

John Couthen, an African American, discusses his career as a UAW production worker and GM manager at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI

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5 Marilyn Colter: Lansing Fisher Body Historical Team Interview. Today is Tuesday, May
6 31st, 2006. The time is approximately 10:00 a.m. We are at the Lansing
7 Delta Plant, and today we are talking – we will first introduce the team.
8
9 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher.
10
11 Marilyn Coulter: And I'm Marilyn Coulter. Today we're interviewing John Couthen.
12 [0:21] John, will you please state your name and spell it for us, please?
13
14 John Couthen: John Couthen, C-O-U-T-H-E-N.
15
16 Marilyn Coulter: [0:28] And your address, please?
17
18 John Couthen: 2100 Ridgeline Drive, Lansing, Michigan.
19
20 Marilyn Coulter: [0:33] Are you married?
21
22 John Couthen: Yes, I am.
23
24 Marilyn Coulter: [0:35] And do you have children?
25
26 John Couthen: Yes, I do.
27
28 Marilyn Coulter: [0:37] And they are boys?
29
30 John Couthen: Two boys, uh, ages 23 and 21.
31
32 Marilyn Coulter: [0:41] Now, where were you born?
33
34 John Couthen: I was born right here in Lansing.
35
36 Marilyn Coulter: Oh. [0:46] And now what was your education level?
37
38 John Couthen: I am six credit hours – or, excuse me, six classes shy of my bachelor's
39 degree in finance, so it's within sight now. Been workin' on that since
40 2000, um little bit at a, at a time. So I'm lookin' forward to knockin' that
41 out here in the next 12 months.
42
43 Marilyn Coulter: Well, you've been very busy. [chuckling]
44
45 John Couthen: Mm-hm.
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: Your plate is full. [1:10] Now, um, were you in the military?
2

3 John Couthen: Nope, never spent any time in the military.
4

5 Marilyn Coulter: Okay. [1:15] And what did your parents do?
6

7 John Couthen: My father was, uh, a material handler at Oldsmobile here in Lansing.
8 Eventually he migrated to the Oldsmobile Transportation Group as an
9 [over-the-road 1:27] semi driver bringing parts from the [stamping 1:31]
10 plant to the body plant. My mother was a sh-, a shipping clerk at the SPO
11 Plant here in Lansing.
12

13 Marilyn Coulter: [1:40] S-, so you've been real familiar with General Motors and the
14 Lansing automotive history.
15

16 John Couthen: Absolutely.
17

18 Marilyn Coulter: [1:44] Um, can you tell us what was it like to, um, grow up in Lansing?
19 And were you familiar with Fisher Body even though your parents worked
20 at Olds?
21

22 John Couthen: Sure. Um, it was great growing up in Lansing. I mean, I, I couldn't
23 imagine growing up anywhere else. Obviously kind of have some
24 prejudice towards your hometown, but I, I've got, you know – or
25 reflecting back, I think Lansing was a great place to grow up at, and you
26 couldn't get away from the GM impact, because everybody worked for
27 GM; my parents, uh, all my uncles. Um, uh, just everybody either worked
28 for or one of their spouses worked for GM [inaudible 2:29].
29

30 Marilyn Coulter: [2:30] Um, what did you know about the Lansing Fisher Body plant?
31

32 John Couthen: Well the Fisher Body plant – this happens to be my mother's oldest
33 brother that lives here lives on Ottawa Street, three houses from the
34 corner, which is where Fisher Body is at. So, spending time at his house,
35 you know, as a little kid, you know, you're right there by the plant. Um,
36 my earliest recollections of GM, though, go back to when I was maybe 4
37 or 5 years old and we used to walk – my, my dad used to walk to work.
38 We lived on Butler Street, which is now – the, the actual driveway to the
39 house that we lived in is the, uh, uh, where you turn in to go to the parking
40 lot for the historical museum.
41

42 Marilyn Coulter: Oh.
43

44 John Couthen: So from there, it was only about a 3-block walk down Butler to, um, the,
45 uh, main gate for Oldsmobile at, at the time. And so we – my mom,
46 myself, and my younger sister would walk my dad to work in the

1 afternoon, he worked the afternoon shifts, and then we would go – there
2 was a corner that we'd meet my two older sisters on, and then they would
3 come back home from school. That was a daily routine; walk dad to work
4 and then walk my sisters back home from school.
5

6Marilyn Coulter: So that was really neat. [4:00] Having your uncle live right there on
7 Ottawa, is there anything that you remember seeing about the Fisher Body
8 plant as a kid? And what did you think about that big green building?
9

10John Couthen: It was noisy. More than anything else, you, you always heard just
11 constant hammering, you know, and, uh, several years later, in my adult
12 years, actually when I hired in, I found out what the hammering was all
13 about. It was right there on the corner of Verlinden and Michigan Avenue
14 was the door department for both what was then the A Line and the B
15 Line, and in the door department, you installed the doors, and to align
16 those doors to get 'em to sit right in the door opening and properly set for
17 door glass and things like that, you had to use a 5-pound machine hammer
18 to drive the hinges forward or backwards to get the door to line up, and
19 that's where all the hammering was coming from. But it was always
20 noisy, um, you know, but y-, you really couldn't see anything on the
21 inside except for, you know, when the, uh – it got real dark at night you
22 could see the bodies passin' by. So...
23

24Marilyn Coulter: Hm.
25

26John Couthen: ...that's, that's what I remember from bein' over at his house.
27

28Marilyn Coulter: Doug Rademacher.
29

30Doug Rademacher: [5:11] John, you said you grew up on Butler Street. Uh, your uncle lived
31 on Ottawa. Can you tell me d-, which high school did you attend?
32

33John Couthen: I ended up going to Harry Hill High School, uh, which is now the Hill
34 Vocational Center, uh, here in Lansing. That was, uh – my family moved
35 to the south side of town, uh, 1970. Uh, I think was 9 or 10 years old.
36 Goin' on 10 anyways.
37

38Doug Rademacher: [5:39] Just knowing the demographics, I had pictured you between...
39

40John Couthen: Right.
41

42Doug Rademacher: ...the Olds and the Fisher Plant.
43

44John Couthen: Right.
45

46Doug Rademacher: On Butler Street, I thought...

1
2 Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
3
4 Doug Rademacher: ...you may have attended...
5
6 John Couthen: That would have been...
7
8 Doug Rademacher: ...Sexton High School.
9
10 John Couthen: ...Sexton, yeah.
11
12 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
13
14 Doug Rademacher: And, uh...
15
16 John Couthen: But, uh, we, we moved – I was in 5th grade when we moved.
17
18 Doug Rademacher: Okay.
19
20 Marilyn Coulter: [5:54] And, um, now what did you do before you hired in to Fisher Body?
21
22 John Couthen: Uh, went to high school [chuckling] basically. I hired in, uh, 3 months
23 after graduation. You know, had the summer of fun, and [sigh] you know,
24 what kids typically do after they, after they graduate, and I was between,
25 you know, going to school and getting' a job, and I really hadn't really
26 applied myself that well in high school, so I didn't have great grades, but
27 I, I could have gone to school, but the only thing that was keeping me
28 back was money. So, I opted to go to work. Initially, I only planned on
29 working for about a year. That was my plan. I was going to work a year
30 and then save up enough money and go to school and I was going to be an
31 accountant.
32
33 Marilyn Coulter: [6:41] An accountant?
34
35 John Couthen: Mm-hm.
36
37 Marilyn Coulter: [6:42] So when you hired in, what was the hire-in process and what was –
38 what did you think about it when you first walked inside Fisher Body?
39
40 John Couthen: Well, um, the hiring process was you, you could either do one of th-, of
41 two things: you could show up early in the morning and stand in a line that
42 extended all the way down Verlinden and past the elementary school and
43 was probably four abreast; you know, um, just hundreds and hundreds of
44 people, which was the situation when I arrived at about 10 minutes to 8 in
45 the morning to put my application in. And rather than stand in that line, I
46 decided I would go play golf instead, and I did, and I went and I played

1 golf, stopped by one of my friend's house, kicked it with him, and
2 basically just blew the whole day off. However, I had committed to my
3 father that this was the plan I was gonna do; I was gonna go get a job at
4 General Motors, and he was gonna make sure that I followed through on
5 that.

6
7 So I knew that I had to do somethin' 'cause he was gonna ask me when I
8 got back home. So at about 10 minutes to 4 in the afternoon, I decided I'd
9 drive back by the plant again, and the line was gone, there was nobody in
10 line, and initially I was going to just drive by, and I said, "No, I'll stop.
11 Let me just, let me just check." So I actually double-parked right in front
12 of the plant here, uh, in the no-parking zone, and went down the stairs,
13 front main entrance, and they were taking applications right there in the
14 lobby, and the two people that were taking those applications were [Jerry
15 Brooks 8:20] and [Tina McCullen 8:21]. Uh, Tina...

16
17 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.

