

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
GM LORDSTOWN

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O.H. 2047

James Beeman
Interview
By
Erin Timms
On
April 11, 2002

ARCHIVE
Oral
History
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ET: This is an interview with Jim Beeman. The interviewing is done by Erin Timms. This is the General Motors Project, and it is at the home of Mr. Beeman. Tell me a little bit about your childhood.

JB: Well I was born in South Carolina, my dad was in the Air Force at that time, so I was born in South Carolina while he was stationed there. Originally, he was from Youngstown, and my mother was originally from Washington D.C.. After he got out of the service, we ended up in Youngstown, Ohio, probably back in 1954. I went to Rayen High School, I went to Hayes Junior High, just an average kid in school.

ET: Did your mom do anything for a living?

JB: Mom was a nurse, father was a truck driver, so we didn't see him much. He was on the road a lot. My dad had gone through a divorce right out of the service, so I had a stepmother. I had had a sister, stepbrother, so there was three of us children in the family.

ET: What was your first job?

JB: First job I worked at a car wash, plus I did a little caddying on the side. The car wash job kind of gave me an interest in doing cars, which is another story, we started a detail shop in Youngstown in 1987. Then from there I worked construction for about four years, then I was in the Army National Guard after that. Then when they built the Lordstown Plant in 1966 I had just gotten out of the Army and they were hiring people, so that's how I ended up getting out there. That was in '66.

ET: Did you know anybody, how did you get your job?

JB: The first day I went out there for an application, a friend of mine who used to work at a gas station, had become a security guard. So I went out for an application and because I knew him he said, "do you want to go ahead and just get hired today if your application is approved?" That's how I got the job. The security guard, at the door, got me in, of course they were hiring a hundred and fifty to two hundred people a day then. So everybody that went out was getting a job if you could walk and talk, at that time.

ET: What was it like when you started there?

JB: First day I really thought it was great. It was exciting, something new, working the assembly line. One thing I do remember there was a hundred and fifty of us that got hired in the day I got hired, and by lunchtime there was only about fifty left. The rest of the hundred had quit, because it was a job that was a little more stressful than most jobs in the area. A lot of guys worked in the mills, and even though they had hard jobs they didn't work continually for eight or ten hours, which out there you did, so a lot of guys weren't used to that. Me, working construction, it was kind of easier for me than what the construction job was, so I kind of liked it. So I stayed.

ET: What was your first job out there?

JB: First job was putting on headliners on 1966 Chevrolets. That was my first job. Then from there I went on to many, many jobs because you transferred around a lot.

ET: How has hiring changed since you were hired?

JB: When I got hired they were hiring anybody that would come to the door, because they were real short man power, they were just starting the second shift. The last time I saw them hire people you had to be family members of employees so that was a big change that I could see. They went from hiring anybody to restrictive hiring.

ET: What can you tell me about the people you worked with?

JB: The people out there were of vast differences. There was a lot of people from the poor area in West Virginia because they didn't have jobs. There was a great number of people that came down from Detroit that had worked in plants there, that had come here just to be supervisors, so those people there were experienced. Although, they were hourly workers there, they were given the opportunity to be supervisors here. So you had a group there. Then you had the minority group of local people that were hired. You had a lot of people from Michigan, some people that were in the area already, then you had a lot of people that came up from the southern states for jobs, that didn't have jobs down there. Maybe they worked in the coalmines or whatever type of lumbering jobs they had down there that didn't pay much. So there was a big variety of difference of backgrounds of people there, which was kind of unusual or strange.

ET: Were there any conflicts by that?

JB: I didn't notice that. I think it was more like a learning experience, trying to get the different backgrounds of people, how they were raised, and how they lived so much different than you did. But I never saw any conflicts. Very seldom you saw anybody that was from Youngstown, most of the people were from out of state or out of town. But never a conflict on that.

ET: How do you feel about a lot of the misconceptions concerning autoworker?

