

**Debra Burpee discusses her career as a UAW production worker
and Material handler at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**

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5 Cheryl McQuaid: This is Cheryl McQuaid. I'm with the Lansing Fisher Body Historical
6 Team. Today is January 23, 2006. It's approximately noon. We're at the
7 Greenhouse across the street from...
8
9 [throat clearing]
10
11 Cheryl McQuaid: ...602 Union Hall. We're preparing to interview Debra Burpee. First let's,
12 uh, state the rest of the people in the room.
13
14 John Fedewa: John Fedewa.
15
16 Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith.
17
18 Cheryl McQuaid: And Gary, you're also here. [0:28] Could you state your name and spell
19 your last name?
20
21 Gary Burpee: Uh, Gary Burpee. That's B-u-r-p-e-e.
22
23 Cheryl McQuaid: [0:35] And Debra, could you state your name?
24
25 Debra Burpee: Debra Burpee.
26
27 Cheryl McQuaid: [0:38] And what is your address?
28
29 Debra Burpee: 6275 South M 66 Highway, Nashville, Michigan 49073.
30
31 Cheryl McQuaid: And you two are married. [0:47] Do you have children?
32
33 Debra Burpee: Not between us.
34
35 Cheryl McQuaid: [0:53] Could you give us a little bit on your educational background?
36
37 Debra Burpee: Twelfth-grade education [that's it 38:08].
38
39 Cheryl McQuaid: [0:57] Did you spend any time in the military?
40
41 Debra Burpee: Nope.
42
43 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:03] Um, did you know about Fisher Body before you – while you were
44 growing up, before you went in to the plant?
45
46 Debra Burpee: Yes, I did. I had a stepbrother that worked in the cafeteria.
47

1Cheryl McQuaid: Oh really.
2

3Debra Burpee: Remember droppin' him off, Mom would bring us over here and drop him
4 off so he could go to work.
5

6Cheryl McQuaid: [1:27] And why did you decide Fisher Body was going to be your place of
7 employment?
8

9Debra Burpee: Because I'd already had two really low-class jobs, and I figured if I was
10 gonna work, I was gonna work someplace that paid good money.
11

12Cheryl McQuaid: [1:36] And so that paid good money?
13

14Debra Burpee: Yeah.
15

16Cheryl McQuaid: [1:37] And when did you put in your application at Fisher Body?
17

18Debra Burpee: August a '76.
19

20Cheryl McQuaid: [1:46] And when were you hired?
21

22Debra Burpee: September a '76.
23

24Cheryl McQuaid: [1:50] So pretty quick. Did you put your application in at the plant or at
25 Michigan Employment Security?
26

27Debra Burpee: At the plant.
28

29Cheryl McQuaid: [1:56] At the plant?
30

31Debra Burpee: Mm-hm.
32

33Cheryl McQuaid: [2:00] You had to wait in a long line to get in here and...
34

35Debra Burpee: I got here pretty early in the morning, because I was told there was gonna
36 be hiring a lot of women during that time period. But there weren't very
37 many lined up out front. I just walked down the steps and got in.
38

39Cheryl McQuaid: [2:15] So it wasn't along line?
40

41Debra Burpee: No.
42

43Cheryl McQuaid: [2:20] And about a month later, you were hired?
44

45Debra Burpee: Yep.
46

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [2:24] Do you remember your first day walkin' into the plant?
2

3 Debra Burpee: Oh yeah I do. I was scared to death. [laughter] Especially walkin' down
4 into the Body Shop where I hired in at. Um, the guys weren't too happy to
5 see ya, and they treated ya like a piece a meat. [laughter] All the whistling
6 and all the cat calls.
7

8 Cheryl McQuaid: [2:47] Tell us a little bit about your first job.
9

10 Debra Burpee: First job, I worked, uh, Body Shop. They called it The Jungle. Main line.
11 Um, I was welding in rocker panels, and learning that job was kinda hard
12 'cause not all the guys wanted us there and they didn't teach us the easy
13 way to run these use guns that we had to run. They just basically showed
14 us what to do and handed us the guns.
15