18
19 John Couthen: ...uh, still works for GM. She's a salaried personnel over at the Grand
20 Rapids [inaudible 8:29] plant. But Jerry Brooks acts-, actually took my
21 application, and I asked if I was too late, and he said no, and my first, uh,
22 thoughts were, you know, when I filled the application out, he turned
23 around and he timestamped it, and so, you know, the early bird gets the
24 worm, that's what you're always taught, and so I was sure that I wasn't
25 gonna get a job because I came and applied so late, but at least I had
26 myself covered with my dad, you know, that I could go back and tell him
27 yes, I made an application that day. So that was day 1. The next day,
28 Oldsmobile was hiring, also.

29
30 And so I, I went over and filled out an application. They didn't have
31 nearly the line that Fisher Body had had. Um, and this was actually the
32 second day of their application process, too, and so I filled out an
33 application at Oldsmobile. Uh, I can't remember exactly what day of the
34 week it was, but that was early in the week, like a Monday or a Tuesday. I
35 think the Monday was the Fisher Body thing that I filled out an application
36 and Tuesday was Oldsmobile. And, um, I think it was Thursday or Fri-, it
37 was Thursday, I got a call from Fisher Body and I got a post-, little, little
38 5x7 postcard from Oldsmobile, um, saying that, that - I believe it was
39 Thursday because [inaudible 9:58] and I had to report the next day for an
40 interview and physical, and I had to choose between Oldsmobile and
41 Fisher Body.

42
43 I had two job offers in my hand. And I chose Fisher Body, and, and I
44 couldn't tell you why other than the, the size and complexity, probably, of
45 the Oldsmobile site was just a little overwhelming, and, you know, all you
46 ever saw of Fisher Body, really, was the, the front on Verlinden and it

1 didn't seem quite so intimidating. So, I don't know that's the exact reason
2 why I chose that one, but that's where I went. And so, I reported when
3 they asked me to. They interviewed me. I was still somewhat, uh, less-
4 than-optimistic that they were going to hire me because everyone had told
5 me you had to be 18 and I was only 17 at the time. But I had graduated
6 from high school, and that's all – uh, I let, I let, uh, Tina McCullen
7 actually did my hiring, and I let her finish the whole interview, and then I,
8 I asked her – because I figured that was my, my one saving grace that
9 would get me out of it...
10
11Marilyn Coulter: [chuckling]
12
13John Couthen: ...was that I was only 17. So I asked her...
14
15Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
16
17John Couthen: ...that and she says, "Well, you graduated from high school?" and I said,
18 "Sure."
19
20Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
21
22John Couthen: And I had a copy of my diploma in my wallet, and was all there was to it.
23 You know, from there they sent me down the hall for a physical, and it
24 was Monday, uh, after the weekend, I had to go to an orientation, and then
25 I think I started a day or two after that.
26
27Marilyn Coulter: [11:35] Really? They had orientation?
28
29John Couthen: Yeah.
30
31Marilyn Coulter: [11:36] Do you remember your first department?
32
33John Couthen: My first apartment? Absolutely.
34
35Marilyn Coulter: And that...
36
37John Couthen: Um.
38
39Marilyn Coulter: ...was what?
40
41John Couthen: That was a townhouse over – you mean apartment...
42
43Marilyn Coulter: No.
44
45John Couthen: ...or department?
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: Department that you...
2
3 John Couthen: Oh, I thought...
4
5 Marilyn Coulter: ...worked in.
6
7 John Couthen: ...you were gettin' off into my [chuckling]...
8
9 Marilyn Coulter: [chuckling]
10
11 John Couthen: ...shenanigans.
12
13 Marilyn Coulter: [laughter]
14
15 John Couthen: [laughter]. My first...
16
17 Doug Rademacher: That comes after the...
18
19 Marilyn Coulter: After, after.
20
21 Doug Rademacher: ...after your first paycheck, yeah.
22
23 John Couthen: Yeah, I...
24
25 Marilyn Coulter: Yeah.
26
27 John Couthen: ...I, I remember very, very well that it was actually 4 months after my first
28 paycheck.
29
30 Doug Rademacher: [laughter]
31
32 John Couthen: But yeah, I worked in, in the door department, the...
33
34 Marilyn Coulter: [12:05] In the Body Shop?
35
36 John Couthen: In the Body Shop, and, um, I remember when they, uh – you know, they
37 had all the new hires sittin' where the general foremans' offices were. At
38 that time, the general foreman's offices were near the front; actually, by
39 the old Labor Relations Office is where all the general foremans all had a,
40 had a office back there, and the area later became, um, Quality, I think just
41 as the plant was getting ready to close...
42
43 Marilyn Coulter: [12:32] Excuse me, John, but for people who won't understand what that
44 is, can you please say what a general foreman is?
45

1John Couthen: General foreman was a, like he, he'd have 6 or 7 foremans on a shift in the
2 department reporting to him.
3

4Marilyn Coulter: Okay.
5

6John Couthen: [Inaudible 12:45].
7

8Marilyn Coulter: Thank you.
9

10John Couthen: So, um, that's where they'd pick you up at was back there, and they'd
11 walk ya out, and they initially walked me out to what was the underbody
12 area, or The Jungle, as we used to call it. We-, the reason they call it a
13 jungle was because all the spot-weld guns were hanging from, you know,
14 high up, and so you couldn't see anywhere. It just looked like a real thick
15 jungle of vines and things like, and it was just actually cables and wires
16 holding the spot-weld guns. And actually, that was as little intimidating,
17 walking through there, and eventually they worked-, they were dropping
18 people off, you know, to different supervisors as they made their way
19 through, and you're half-scared, uh, half, uh, overwhelmed, you know...
20

21Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
22

23John Couthen: ...just interested and curious looking at things, trying to make sure you
24 don't trip and fall or get hurt. You know, the first time you see a spot-
25 weld gun go off, the sparks fly right at you. You know, that's a little
26 unsettling, too. But finally made my way with the general foreman to the
27 foreman that he was going to assign me to over in the door department,
28 and that was [Jim Simms 13:58], and if anybody knows Jim Simms, he's
29 quite a character.
30

31Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
32

33John Couthen: That was my, my first boss, was [Jim Simms]. And went to work. Uh,
34 lunchtime came, and I tried to go to the cafeteria. I got lost on my way to
35 the cafeteria and I got lost on my way back. [chuckling] So.
36

37Marilyn Coulter: [14:22] Was [chuckling] the distance from the parking lot to your job and
38 from your job to the cafeteria a long...
39

40John Couthen: Well, actually...
41

42Marilyn Coulter: ...distance?
43

44John Couthen: ...actually, um, the parking lot wasn't such an issue because I got dropped
45 off.
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: Okay.
2

3 John Couthen: However, when they gave us the instructions of where to report to in the
4 orientation, they assumed that everyone was going to park in the parking
5 lot because you were driving. Well, I didn't, I didn't have a car, so my
6 mother actually had to drop me off, um, and so where she dropped me off
7 at, though, was in the front of the plant. The instructions were from the
8 back of the plant. So I didn't know what to do, because if I went in the
9 front, I was going to be lost because I didn't have directions from the front
10 of how to get there, and actually, you were right there. So I walked
11 [chuckling] all the way around the plant...
12

13 Marilyn Coulter: [quiet laughter]
14

15 John Couthen: ...and came in the back. And proceeded to get lost anyway, because at that
16 time, the paint shop was down on the first floor, and that's what – you had
17 to walk through the paint shop to get back to the front of the building. So,
18 um, that's how my first day started.
19

20 Marilyn Coulter: [15:33] So your first day, knowing that initially you really were trying to
21 get out of working there, what was going through your mind on your
22 decision to...
23

24 John Couthen: So...
25

26 Marilyn Coulter: ...come in here? Like did you – how'd you feel?
27

28 John Couthen: Uh, I was scared. I, I think you, ya know, no one's really totally prepared
29 for, ya know, that work pace, that work environment. You know,
30 everybody that you're working with is old enough, really, to be your
31 parent. They're, ya know, in their 40s and 30s. Ya know, to me, 17, a 30-
32 year-old is ancient...
33

34 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
35

36 John Couthen: ...ya know? So, um, and every now and then there a, um, person in the
37 same age group that you recognize, ya know, so that was – but it was, it
38 was, uh, it was not easy and it was no guarantee that I was going to make
39 it, you know? Because I just, ya know, struggled with the job that they put
40 me on. I was a door hanger, and a very demanding job. At the time, you
41 know, I, I think I weighed about 175 pounds. The doors that we were
42 liftin' were in excess of 60 pounds; they were the big Toronado, and the
43 last year that we build a Toronado...
44

45 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
46

1John Couthen: ...was 1978, and we were building the '78 model Toronado, and I was
2 hangin' the doors on the passenger side.
3

4Marilyn Coulter: [16:51] Now, did you have any type of assist or were you just manually
5 putting...
6

7John Couthen: Well you had...
8

9Marilyn Coulter: ...those doors up?
10

11John Couthen: ...an assist, but that was [chuckling] – you have a fixture that you put the
12 door on into the fixture, but your, your door actually came on a monorail.
13 Okay?
14

15Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
16

17John Couthen: They didn't in racks. They were on monorails, and the monorail was quite
18 a ways away from the line. So you had to go get the door off the monorail
19 and then carry it back to your car. That was the, the toughest part of the
20 job. And they had a hoist, but, you know, it, it took a little finesse to learn
21 how to use that. You know, I never did learn how to use the hoist.
22

23Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
24

25John Couthen: Nobody used it because it was cumbersome and then it was tricky to work,
26 and you couldn't make any mistakes with it or the car would be gone by
27 the time you got back with the door.
28

29Marilyn Coulter: [17:37] John, when you hired in, were you on the 1st shift or the 2nd shift?
30

31John Couthen: First shift, which compounded things, but actually it turned out to work in
32 my favor, because from the – I'm the, I'm the 1st shift. I was obviously
33 the lowest-seniority person there. And, um, that was a very difficult job.
34 Back then, when they did shift preference, the highest, the highest-
35 seniority person who was on the 2nd shift, they had to take out the lowest-
36 senior person on the day shift, and the lowest-senior person then went to
37 the opening or went to where the bump originated at. So I had a very
38 high-senior person decide that they wanted to go days, and that's who
39 bumped me. Consequently, I went from the worst job in the Body Shop to
40 the best job in the Body Shop. So while I was going through all this
41 fretting, you know, for the first 3 weeks to a month, once I landed on the
42 night shift, it was, it was a whole different world.
43

44Marilyn Coulter: [18:41] So when you went from the day sh-, the day shift to the night shift,
45 what job were you doing on the night shift that made...
46

1John Couthen: Night shift I had the door striker job, which was just putting in the, putting
2 in the striker that the door latched onto when you...
3
4Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
5
6John Couthen: ...close it, and then you just, you had a power wrench, and you'd put that
7 in, it screwed right in, and then you'd close the door and look at how the
8 door alignment was, and then you just had to adjust that little screw up and
9 down, left or right to make it right.
10
11Marilyn Coulter: Okay. [19:10] Um, you said that you started out on the day shift working
12 with people who were old enough to be your parent.
13
14John Couthen: Mm-hm.
15
16Marilyn Coulter: Then you went to night shift. What was the climate like – or because you
17 were working so hard did you even realize what the climate was like that
18 you were working with on the day shift?
19
20John Couthen: On the day shift, it was – like I said, it was, it was, uh, very cliquish. You,
21 you – right away, I mean, you didn't fit with anybody. So it was kinda
22 lonely, because other, other than your friends that had gotten hired in and
23 that were workin' in other areas, you didn't dare venture off, ya know, go
24 exploring or anything. I had that experience my first day and I stayed
25 right in my work area, ya know, once I found my way in. But it was, uh –
26 you felt kind of alone. I had a very nice relief man. I can't remember his
27 – I, I know his first name was Keith, but I can't remember his last name.
28 But he, uh, was very nice, and he always took the extra time to help me
29 learn little tricks to do the job, and, ya know, he's see me sittin' by myself
30 during breaks or whatnot and he'd come over and talk to me.
31
32Marilyn Coulter: So he kinda took you...
33
34John Couthen: Ya know, so...
35
36Marilyn Coulter: ...under his wing?
37
38John Couthen: Yeah, he, he – and actually, he had a, he had a son who had played
39 football against me in high school, and so he recognized my name, and
40 that's kinda how we got to be friends.
41
42Marilyn Coulter: [20:40] Being a new hire, being young, and being isolated a little bit, did
43 they ever play any pranks or jokes...
44
45John Couthen: No.
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: ...on you as a new hire?
2
3 John Couthen: No.
4
5 Marilyn Coulter: Okay.
6
7 John Couthen: They never did. They never did. They would, uh – they actually, uh,
8 they, they gave me a nickname. They called [chuckling] – it was kind of,
9 uh, eh, uh, an – one of those you're the opposite of what they call you, and
10 my nickname was Lightning...
11
12 Marilyn Coulter: [chuckling]
13
14 John Couthen: ...because they, they were – you know, I was slow. It take, it took a long
15 time. You had to drive 6 – you know, once you got the door situated in
16 the fixture, locked down, ready to go, you-, then you had to put 6 screws
17 in it, then you had to unhook the fixture, push it all the way back, and then
18 [gear 21:20] it, grab your hammer and start bangin' on those hinges. So it
19 took a long time. So obviously when you're young, you know, you...
20
21 [click]
22
23 John Couthen: ...try and do a good job, but you only got so much space to work with, and
24 so it was just takin' me a little bit longer, and they nicknamed me
25 Lightning.
26
27 Marilyn Coulter: Lightning.
28
29 John Couthen: Yeah.
30
31 Marilyn Coulter: So...
32
33 John Couthen: But other than – I mean, that was, that was fine, but everybody was, was
34 very helpful. I mean, even, even the person that you thought was just as
35 grumpy as could be, they wouldn't let you fail. I mean, they would, they
36 would jump in and they'd help you, ya know, do whatever repair or fix
37 whatever, you know, didn't get done.
38
39 Marilyn Coulter: Okay. Doug...
40
41 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rad-...
42
43 Marilyn Coulter: Doug...
44
45 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher. [22:03] John, you were 175 pounds, just outta high
46 school, 17. You're a strapping young lad. Played football.

1
2John Couthen: Mm-hm.
3
4Doug Rademacher: You said these doors weighed upwards of 60-plus pounds? And, uh, the
5 nickname Lightning. You said it was, right off the bat, you still weren't
6 sure if you were going to make it.
7
8John Couthen: Yeah.
9
10Doug Rademacher: And yet you saw all these people around you. Can you just give someone
11 that's never seen the auto industry or an assembly line – how often did a
12 vehicle come at you that you had to throw 60 pounds, uh, finesse, and put
13 the bolts and swing a hammer? How much time did you have?
14
15John Couthen: Well...
16
17Doug Rademacher: Can you describe...
18
19John Couthen: ... time was really...
20
21Doug Rademacher: ...that feeling?
22
23John Couthen: It wasn't so much the car, because the Toronados were on what was the B
24 Line, which had Olds Eighty-Eights, Olds Ninety-Eights, and Toronados
25 on it, and the Toronado mix on that line was every third car was a
26 Toronado. So ya, ya had a...
27
28 [coughing]
29
30John Couthen: ...3-car working envelope, but you had 2 other people working with you,
31 and then you got every 3rd car. Well, the highest-seniority guys got the
32 Ninety-Eights, the low-seniority guy got the Eighty-Eights – I mean the
33 middle-seniority guy got the Eighty-Eights, and the, the new guy got the
34 Toronados because the Toronado door was bigger. The, the Oldsmobile
35 coupe doors – excuse me, sedan doors – so there were – ya know, it's a 4-
36 door, so a smaller door. Same way with the Eighty-Eight. They're small
37 doors. The Toronado was a coupe. Bigger door. New hire. [chuckling].
38 You get the hard job. It's always been that way.
39
40Doug Rademacher: [23:49] So in – the line speed is what I guess I'm after.
41
42John Couthen: Oh.
43
44Doug Rademacher: How often did these cars go by...
45

1John Couthen: You were buildin' better than 1 minute. I mean, so if the line was, was
2 probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 65 to 68 jobs an hour.
3

4Doug Rademacher: And so you were actually throwing a 60-pound door less than every 3
5 minutes...
6

7John Couthen: Less than every...
8

9Doug Rademacher: ...and having to...
10

11John Couthen: ...3 minutes. About every, every 2 minutes and 40 seconds, 2 minutes and
12 50 seconds.
13

14Doug Rademacher: [24:15] Did the people around you – you said they never let you fail.
15 Even though they were quite a bit older than you, how long'd you work
16 with them before you went to the, the night shift?
17

18John Couthen: About, uh, 3 weeks. 3, 3 or 4 weeks.
19

20Doug Rademacher: [24:31] In that short amount of time, did, uh, learn, uh, an appreciation or
21 a respect?
22

23John Couthen: I think the respect took like 1 day, um, because it was, it was, uh, it was
24 very sobering, and I, I didn't have any expectations that it was gonna be
25 easy when I went in there, but it was, it was hard work. And I had
26 worked, um, as a student, as a high school student, I'd worked for the
27 Department of Social Services in their warehouse. Um, you know, so
28 liftin' boxes and things like that, and shipping stuff. That was what I did.
29 And some of those boxes would be heavy and it was hot in there, so it was
30 hard work. Wasn't easy. But that was nothing like building a car on an
31 assembly line. That was, that was hard, and every night, um, that I left to
32 go home, I wasn't 100 percent sure in my mind that I'd be back the next
33 day, because you just – it was just – all I could think of was just trying to
34 make it home, and then the next morning, you wake up and you have to do
35 it all over again, and it was just – it was a struggle just to drag yourself
36 back in there.
37