JB: See the autoworkers are a tough group. I was on both sides of the street. I was on management side for five years, and the problem out there is, somebody told me one time, you're not here to make cars or buses or trucks, you're here to make money. That's kind of hard for someone, on the line that's building a product to think, well I'm not really building a product, I'm building money, but that's the way General Motors thinks. Not to criticize them, because they are in the business to make money and the cars just happen to be their product. So a lot of time the individual kind of thinks, well this is my product, and I want it to be the way I want it to be, and it's not necessarily always like that. I had an incident where we were using a certain type of screws on a kick pad job I was on. They changes the screw, and just an individual situation, the new screws they were using, we thought, were kind of cheap. They didn't go in as well. We tried to take management on to try and get them to go back to the old screw, which we were told, in a polite way, that that is not our responsibility. It's management's responsibility to use the type of material they want to use. If they are using something because it is more reasonably priced, or maybe a vendor went out of business or whatever. Our job was just to do what we were supposed to do. So that was kind of a learning experience there. Which I can understand that, you know?

ET: Yeah.

JB: The guy on the line can't dictate the outcome of the product.

ET: Did you ever find though, I mean I have been told by other people I've interviewed, that the line person sometimes had a better idea how, they would give you engineering problems and you would go to actually put them into practice and things didn't...

JB: Oh yeah I agree with that. But a lot of times I found that management wouldn't listen because naturally when they do something in an office on paper and then they get it down on the floor and a lot of times not all the times is it going to work. But at times I found, if you had a better way to do something they would listen to you. They had a suggestion program out there too. I know a lot of guys won money from that. I think they were pretty open minded. The only thing I found strange about General Motors is that, and probably all companies would do this, they went through a lot of mood changes. I was on supervision so I saw it more than the average guy, where they would want to get along with people, then they wouldn't want to get along. They'd want to get along, and back and forth and you never knew exactly how they were going to be. It was all based on the economic situation of the country. If car sales were slow, they would push the workers to maybe do a little bit more so they could cut back on employees, because that's their biggest expense, besides the

cost and material, labor was a big cost for them. If they were in a situation where the economy was a little slow and the cars weren't selling, they would try and reduce their costs, by reducing the employees, which would add work to they guys that were still there, which was a conflict. If car sales were up it was a happy situation. Then they would go ahead and just let the people work, and keep the quality up. You had to be flexible on how the condition of the country was. If you weren't flexible then you had a hard time.

ET: How long were you employed out at Lordstown?

JB: I started in 1966 and I was there for thirty years. So I stayed the whole thirty years. Out of the thirty years I probably had, not exaggerating, hundreds of different jobs. Once you get hired there on a specific job you were allowed, once you got seniority, to transfer to different jobs and bid on certain jobs. I was on supervision for around five years. I was in the truck plant for a while before they closed. The truck plant was kind of a nice place because it was slow paced. You did more work, but the line speed was at twenty some jobs per hour, compared to eighty or ninety at the car plant, so your work was at a slower pace. I kind of enjoyed that more. As far as supervision, I enjoyed that, but it was up and down too, depending on the mood. I was cut back twice, I quit once. Last time I was on, I really enjoyed it, but then there was another cut back. So that's the other thing you faced all the time. I was probably laid off about three or four times in the thirty years, because they would shut one shift down, and I didn't have seniority to keep working. So there was a lot of layoffs, and you always had to expect that.

ET: Did you move around a lot, just to avoid, I mean what was attractive about moving around?

JB: I think the attraction to that was the jobs were so repetitive where you're doing the same thing everyday, and physically if you were doing a certain job, say hypothetically, hard on your right hand, after awhile you'd want to try to move so you could change different part of your body, because you figure you're there eight or ten hours a day doing the same thing over and over and over, you're doing six or eight hundred jobs a day of a certain thing. After awhile, when I got older I became an Absentee Replacement Operator, and that way I was doing different jobs everyday and I wasn't stuck on the same repetitive job everyday, and you got to see more of the plant, and more of the finished product. So it was better. But the moving around I think is mostly because of your physical body problems.

ET: What do you think of your union?

JB: Unions are something where you hate to have them but you need them. I never was a strong union member, but I always felt that the union was something that if you didn't have it, especially at Lordstown or automotive places, you'd have the jobs would be a favoritism type thing without the union, instead of a seniority thing. In fact they tired to do that when they started utility people, which is like an assistant foreman. When they first started that before the union got involved in it, they were hiring like teacher pet guys to be these utility people. Then the union got into it, and made them use the seniority people.