16 Cheryl McQuaid: [3:19] How big were the guns?
17

18 Debra Burpee: Almost as big as I am. [laughter]
19

20 Cheryl McQuaid: They're big guns.
21

22 Debra Burpee: Yeah, they're big guns.
23

24 Cheryl McQuaid: [3:28] How tall are you?
25

26 Debra Burpee: I'm 5' 9".
27

28 Cheryl McQuaid: 5' 9".
29

30 Debra Burpee: Yeah.
31

32 Cheryl McQuaid: [3:36] And did you spend all your time in the Body Shop?
33

34 Debra Burpee: Yeah until, um, later when I got into Material. I went up ta Trim for 6
35 weeks and then went back down into the Body Shop.
36

37 Cheryl McQuaid: [3:51] So just about your whole time there has been Body Shop.
38

39 Debra Burpee: Yep.
40

41 Cheryl McQuaid: When you first hired in to the Body Shop, what kind of atmosphere did
42 you work in? Other than the hostile men, um, what was it like walkin' into
43 that Body Shop? The air quality, the...
44

1 Debra Burpee: It was pretty dusty. It stunk, especially welding. All you could smell is the
2 fumes off the welders and the sealer burning and – that's – it wasn't nice. It
3 was dirty. It was a very dirty place.
4

5 Cheryl McQuaid: [4:22] Did you work around a lot of people?
6

7 Debra Burpee: Yeah I did.
8

9 Cheryl McQuaid: [4:25] And was it easy to communicate with everybody or...?
10

11 Debra Burpee: Some of'm were easy to communicate with. Others treated you really bad.
12 If they didn't want you there, they didn't wanna say anything to you. So
13 they just – the newer young people were good. The older people were bad.
14 Even the supervisors. They didn't [laughter] really like having a woman in
15 their department.
16

17 Cheryl McQuaid: So it sounds pretty rough hiring into the Body Shop.
18

19 Debra Burpee: It was.
20

21 Cheryl McQuaid: [4:54] And was it a hard job?
22

23 Debra Burpee: I thought it was hard because nobody taught me how to run the guns. They
24 – I was fighting with the guns because nobody showed – told me that they
25 glided right in. And after the first week, I almost quit because my hands
26 hurt so bad and I had been so humiliated by the guys in there that I went
27 home that Friday and I really thought about it, and I decided that I wasn't
28 gonna let the men in the shop beat me. I was gonna come back and, uh,
29 play their game with them. So I started humiliating them back, and they
30 started leaving me alone.
31

32 Cheryl McQuaid: [5:28] How did you humiliate'm back?
33

34 Debra Burpee: I used their own magazines against'm.
35

36 Cheryl McQuaid: [5:36] They had magazines?
37

38 Debra Burpee: Oh yeah. And don't ask me why there was a *Playgirl* book in there, I have
39 no idea, but there was a *Playgirl* magazine laying on one of their tables,
40 and I just picked it up and started comparing them.
41

42 Cheryl McQuaid: [laughter] And that's what they would do to you to you [inaudible 5:47].
43

44 Debra Burpee: That's what they would do. They'd send pictures down the line on the front
45 of the cars and stand there and gawk at me when I'm trying to run my job.
46 I was pretty embarrassed. I was shy when I hired in. I'm not so shy now.