38 And many, many days, I wun't even sure I was gonna be able to tie my
39 shoes because my hands hurts so bad, ya know, and were so stuff. Uh, but
40 once you got, you got goin', and once that, once that horn – back then
41 there was a horn that sounded in the Body Shop when they were gettin'
42 ready to start the line, and when the horn sounded, you just took off and
43 you did the best you could. And you know, 15, 20 minutes into the, into
44 the day, everything would kinda loosen up; ya know, your fingers would
45 start workin' again and whatnot. So, um, that was pretty much it.
46

1 Doug Rademacher: [26:19] The only thing I'll s-, early there, first day, second day, standin' in
2 line with these older gentlemen to punch in and out...
3
4 John Couthen: Yeah.
5
6 Doug Rademacher: ...did your thought drift to your father?
7
8 John Couthen: No.
9
10 Doug Rademacher: Never thought about him...
11
12 John Couthen: No.
13
14 Doug Rademacher: ... goin' to work every day...
15
16 John Couthen: I'll tell ya what, I, I – the only – this is what I thought about him, because
17 my mother dropped me off the first day and after that, I rode with my dad,
18 and every time I h-, I thought I wanted to quick, I, I had to think about
19 who I was gonna have to tell that I was quittin', and he was number 1 on
20 the list because I rode to work with him. And you know, I'd lay down at
21 night and I'd tell myself, "Okay, tomorrow, you're not goin' in there,
22 because you, you can't do that. So you might as well just tell him when he
23 comes to wake you up tomorrow mornin', tell him you quit." And so I'd
24 say, "Yup, that's what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna tell him I quit when I
25 wake up tomorrow." [chuckling] Well. [chuckling].
26
27 Doug Rademacher: [chuckling]
28
29 John Couthen: I never did quite build up the nerve or the guts or whatever to, to confront
30 him and tell him that I was gonna quit, so that's what really saved me, you
31 know, and my career with General Motors is-, was my father, and the fact
32 that, um, that was, uh, a confrontation that I was not willing to have.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: [27:36] There was a standard or a work ethic in that house...
35
36 John Couthen: Absolutely.
37
38 Doug Rademacher: ...and, uh, you knew what was – it was tough, but you, you knew if he was
39 doin' it and that it was expected of you.
40
41 John Couthen: Yeah.
42
43 Doug Rademacher: [27:45] Now, you made it the three weeks, you went to the night shift...
44
45 John Couthen: Yup.
46

1 Doug Rademacher: ...and you said – can you describe the part you put on at that point, from a
2 60-pound door? What, what's a striker?
3
4 John Couthen: A door striker's a – it looks like a long bolt with washers on the end of it,
5 and the washers serve as like a shim, um, for spacing, and prolly 3 inches
6 long, prolly weighed less that, ya know, maybe, maybe, uh, 8 ounces or
7 so. It was just [inaudible 28:19]...
8
9 Doug Rademacher: A half a pound.
10
11 John Couthen: Yeah.
12
13 Doug Rademacher: Now did your wage decreased when you had, uh, an easier job?
14
15 John Couthen: No.
16
17 Doug Rademacher: Did you ever wonder about the disparity and the workload in those jobs
18 that...
19
20 John Couthen: Nope, never, never thought about disparity. As long as I had a good job...
21
22 Marilyn Coulter: [Inaudible 28:33].
23
24 John Couthen: ...I was, was all set. I figured I'd be here 30 years. [laughter].
25
26 Doug Rademacher: [28:38] Well, initially, you said you were gonna go 1 year...
27
28 John Couthen: [chuckling] Yup.
29
30 Doug Rademacher: ... and go to school.
31
32 John Couthen: Yup.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: Can ya tell me about that 1-year anniversary?
35
36 John Couthen: Well, the f-, the, the first year, by – uh, typically, I think, by the time you
37 get to the first-year anniversary, you know, you've gotten addicted to the
38 money, and I still knew that at some point I was gonna go back to school,
39 just didn't know it was going to take me, you know, 22 years or 23 years
40 to finally get off ma butt'n do it. But, um, lifestyle changes. When you
41 don't have anything and then you – all of a sudden ya do, and you start
42 spending it, and you want more, you know? It's, it's the American way.
43 And that pretty much settled my fate. You know, by the time I had been
44 working a year, I had a brand new car, I had a-, an apartment, or a
45 townhouse; ya know, all the toys and gadgets that a young single man
46 would want, ya know? And I didn't have a lot of money in the bank, but I

1 had everything I wanted. And, uh, come every Friday night – or Thursday
2 night, you know, I had a pocket full of money. So, I couldn't see myself
3 walking away from that.
4

5Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter. [29:54] John, you initially started on day shift and then
6 you went to the night shift, and being 17 – or 18 by now, maybe?
7

8John Couthen: Nope, not quite.
9

10Marilyn Coulter: Still 8-...
11

12John Couthen: I was still...
13

14Marilyn Coulter: Still 17?
15

16John Couthen: Yeah, I didn't turn 17 for – it was two months after I hired in.
17

18Marilyn Coulter: [30:07] What was the differences that you noticed as far as people and the
19 environment between day shift and night?
20

21John Couthen: Younger people, much younger people, and, uh, uh, the difference was the
22 day shift was quiet and all you heard was the tools; night shift, it was
23 music. Ya know, not too loud, 'cause all, all we had back then was
24 transistor radios. We didn't have boom-boxes or anything. But they did
25 allow, you know, you to have a, radio if you wanted to listen, and people
26 would listen to the radio, and it was just a, uh, a much more relaxed
27 environment.
28

29Marilyn Coulter: [30:45] Was it relaxed? Did they have as much supervision on the nights?
30

31John Couthen: Yeah.
32

33Marilyn Coulter: Was it more...
34

35John Couthen: Sure.
36

37Marilyn Coulter: ...relaxed because there were more young people on nights?
38

39John Couthen: Just because there were more young people on night. I felt more
40 comfortable on nights. And maybe it was all perception and all paranoia
41 on my part, but, um, I was m-...
42

43Marilyn Coulter: You found a...
44

45John Couthen: I was more...
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: ...comfort zone.
2

3 John Couthen: ...more comfortable. Yeah.
4

5 Marilyn Coulter: [31:03] Uh, finding that comfort zone in the plant, did you – were you able
6 to, um, develop long-standing relationships with those people in the plant?
7 Did you work in a – and in fact, did you even work in the Body Shop...
8

9 John Couthen: Yeah.
10

11 Marilyn Coulter: ...for a long time?
12

13 John Couthen: I, I had always worked in the Body Shop, uh, for the entire time that I
14 worked in production. Yeah, I made some, some friends. Um, in terms of
15 lasting relationships, a lot of the people that I, I worked with I still work
16 with. Um, some of them have gone to different jobs and some of them are
17 now union representatives.
18

19 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
20

21 John Couthen: Um, but, yeah, I, I'd say I made some, some friends there.
22

23 Marilyn Coulter: [31:40] And they extended outside the plant?
24

25 John Couthen: Mm-hm.
26

27 Marilyn Coulter: [31:42] Did you find that your work family became part of a family for
28 you?
29

30 John Couthen: I don't know that I'd say that. Um, there's – no, I wouldn't, I wouldn't go
31 that far.
32

33 Marilyn Coulter: [chuckling]
34

35 John Couthen: It wasn't that close, you know, back then. You're...
36

37 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
38

39 John Couthen: Because you still had your job and only your job and, you know, I knew
40 my, my repair guy, you know, who was a couple feet down from me. My
41 job was the last one before the department repair station.
42

43 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
44

45 John Couthen: So I knew the repair guy real good, he and I talked a lot, and he just
46 happened to be going through a divorce and needed a good psychiatrist at

1 the time, and I think I filled that role for him. But he and I got pretty
2 close.
3

4Marilyn Coulter: [32:31] John, working in the body shop, how long did you work – I know
5 you’ve had quite a interesting career that we’re going to get into here
6 shortly. How long did you work t-, in the Body Shop?
7

8John Couthen: I worked in the Body Shop from 1977 until 1980. ’80, ’81ish.
9

10Marilyn Coulter: [32:51] And what happened for you in ’80, ’81?
11

12John Couthen: Well, one th-, I had actually gone back to LCC and I had just finished an
13 advanced statistics class, and the plant was starting to roll out statistical
14 process control, and there was a 2-day workshop that they put everybody
15 through in the Body Shop, or at least that was the, the initial goal, and
16 when I went through the SPC class, um, I, I believe the person who was
17 doing the facilitation in that class recognized that I, I knew a little bit
18 about statistics. As it turned out, they were lookin’ for someone to partner
19 up. This was one of the first joint things that, that we did, um, you know,
20 starting in 1980, and we were looking for someone to partner up with the
21 management person. They wanted someone from the UAW to te-, help
22 teach these classes, and they selected me. And the selection process was
23 nothing like it is now. I mean, it was just, you know, uh, the person who I
24 was going to work for wanted me to do it, and they went to the union
25 chairman and he said, “Yeah, go ahead.” That was it. And so that’s what
26 I did from, uh, from 1980 until midway through 1981.
27