ET: How do you think the union has changed over the years?

JB: Well I never would criticize the union, but I think the union now has to think about not being so not strong, they're still strong, but they can't be so demanding now. GM is known to keep a plant open for anywhere, from thirty to fifty years and then close it and build a new one, because the innovations in the car industry change so much that a car is outdated in thirty, forty years, because assembly techniques change so much. We were always threatened by that because sometimes it's cheaper for the company just to go ahead and build a brand new plant somewhere else with a whole new labor force then to try to remodel and reassemble the plant that they have. So I think the union is still strong, but I think they are doing everything they can to work with the company to get this new car line, to keep the place going for another twenty or thirty years.

ET: Do you think the shut downs of the steel mills, during the '80's, kind of affected the way the union had to negotiate during the '90's?

JB: Yeah, because you could see when companies say we're going to shut down, it's not just a bluff anymore. It happens. I think people that worked in the mills would probably do anything to get their company back. I think the union at Lordstown is the same way. The threat is not an idle threat. It's something that could happen, it's something we all face. Like I said, it's only logical that they could build a new plant with a brand new work force somewhere else, and it's state of the art compared to our plant, even though it doesn't seem old it's thirty-five, thirty-six years old.

ET: It's funny because when we started this project that was one of the discussions we had, about when Lordstown opened it was state of the art, it was General Motors ideal dream.

JB: Yes it was, but now state of the art's not there anymore, it's thirty-five years old. Although they had renovated it two or three times since I've been there, but that's real expensive to do.

ET: Who among your union reps, do you think, was particularly effective?

JB: I think everybody will say this, Al Alli was one of the spearhead leaders out there. There's no doubt about it, you either liked him or you hated him, but he was very strong. I was in Management, when he was the shop chairman, and at one meeting we were in and they would be talking about let's do this, and this, and this; and then somebody said, "Al's not going to go for that, and they would back right down on the idea, because they didn't think he would go for it. He had a lot of power, and he had a position where they were a little bit fearful of that power. Out of all the years I was there, I would have to say he was one of the most dominant leaders out there that I've seen.

ET: During the '80's there was off site meetings between union leaders and management, what did you think about the meetings?

JB: I went to one, I thought it was a big joke. I think it was just a waste of money, and I didn't get much out of it. I can't even remember what they talked about. For the employees, it was

a week out of the plant, but as far as it being effective. I don't think it was. Some of the meetings I went to talked about management and union getting along, but I think you can do that by just trying to do it inside the plant without trying to brainwash somebody in a hotel somewhere.

ET: Were you involved with any of the strikes?

JB: When we first started there was a lot of little mini strikes going on. And you didn't have any choice. We were all brand new in '66, they would just walk out for no reason at all, but they weren't official sanctioned strikes, they were just walkouts. It was so many different people from different areas that it was a lot of people that worked in the mills, and worked in jobs where they just didn't like the idea of having to work for the eight or ten hours. Most of management were hourly people that came down from Michigan, so they were still new at their jobs. So there were a lot of little mini strikes. We were all involved. If the place shut down you were forced to go out, you didn't have a choice.

ET: Were you involved in the '72 Wildcat Strike?

JB: I'm sure. If they went out, you went out. It was almost like you had to go. You definitely didn't want to stay in the plant hiding while everybody else was outside picketing. You sort of had no choice whether your opinion was for them or against them.

ET: Have you ever heard of the Lordstown Syndrome?

JB: No.

ET: It's kind of, I guess, people explain it as I don't know if it's monotonous, but people are getting bad attitudes about their jobs. Did you see a lot of that out there?