1
2 [laughter]
3
4Cheryl McQuaid: [6:09] So how long did you do that job?
5
6Debra Burpee: Until I got bumped to nights, which was about two weeks. And then I
7 went in to a different area, like on side frames, hanging parts. That was a
8 lot better.
9
10Cheryl McQuaid: [6:25] So from day shift to night shift was even a lot better?
11
12Debra Burpee: Yeah, because there was a younger crowd on night shift.
13
14Cheryl McQuaid: Okay.
15
16Debra Burpee: So that wasn't as bad, and I'd already made up my mind that whatever they
17 said to me I was gonna come back at'm with somethin'. I mean, it wasn't
18 nice because you always had to stoop to their level with their dirty mouth
19 and everything. So my mouth got pretty bad over the years. I'm tryin' to
20 break that habit; it's not a good one. [laughter]
21
22Cheryl McQuaid: [6:56] Yeah, it is hard. [laughter] What, um...oh. Debra, could you tell me
23 a little bit about the side frame area?
24
25Debra Burpee: Yeah, um, while I was working in the side framin' area, I worked a few
26 different jobs. I had, um, I run the booking desk where, um, this part, this
27 area determines what style of car you're gonna have. And it, they had big,
28 humongous gates so if you picked out the style a car you needed, you had
29 to go over and change the gates out. Take the one style out, put the style in
30 you wanted. And then the next area that I worked in is you just go there
31 and on the gate you knew what style it was 'cause it had a certain number
32 for a style on the gate. You just take that and you'd turn around, grab your
33 parts off the monorail and load them in, and rockers and smaller parts
34 were usually in a basket close to your job, and you'd load them in and just
35 send them down the line.
36
37Cheryl McQuaid: [7:53] And then somebody else would put that...
38
39Debra Burpee: Yeah.
40
41Cheryl McQuaid: ...those pieces together. Gary.
42
43Gary Burpee: Yeah, I'm Gary. And, uh, that, uh, gate was a fixture that, uh, was on
44 wheels that would roll down the top of a beam, and that fixture was, was a
45 fixture that had clamps from the start of it to the end of it. Probly had 40,
46 50 clamps on it, and the clamps were, were for parts to be clamped in in a

1 certain sequence. Like you'd start with a hinged plate, the hinge pillar, the
2 roof rail, the, uh, – now what was that, center...
3
4 Debra Burpee: Center panel.
5
6 Gary Burpee: No [inaudible 8:33].
7
8 Debra Burpee: Center post.
9
10 Gary Burpee: [Inaudible 8:35] they call that the center piece. Uh, I can't remember it
11 now. But then the quarter panel and then the rear tail. And you had the
12 door lock in the front or in the middle section. And every one of the pieces
13 had to be, uh, clamped in in sequence and welded in sequence as they
14 went down the line.
15
16 Cheryl McQuaid: [8:54] Uh, so you would set up for the next operation.
17
18 Debra Burpee: Mm-hm.
19
20 Gary Burpee: Basically.
21
22 Debra Burpee: Yeah.
23
24 Cheryl McQuaid: [8:59] And then whatever you sent up was what that vehicle was gonna be
25 the rest of the ride through the assembly line.
26
27 Gary Burpee: And determine the style of the doors, either a coupe or a sedan.
28
29 Cheryl McQuaid: [9:08] Now did you two meet in this area?
30
31 Debra Burpee: Uh, no. I actually, ha, I was workin' in the weld line when I seen Gary and
32 his brother hire in. I seen'm walkin' down the line. And then, he worked in
33 an area, I can't remember exactly, but we'd always said hi to each to other,
34 and he only hired in a year after I did. So [inaudible 9:34] challenge
35 [inaudible] recently.
36
37 Cheryl McQuaid: [9:36] Did you play any new-hire initiation-type pranks on him?
38
39 [coughing]
40
41 Debra Burpee: No. No. I was a girl. They'd get me.
42
43 [laughter]
44
45 Gary Burpee: We won't talk about the pranks.
46

