

O.H. 2098

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown Project

Personal Experiences

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Walt Constant

Interviewed By

Nekia Hilson

On

April 22, 2003

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Interviewee: Walt Constant

Interviewer: Nekia Hilson

Subject: GM Lordstown

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H: This is an interview with Walt Constant for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Lordstown, General Motors by Nekia Hilson at the Lordstown Plant, on 4-22, 2003 at 4 o'clock PM. Mr. Constant, can you tell me where and when you born?

C: I was born on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1947 in Greensburrough, Alabama.

H: Can you tell me a little bit about your family?

C: Ok, my mother was a homemaker. My father was a contractor. He'd build houses, was a carpenter.

H: Did you have any sisters or brothers?

C: I have five brothers and, uh, onc sister.

H: You said you grew up in Alabama. What was the community like?

C: Well we actually grew up out in the country. I mean, it was a rural area. That was base about it. Just, um, out in the country.

H: And what is your educational background?

C: I have high schooling, two years of college.

H: And can you tell me what your work experiences were prior to Lordstown?

C: I worked for General Motors at Willowrun, Michigan for twenty-two years. Uh, that's the only job I had before comin' to Lordstown.

H: Ok, so you've always, now when did you get employed at GM?

C: I got employed at GM in, uh, July the 16<sup>th</sup>, 1970.

H: And how old were you at this time?

C: Twenty-two.

H: Now what made you decide to go get a job at General Motors.

C: Well at the time, that was the best place to work because they was hirin' and that was in the early 70s and I needed a job.

H: And how did you get your job out at the plant?

C: I just fill an application, uh, in fact, I fill an application that morning, took a physical that afternoon, started to work that same night.

H: And have you seen the hiring process change over time.

C: Well yes, the process changed because before everything was done right at the plant. Now they have a independent company that, uh, does the interview and hiring people, so it's a big change from that.

H: Tell me a little bit about when you first started your, um, hiring process. Um, tell me a little bit about the test that you took.

C: There was no test. All you did was have a physical and...

H: When you say physical, what did you make you do for your physical?

C: Well, they just did examination on me, you know, a medical physical, that was it. You know, you fill out the application, but there was no tests at all.

H: Now you were talking about outside hiring for the process today and do want to include that you are in management, is that correct?

C: Yes.

H: Now what is your job responsibilities for management?

C: I'm a business manager for, uh, the trim department, first shift. Uh, Responsibility, manpower, quality, also working between the relationship with the union. Really the day-to-day operation on first shift, I do it all.

H: Um, can you take us on a mentally walk through General Motors as far as what your duties are? Can you take us on a typical day? Can you describe to us?

C: Well sure, ok. We start out at 6:30 in the mornin'. We have a departmental meetin'. Talk about, you know, the activities the day before and what we did wrong what we need to work on. Uh, we talk about how we left the shift that work after us. You know, how we left them and the things that we need to correct. After that, at 7 o'clock, I start manpower. Each supervisor call in, give manpower. I set the manpower. That take about an hour. After than, just pace on the floor, runnin' the floor. Make sure that the, the productivit get done, quality, and like I said, my relationship with the union. I do all of that.

H: You said you have a relationship with the union. Is that correct?

C: Yes.

H: Now what is the relationship between management and union?

C: Well, I think it all depend on the management person and the union person. I have a great workin' relationship with my union, uh, counterpart. He calls me and we understand each other and we just get along great but it's not that way all over the plant.

H: And have you seen labor, labor relations, and management relations change over time?

C: Yes. Uh, if you go back and look at the 70s and 80s, I mean, everything was a dog fight between management and union but, I think things have really improved over the years.

H: Ok, and during the 70s, I have heard that plant supervisors were called, um, Gestapo. Have you heard of that name?

C: Yes, I've heard of that name and it happened sometimes. Like I've said, for my first 22 years, I came out of Michigan and it was a little different than Lordstown. I read about some of the horror stories at Lordstown, but they have really changed since I been at Lordstown.

H: Can you give us an example of some of the horror stories you've heard?

C: Well, I mean, I've heard how, uh, the people just didn't respect management and management didn't respect the union and just about anything that came up, you know, they had what they call a wild strike. I mean a wildcat strike. People walked out of the plant. There was just no respect for each other.

H: And how do you feel about the infamous wildcat strike in 1972?

C: Well, I mean, that's no way to settle anything. I mean, all it does it just create more hostility and everything. But, my opinion, that's not that way you need to settle any kinda problem that you have.