JB: Yeah I did. I didn't know it was called that. What had to happen at Lordstown if you worked there, you never saw a finished product. So if you were working in the trim area, you saw a body go by that you put the headliner, or the seats in, or the carpeting in, but you never saw the car done, unless you walked to the other end of the plant you never really did see the finished product. So what happened there was not a lot of satisfaction in your work. You were just putting a screw in a certain item all day long, unless you got around. A lot of people that I know that kept their sanity out there, they had things they did on the side, like myself. I started like a little detail business, buffing and waxing cars. Others would be in the jewelry business or they would be in a lawn mower service, or stuff like that. The guys that just came to work and went home and had nothing else, they were going stir crazy. I remember one incident we were talking, there was about eight or ten of us, just talking, and out of the ten of us seven of the guys had been divorced at least one or two times. Five or six of the ten were alcoholics, two or three of them were drug addicts, it's because the job is not satisfying. It's repetitious, and I knew a lot of guys they'd never make it home Friday nights from the bars. They'd spend their whole check on the way home, then on Monday morning they didn't even have coffee money. It was a problem in that, but I don't blame the people. I blame the type of job.

ET: Sure. How did the influx of small imports impact Lordstown?

JB: Well there's no doubt about, and you can talk about foreign imports, but I think really what it boils down to I'm sorry the imports came in, but I do think that the imports created a new quality improvement situation. When I first went out there they were throwing cars together, and I don't say that to criticize them, but that's just the way they built cars. If you look at the big cars in the 50's and 60's they were thrown together, there not like the cars today. Regardless of how much market the imports took, the import industry always became a target of General Motors, where they tried to catch them, because they did have the quality. They could have quality products, because the Japanese Government, was not spending billions of dollars on the military, they're spending it on industry. So the money that we are spending on state of the art military products, which are the best in the world, they're spending on cars and items that the everyday guy uses. So we still always play a catch up game with the Japanese and the foreign imports, because they are quality orientated. I think one thing that really hurts us is these automotive magazines that's always favoring the Japanese market. Like now there was a report on the Cavalier being not such a good car, but when you ask people if they like them, people love their Cavaliers. I don't really always go along with the magazine reports.

ET: Do you think they have improved working conditions out there?

JB: I don't know. I would say no, because the problem I ran into, when I got older, pushing towards my thirtieth year, the work was just hard. For instance, when I was an ARO years ago, I could go and a job and in ten minutes I could do it. Well as I got older and jobs changed, it would take me hours to learn a job, and it was just an uphill battle all the time to get a job. I'm not going to say the conditions changed so much, but I think the work force out there did. I was a young man when I started, and an old man when I quit, so I think it was just harder for us to work because of our age more than the conditions. I don't blame it on the company, I blame it the age of the workforce.

ET: You talked about some of you unemployment. Were you unemployed during the '80's, during the layoffs?

JB: Yes but, you always got sub pay during unemployment. The only problem people had at Lordstown is there's always overtime out there, so if you worked forty hours a week, which I always tried to do, and you were laid off it wasn't a big effect, because you had unemployment sub pay which was a supplemental pay. You got most of you check anyway, although you had to wait on it. But a lot of guys out there worked sixty, seventy hours a week, so if they're laid off they're affected more than what I would be because it's human nature to live on what you make. So everybody that worked at Lordstown at one time or another was laid off, there was just no getting around it.

ET: Were you ever involved in the quality programs out there?

JB: Yeah I was an inspector for a while. When I was a supervisor, you were deeply involved in

the quality problems because you had to go to audit meetings everyday and you had to address situations that were going on. I think in the last ten or fifteen years I worked there it was probably more important to the country than it was the first fifteen years. When I worked the last few years quality was a big issue out there, because quality, and this goes back to what I said before, quality meant money. If the quality was up then people were buying the cars it was the old concept of GM's in the business to make money. If they made more money by building the quality up then that's what they would do. That's what they did do.

ET: Did you participate in any off site groups?

JB: Now or then?

ET: Then.

JB: Not really, no.

ET: Do you now?

JB: I'm off site all the time now. Yeah, I'm going to a class right now, I just started it last week. it's a motorcycle repair class at General Motors, and the union offer different schooling for retirees and employee. I don't know how effective it is, because they just started it, but it's something if you're bored or you got a little time they offered a class in typing, which I which I would have liked to taken, the entire class in computer. But even though I'm retired there is still things that are available, that I admire the company and the union for doing it. There still thinking about the guy out there to give him something to do, this motorcycle class, I can't make any comment on it, because I only went to one meeting, but it seems like it's going to be something that's going to be interesting for me.