1 [laughter]
2
3 Gary Burpee: The buckets a water [inaudible 9:49] HAZMAT [inaudible].
4
5 Debra Burpee: Oh I did a lotta stuff too.
6
7 [laughter]
8
9 Cheryl McQuaid: [9:54] Were there a lotta pranks on the second shift in the Body Shop?
10
11 Gary Burpee: Both shifts.
12
13 Cheryl McQuaid: Both shifts?
14
15 Gary Burpee: Yep.
16
17 Debra Burpee: Oh water fights.
18
19 Jerri Smith: [10:00] What was the gas bags? Jerri Smith.
20
21 [laughter]
22
23 Cheryl McQuaid: Yeah I never heard about gas bags.
24
25 Gary Burpee: Uh-huh. [Inaudible 10:09] not say nothin' about that.
26
27 [laughter]
28
29 Gary Burpee: But anyway, that, that would go down that line, and then everybody would
30 weld in the parts as it went down the line and then would leave the side
31 frames, both side frames would leave the side frame area and come to the,
32 they, they call it a marriage where both side frames would come together
33 with a rear pan and the pan that was comin' down the line. Then, then
34 those gates would meet up and lock on and they'd go through their process
35 of weldin' the roof and the, uh, [tulip 10:39] fixtures and everything would
36 go on down the line. And everything was welded when it got back to the
37 front a the line, those two gates, they had, uh, one guy on each side a the
38 line, the pole gates, and what they do is they'd stick a hammer inside the
39 car and hafta physically unpull every clamp on the gate ta unlock the gate
40 from the vehicle. Then when they got down to the end of the line, if those
41 clamps were all unclamped, they had a...
42
43 [coughing]
44

1 Gary Burpee: ...fixture that would pull them gates off the car, and if somebody missed a
2 clamp, that gate wouldn't come off and it'd shut the line down and you'd
3 have to go down and fix it. But one a them gates...
4

5 Debra Burpee: [Inaudible 11:13] horn go off.
6

7 Gary Burpee: Yeah. When them gates did come off, they'd go start the cycle all over
8 again with, at the side frames [inaudible 11:18] load'm up, they'd just keep
9 goin' around in circles.
10

11 Cheryl McQuaid: [11:25] And once all the gates came off, where did the car go after that?
12

13 Gary Burpee: Just kept on goin' down the line.
14

15 Debra Burpee: [Inaudible [11:29] down around and – there was a pit area past that there
16 they welded the wheel housing area in it, the pit, was probably 12-foot by
17 4-foot wide.
18

19 Cheryl McQuaid: [11:40] And one person [inaudible]?
20

21 Debra Burpee: Usually in that area. But they had, what, four, five jobs they had to do
22 under there like welding, take this gun and weld way up over their head on
23 the inside of the wheel housing and stuff. A lot of other little areas they
24 tacked with welds. But then it went around to, um, put the little plate on,
25 the serial number or whatever you wanna call that number.
26

27 Gary Burpee: [Inaudible 12:06].
28

29 Debra Burpee: Yeah.
30

31 Gary Burpee: The VIN number.
32

33 Debra Burpee: And it ended up goin' over the Weld Line. And then they did their welding
34 over there. Like they welded the rockers – 'cause everything was basically
35 just held in place once everything clamped together. Then they'd go over
36 there and weld their rockers and their, and the underbody together and,
37 you know. Just different little things. And from, they just moved [on down
38 the line around. 12:25]
39