H: Now prior to comin' to Lordstown, you mentioned that you worked in Michigan. Can you see a big difference between Michigan and Lordstown, and if so, how.

C: Well, it, it, just the atmosphere or the people. I mean it's just totally different. I think it just devele, you know, where the people came from around here. You have such a mixture of people and I, I was surprised when I came here how different it was, but yes it's certainly different. Just, it's just attitude.

H: When you first started out in Michigan, did you automatically start out as management?

C: No, I was, I worked [unknown] for five years. I was absentee replacement and uh, I guess if you really say so, I got my job in management through my work ethic by working for different supervisors. They recommended that I go into management, which I did.

H: How affective do you feel that the local union representatives are?

C: Well, I think they're quite effective. I mean, they don't, they don't, let management control everything. I think it's a group effort and I'm sincere about that. Basely, anything I do, I talk to my union members before I do it. I don't make decisions alone about manpower movements, any job movements, anything without communicating with the union.

H: When you were in Michigan, were you involved in the union.

C: No.

H: No? And um, do you recall the other strike, any other strikes that happened throughout the plant, throughout General Motors?

C: Well, the only, the only strike we had was in 1970, about two months after I hired in. That's when, you know, GM went on strike, was down for two months. But basely, that was the only thing, only time I been involved in any kind of strike in my 33 year history.

H: Ok, now, um, do you recall the 92, out at Lordstown?

C: No, because I didn't come to Lordstown until October 92, so that was done when I got there.

H: Ok. And when you started out working in Michigan, what kind of car did you guys produce?

C: We started out, we had a lotta cars. We had the Chevy, Chevy Nova, the Pontiac [unknown]. Those was the first two cars I started buildin' when I first started workin' for GM. Over the years it's so many. I don't think I could name all the car we built.

H: And when you came to Lordstown in 92 of October, what kind of cars did Lordstown produce?

C: We had the Cavalier and the Sunfire. Same as we have now.

H: Ok. Now that you're a management, how is the relationship between management and workers?

C: Well, I think it depend on the management person. I'm not sayin' that, uh, I'm so different. But, I mean, you gotta be a people person. You gotta try to understand the people and work through issues. Uh, is, is better, but you still have some management still from the old school and some union officials from the old school and don't wanna

change. But I mean, it's a change in time now and you just got to learn to work through issues.

H: Now what problems might you encounter in a typical day?

C: Well, I mean, you can, you can count on a lotta thing. They do, um, you can count on people that, uh, don't wanna perform the jobs correctly that you, you gotta deal with, uh, basely, I don't deal one-on-one with individual worker because I have eleven supervisor that work under me. But, uh, it's just a lotta thing I have to intervene in. Like if a supervisor make a mistake, I get called in to help correct those mistakes, so, you really couldn't name all they things we go through on a eight hour day.

H: Now hypothetically, if you have an employee who's having a problem with one of your supervisors and they go to talk to you, how do you resolve the issue?

C: Well, basely I, first of all, I would, I would call the union representative. He and I and the person and the supervisor would sit down and talk it out. See if we can work it out. Uh, I, I basely never set down one on one with a individual unless I have a union official there too and, uh, it just good practice and, uh, it save alotta problem down the road. But most time, we able to work out our problems on first shift.

H: What are some of the issues you think that management faces today that they didn't face in the 70s?

C: I think one thing management face now, people are more educated, the workers are more educated. They're more smarter, they understand the contract. But before it was all management controlled everything. Do this, do that, but now the people have a say-so in the thing they get done. They have a say-so at job set up and everything else, so, like I said, the people are more educated and more involved and everything now.



H: Do you think this is because of GM's new programs where they have the higher education learning program where they basically pay for employees to go back to college?

C: Well I think that could be part of it. Also another issue you have, right now the job situation. You know, it's tough to get a good job pay the kind of money General Motors pays. So people, even though they have an education, they can't find a job within their field, so they chose to work, you know, to hire in.

H: Do you feel that a lot of employees are taking advantage of the new program as far as going back to college?

C: I don't think enough take advantage of it. I mean, you, you look at the, the issue there. I mean, General Motors pay for 100% your education. I think more of the young kids should take advantage and go back to college, but I definitely don't think enough kids does that.

H: I noticed you, um, refer to kids. Is there a generation gap where you see some of the old employees who are about to retire to some of the new hires? Do you see as generation gap between them?

C: Oh, certainly! Because if you, uh, look at right now, you have probably 50% of the people hired in and 7 are available for retirement this year. So yes, this is generation gap and then if you look next bunch of hires was 77, so sure you have a generation gap.

