

SC: That's pretty good. Is that because you had so much seniority, because it seem like there were other people that were affected by it a lot more?

WC: Oh I didn't mind being off for change over.

SC: It just gave you a break.

WC: Gave me a break.

SC: I can understand that. Did you know anything about when the Van plant closed? Did that affect anything?

WC: It didn't affect us no. The ones that were over there came back over to the car plant.

SC: So in some departments they probably had some seniority and did some bumping.

WC: I don't think that they laid very many off at the time.

SC: Do you think that management changed from the beginning until the 90's?

WC: Yeah, they got a woman up there now.

SC: I've heard that. Have you heard anything from anybody about how they feel about her?

WC: I haven't heard anything.

SC: Do you know anybody that works there now or are most of the people you know are retired?

WC: My brother still works out there. I don't know very many working, the ones that I worked with are all retired.

SC: That is what I was saying you guys are all pretty much a group there. Did your brother start when you started?

WC: Yeah I started in March and he started in May.

SC: Did he just go when you went and got...

WC: He could quite anytime he wanted to now.

SC: He just likes to get out of the house?

WC: He doesn't have anything else to do. I work with recovering furniture and work on cars and stuff. I've got something to do in my spare time, where he didn't so he kept going.

SC: What department did he work in?

WC: Trim.

SC: So did you seem a lot?

WC: I saw him some.

SC: Did he work the same shift?

WC: Yeah. But most of the time he worked one end and I worked the other end. We both worked the same end for quite awhile.

SC: What did you think about when they started putting the robots in the plant? Did they have those in the beginning?

WC: They had them over in the body shop pretty early. Not like they do now.

SC: Now it seems like they replaced everyone.

WC: They are all robots now.

SC: Do they do the welding and things?

WC: Yeah.

SC: So do you think that they do the same quality of work as a man could?

WC: Well, they might have less trouble with them then some of the men.

SC: They don't talk back.

WC: You said that.

SC: Well. Did it seem like there were people, like you said that were just trouble makers that got into it with the boss or something? Did you seem like you saw some of those kinds of things?

WC: Not too much no.

SC: Probably about average.

WC: Of course you got some people that can't get a long with anybody. And there are some of us that can get a long with anybody.

SC: It seems like from what I read that people think that Lordstown had a kind of reputation do you think that it did?

WC: You mean when it started out?

SC: Yeah. For having a sort of rebellious group.

WC: Well, that's them kid's.

SC: Those younger ones, the ones just out of high school.

WC: Yeah. They didn't know what work was. We put them on the line and they didn't like it.

SC: So you think those were the ones that gave it that kind of reputation?

WC: Yeah, I went to work and did my job and kept my nose clean.

SC: I see. How did you feel when GM put the plants in Mexico?

WC: Well, they keep taking the good jobs around here and taking them down there the people around here won't have money to buy stuff if they keep doing that. Down there they don't pay them enough to buy them.

SC: I know that's what someone else said. That it is pretty sad that the people that work on the cars don't have enough money to buy them. Do you think that everybody feels the same way. They are not thrilled with it, but they don't know how to protest it.

WC: Well, what can you do? The people with the money are the ones the control it. All the companies are doing it though, it just not with cars.

SC: That's true its pretty sad.

WC: People with money don't care where it comes from just as long as it comes.

SC: What do you think of the benefit package that you got?

WC: What?

SC: When you worked there, your health insurance was equal to what other people around were getting? Did you think that yours was better or worse?

WC: I didn't get any insurance from up there just kept what I had before. Of course when we did get insurance my wife would go to the dentist for eight or ten bucks. First time she went without the insurance it was twenty-five.

SC: So, what year did you retire?

WC: '92.

SC: That was at the time when a lot of people were getting laid off?

WC: Two years before. '94 was when the ones that had twenty-eight years could take a two year lay off. I was about two years before that.

SC: So, you kind of got out at a good time then?

WC: Yeah. In the last three years that I worked there some coworkers said I won't be here, look how much you're working for. I was working until 65, I think that some of the ones that said that to me were the ones that had their 30 years in and were still working.