40 Cheryl McQuaid: [12:30] And then, once you left that area, where did you go then?
41

42 Debra Burpee: Well, I was in, I was in the Body Shop for 22 years basically before I went
43 on...
44

45 [coughing]
46

1Debra Burpee: ...Materials. [Inaudible 12:40]...
2
3 [coughing]
4
5Debra Burpee: I worked all different areas in the Body Shop. I worked in underbody, I
6 worked in, um, side frames, frontend sheet metal. And it all changes so
7 much after the years, there was no more just putting it on a gate and
8 sendin' it down to the next person. They usually, it ended up bein', uh, like
9 a backend process where they put in on something and kinda bring it...
10
11 [throat clearing]
12
13Debra Burpee: ...around, and I can't remember exactly that area and what – 'cause I was
14 up front then – on how they sent those, um, side frames around. I don't
15 remember. But...
16
17Cheryl McQuaid: [13:15] Was that about the time when the robots first started coming in
18 or...?
19
20Debra Burpee: Yeah. Basically the robots were there, um, anyway – so backend of the car
21 came up through the frontend, and then we just put the fenders on, the
22 deck lids, the hoods and the roofs and just start poppin'm together up
23 there. Um, I guess the rest of it musta been done back there in Underbody.
24 I wasn't sure about that part.
25
26 [laughter]
27
28Cheryl McQuaid: It's amazing how big the place is.
29
30Debra Burpee: It is. It just goes through a whole bunch a different phases.
31
32Cheryl McQuaid: [13:50] How did you find your way in to the plant?
33
34 [throat clearing]
35
36Cheryl McQuaid: [13:56] Was that quite the job by itself when you first hired in?
37
38Debra Burpee: Well I had somebody show me out – when I was goin' out to the north lot,
39 I got lost all the time, so I had ta have somebody show me out to the north
40 lot until I realized the south lot was a lot closer and I'd park there. And that
41 was a lot easier. You just go down the main aisle and the escalator and out
42 the tunnel.
43
44Cheryl McQuaid: [14:19] Did, um, do you remember the wagons and what you did on some
45 of the breaks...
46

1 [throat clearing]
2
3 Cheryl McQuaid: ...back then?
4
5 Debra Burpee: For the wagons, it's only a six-minute break. If you hit – if you wanted
6 anything off the wagon, that usually took your whole break, and then you
7 had to eat your food while the line was moving because you didn't have
8 much time. It's either go to the bathroom or get somethin' off the wagon.
9 You didn't have a whole lotta time for a six-minute break.
10
11 Cheryl McQuaid: [14:44] What did you do for lunches?
12
13 Debra Burpee: For lunches, I usually went to the cafeteria or I went across the street to
14 Harry's. [laughter]
15
16 Cheryl McQuaid: [14:53] Did you have enough time to go across the street to Harry's?
17
18 Debra Burpee: A half hour? Yeah. Yeah. It was a half-hour lunch. So, yeah. Used to go
19 over there, order your food. You could usually call over there and order
20 your food and have it waitin' for ya.
21
22 Cheryl McQuaid: [15:08] Oh, they took orders and...
23
24 Debra Burpee: Mm-hm. Yeah.
25
26 Cheryl McQuaid: ...[inaudible 15:09]? Did you ever see anybody get hurt in the Body Shop?
27
28 Debra Burpee: Oh yeah. I did. I seen a guy named Amer that got hurt on the shuttle.
29 That's where they...
30
31 [throat clearing]
32
33 Debra Burpee: ...had [inaudible 15:24] lay down the side frame with it at that time. Um,
34 he, uh, didn't, use his lock-out procedures on locking anything out, and he
35 stepped up next to the shuttle, and it decided to move, and it took half of
36 his, part of his leg off his...
37
38 Cheryl McQuaid: Amer Brooks.
39
40 Debra Burpee: ...thigh.
41
42 Cheryl McQuaid: We interviewed him.
43
44 Debra Burpee: Yeah. [Inaudible 15:44].
45
46 John Fedewa: He told us about that too.

1
2Debra Burpee: Yeah. Basically, he couldn't – when I found him over there...
3
4 [throat clearing]
5
6Debra Burpee: ...he was just wanderin' standin' up, and I'm tryin' to get him to sit down
7 because it hadn't started bleedin' yet, but you could see all the meat that
8 had tore off that was on the rack. So I'm yellin' somebody to call on the
9 emer-, you know...
10
11Gary Burpee: Security.
12
13Debra Burpee: ...security, and I says, "Uh, I'm tryin' to get him to sit down." He wouldn't
14 lay down. That's what I tried to do. So finally I got him to sit on the edge
15 of a basket. And then everybody else took over after that. Oh yeah, I seen
16 him get hurt. I also seen a guy get scalded by the hot hydraulic oil comin'
17 off one a the robots. It crystallized his T-shirt.
18
19Cheryl McQuaid: Ooh.
20
21Debra Burpee: Yeah, it was so hot comin' outta there. So other than just minor cuts and
22 scrapes and bumps and...yeah. Everybod-, people were always...
23
24Cheryl McQuaid: [16:41] It's just a dangerous place to work. Was it unsafe or was it
25 horseplay?
26
27Debra Burpee: Um, no, basically this was working. I hadn't really never seen anybody get
28 hurt goofin' around. So...yeah, it was basically on the job. It's just they'd
29 get their finger pinched somehow or hold the gun the way they weren't
30 spose to and they'd get pinched in one of the guns or...or if you were wet...
31
32 [throat clearing]
33
34Debra Burpee: ...you'd grab that trigger, you'd get a shock from it.
35
36Cheryl McQuaid: Oh really.
37
38Debra Burpee: Yeah. From buckets a water bein' thrown around. [laughter] It'd get hot in
39 there in the summertime, and everybody'd decide a little horseplay. But
40 the shock wasn't, isn't really that bad off the guns.
41
42Cheryl McQuaid: Jerri Smith.
43
44Jerri Smith: [17:24] Yes, I'd like to go back to when you were saying that you and
45 Gary met and got married. When did you actually get married and

1 everything, and how long did you go together and was it a problem at
2 work or...?
3
4 Debra Burpee: Oh we actually just got married last April. And, um, we actually went
5 together for probably a little over a year before we got married. So...
6
7 Jerri Smith: [17:54] So you just knew each other in the plant...
8
9 Debra Burpee: Yeah, just...
10
11 Jerri Smith: ...or just friends and...
12
13 Debra Burpee: ...just always cordial to each other goin' back and for- – in fact, the day, he
14 asked me out, I kinda looked at him dumfounded. I mean, [laughter] I
15 never expected it, and I kinda drove away from him, because I was in
16 Material at that time. I drove away from him and went down. I was sittin'
17 at the end of the line workin' on a crossword puzzle waitin' for my next
18 job, and he come down told me he was serious.
19
20 [laughter]
21
22 Debra Burpee: And me not knowin' anything about his life...
23
24 [throat clearing]
25
26 Debra Burpee: ...I thought he was still married. And I go, "I'm sorry, I don't date married
27 men," and he's goin', "Sorry, our marriage is over." [laughter] And I'm just
28 lookin' at him. And he goes, "We need to talk." So that's what we did. We
29 just talked. [laughter] It got awful quiet [inaudible 18:45].
30
31 Gary Burpee: That sums it up.
32
33 Debra Burpee: Yeah it does. That's it.
34
35 [laughter]
36
37 Gary Burpee: That sums it up.
38
39 Cheryl McQuaid: [18:52] Okay. Now you said that you went into Material. When did that
40 happen?
41
42 Debra Burpee: Just a minute here. I gotta do the figurin' here. [laughter] About eight years
43 ago.
44
45 Cheryl McQuaid: About eight years ago.
46