H: And how do you feel between, um, gender relationships? Do you encounter any problems with gender issues as far as the women in the work force?

C: Personally, I don't. I mean, I look at it this way, if a woman done the things she did to deserve the job, then there's no problem from me. I really don't care whether I

work for a male or female. I work with a male or female. I mean, we all there for thing, to do a job. So it's no big deal to me.

H: Now does racism exist out at GM?

C: Yes.

H: And can you tell me about the first time you encountered racism out at General Motors?

C: Well, the first thing I encountered when I first came in in management when they had a FEPC rep. I never had that at Willow Run because we never had racism problems there.

H: Now what's a FEPC rep?

C: Fed, it's Federal Employment, uh, wait a minute I gotta hold this a minute let me think about it how they...

H: Ok, go ahead.

C: The FEPC rep just makes sure that everyone treated fairly. Uh, you know, there's no discrimination, I mean between, you know, black or white, male or female, so basely that's what the FEPC rep is. Make sure we don't discriminate against people, you know, chooses what kind of jobs they get and things like that. So that's what that person does.

H: Ok, can you go back and tell me when the first time was you encounter racism out at GM?

C: Well, I mean, you can go back even to the, to the 70s when I got hired in and look at some of the jobs that, you know, different people was put on. See like sometimes you might have been chosen by color, you known, or what hard of job you was given and

things like that. And if you look at the Lordstown plant right now, you look around, they're some of the people are promoted by, you know, their race.

H: Now recently you guys encountered a lay-off for a week. Do you feel that affected General Motors?

C: Well of course. Any time you lay off because, uh, you know, not sellin' cars [unknown] supply's high. Of course it does. I mean it effect the stock, I mean it effect, uh, people mind on spendin' because people not gonna go out and buy cars if they're laid off. So yes, it goes effect General Motors.

H: And how do you feel that the company handled the lay off?

C: Well, I thought it was handled very well. I mean, people was informed three or four weeks ahead of time, so they had time to make preparation for the lay off. It wasn't like we came in on Monday mornin' said you gettin' laid off on Friday. You know, so, everyone knew in advance they was gettin' laid off.

H: And what do you think about GM's employee benefit packages?

C: I think they have a excellent package. I can't really complain about it. You think about it, after one-year seniority, you get 95% of your pay if you get laid off, so how can you knock that?

H: What are some of the other perks of the benefits?

C: Well then if you look at the medical benefits that you have. Like I said, you have education benefit. You can take advantage job. It's, it's alotta good things there that you can take advantage of out there. The employees seek the right things to do.

H: Do you feel that foreign steel dumping has impacted the plant?

C: There's no doubt about it because they sell steel for a cheaper price. Same thing if you look at the foreign automotive company. They come and in right now sellin' cars at a cheaper price. They build them at a cheaper price than we can do and, sure, they just takin' over.

H: And how have the influx of imported vehicles impacted the plant?

C: Well, I mean you look at the, the market share right now. At one time, General Motors had 60 to 70 percent of the market share. Now they down to less than 30%. So I mean, it had a big impact on all the American automotive companies right now.

H: And how do you feel about GM plants in Mexico or abroad?

C: I guess I never thought about it too much. I understand that, uh, they, they have those plants over there and um, it's cheaper labor and that's one of the advantages to havin' a plant in Mexico. But really and truly, I really haven't thought about it too much.

H: In the long run, do you see this helpin' General Motors in America?

C: No, I can't see it helpin' us because it's takin' work away from American people. Any time you go, go foreign with anything.

H: Now you weren't here when the van plant closed, but have you heard anything about that?

C: Well, I came in right when the van plant closed. I came in the same year they closed it then. Yes, I heard alotta things about the [inaudible].

H: And do you know why they closed the van plant?

C: Honestly, I don't because, uh, talkin' to the people they thought they did everything right. They got the qualiti where it need to be, and I guess they thought they

had a commitment from GM to keep the van plant open. But it end up then goin' to Michigan. I don't know the real reason they made that decision,

H: Now with new technology being in force everyday, how do you feel about robots in the work place?

C: I mean, it's a must. Some of the things a robot does, a human body can't do anymore. I mean, the speed, the accuracy, of the, uh, like the welding and the different thing that a robot does. You know, it's impossible to keep up. You know, a human body these days. So yes, we need it.

H: How secure do you feel about your position at General Motors?

C: I feel very secure about my position. I have no, no problem thinkin' that someone can take it away or anything like that. I feel no threats at all.