28Marilyn Coulter: So prior to that, were you involved with the UAW at all?
29

30John Couthen: Mm-mm. Never had made a committee call, never – didn’t know what a
31 grievance was, didn’t know what [78 34:25] was, I never...
32

33Marilyn Coulter: Just paid your dues and...
34

35John Couthen: Yeah, just, you know, I never, never done anything, really.
36

37Marilyn Coulter: [34:31] And then you became a statistical process control...
38

39John Couthen: Uh...
40

41Marilyn Coulter: ...instructor.
42

43John Couthen: ...facilitator...
44

45Marilyn Coulter: Facilitator.
46

1John Couthen: ...for, for, like I said, about a year and a half.
2

3Marilyn Coulter: Okay. [34:41] Once you became a facilitator, did you get active with the
4 union at all or were you primarily doing your job?
5

6John Couthen: Just doin' my job.
7

8Marilyn Coulter: Okay. [34:49] How long did you do s-, the stats, and then – well, before I
9 go there, how did the management personnel like having an hourly
10 person...
11

12John Couthen: Oh [inaudible 34:59]...
13

14Marilyn Coulter: ...helping them teach?
15

16John Couthen: I can honestly say that they treated me the same as the – as everybody
17 else.
18

19Marilyn Coulter: [35:04] So that was as true partnership, then.
20

21John Couthen: Yeah. Yeah, there was, uh, there was actually four of us that were doin' it,
22 um, and, yeah, it was, it was good. But, you know, the roles were limited,
23 too. You, you, you had what you were supposed to do and the
24 management person, they had what they were supposed to do.
25

26Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
27

28John Couthen: Yeah, it was, it was pretty cut-and-dry.
29

30Marilyn Coulter: [35:25] D-, Ha-, did you have much of a say in the outline...
31

32John Couthen: No.
33

34Marilyn Coulter: ...that you did? You just did your job.
35

36John Couthen: Mm-hm.
37

38Marilyn Coulter: [35:31] How long and – [let me put 35:35] – how did your coworkers like
39 having you do s-, a job like that?
40

41John Couthen: My coworkers? As in...
42

43Marilyn Coulter: The people that you...
44

45John Couthen: ...the people that I...
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: ...left from...
2
3 John Couthen: ...used to work with...
4
5 Marilyn Coulter: Yes. Exactly.
6
7 John Couthen: ...on the floor? Well, um, when I left from the floor...
8
9 Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
10
11 John Couthen: ...um, I didn't really know, you know, that it was going to turn into a
12 permanent job. It was really like a 30-day, ya know, assignment that just
13 kept gettin' extended, and then it was 6 months, and then it was, ya know,
14 another 30 days, or – and so it just kept goin' on and on. So my
15 expectation was that I was, I was goin' back to that job. I just, I, I never
16 made it, because right at the end of the SPC stuff – actually, while we
17 were halfway through it, um, 1981, um, QWL started to get rolled out.
18
19 Marilyn Coulter: [36:34] And what is that, please?
20
21 John Couthen: Quality of Work Life, that process. And so, I went from SPC directly into
22 going QWL as a union person.
23
24 Marilyn Coulter: [36:46] And what was your responsibilities with the Quality of Work
25 Life?
26
27 John Couthen: Facilitating the workshops, um, and introducing people to the concept of
28 improving Quality Work Life and employee participation groups.
29
30 Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
31
32 John Couthen: Um, that was a 40-hour workshop. So, it was, uh – no no no, excuse me.
33 That was a 2-day workshop, as well. The 40-hour stuff was [off site
34 37:07].
35
36 Marilyn Coulter: [37:08] So General Motors had you trained...
37
38 [throat clearing]
39
40 Marilyn Coulter: ...to do that and then...
41
42 John Couthen: Mm-hm.
43
44 Marilyn Coulter: ...you began to roll that process out.
45
46 John Couthen: Right.

1
2 Marilyn Coulter: [37:14] So, you d-, w-, went far beyond doing just statistical processes.
3
4 John Couthen: Yes. Yeah, just one – just went from one to the other.
5
6 Marilyn Coulter: [37:22] And then – and how long did you do that?
7
8 John Couthen: Well, as an hourly person, I think I did it for a year and a half.
9
10 Marilyn Coulter: For a year and a half?
11
12 John Couthen: From '81 until, uh, early '83, and '83, there was a job that came open in
13 the quality – what was called Quality Control there...
14
15 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
16
17 John Couthen: ...as a statistician analyst, and it was a salaried position, and I interviewed
18 for that, and they offered me the job, and I took it. And, and it paid better,
19 by the way.
20
21 Marilyn Coulter: [38:01] So you were an hourly person in one ar-, in one department, and
22 you were training, and then you went to management, asked, while you w-
23 interviewed for this next job.
24
25 John Couthen: Mm-hm.
26
27 Marilyn Coulter: Wow. [38:16] Was that a difficult process being an hourly employee?
28
29 John Couthen: I, I don't understand the question.
30
31 MC: [38:23] Well, was it a difficult process – was it an easy job for you to
32 segue into...
33
34 John Couthen: Yes.
35
36 Marilyn Coulter: ...because you had already worked w-, in the process with...
37
38 John Couthen: Well, the...
39
40 Marilyn Coulter: ...some of the managers?
41
42 John Couthen: ...the – what made it easy was I didn't – as an analyst, you know, it's, it's
43 a 5th level job, so you're not supervising anybody.
44
45 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
46

1 John Couthen: And it was really kinda seamless for me, because all I was doin' the-, we
2 had a function back then that was called critical audit, and basically what
3 it tracked was the number of defects per car, and that was my
4 responsibility was to track that, keep that data, and then to share that or
5 present that data, uh, on a weekly basis to the plant staff in the morning
6 staff meeting.
7
8 [click]
9

10 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher. [39:07] John, before we move on into this move into,
11 uh, the management side of a-, of the business, you said that you were
12 recognized for your abilities and that they wanted someone from the UAW
13 side to work with the, uh, the corporate side, and you were, uh, referred by
14 your supervisor? Or somebody had, uh, recognized you?
15

16 John Couthen: No, somebody recog-, the guy that was – that I actually ended up workin'
17 with, uh, when he taught the class, um, recognizing that I, I had some
18 abilities.
19

20 Doug Rademacher: [39:40] And I was just curious, was there ever a time where your UAW,
21 since it was a position they wanted to, more or less, marriage together, uh,
22 in a working relationship, did – was there a president or a shop chairman,
23 someone that, that, uh, had to approve this move or was it only...
24

25 John Couthen: [Like 40:02]...

26

27 Doug Rademacher: ...management's decision?
28

29 John Couthen: No, it was the union's decision.
30

31 Doug Rademacher: [40:05] And do you remember who that was?
32

33 John Couthen: Yeah, it was, uh, [Don Brown 40:07] was the...
34

35 Doug Rademacher: Don Brown.
36

37 John Couthen: ...[chairman 40:08] at the time. Yeah.
38

39 Marilyn Coulter: [40:14] John, when you – we talked about work environments and work
40 groups, and, um, being Q-, a Quality of Work representative and a
41 statistician, you went into a different type of element as far as that. What
42 was that like, insofar as having coworkers and things like that?
43

44 John Couthen: Yeah.
45

46 Marilyn Coulter: How did they treat you?

1
2John Couthen: Um, fine. Um, just another group of folks. But overall, treatment was no
3 different than when I was [hourly 40:41].
4
5Marilyn Coulter: [40:41] When you were a Quality of Work Life representative and taking
6 that new pro-, and actually that's one of the beginning of the new
7 processes that the workers were going to be taking up, was that something
8 that you think actually did help the quality of the work inside there as far
9 as getting, uh, hourly representative and active in the business?
10
11John Couthen: It was a start. I mean, it took, it took many, many years, and I, I think
12 we're still evolving to that, but that's where we started changing the
13 workplace, and I, I think a lot of the things that we do today are a direct
14 result...
15
16Marilyn Coulter: Of what you did then.
17
18John Couthen: ...of what we did in '83. So I, I, I'm really proud of being part of that,
19 because it wasn't easy.
20
21Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
22
23John Couthen: There was, uh – and skepticism doesn't even begin to, ya know,
24 comprehend what it was like, ya know, trying to pitch this idea of a more
25 democratic workplace.
26
27Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm. [41:38] And, and it's kind of down the road a little bit, but
28 however, since you were a worker and you talked about the work life, one
29 a the things they talked about in Lansing was we were always called the
30 Capitol of Equality. Do you think one of those things had anything to do
31 with the programs such as that?
32
33John Couthen: Uh, no, because, uh, we – Quality of Work Life was, was a corporate-wide
34 initiative. Um, we weren't, we weren't really the, the trailblazers on that.
35 There were a lot of plants that were doin' things a couple years before us.
36
37 [click]
38
39Marilyn Coulter: [42:11] What do you think made Fisher Body special, as far as the
40 workforce?
41
42John Couthen: Uh, boy. I don't, I don't know quite how to describe that. Um, I'm not so
43 sure that at that time I really recognized that it was unique, because it was
44 – uh, it only seems unique if you've got somethin' to compare it against,
45 and I didn't.
46

1Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
2
3John Couthen: Um, so it seemed like it was just normal.
4
5MC: Mm-hm.
6
7John Couthen: Like that's the way it should be.
8
9Marilyn Coulter: That's the way we do things. Doug Rademacher.
10
11Doug Rademacher: [42:46] John, as we talk about that, the Capitol of Quality, the, uh, Lansing
12 being, uh, uh, recognized for it's quality of achievements. What about,
13 you said earlier on about the old guys, they wouldn't let you fail? Is that
14 somethin' that's connected to that Capitol of Quality?
15
16John Couthen: I think there was or always has been some – a high level of pride that other
17 people have taken in their work and in this workforce, and if one person
18 wasn't functioning correctly, I, I think they took that as a reflection of the
19 whole group, and ya know, that was – we weren't a formal team,
20 obviously, but we were a team. Ya know, you had 6 door hangers, and, ya
21 know, we worked together. I wasn't able, ever, to get to the level where –
22 at that time, when I first hired-in – to where I was able to help anybody
23 else, but I know that eventually I, I would have gotten there. I mean, the
24 next time a new person came in, it woulda been expected. You know what
25 I mean? You help the new people out, because it was a difficult job to
26 learn.
27
28 And in fact, just goin' back, I, I didn't stay on that door striker job forever,
29 because eventually I, I tried to get back to days again, which I did, and
30 when I got back to days, uh, again, I was put back on the door hanging
31 job. So I actually went back to door hanging, uh, by choice, but that was
32 maybe '79. You know, so I had been there about 2 years, and I had an
33 opportunity to bump out the lowest person, and that was a person on days
34 that had less time than me. So at some point, you know, your life changes
35 and it's more important to be on days than it is to have an easy job. I
36 knew I was going back to a harder job, but it was more important for me
37 to be on days...
38
39Marilyn Coulter: Yeah, on days.
40
41John Couthen: ... than have an easy job.
42
43Marilyn Coulter: [45:04] But when you went back to that door job, did you get the coupe
44 doors again?
45

1John Couthen: Actually, we had stopped building the Toronado, and they, they had
2 actually built a new body shop out in Building 16 where the, uh, the [M
3 45:19] Body Shop went to when the plant got ready to, to shut down, that
4 body shop...
5

6Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
7

8John Couthen: ...that was on the, on that side. That was all new back in '79.
9

10Marilyn Coulter: [45:29] John, you've spoken about M Body Shops and C Body Shops.
11 Can you let people know a little bit what's the difference between the two
12 and the havin' to do different...
13

14John Couthen: It's a...
15

16Marilyn Coulter: ...things?
17

18John Couthen: ...different, different system altogether. There's two systems that was
19 kinda unique with Lansing car assembly, it was a dual-system plant. They
20 had two assembly lines, and you had the A System, which ran the Cutlass
21 models, and then the B System was the bigger cars; Eighty Eights, Ninety-
22 Eights, and Toronados, which later became – from A and B, it went to M
23 and C. So, just a different change in letters. I don't know...
24

25Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
26

27John Couthen: ...why, but they did it.
28

29Marilyn Coulter: [46:12] And what was – there was something that was unique about the
30 way Fisher Body did vehicles. You want to explain a little bit about that?
31

32John Couthen: Just building the body, the shell, all the chase and engine. Uh, uh,
33 assembly took place across town at Oldsmobile. So the bodies were
34 shipped by body haulers across. All we, all we would have done was the,
35 uh, the shell on the body.
36

37Marilyn Coulter: Mm. Doug Rademacher.
38

39Doug Rademacher: [46:39] Just to clarify that, so the, the body was unfinished and it was
40 shipped to another location to be...
41

42John Couthen: Well, the...
43

44Doug Rademacher: ...finished?
45

46John Couthen: ...the body was finished. Know what I mean? It was painted, uh...

1
2 [shuffling papers]
3
4John Couthen: ...had glass in it, uh, interior was complete. What it didn't have was a
5 frame, chassis, brakes, tires, engine, and front fenders, and a hood.
6
7Doug Rademacher: Okay. [47:02] Um, John, would you say – what made a good or a bad
8 supervisor, in your eyes?
9
10John Couthen: Well, I've worked for both. Um, a good supervisor was someone who was
11 always approachable, um, had, um, had [inaudible 47:22] for you as a, an
12 employee and the work that you were doin', and if, if things weren't right,
13 which quite often they weren't, he was there to try and help you or get you
14 the help that you needed. Uh, bad supervisor's just the complete opposite.
15 Ya know? Who were mainly attendance takers, and that's, that's the
16 extent that they wanted to get involved with you. It was, you know, "I'm
17 here to make sure you do your job," not "I'm here to help you do your
18 job."
19
20Doug Rademacher: [47:55] Now, when you transitioned into a management position, do you
21 feel coming from the assembly line was a asset to you to know, to
22 recognize a worker's needs or his...
23
24John Couthen: Not, not...
25
26Doug Rademacher: ...difficulties?
27
28John Couthen: ...not early on, because like I said, I've-, I went to, to quality, and I didn't
29 supervise anybody for maybe the first 2 years that I was on salary. Um, it
30 was probably, um – it was many, many years, um, before I really gained a
31 full appreciation of it and, and had to reflect back to what it was like. I
32 spent 6 months in 19-, 1995 I ran a department as a supervisor, um, just
33 for 6 months, and I knew goin' in I was only gonna be there for 6 months.
34 So, um, that kinda puts you in a different frame of mind. But I also knew
35 what it was like to work on the line, and, uh, you know, I tried to, tried to
36 respond accordingly.
37
38Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm. [49:04] John, so you went from the status – from the Quality
39 Department, and how long did you stay in Quality? Until you went to the
40 line?
41
42John Couthen: No. Um, I went to-, from, I went from Quality back to QWL...
43
44Marilyn Coulter: Okay.
45
46John Couthen: ...as a salaried person.

1
2Marilyn Coulter: Oh.
3
4John Couthen: So I was an hourly QWL person, then I went to Quality as-, on salary, and
5 then eventually back to QWL as a salaried QWL person.
6
7Marilyn Coulter: [49:30] And how long did, did you do the salary QWL?
8
9John Couthen: I did salaried QWL until 1990. So that would have been, uh, 7 years.
10
11Marilyn Coulter: [49:41] What happened for you in 1990?
12
13John Couthen: In 1990, um, I was asked to interview for a job as a labor rep, um, in the,
14 in the early spring of 1990, and I didn't know what a labor rep was, but the
15 person who was asking, uh, I [inaudible 50:00], and so, because he asked,
16 I, I sought it out, you know, and actually applied for it – or self-nominated
17 for it, and, uh, got an interview, and I didn't get the job. Uh, someone else
18 got the job who became one of my closest workin' buddies. Um, but I did
19 get told why I didn't get the job, and was also committed to the next
20 opening that occurred in that department, um, was mine if I wanted it, and
21 they on-, the reason why they took the other guy, uh, was because he had
22 so much more experience. He was, he was a general foreman.
23
24Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
25
26John Couthen: And he wanted to, to go into labor relations.
27
28Marilyn Coulter: [50:50] So a labor rep was in labor relations.
29
30John Couthen: Yes.
31
32Marilyn Coulter: [50:54] And so, you got the next appointment.
33
34John Couthen: The next – and then, ironically, someone moved on from labor to another
35 – actually left the company, and so another opening came up, and I was
36 given the job.
37
38Marilyn Coulter: [51:09] And how long – and now that's where you are currently?
39
40John Couthen: Yup. I've been in labor relations for 16 years. Um, when I first went into
41 labor, I was the night shift labor rep in the body plant, which was a, uh –
42 that was an eye-opening experience.
43
44Marilyn Coulter: [51:29] What was eye opening about it?
45

1John Couthen: Um, I, I didn't know anything about the, the contracts, um, didn't know,
2 uh, anything about agreement, I didn't know anything about discipline, I
3 didn't know anything about negotiations, or anything. I had no idea what
4 labor relations even did. So, uh, it was, it was as overwhelming if not
5 more than...
6

7Marilyn Coulter: As the [inaudible 51:58].
8

9John Couthen: ...than the, the first – yeah, the first day I stepped into the plant. And it
10 went on for a long time. Labor is really somethin' that you have to
11 experience before you ever get comfortable with it. Um, and it took me
12 probably a year and a half to two years to even feel like I even knew what
13 I was doin'.
14

15Marilyn Coulter: [52:16] You talked about being a part of negotiations. What was it like to
16 be on the management side and the first time you had to negotiate a
17 contract for your plant?
18

19John Couthen: Well, my first experience with negotiations was all observation. It was –
20 I, I wasn't, I wasn't, uh, in a position to settle anything, uh, add any input,
21 because I didn't know anything. They were in negotiations, actually,
22 when I arrived into labor. They were – 1990 was a, a, a contract year, and
23 all I did was watch. I, I didn't even know how to take good notes because
24 I didn't know what part of the conversation was even relevant.
25

26Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
27

28John Couthen: And, uh, after about a year and a half of feeling totally inadequate, you
29 know, every, every day, just wrestling with not knowing what to do, ya
30 know, gradually, you just kinda – you, ya grab on to what's going and
31 what needs to be done and what's expected of you.
32

33Marilyn Coulter: [53:15] There were no labor classes that they sent you to?
34
35 [rumble]
36

37John Couthen: [Sure 53:18]. Yeah, there was lotsa classes.
38

39Marilyn Coulter: But practical applications...
40

41John Couthen: Practical application, it just – it didn't – when, when, you know, you got to
42 class and they give you a manual and the answer would be in the manual.
43 When you're on the floor, if someone asks you a question, they expect an
44 answer w-, during the conversation, not for you to have to go back to your
45 office and look it up in the book.
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm. You have to be able to, as they say, dance on your feet.
2

3 John Couthen: Right.
4

5 Marilyn Coulter: Um, Doug Rademacher.
6

7 Doug Rademacher: [53:48] John, it's never been discussed in the interview, but you're a black
8 man, and I'm curious...
9

10 Marilyn Coulter: [chuckling]
11

12 John Couthen: I am?
13

14 Marilyn Coulter: [quiet laughter]
15

16 Doug Rademacher: ...was your, um, being of, of another – of a, uh, diverse group of people
17 and bein' selected, did that have anything to do with it? Were you one of
18 many? Were you the only, uh, black man? Was there any women? And
19 what was that like, breaking ground in that arena?
20

21 John Couthen: In labor? Um, there, there were other African-American [men 54:26] in
22 labor. In fact, the guy that left the company that I replaced was African-
23 American. Um, there were women. Uh, I can't remember [Candace's
24 54:38] last name. Uh, and then, uh, [Mary Holmes 54:41]. So we had
25 women in the, in the labor group at the time.
26

27 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
28

29 Doug Rademacher: Okay.
30

31 Marilyn Coulter: [54:52] Being a part of the labor [inaudible 54:54] and being the ones that
32 help make the decisions, and, as you say, making the ultimate disciplines,
33 actually, because when disciplines reached your office, that was usually a
34 discharge-type of a discipline or?
35

36 John Couthen: Uh, not necessarily, but it, it was somethin' that was serious, usually, and
37 could have resulted in discharge. Sometimes the...
38

39 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
40

41 John Couthen: ...discipline would, would reach, um, our office and we – the department
42 may want a discharge and we would not support discharge because the,
43 the evidence or the, the...
44

45 [crumpling paper]
46

1John Couthen: ...proof of, uh, of misconduct is, is our burden.
2

3Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
4

5John Couthen: And we had to make a call on whether or not we felt that we could
6 substantiate the burden of proof.
7

8Marilyn Coulter: [55:40] What was one of the biggest things that surprised you about going
9 into labor relations, outside of it being overwhelming and all the things
10 you had to know?
11

12John Couthen: I, I don't know that I'd characterize anything as a surprise. Um, it was an
13 eye-opener because you really, you really had no, no knowledge when you
14 were out there on the floor...
15

16Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
17

18John Couthen: ...of, of exactly what was going on, you know, between the union and
19 management...
20

21Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
22

23John Couthen: ...and how big an impact that had on things that happened out on the floor.
24

25Marilyn Coulter: Mm. [56:17] And now, you initially started out as a labor rep right inside
26 the Fisher Body plant...
27

28John Couthen: [Oh yeah 56:23].
29

30Marilyn Coulter: ...and, um, it later went on to you're the site-wide person, correct?
31

32John Couthen: Mm-hm. Yes.
33

34Marilyn Coulter: And so, you are now the head of labor relations. Is that correct?
35

36John Couthen: Well, that's what some people say.
37

38Marilyn Coulter: What they say.
39

40John Couthen: Yeah.
41

42Marilyn Coulter: Okay. Um, and, um, being the head of labor relations – well, let me
43 digress a little bit before I get into that question. [56:48] Because you're
44 at Fisher Body and Fisher Body went through a lot of name changes,
45 what'd you think about all those different name changes and what did you
46 call Fisher Body?

1
2John Couthen: I, I called the body plant, and, uh, you know, that's – I think that's proly
3 the most common term that, that people refer to it as. There's some
4 people that call it Fisher Body, there are some people that still call it BOC.
5
6Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
7
8John Couthen: Um, to me, it's always been the body plant.
9
10Marilyn Coulter: It's always been the body plant.
11
12John Couthen: And, and I think that came about – I shouldn't say it's always been the
13 body plant, because it was after I had moved, uh, from the body plant to
14 the [chasse 57:30] operation, I actually moved to [inaudible 57:31]...
15
16Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
17
18John Couthen: ...and then it was the body plant I think more than anything else. It was –
19 when, when you're there and that's the only plant that you've worked in,
20 it...
21
22Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
23
24John Couthen: ...it was just the plant. Okay? It wasn't – no other nomenclature really
25 was...
26
27Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
28
29John Couthen: ...you know, necessary. I mean, it was just the plant. It wasn't Fisher
30 Body, it wasn't BOC, but it was – well, it was once I moved away and had
31 responsibilities in another plant, then to reference back to the plant, the
32 plant was no longer the plant, it – you had to call it by what it was.
33
34Marilyn Coulter: [58:09] You said that you worked at the [fat plant 58:11] also [inaudible
35 58:13]...
36
37John Couthen: Right, in the office at the fat plant.
38
39Marilyn Coulter: Yeah, [to have 58:14] – was there anything that you noticed different –
40 because you were site-wide, was there anything that you noticed different
41 between the Fisher Body plant and the other plants within the Lansing
42 area?
43
44John Couthen: No. Because the, the same pride and heritage existed because the, the –
45 those other plants, the fat plant, the engine plant, the chasse plant, all a that
46 stuff was old...

1
2 [paper rustling]
3
4 John Couthen: ... [inaudible 58:39].
5
6 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
7
8 John Couthen: And the same pride that I think, uh, that you found in Fisher Body people,
9 there were as many people who were, you know, loyal to the Oldsmobile
10 name plate, you know, and identity as there were Fisher Body...
11
12 Marilyn Coulter: [58:58] So that Lansing site, loyalty is what helped make it the Capitol of
13 Quality.
14
15 John Couthen: Yeah. Absolutely. People were very proud to, to work for Oldsmobile,
16 people were very proud to work for Fisher Body.
17
18 Marilyn Coulter: [59:08] You've had quite a, um, outstanding life, um, working here in
19 Lansing. You started out as a 17-year-old who went and took that extra
20 time playing golf all day and said, "Well, I don't wanna deal with dad"...
21
22 John Couthen: Don't let my daddy know that, either, 'cause he's still...
23
24 Marilyn Coulter: [laughter]
25
26 John Couthen: ...[inaudible 59:29].
27
28 Doug Rademacher: He doesn't get the...
29
30 John Couthen: [chuckling]
31
32 Marilyn Coulter: [chuckling] So, and, you know, you took those last few minutes before
33 time to close to go in and put your – to now being the head of labor
34 relations here at this site. What do you think about that? What does that
35 make you think about?
36
37 John Couthen: Well, I consider myself extremely blessed. Okay? And there's, and, um,
38 there's not a day that goes by that I take it for granted.
39
40 Marilyn Coulter: [59:54] Is there anything, given the fact that you are one a the ones in
41 power, um, are you – was there anything that you saw, experienced that
42 took place when you first came in under your time on the line or some
43 things that you said, "Well, I want to try to do somethin' to change that,"
44 and now that you're at that table to make those negotiations, you've tried
45 to make those changes happen?
46

1John Couthen: You know, in – uh, uh, I can't point the one moment or one inspirational,
2 uh, deed or episode. Uh, I think we've kinda all evolved together, you
3 know, as to what's important and what needs to be changed and how we
4 should be treating each other and...
5

6Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
7

8John Couthen: ...how we should do business. I, I've seen some, some change just since
9 we've closed the body plant and moved everybody out here to Delta
10 Township. Uh, you're a product of your environment. Everybody is.
11 And we do – you know, we went through the phase of, you know,
12 screamin', yellin'. I can scream with the best of'm. I can pound the table
13 with the best of'm. You know, I knew every cuss word in the book, too,
14 and knew the right moments to, to use'm for, for emphasis, but even, even
15 within the last 4 or 5 years, I've noticed a shift, not only mine – myself,
16 you know, but the people that I deal with with, the shop committee, um,
17 that we have, uh, here in Delta Township, the shop committee that's at, uh,
18 652, um, our relationship just keeps evolving to where...
19

20 [telephone ring]
21
22 ...everyone is now more business-oriented.
23

24 [telephone ring]
25

26John Couthen: This is supposed to be off.
27

28 [telephone ring]
29

30John Couthen: Sorry about that. I had to turn – I turned it off.
31

32Doug Rademacher: [61:54] So everyone was more business oriented.
33

34John Couthen: Everybody was more business oriented, uh, to the extent that, uh, you
35 know, it used to be the union had their ideas about things and how they
36 felt like they should go...
37

38Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
39

40John Couthen: ...and, uh, now it's we all have a common understanding of how the
41 business works.
42

43Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
44

45John Couthen: Okay? And, uh, it, it really makes things a lot easier, because I, I really
46 feel like the union is more tuned in to the dollars and cents sign of the

1 business. It used to be, you know, 10, 10, 12 years ago, the union wanted
2 what they wanted and they wanted it at all costs. Now, they, they, they,
3 take a more balanced approach. Their membership is still their first
4 priority...

5

6Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.

7

8John Couthen: ...you know, no mistake, no question about that. They're gonna protect
9 their membership. Job security is number 1 and job satisfaction, number
10 2. Okay? And they, they hold that very near and dear. But it's easier now
11 to have good, healthy dialogue on topics, you know, anything...

12

13Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.

14

15John Couthen: ...that we need to talk about for business, because they understand the
16 business. They understand our competition. They understand, uh, what
17 the needs of the business are, and they understand, you know, always
18 driven by the needs of their people that they represent, and I, I think they
19 do a very good job, because it – in order to really adequately represent
20 people, I think you gotta know what the business conditions are.

21

22Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.

23

24John Couthen: You know, if they're favorable or unfavorable, and I, I think the unions
25 here in Lansing, uh, 652 and 602, do a great job at the – especially in the,
26 in the last, like I said, 4 or 5 years.

27

28Marilyn Coulter: [63:41] John, because, um, you grew up in this community, can you tell
29 me, um, have you participated in community activities outside of the plant
30 that General Motors had things to do and has this extended into the
31 community for you?

33John Couthen: Well, not necessarily from a GM standpoint. You know, um, I – that – I'd
34 say that I'm probably just a typical, uh, person. Uh, you know, when my
35 kids were little league and, you know, that age and whatnot, I coached...

36

37Marilyn Coulter: Mm.

38

39John Couthen: ...and helped out and organized and did stuff like that. Uh, my church,
40 you know, and, you know, get involved with, with things like that. But I, I
41 don't think to the extent of, uh, some people in the community like
42 participating on commissions or committees and things like that, I haven't
43 done any of that.

44

45Marilyn Coulter: [64:40] Then, uh, as far as benefits and things like that, you said that
46 you're just now getting ready to finish your bachelor's.

1
2John Couthen: Mm-hm.
3
4Marilyn Coulter: Is that something – the tuition assistance, that something that managers get
5 a part of and do you find...
6
7John Couthen: Oh yeah.
8
9Marilyn Coulter: ...more – and because you're doing that now, do you find that, um, now
10 we're getting more people involved, that we have a more skilled
11 workforce in terms of education?

13John Couthen: Yes. I think, um, it was rare to find people on the assembly line in 1977
14 that had a lot of college, let alone degrees. I think it's, it's pretty
15 commonplace now. You'd be hard-pressed to go to any one department...
16
17Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
18
19John Couthen: ...uh, in the plant now and find no one that has a degree. Uh, we've got
20 people that are working in production that have advanced degrees.
21
22Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
23
24John Couthen: Ya know? And I just think that makes us better.
25
26Marilyn Coulter: Mm.
27
28John Couthen: It makes us more business-savvy and just, you know, um, for myself, um,
29 I'm in the job that I, I want to be in. Uh, I don't know that it's healthy for
30 me to stay in the job forever, but I will if they let me.
31
32Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
33
34John Couthen: Um, because I like what I'm doin' and I really feel like I, I make a
35 difference. Uh, the pursuit of my bachelor's degree is just somethin' that I
36 committed to myself...
37
38Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
39
40John Couthen: ...that I would do. It was one thing that was brought into question,
41 actually, when I got this job, the fact that I didn't have it. Uh, but the
42 folks who were makin' the decision were gracious enough to, ya know,
43 not hold that against me, and at the ti-, I had, in fact, uh, just recently, like
44 two months before, uh, I interviewed for this current position, um, and
45 reenrolled, and, uh, was, was actually taking classes [inaudible 66:37]...
46

1 [coughing]
2
3John Couthen: ...so. And you know, and I had never really stopped goin' to school. I just
4 kinda sporadically took a class here and there, uh, but never really entered
5 a degree program...
6
7Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
8
9John Couthen: ...and, you know, trying to really knock it out, so.
10
11Marilyn Coulter: [Inaudible 66:53]?
12
13Doug Rademacher: We have transitioned now, the body plant, you've worked in different
14 facilities.
15
16 [coughing]
17
18Doug Rademacher: [67:01] Can you just briefly think of, uh, one a your best moments at
19 Fisher Body?
20
21John Couthen: Best moments at Fisher Body. I'm not struggling so much with finding a
22 good moment. It's...
23
24Marilyn Coulter: Which one?
25
26John Couthen: ...yeah, which one. 'Cause there were, there were a lot of good things that,
27 uh, that happened at Fisher Body. I think probably the thing that I felt, felt
28 the best about was the last, uh, uh, JD Power Award that we were, we
29 were given in the body plant, because it was clear when we got that award,
30 everyone knew – not necessarily had come to grips with, but everyone
31 knew that we were gonna close that plant, and yet still, uh, people were
32 proud of what we did and it was being recognized, and it – I just
33 remember standing there that day and thinking about, you know, that,
34 that's a pretty amazing accomplishment, that here's a plant that we're not
35 investing any money into, it just – it's all band-aided together, and we're
36 still able to do somethin' like this. So, I'd say that was probably a better
37 moment. Yeah. I wouldn't say it was the absolute best, but I remember
38 that moment well.
39
40Doug Rademacher: Now, if you would, describe, since you're part of the company, what is
41 General Motors thinking in building a brand new facility as the Delta
42 plant, in Michigan? What would drive them to come up and pay those
43 heating bills? Uh...
44
45John Couthen: Well, it's, it's, uh – you know, once you set the ball in motion and you've
46 committed yourself to build a, build a plant, um, you could – we coulda

1 built these plants anywhere in the world, let alone the United States. We
2 coulda built'm anywhere in the world, but my personal thoughts are that it
3 was important to – for the corporation to demonstrate to the UAW that
4 General Motors had belief or faith in the UAW, that we could be as
5 competitive right here, right in the heart of the UAW, right in – here in the
6 state of Michigan. It's no accident that these two plants were built in this
7 town. I think they wanted'm built in Michigan, and Lansing was the best
8 place, and there are several things that played into our favor. Number 1
9 was the age of the plants that we have and the fact that we were able to do
10 so much with so little, uh, in terms of technology and, and, uh, a state-of-
11 the-art facility. But it, it was important, I think, to, to, to build these plants
12 in, in Lansing, or in Michigan, in the heartland of the UAW; you know,
13 right on the home front rather than try and hide these plants, ya know, in a
14 southern, non-union state, uh, or try and get away from, ya know, anything
15 or do it as a joint venture or, ya know, put it in, ya know, another country,
16 and, uh, that's why it's, it's critically important that we are successful...
17
18 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
19
20 John Couthen: ...here, as well as at Lansing-Grand River.
21
22 Marilyn Coulter: [70:51] John, we've touched on a lot of things about your life. Is there
23 anything that we haven't touched on that you'd like us to talk about?
24
25 John Couthen: When you asked me just a moment ago what, what was the, the best
26 moment, uh, I can tell you without any degree of difficulty what the worst
27 moment was, and it's something that I strive and will continue to strive to
28 avoid, um, at all costs. Um, in 1992, there was a strike that, in my opinion,
29 and I think if you, you go back and ask anyone that was involved in that
30 situation, "Was it necessary?" and the answer is "Absolutely not." It was
31 the most gut-wrenching, uh, emotionally challenging that, that I've gone
32 through in my work career, um, and the fact that the workforce was only
33 out for like 2 days, it, it wasn't that; it was you never get over watching
34 people that you've known, in some cases, for nearly all a your life walk
35 out with picket signs, and that's somethin' that, that I don't ever want to
36 happen again, and I'll do everything that I can do to, to keep that from
37 every happening again, 'cause it, it's not a pretty experience.
38
39 Doug Rademacher: Well, John, as a, uh, vice president and leader of this local union and, uh, I
40 worked with the plant for 27½ years now, and now on to the new Delta,
41 uh, I've grown up also with you, and, uh, seen you grow, and it's been, uh,
42 very rewarding, and it's a pleasure to work with you, and I, uh, I have
43 appreciated that.
44
45 John Couthen: Thank you, Doug.
46

1Marilyn Coulter: I, um, want to say thank you, also, and I hope all the young people who
2 are not sure what they want to do never know that a decision you make at
3 17 can make a big difference...
4
5John Couthen: Absolutely.
6
7Marilyn Coulter: ...on your life, and it can be a good thing.
8
9John Couthen: Yes.
10
11Marilyn Coulter: And thank you for your time.
12
13John Couthen: Thank you, Marilyn.
14
15Doug Rademacher: Thank you for [time 72:48].
16
17
18/rt