

**1 Willie Campbell, an African American, discusses his career as a UAW production worker
2 and skilled trades millwright at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**

3
4
5Earl Nicholson: [recorder clicking] Uh, Earl Nicholson, uh, we're going to move on to a, a
6 different subject now. Um, I'd like to, uh, cover, uh, um, more personal
7 items. [0:19] Um, what, what would you consider, uh, to be your saddest
8 moment in the factory?
9
10Willie Campbell: Um, wow, I don't know. I can't recall what's really been my saddest
11 moment, um, no.
12
13Earl Nicholson: Wow, that's a, I think that's a, that's a, I think that's a, a testament to the
14 type of man that you are and that's a...
15
16Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith. [0:50] Would it be the day you left when you retired or would
17 that be your happier moment or?
18
19Willie Campbell: After I was hired [inaudible 0:57]?
20
21Jerri Smith: [0:58] Like your saddest moment, would it be the day you retired or would
22 it be, that be your happiest moment?
23
24Willie Campbell: That would be the happiest day.
25
26Jerri Smith: Yeah.
27
28Willie Campbell: [laughter] That would be the happiest day I retired. Uh, I don't know. I
29 was so happy to get into skilled trade and, uh, and, you know, I, I just, I
30 was just proud to be there, to be, uh, in, uh, be doing something I really
31 enjoyed doing. I always, always never could, I never had the patience to
32 have to do the same thing over and over. I was – I don't know. I think my
33 saddest thing when, when I had a job when I had to do the same thing
34 every day over and over and I could not [inaudible 1:40].
35
36Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [1:42] So the saddest times were when you were doing
37 production work?
38
39Willie Campbell: Yeah. That was my saddest time. That was my hard time.
40
41Michael Fleming: And then your happiest time was when you finally...
42
43Willie Campbell: Got in to skilled.
44
45Michael Fleming: ...uh, uh, were, uh, were accepted when the OSHA came in and, and set
46 the standards and asked why they didn't have any minorities and you

1 finally got a chance to be in s-, skilled trades and that was one of the
2 happiest times.

3

4Willie Campbell: One of the happiest moments. Then after I got my journeyman's card.

5

6Michael Fleming: Even happier yet.

7

8Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 2:09] Willie Campbell, journeyman millwright.

9

10Earl Nicholson: So, uh, tell us, um, were there any memorable pranks? Earl Nicholson.
11 [2:22] Were there any memorable pranks that, uh, were played on any of
12 the people in your group?

13

14Willie Campbell: Uh, yes. We used to have those gas trucks and have a spark plug and we
15 used to take a little [inaudible 2:35] wire and hook'm up, [tapping]
16 hook'm up to the spark plug, [coughing] put them on the seat and when
17 you start it up it would give you a shock in the butt.

18

19Male: Oh [inaudible 2:44].

20

21Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. You had an awful lot of apprentices [laughter] and
22 apprentices come and apprentices go. [2:53] I'm sure you had something
23 particular that you did with your, or did, or did you, did you have
24 something that you did with each of your apprentices as they came in to
25 your, uh, uh, to be an apprentice under you as a journeyman?

26

27Willie Campbell: Hm. We used to have water fights. [laughter]

28

29Michael Fleming: Tell, tell me about the water fights.

30

31Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 3:16] once we get through work, we used to on Fridays, uh, last
32 day we would take five gallon buckets of water and [inaudible 3:26]. We
33 got the last guy to walk in the shop and we would, we would drown his
34 butt. [laughter] And [laughter] that was – uh, uh, let me see. What's the
35 biggest prank I ever pulled on an apprentice? I can't remember [inaudible
36 3:44] apprentice. I used to have an apprentice I used to call him student
37 all the time.

38

39Michael Fleming: Mm-hm.

40

41Willie Campbell: And, uh, and when he, uh, got to be a journeyman, he, when he finished
42 and he told me [inaudible 3:57] he says, uh, "I'm a journeyman now. I
43 finished my apprenticeship." He says "What's you gonna call me now?"
44 And I, I called him professor. [laughter] He retired and I went to his
45 retirement party on a Saturday and he, and he said, he be tellin' everybody
46 I used to call him student and he says "I used to hate that." And I said

1 “Why didn’t you say something to me?” He says “Well, I didn’t want you
2 to chew me out.” [laughter] [Inaudible 4:26] when I was coming through
3 we used to be rough on them. And, uh, and, um, the old journeymen, boy,
4 they would take you through, through the ropes but they were fair. At one
5 point, that one guy he wasn’t fair with me but, uh, I think that, that really
6 helped me out. I, uh, it’s, I always say if you carry yourself in a way that
7 people can respect you and you respect yourself. People go through life
8 [inaudible 4:56] you walk around with a chip on your shoulder.
9

10 Michael Fleming: Mm-hm.

11

12 Willie Campbell: And I never, my mother said never – and she always used to tell me
13 “There’s nobody on God’s earth any better than you and you no better
14 than anybody.” And I took it to my, my heart. I don’t care who you are,
15 who you come from and what you are, you ain’t no better than I am. Like
16 I had a guy ask me, he told me once, he says, uh, I was in, uh, working in
17 the booth cleaning work and this guy, he says “I wish I was like you.”
18 And I said “What do you mean you wish you were like me? Well, what’s
19 your problem?” He said “Well, when you get dirty, you can’t tell.” I said
20 “Let me tell you one thing, my ass stinks just like yours. I get up every
21 morning, I put my pants on the same way you put your pants on. My wife
22 had a baby the same way your wife had a baby.” I said “The only
23 difference between you and I, your skin is light and mine is dark. I bleed,
24 I die. If I don’t believe in religion, I, I go to hell. If you don’t, you going
25 to hell.” I says “Now what’s the difference?” “Well, I didn’t mean no
26 harm.” “If you didn’t mean no harm, you would’ve never said it.” I said
27 “I’m not a monkey. I don’t hang by my tail. I walk down the street the
28 same way you walkin’.” And he thought I was going to get mad.
29

30 And then I had [inaudible 6:25] I had another guy was my trainee and we
31 were puttin’ a chain together, conveyor chain and sometimes the pin on
32 the conveyor chain it’s flat on one side, it’s flat so we can slide it through
33 and it won’t roll. So he was on the side and I was pushing the pin through
34 the [inaudible 6:45]. I asked him, I says “Is that a slot, uh, uh, flat on that,
35 on that chain linkage or is it round?” He says “No. It’s round as a
36 nigger’s ass.” I was up in the basket, you know, he thought I was going to
37 get down and take a hammer to him. I got down out of the basket. I
38 explained to him, I said “Young man, let me tell you something. You look
39 up in Webster’s Dictionary, Webster’s Dictionary says anybody can be a
40 nigger. Anybody act a fool is a nigger. I asked you a plain simple
41 question.” I said “Now you my nigger.” [laughter] He didn’t know what
42 to say. I said “You don’t believe it, you go home and look in the
43 dictionary.” And I said “You teach your kids not to never call a black man
44 that [inaudible 7:37] get hurt.” I said “I just don’t believe in violence.” I
45 said “I’m gonna tell you the same thing but look in the dictionary. Go
46 home and look in the dictionary if you don’t believe me, see what

1 Webster's says." And after that, him and I were the best of friends but he
2 got, he got [inaudible 7:56]. He, he was scared after he said it. He was
3 shakin'. [Inaudible 8:00].
4
5 I think if you're smart enough, you can take and use words, use common
6 sense and you can embarrass a person more than you can if you was to get
7 violent with them. That's my belief in life.
8
9 Earl Nicholson: So – Earl Nicholson here. So, we're comin' up on retirement now.
10
11 Willie Campbell: Uh-huh. Boy, that's good.
12
13 Earl Nicholson: [8:28] What, uh, what year are we talkin'?
14
15 Willie Campbell: Uh, 14 years ago. I don't know when was that, ninety-, '92, '93.
16
17 Earl Nicholson: '92, '93. [8:44] And, uh, were you looking forward to retirement?
18
19 Willie Campbell: Oh yes. [laughter] Oh yes, I was. I was so – I thought I was so blessed to
20 be able to work [inaudible 8:55] 38 ½ years and be able to retire and I was
21 in good health. I could do anything I wanted to do. I didn't have much
22 money but I had pr-, pretty good health, uh, a good wife, a good home.
23
24 Earl Nicholson: [9:17] Is there, is there anything that you're, that you're doing now outside
25 of the factory now that you're retired?
26
27 Willie Campbell: You mean right now?
28
29 Earl Nicholson: [9:23] Uh, is there anything doing, that you're doing outside of the factory
30 now that you're retired and have any of the skills that you have learned in
31 the factory have they helped you outside of the factory?
32
33 Willie Campbell: No. 'Cause I don't do nothin' but play golf [laughter] and mow my lawn
34 and do my gardenin'. [laughter] No. I, I have done a little welding. I did
35 some welding but, uh, I, um, I just don't want to work no more [inaudible
36 9:52].
37
38 Earl Nicholson: You're fully retired. You put your time in and now you want to, you want
39 to enjoy your [inaudible 9:57].
40
41 Willie Campbell: I want to enjoy every moment. I [inaudible 9:59]. I like to be around
42 people that enjoy life. I like to – that's why, that's why, that's why I like
43 golfing now 'cause out on the golf courses everybody out there the same
44 thing, the same age and the same religion, the same color, you're out there
45 to try to beat that golf course and that's why I love golf so much.
46

1 Gary Judy: Gary Judy. [10:21] So now do you golf with some of your workers that
2 you worked with in the plant?
3
4 Willie Campbell: Oh yes.
5
6 Gary Judy: [10:26] You guys still keep in contact?
7
8 Willie Campbell: Yeah. Mm-hm, mm-hm. [Inaudible 10:30] lot of my guys I golf with. I
9 could golf every day if somebody called me to golf. That's what make my
10 wife so mad. She says "You know too many people. Too many people
11 know you." I tease her sometimes. I say "You know, you're married to a
12 celebrity." [laughter] [Inaudible 10:46]. We was always down in, uh, uh,
13 Alabama and people holler, "Hey Willie, what the hell are you doin' down
14 here." And we was up, way up north.
15
16 Male: [10:57] So you go back to Alabama, Alabama to visit now?
17
18 Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 11:00] my wife has some folks down there. I don't know, none
19 of my peoples, I don't know anybody that live in the south. I [inaudible
20 11:06] of the people that I have living now I have no aunts or uncles on
21 my mom's side or my dad's side. I have my one brother, um, three kids,
22 biological kids, uh, two grandsons, and I think about four or five cousins.
23 That's my [inaudible 11:32]. [tapping]
24
25 Male: [11:32] So you, you, and you don't ever get the urge to go back to...?
26
27 Willie Campbell: No. [laughter] I like to go down there and golf but I have no reason to go
28 down. I don't know nobody [inaudible 11:41].
29
30 Male: [11:41] You don't, you don't want to go back and visit any of your, your
31 former homes or...?
32
33 Willie Campbell: No. I don't know where it's at.
34
35 Male: Oh, okay.
36
37 Willie Campbell: I've never been there. I don't, I don't, [banging] I've never been, I've
38 never been where I was born since my folks left down there over 70 years
39 ago, 70 years ago. I've never been back.
40
41 Male: So you'll be a Michigan...
42
43 Willie Campbell: I have no reason [inaudible 12:01].
44
45 Male: ...be a Michigan man for the rest of your life.
46