H: And what's the relationship amongst supervisors and other supervisors or management?

C: Sometime I think it depend on the shift. Uh, alotta things have to do with the shift leader. You know, how management work together as a team. Now you do have people that, you know, I got [unknown] no supervisor, but basely they all get along great. On first shift we try to have a team, like maybe once per month. We have a lunch-in together. And like I say, everyday we do have meetin's together and we work pretty close together. And I think that's the way you gotta be. You gotta hold it together. You can't let management start fighting with each other.

H: And how often do you guys have a meeting with Maureen?

C: We, maybe once every couple months she call a all management meetin', but then she also have what they call a one-on meetin' where so many members of management

might go in and she have like a lunch-in once ever month or so where a chosen few go in. They sit down and talk about issues. So that does happen.

H: And do you feel that this affective?

C: Well sure. Anytime you can sit down with the leadership and talk about some of the issues that, uh, that you feel the management have out there, sure. I mean, they might, might only be one problem you talk about. They take it back and do somethin' with it. But what ever happen, you know, it worth it to sit down and talk about your problems sometime.

H: Now do the personality of GM atmosphere change when they had, went from a man, such as Herman Moss to Maureen?

C: Yes, definitely. Because, I mean, the atmosphere changed. She's so different than Herman. I mean, well Herman was, uh, well, I wouldn't say a hard guy, but, you know, he, he was a tough guy. But Maureen, she, um, more on the lady's side. She got things done, but she got them done in a different way, but yes the plant did change.

H: And did you guys have, did any supervisors or any employces have any problems with a women and coming and takin' of a place of male oriented job?

C: Honestly, I don't think so and I don't see no reason to. I mean, like I said before, I mean she did the right things to make it there, so what different does it make who run the plant. You know, I don't think that made a big different.

H: Just to wrap things up, what types of renovations are being made to the current assembly line?

C: Well, I mean the whole plant changin'. They buildin' a new, uh, paint shop right now. Uh, every department will change. I mean it will be like a brand new plant once

they, uh, get ready for the car. So it's alotta construction goin' on as we do production right now.

H: You mentioned the new car. How do you feel about the new comin' in?

C: Well, it's, it's kinda scary. You can look at it two ways. I mean, it's a more upgraded car than the car we buildin' now, so let's hope it will, uh, it sells. Sometime people looks at the Cavalier as cheap transportation, but this car will be a little bit more expensive than the Cavalier so, you know, it could be a problem, maybe not. I guess we just have to see what the market like once we get on board.

H: Now bringin' in he new car, how will this affect production or will the workers be able to get the same, this new car out, the same amount of time as they were able to get the Cavalier out.

C: Well, no, it'll be a slower line speed. Uh, it'll be alotta changin' in the new car. No doubt about it. I mean because, you know have a, it's just different technology that we buildin' into this car, so. We really gotta see it. We haven't build one yet to really know all the problems that we might have or might not have. So we really start doin' pilot programs.

H: And do you see a future for GM?

C: Well, I thing that GM'll have a future because of being so large, but also it's scary. If you look at all the automotive world, like I said, twenty years ago, General Motors had 50 to 60 percent of the market share right now, now they do to 30 so. I mean, they decreasing everyday.

H: And what advice do you have for new comers comin' into the plant?

C: The only thing I can say for new comers comin' into the plant, I really don't see a future for young kids, you know bein' around 30 to 35 years like, like I have. I just don't think the automotive business would be the same and like I said, right now the technology change. You definitely need to education and things like that to keep up with the time.

H: And is there anything you would like to add to the interview.

C: No, basely I think we said it all. I really don't have any to add.

H: I have one more question. How do you feel about GM hiring outside help, contracting outside help?

C: Well, I think it's a great idea for on reason before there was so much family get family hired in the plant, so that was taken away by GM doin' the outside contra, no had outside contractor and end up being and every company then is basely the same way for years.

H: Now I know you've had perfect attendance for GM, you is that concurrent to your 30 years that you've been there?

C: Yes, I've been with GM be 33 years in July. I never missed an unexcused day. Uh, some people look at it as, um, you're nuts, but I mean, I never been sick or had any kind of problems where I had to take off of work unless I was on vacation or a death in the family.

H: Now has working out at GM affected your family life?

C: No.

H: Ok, I wanna say thank you for takin' time to get, for me to interview you and you have a good day.



C: And you're welcome.

[End of Interview]

I HAVE READ AND EDITED THE INTERVIEW AND, BY MY SIGNATURE,  
INDICATE THAT IT IS APPROVED.

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE