

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown

Personal Experiences

O.H. 2076

Laura Scott O'Brien

Interviewed By

Heidi Scott

On

March 14, 2003

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: LAURA SCOTT O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Heidi Scott

SUBJECT: GM Lordstown

DATE: March 14, 2003

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S: This is an interview with Laura O'Brien for the Youngstown State University Oral History Lordstown project by Heidi Scott in Masury at Laura's house on March 14, 2003 at approximately 1:00 p.m. Thank you for doing the interview Laura. Our first questions are about background information, so first, where and when were you born?

O: I was born December 30, 1970 in Sharon, Pa.

S: Can you tell me about your family?

O: [Laughs] I have a mom and dad and they are wonderful. I have two older brothers and I had a dog. We are a very loving family.

S: Are you married?

O: Yes, I'm married and I have five children, four stepchildren and one of my own.

S: What was it like growing up in your community?

- O: Very work-oriented. Pushed to work. I don't know, what was it... It was nice. We had a nice community, nice neighbors. We weren't scared to play outside and go for walks and do things like we are now. Everybody watched out for everybody then.
- S: What did your parents do?
- O: My mom stayed at home and raised all of us kids and dad worked at General Motors.
- S: What is your educational background?
- O: I graduated from high school and then I went on to four years of college and I have a Bachelor's of Science in psychology and sociology.
- S: Now, I understand you had worked at GM and I was just wondering some of your experiences with that, but first what were your work experiences prior to Lordstown.
- O: Oh my gosh. I taught pre-school for about a year and a half.
- S: Anything you'd like to share.
- O: I was a supervisor for TCBY while I went through college. I worked in retail for a couple of years and I did work at Western Psych Hospital in Pittsburgh, which was a part of my degree work.
- S: So, a little bit of everything.
- O: Yes.
- S: How did you get your job at the plant?
- O: I had applied because my father had told me that there were some possible openings and that they were planning on hiring. I applied and out of the blue I got the phone call, but I had worked there before as a summer hire when I was going through college. They did mention that when they called.
- S: So you worked first during the summer and then after your degree you got hired full-time?

O: Yes.

S: Did that have anything to do with your dad working there, do you think?

O: The summer hire did. The second time when I got hired, I don't think so, because I had to go through a big, long testing process the second time.

S: The first time you didn't have the big process.

O: No, no.

S: It was the second time.

O: It was the second time.

S: Why did you seek employment at the plant?

O: Because I had a goal in mind. My husband and I were getting married and we wanted to build a big house and basically that was why.

S: So, money talks?

O: [Laughs] It was the money. That's why.

S: When were you hired?

O: I want to say... I know it was in March of 1995. I'm pretty sure.

S: And, you quit when?

O: I quit... it would have been the start of 1999. January 1999.

S: Do you know if the hiring process has changed since you were hired?

O: I really don't know.

S: When you were there, were there periodic drug tests after the initial hire?

O: Yes. Not on me personally, but I heard about it for other people, yes.

S: Could you describe your first job at Lordstown?

O: [Laughs] Ah, yes. I worked on the motor line. I had to snap in harnesses, which are a bunch of plugs. Oh, there were about probably ten different plugs I had to plug in on the motor itself, but then I was bumped around a lot. I also put in air conditioners. Oh gosh, I can't even think of everything. Alternators, that was the other one and various little things. Oh, the tires. I did do tires on the line.

S: You were bumped around a lot, so you had a lot of different jobs.

O: Yes. At first, yes.

S: Could you describe a typical day at work?

O: I'm going to start after I was put on regular chassis line. Get there early in the morning. I'd leave my house about 5:00 a.m. and walked in about ten to 6:00 a.m. or five to 6:00 a.m. I walked to my job and the line actually started moving at 6:18 a.m., but I had to get all my gloves on. I put three pairs of gloves on myself, because my hands were little and they got blisters real easy. I put on three pairs of gloves and got all my guns and strapped on my belt that I had to wear with all my tools in it. Then, the line would move and we'd work. I can't remember how much time there was, but we could, you know, take a bathroom break and then somebody else would fill in while you went to the bathroom or whatever. Then, we would take a break for lunch. It was like hurry up and rush to sit down somewhere if you could sit for a while. And then it would just be back on the job until like 3:30 p.m., 4:00 p.m. sometimes.

S: So, it was 6:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., it was ten hour days?

O: Yeah, at that point.

S: How did you adjust to the assembly line?

O: Oh, it wasn't easy. It was hard because your back hurt, your hands hurt. Everything hurt every single day. The walking, I had to get used to. I never walked so much in my life. The people were pretty nice though. For the most, it wasn't too bad because the people were really nice, you know, try to help you out in any way they could just to get you used to a job.

S: What kind of car did you produce when started working at Lordstown?

O: The Cavalier. Well, it was the Chevy Cavalier and the Pontiac Sunfire and then was added the Toyota Cavalier. So, I actually built the Toyota Cavalier, which a lot of people didn't know about. On that one, it got the same thing as our regular Cavalier, except everything was in Japanese or Chinese. It was Japanese and we had to put Toyota symbols on everything. There was no English allowed on the car at all and it was the actual Toyota symbol that we had to stick on or put on, and it was reversed. Everything was put on the same, but the driver side was on the opposite side. We put them on the right-hand side.

S: Do they still do that?

O: I don't know. I have no idea.

S: That's interesting. I had never heard of that. What problems might you have encountered in a typical workday?

O: Do you mean like myself personally or just on the line itself?

S: Anything, because if the line stops, how does that affect you?

O: Well, if the line stopped we just had to sit and wait and you'd hear rumors of a car floating off in the dipper in the primer where they dip them down or like something would break down. See, I worked on the chassis side and then there was another that was like the body. There was the body shop. I forget the name of the other side. It was harder, though, over there. A lot of times things would happen over there and it was pretty much just waiting

around because you couldn't leave. You couldn't do anything, you just had to wait at your job to see if the line started back up. Sometimes, they'd say you get to go home early, which was great.

S: How safe do you think the plant is?

O: How safe? I think it was very safe because I know myself, I always had to wear protective eye, you know, like sunglasses, very special ones. I always wore ear protection. I always had my hands covered. I know a lot of the older people who had been there, they like refused to, which I think that was pretty bad. I'm sure it was their pride more, but I think it was pretty safe.

S: Do you think there are any health risks from working there?

O: Not so much where I worked, but I'm sure like in the paint section where there are fumes. I know they do wear masks. In other areas, it's hot. Probably that one, you know, they didn't have air conditioning and in the summer it's always twenty degrees higher in the plant, which makes a difference because you are sweating more and it's harder to breathe. No, I never had a problem.

S: How do you feel about race and gender relations in the plant?

O: I never thought about it.

S: So you didn't think it was an issue or anything?

O: No.

S: What are your thoughts concerning a woman general manager?

O: Oh, I wouldn't have a problem with it. Now, I know they didn't, like, we never called them managers. We always had supervisors. Now, there were more men supervisors. There were

a few women, but I think that the majority of men there would have a hard time listening to a woman.

S: Do you think that was a concern?

O: Yeah, for the older workers.

S: For the ones who have been there for a long time...

O: The older guys who have been there a long time, yes.

S: While you were there, I don't know if there were any layoffs. If there were, how do you feel the company handled them?

O: Let me see. I know while I was there the whole plant was laid off for like two weeks and it was in October. I don't know what year. It was because something happened outside of the plant. It wasn't the plants fault. It was just somebody was on strike.

S: Out on a strike?

O: Yeah, so we got laid off there, but then we were paid for it and then they called us back only two weeks later, which I enjoyed my layoff. As far as I know, when I was there I never knew anybody to get laid off. They were always bringing more people in to help for anything. I saw summer hires get laid off. That was always normal for summer hires, but nobody permanent or full time.

S: What do you think about GM employee benefit's package?

O: Oh, best in the world.

S: Really?

O: Yes, that was the one thing that I miss the most from when I quit and it took a year to quit because of the benefits. It was great, especially having five children and because also they



covered stepchildren. They were all covered under my policies and it was the best. They had everything. I have nothing now. [Laughs]

S: [Laughs] How do you feel about the GM plants in Mexico?

O: I don't like that. [Laughs] No, just because why couldn't they keep it here, you know, to help our people.

S: During the 1990s the van plant closed, describe how you felt about that.

O: I was sad. It had already closed, though, from what I remembered. I just used to listen to what other people said and they were really upset about it, because they said it was a close knit group over there. It was sad, though. Oh, oh, I can say this myself, because I own a van that after it moved or they closed the one in Lordstown, and I had to buy a van that was built somewhere else. It wasn't built as well, which I really believe that, yes, because I can compare just from my parents van that had been built at Lordstown compared to my van that was built somewhere else and I had so many problems.

S: Oh...

O: Of course, my parents had their van for probably twelve years with hardly ever anything ever went wrong with it and from day one that I had mine I had nothing but problems, still true to this day too. [Laughs]

S: Wow. Did the introduction of robots affect your job?

O: No. They were already there.

S: Did you feel secure in your position?

O: I really can't say secure because I was low seniority. I was considered low seniority and I knew that I could be bumped, but I was secure with what I was doing and I know I could do a job.

S: There is always that chance of being bumped?

O: Yes, yes.

S: How effective do you think your local union representative was?

O: He was effective. I can't remember his name. He was the guy who died. Oh, everybody loved him.

S: Was it Al Sharpton or something?

O: I can't remember, but (inaudible). I know everybody loved him. I really didn't know him. He would come by and say hi, but everybody else said that he did great things for us. I was just kind clueless. [Continuous laughs] I just knew that I was in the union and they protected me.

S: How well did union leadership represent the workers?

O: Very well. They were always fighting for us for everything, and I didn't know why because I thought we had good benefits and everything there. They did a lot. They really did. That's how we got such good benefits, because they fought for us.

S: They fought for you?

O: Yes, yes.

S: How active were you in the union?

O: I wasn't active at all. I paid my dues. That was about all I knew. I'd get a book every now and then, but never really read it. [Laughs] I just paid my dues and that was it. They'd ask sometimes to go help out with charity functions and that, but I never could because of the kids.

S: Were you ever involved in any of the strikes?

O: No.

S: No.

O: No.

S: How do you think the union has changed over time?

O: They have become more powerful. Some things I think they are a little outrageous about. I don't really know, because I was never in that.

S: And, you were there for a short period of time, so...

O: Yeah.

S: Just a few questions about the future. How do you feel about the new paint line? That's kind of going to become the new line.

O: I didn't even know about the new line.

S: [Laughs]

O: I don't really pay that much attention. I'll catch whatever they have on T.V., but I didn't know. I don't know what it is.

S: What advice would you have for a new comer to come into the plant?

O: Just be so ready to do anything. Be open-minded about a lot of stuff. Just listen to people. Watch what you say. Just take in what the old-timers have to say because they do know what they are talking about and what is going on.

S: Is there anything else you would like to add?

O: No.

S: Okay. Well, thank you for your time and for doing this interview.