SC: Like your brother?

WC: Working for less then I was, of course the shoe is on the other foot then.

SC: Do you think your brother is ever going to retire or is he just going to?

WC: Maybe when he reaches 65, he's 50.

SC: Well, you've got to kind of admire him. Did you ever go to or did they ever sponsor any activities outside of work? Baseball teams or picnics?

WC: Well, they would usually go to Cedar Point or something like that. I went there a few times.

SC: You didn't go to Idora Park?

WC: I don't think anybody did that.

SC: Well, I was trying to remember when it closed. I remember going for a picnic it had to be in the 80's.

WC: Yeah. I was never in the ball team or anything like that.

SC: Were some of the guys from the trim shop involved in that?

WC: Yeah.

SC: You were too busy coming home to five kids, uh?

WC: My family and my income, a lot of people don't think you can do it now, but we did it. Times are better now than they were back then. We didn't have everything right away. The kids now the young people now want everything right now that we worked for a lifetime of what you get. There's were they have there problems.

SC: Did you ever regret that you worked there?

WC: No.

SC: You were happy with your choice.

WC: I got paid and came home.

SC: And it never got monotonous?

WC: Uh, you had to have the right attitude.

SC: You stayed with that as your hobby you still like working on furniture?

WC: Right.

SC: Or do you do that now as a business?

WC: Just a hobby. I don't have to do it.

SC: Just something to keep you busy, something to keep you out of trouble.

WC: Right.

SC: And you still see all the guy's you worked with, you all go out to breakfast. That's pretty a standard weekly?

WC: There's sometimes about two-dozen that go up there.

SC: That's nice and all of them are retired?

WC: Yeah.

SC: And you just meet once a week for breakfast and to talk? Do you still go to the union? I don't understand this capcom. Are you involved in that?

WC: I never was involved in that. There is a retired meeting I go to the first Monday of the month.

SC: Oh is that at the union hall?

WC: Yeah.

SC: What do you did if your retired?

WC: Usually they bring us up on the insurance and tell us what's going on. And different things come up and we have a dinner, covered dish.

SC: Oh that sounds nice.

WC: It lasts a couple of hours and you get to see the people you worked with. Several times I learned more of what was going on then when I was working there.

SC: Yeah.

WC: The union president comes down and speaks.

SC: And they tell you about the changes at the plant?

WC: Yeah.

SC: Do they ever offer you any tours through that or anything like that to see the changes in the plant?

WC: I supposed we could go anytime you wanted to. I know one time they had an open house and you could volunteer to go and help. Give you places to stand were people weren't supposed to go in some areas.

SC: I thought maybe you were going to show them how to put the trim in.

WC: Oh they already know.

SC: Do they still make the same cars there now? What cars do they make there now?

WC: Cavalier and the Sunfire.

SC: I don't think... when I read the article it took me awhile to figure out what the J car was. They kept talking about the J car and the production of the J car and how they had to bid on it and I had no clue. And then I finally read somewhere that it was the Sunbird, which is what I had. And I said oh that's what that is and it was nice to be informed as to what it was. So your brother kind of keeps you up dated and what's going on in the old trim department, uh?

WC: Yeah, he's worked with new models. He went to Mexico for about a week.

SC: To learn?

WC: At the GM Plant down there.

SC: Yeah, to learn or to teach them?

WC: I don't know.

SC: See you weren't nosy enough. Well it was a free trip to Mexico who could blame him.

WC: He said that the plants down there are a lot different then this here.

SC: Like less automation or just the workers in general I wonder?

WC: Well, they don't have the same amount of people down there as they did up here so.

SC: I've never heard of the size of the plants down there. If there was anything that you would change at the plant, if you were in management and you had the power would you do anything differently?

WC: They probably knew what was going on more then I did.

SC: So over all?

WC: It was a good place to work.

SCL It was a good place. Well, that's good and something to be proud of that you got along so well there for as many years as you put in. Well, I can't think of anything more to ask you so... interview ends.