ET: Well good.

JB: They just don't, even though you retired, they don't forget you, so that's a good thing, and the check comes every month so that's okay.

ET: When the van plant closed, how did you feel about that.

JB: I was sorry to see that happen, because that was a nice little plant. It was quiet, it was in the background a little bit. It was a real nice place to work, but you could see it coming because this van, the whole time I was there, never changed. It was always the same body style, the same product. There was just never any change in the van they built there. It was a little awkward to get there, because there was no access to the place. You had to go through a tunnel to get there, or you had to walk through the car plant. When you went to work you had to give yourself an extra half an hour to walk back there. It was always like a back door place. I really wasn't happy to see it close, because it had a real nice slow, laid-back pace attitude. Even though the work was good and the quality was always good, but there was just no improvements to it, no change in the body style, and I think it was just

destined to eventually fall down.

ET: How do you feel about the GM plants in Mexico?

JB: Well you know I'm not going to like them.

ET: Yeah.

JB: But I understand the concept of it, but there is a gripe about it. You go across the river and the EPA standards are so different, there is no way we can compete with them. It's so ironic, and I will give you an example, I love the Volkswagen Beetle, they built it down there, and they drive it down there, but we're not allowed to buy them and drive them here, because they won't meet our EPA standards. You go across the river, same air blowing back and forth. My idea is that we are being cheated by the United States government because they set such high EPA standards for us, and you could build a plant down there and you can dump raw sewage into the river, where we can't do that, and don't want to do that. So it costs us more money to purify the water. We have to filter our air, they don't, and they can pay them a few dollars an hour compared to somebody here. So definitely I don't like the idea, but I could understand it. Although, now I'm hearing, that the Mexican government is having trouble, because companies are building a lot of the cars in Korea. They are even more backward, or whatever you want to call it, than even Mexico. It all comes around eventually. But definitely I don't like the idea.

ET: How did the workers feel about NAFTA agreement?

JB: I don't think most of the workers were for NAFTA because we really didn't understand it. About NAFTA, the union was against it, so basically the people were against it. But whether it was good or not, I couldn't tell you now.

ET: What do you think about the installation of robots into productions?

JB: It's gotta happen, it going to happen. There's no way to get around that, that's going to happen. Plus, some of the jobs that the robots do are jobs that really aren't able to be done by human beings. I mean they lift these big panels up and weld them in one little operation. Then the down side to them is there's a lot of maintenance on them. There's a lot of technical maintenance, so they still have to have people, a big work force just to keep these robots going. But as far as robots, you got to have them and it's going to happen more and more and it's just something you have to live with. I always think about, when I think about these robots in the situation in the work force, if you ever watched these old movies on the Chinese how they would build railroads. It would take ten and thousands of them to do what a machine could do today, so progress is progress. You couldn't be laying railroad tracks the way they did it with the work force they had years ago. Look at the way they would harvest wheat, with a horse and buggy, you can't do that forever.

ET: How well do you think the company handled layoffs?

JB: In which way?

ET: Do you think they handled it well, do you think that it wasn't taken personally when things would happen?

JB: General Motors, or any company, never had any control over layoffs, it's all about car sales and economics. If things are good, you'll work sixty or seventy hours a week, if things are bad, you're going to be laid off. But the union was smart in having a supplemental income. Layoffs were a little traumatic, because you had to wait two or three weeks for your unemployment and sub-check to get there. The problem people had with layoffs is, and I'm in the same boat, you're spending your money as you make it and if you don't put money aside a layoff is going to affect you because you wait three or four weeks on a check. I think the company and union, they didn't lay you off because they wanted to, it was just the way it was.

ET: Do you ever socialize after work?

JB: After work?

ET: Or socialize anywhere with any of your other employees?

JB: No. When I was on supervision, they definitely didn't want you to do that. If you're friends with somebody that work for you and you have to step up to them on a discipline situation, you don't want to be friends with someone you may have to confront because of work. So I never really bothered with too many guys that I worked with, not that I didn't want to but it just wasn't good sense. As far as hourly, we worked together, most of the guys, and I liked them and I had a lot of fun with them but when you went home they had different lifestyles so didn't really bother with them too much.

ET: Was there a time of for a lot of comradely out at the plant itself?

JB: Yeah, that's one thing I miss the most about the work, the guys I worked with, because you had fun while you were there. You were there eight or ten hours a day so yeah you had a friendship there, but like I said most of the time when you left the plant you left your friendships there too. At least I did.

ET: What changes have you noticed in management style over the years?

JB: Well management, one thing I'll say about them, and I'll say it in a complimentary way, they were always flexible. Like I mentioned before, if times were bad they could be aggressive, if times were good they were wanting to be your friend. That's the way of business, and some of the techniques they used can still be used today. I don't have the business now, but the business that I started, the same philosophies and techniques could be used there. You'd push the people when you had to and you'd back off and be friends with them when you don't have to. If you're not willing to do that, I mean you can't be the same all the time when you're manager, there's no way you can do that. If you have to fire

or discipline someone because they're not doing the work, then you have to do that. You have to be able to face that.

ET: What changes did you notice when women were introduced as coworkers?

JB: I really didn't see a big change. I know a lot of the guys corrected their language and stuff. The only problem I think they have with the women is naturally they couldn't do certain jobs that the men could do, so sometime believe it or not, you can talk on and on. That a subject you can go on for hours, but sometimes the women coming in the work force was better for us, because if they went on a job and they couldn't do it and then they try to put a man on the job, sometimes the jobs would change because the women couldn't do the same work. So some of the jobs became easier. I was a manager for awhile, some of the jobs had to be set up thinking, well what if a woman goes on there, how are they going to do it. So some of the jobs were lightened up somewhat because of the possibility that a woman might have to do that job. I think in that respect women coming in the plant really helped the work force.

ET: Any regrets with your choice, as far as working?

JB: Which one working or quitting? Quitting was great.

ET: How was working?

JB: Working, I was very happy out there. There was times I didn't want to go to work, but as far as being sorry I worked there, I was lucky I did, because I retired at forty-nine years old and I could never have done that at any other job. As far as retirement, I retired maybe a little bit too early, I retired at forty-nine with thirty years. I probably should have worked a few more years, only because the kids, my kids in my case, they still had needs that I was responsible for. After I retired I had two weddings that were expensive, and I had a car that I cosigned for one of the daughters that she didn't make any payments on. A few other things that happened, that if I still worked you could always pick up a little overtime to make some extra money. Well when you retire you're on the old cliché, "fixed income," As far as regrets? No I was glad I worked there and I would do it again if I had to.

ET: So have you enjoyed retirement?

JB: So far. Sometimes I'm too busy. The only regret I have right now is I want to move to a warmer climate and I have problems with that, because the family is still in the area. It's just a matter of time. I'm not saying I want to move to Florida, but I would like to move where the winters aren't so bad. Because when you retire you get your money regardless of where you live, your check is going to come to you. So why be in the Snow Belt when you could be in the Sun Belt? But I gotta face that with my wife someday. Now she didn't like me being retired.

ET: Really? Why not?

JB: Well I was getting underfoot. She's used to having her own little thing at the house, and now she's got someone in her way. It's been long enough we've gotten over that.

ET: I appreciate your time.

JB: That's it?

ET: That's it. Thanks a lot.

JB: Come on, I could tell you more.

ET: What do you want to say, anything else you would like to say, it's more than welcome?

JB: Not really. No I think the whole key to working out there, and I don't know if some of the the other people, the key to working out there is keeping your mind off the place, which I always did. If you thought about your job all day long you'd go nuts out there, or if you tried to compete with some of your coworkers. I always found that strange, because you're working with six or eight guys at work in a group, one of them will live in a mansion, one of them will live in a trailer, one of them will have money, one of them will be broke, and it was always strange to see guys making the same amount of money will have such extreme lifestyles. I still don't have an explanation for that but I guess it's the old saying; you give one guy a dollar and another guy a dollar, they're going to do different things with the dollar. You'd never find two people that lived identical out there, although they worked the same. So I thought that was strange, but that's going back on human nature.

ET: Thanks a lot.