1Willie Campbell: Yeah. That's all I know [laughter] [inaudible 12:04].
2
3Male: That's fantastic.
4
5Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 12:10].
6
7Male: Gentlemen, anything else?
8
9Michael Fleming: Absolutely not. Um, I, I think you did a wonderful job, uh, um, taking
10 care of everything we've asked you. Um, this is Mike Fleming. Uh, uh, I
11 did want to ask you this. [12:25] Um, when, when you look at where we
12 are now and, uh, the state of, um, General Motors, what do you, what,
13 what do you think about the future for those individuals that are still
14 working at General Motors? How do you feel about that?
15
16Willie Campbell: Uh, I, every night when I say my prayer I just hope and pray that we can
17 find a way that General Motors can get back together. We have too many
18 young people. Uh, I have my son. I have grandkids. Uh, my son, my
19 youngest son established a home here. He have two sons and there are so
20 many other young people. That, you know, and, and to me I, I just cannot
21 figure out for my life why so, people want to make so much money, you
22 know, these big shots. And it's all right to make the money but why you
23 want to just shut this country down? I, I cannot see why we've been in so
24 much all our, all, everything we do now is coming from Japan, China and
25 that really hurts my heart to see these things happen. Why are we doing
26 this? Why are we selling our country out? We've fought too hard for this
27 country for them to sell everything [inaudible 13:55]. Free trade is fair
28 enough but why make 110% of everything you get over there and we're
29 outta work here. Gas prices going up. Why are these people making, uh,
30 trillions and trillions of dollars and "but I love my country." No, you
31 don't love your country. You love your pocketbook. You don't love, you
32 don't give a damn about this country. You don't give a damn about your
33 neighbor. That's how I feel.
34
35Michael Fleming: Yeah. I, I can understand what you're saying 'cause General Motors, um,
36 has, um, helped build this country.
37
38Willie Campbell: Yeah.
39
40Michael Fleming: When we were in war, I don't know if you [inaudible 14:35].
41
42Willie Campbell: Yeah. I remember when, when they're building shells and [inaudible
43 14:37] over here at, at Olds [inaudible 14:39] WWII when, when they
44 used to have [inaudible 14:43] old plant was there when they were buildin'
45 and Cadillac was, uh, buildin' the motors for, for the tanks and stuff. I
46 remember General Motors did a lot [inaudible 14:55] now why all of a

1 sudden [papers rustling] they got to close down when they used to build
2 everything, trains, buses, cars, refrigerators. Now all of a sudden hey, we,
3 we're broke. Why? You know, somebody [inaudible 15:09] just...
4

5Michael Fleming: Times have changed haven't they?
6

7Willie Campbell: That's what everybody say. I talk to a lot of young people. They say
8 times have changed. You know, things ain't like they used to be.
9 [Inaudible 15:21] things are not like they used to be.
10

11 If my kids were bad, I would whoop their ass. I didn't beat'm, I
12 spanked'm. I never slapped them upside the head. I whooped his butt.
13 Now, kids tell their parents where to go. You see my kids, my son at 49
14 years old he will not tell me where to go. If he did, I would send him
15 where to go. [laughter] I was at, we was in, my wife and I were in the
16 store the other day, [inaudible 15:49] and there was a little boy who was
17 so bad, I mean [inaudible 15:53] running up and down the aisle. [vroom,
18 vroom] His mom got ready to take him home, put him in, in, in his
19 [inaudible 15:59], he was [inaudible 16:00] his mom. I said [inaudible
20 16:03] what the hell are you raising here? [laughter] He's doin' this now,
21 what is he going to be like when he is grown, you know? Why are you
22 raising your kids like this? Why are you raising animals? And I think
23 people have forgotten what parents are. Parents are to teach your child to
24 respect you, to respect other people's property, to get an education and be
25 what you want to be. I got some grand-, well, we have some grandkids,
26 Mike, shoot, we don't even want, great grandkids we don't even want in
27 our house 'cause their p-, parents don't give a damn what they do.
28

29Michael Fleming: Willie, [coughing] has anybody in your family, we talked about benefits
30 earlier, had an opportunity to utilize your TAP benefit, Tuition Assistance
31 Plan?
32

33Willie Campbell: From this plant now?
34

35Michael Fleming: From General Motors, you know, that's one of the benefits that we have.
36 [16:54] Has anyone in your family been able to utilize the Tuition, Tuition
37 Assistance?
38

39Willie Campbell: Uh-uh. My brother, he used to work for General Motors and, uh, uh, but
40 he got fired. He do get some benefits, some little bit but that's about all.
41 The only thing I got – I have a brother-in-law.
42

43Michael Fleming: [17:13] Have any of your kids went to school and used the...?
44

45Willie Campbell: General Motors plan?
46

1Michael Fleming: Yes.
2
3Willie Campbell: Um, no, no. My, my youngest son now, I don't know if that counts or not,
4 he's going to the new plant.
5
6Michael Fleming: Mm-hm.
7
8Willie Campbell: He has to go to school. He's, he's going to be a, setting to be, be a group
9 leader.
10
11Michael Fleming: Okay.
12
13Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 17:33]. He's working on that now.
14
15Michael Fleming: Okay.
16
17Willie Campbell: Chris, uh, Chris, Christopher Campbell.
18
19Michael Fleming: [17:40] Um, Willie, is there anything that we haven't asked you that you
20 would like to talk about?
21
22Willie Campbell: No.
23
24Michael Fleming: [17:50] We pretty much covered it all you think?
25
26Willie Campbell: I just – uh, no, no, no.
27
28Male: Earl, do you got anything?
29
30Earl Nicholson: Um, uh, Willie, thank you for, uh, coming today.
31
32Willie Campbell: Uh-huh.
33
34Earl Nicholson: Um, uh, uh, this, the, the, the interviews that we're doing today, they're
35 going to be, they're, they're, this is mostly research material for Michigan
36 State and this is going to be something that people are going to be able to
37 look back on and they're going to be able to listen to this and they're
38 going to be able to hear your stories and, uh, you know, and it's, it's
39 important that we get this information.
40
41Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 18:23].
42
43Earl Nicholson: And I just want to thank you, uh, [inaudible 18:25] thank you and the rest
44 of the committee thanks you.
45
46Male: Thank you Willie.

1
2Male: Thank you.
3
4Willie Campbell: And I'll be looking for some [inaudible 18:29] from your wife.
5
6Male: Yeah. [laughter]
7
8Michael Fleming: Willie, I got a question for you. [recording clicking] [18:34] When you
9 retired, Willie, what did they, what did they give you? Did they give you
10 – this is Mike Fleming talking. Did they give you a Fisher Body Coach?
11 And through the years you worked here, what did they give you? Did they
12 give you any rings? What did you get from Fisher Body [inaudible
13 18:45]?
14
15Willie Campbell: I, I got, I got, a, a, a Coach, you know, and, uh, they give me that. Um,
16 each 25 years, you know, you get, uh, I, I got a watch and then I used to
17 get those little [inaudible 18:59]. And, uh, the guys were real good there.
18 I mean I, I got an ice fishin', uh, tent. I got ice fishin' poles. I, I got more
19 money than, uh, when I retired than anybody retired from skilled trade. I
20 was out of skilled, uh, retired for five years and I had colon cancer and,
21 uh, they taken out 22 inches of my colon. I'm fortunate they got it all out.
22 And that's something they generally don't do when, once you retire they
23 don't take up but I got over \$700 from the people that I worked with.
24
25Male: They collected to give it to you.
26
27Willie Campbell: Mm-hm, mm-hm. And every time something happened now, they always
28 do. I'd be the first one they call. Willie, come do this and Willie do this
29 and that's why I say, you know...
30
31Male: You were very...
32
33Willie Campbell: ...if you carry yourself.
34
35Male: You were very well liked in the, in the plant. I just wondered, you know,
36 you said you got the 25-year ring. You got, uh, the Fisher Body Coach
37 which...
38
39Willie Campbell: Mm-hm.
40
41Male: ...has got emeralds and whatnot on it and you, you got some other things.
42 At 15 and 10 years did you get anything at all?
43
44Willie Campbell: No. We didn't get anything [inaudible 20:17].
45
46Male: Okay. [Inaudible 20:18].

1
2Willie Campbell: If I did, it's been such a long time [inaudible 20:19].
3
4Male: So when you got to 20 years you started...
5
6Willie Campbell: [Inaudible 20:21].
7
8Male: ...getting stuff.
9
10Willie Campbell: 25 I had a watch.
11
12Male: You said an ice fishing tent, like an ice fishing shanty?
13
14Willie Campbell: Yeah. Ice fishing shanty.
15
16Male: [20:29] Did they give you that, the Company gave you that?
17
18Willie Campbell: No. Uh-uh. [Inaudible 20:32] my workers did.
19
20Male: When you retired.
21
22Willie Campbell: Uh-huh, when I retired.
23
24Male: Oh. [squeaking]
25
26Male: Okay, Willie. Thanks a lot for coming, brother.
27
28Male: [Inaudible 20:38] fantastic. Thank you.
29
30Willie Campbell: Yeah. [recorder clicking]
31
32
33/mlc