1Debra Burpee: Yes.
2
3Cheryl McQuaid: [19:06] And your first stunt with Material was, um...
4
5Debra Burpee: I worked in Trim.
6
7Cheryl McQuaid: Trim being a tugger.
8
9Debra Burpee: Bein' a tugger. Yeah,, um, just had ta load these two, um, these two trailers
10 on the back of this little vehicle we got to drive around. And you'd have ta
11 go around and pick up the cards off the racks that the people slid down so
12 you knew what, what you needed. And you just go in their little
13 supermarket area that they called it, and you pick up all your parts and you
14 deliver it back to the location. And start all over again.
15
16Cheryl McQuaid: [19:42] And you said that you worked so hard...
17
18 [throat clearing]
19
20Cheryl McQuaid: ...in that job you ate and ate and ate and lost the weight.
21
22Debra Burpee: I lost 10 pounds. [laughter]
23
24Cheryl McQuaid: Very [inaudible 19:46].
25
26Debra Burpee: Yeah. It's a lotta lifting. A lotta running. In fact, um, my modules, and I
27 can't tell you exactly what that is except for some [inaudible 20:00] area
28 that they needed, and I had, uh, there was only like 8 of them in a box.
29 And that was my busiest area tryin' to hurry up and fill that up so I could
30 go make sure nobody else ran out of stock. And I've had to add extras,
31 stack'm extra high just so I could get through there and go do another area.
32 That was a busy area. [laughter]
33
34Cheryl McQuaid: [20:22] And you did that for six weeks.
35
36Debra Burpee: Six weeks.
37
38Cheryl McQuaid: [20:25] What kind of training process did you have to go through to
39 become a truck driver in there?
40
41Debra Burpee: Oh they take you through a Material training, and it's a safety class, tell ya
42 how ta run the truck and...well, they had, um, showed you how to use the
43 forklift. Um, every lever on it, and basically made ya sit here and practice
44 for, uh, [inaudible 20:49] it was a whole weekend that I, [inaudible] a two-
45 day weekend that I took the class and, actually, there was no really big

1 safety rules when I took it eight years ago other than to watch for traffic,
2 watch for people and just be careful how ya stack. That was it.
3
4Cheryl McQuaid: [21:11] And did that start, did they start gettin' more strict on their safety
5 with truck driving, or is that how it was basically when the plant closed?
6
7Debra Burpee: Oh they started getting a little stricter. Um, they always took us down
8 unti-, um, they started showin' us videos of people getting run over by fork
9 trucks and all the accidents or stock toppling over 'cause it wasn't bein'
10 stacked right or somebody being in too big a hurry...
11
12 [throat clearing]
13
14Debra Burpee: ...pulling out too fast and...Um, they made a few changes there, but
15 basically the old people just drove the way they wanted to anyways 'cause
16 we had other pe-, a few people in there that would drink and drive and –
17 actually one guy was, hurt somebody and he jumped off his truck and ran.
18 And as long as they didn't catch him on the truck, they couldn't burn him
19 for drinkin' and drivin'.
20
21Cheryl McQuaid: [22:05] And he had been drinkin?
22
23Debra Burpee: Yeah. He'd already lost his license out...
24
25 [throat clearing]
26
27Debra Burpee: ...side, and with, that was one of our big issues is that we couldn't figure
28 out if he even had a license. Didn't have a license outside a here, how he
29 could have a license inside to drive a fork truck. So...yeah, there were
30 some that would still run the way they wanted to. Others of us just slowed
31 down and did our job.
32
33Cheryl McQuaid: [22:28] Did you feel that the training that you were given was enough, was
34 that adequate to be able to perform your job in the plant, or did you feel
35 that maybe you needed more training?
36
37Debra Burpee: Probly needed more training 'cause I was a little slow at first when it come
38 to stackin' stuff way up over my head. I was still really leery on puttin'
39 stuff up above my head and tryin' to stack, especially these huge racks that
40 were probably – what, 12, 14 feet wide and you'd have to take and
41 shove'm on it, that hold these big rings, the side a these rings. They were
42 huge. And you had to shove'm up, up...
43
44 [throat clearing]
45

1Debra Burpee: ...here to like a gate where all this, this monorails run above your head.
2 And you have to get it between the gate and this or between the top of
3 another rack and a sprinkler system. You didn't always make it. We kinda
4 popped heads off sprinklers and...[laughter]
5
6Cheryl McQuaid: [23:23] What happened when that, when you did that?
7
8Debra Burpee: Soakin' wet.
9
10Cheryl McQuaid: Oh really.
11
12Debra Burpee: Yeah.
13
14Cheryl McQuaid: [laughter]
15
16Debra Burpee: A lotta people would get soakin' wet.
17
18Cheryl McQuaid: [23:32] And did anybody get fired for that or...?
19
20Debra Burpee: Ah, no. Actually, in certain areas back where I was, there wasn't enough
21 clearance because you were spose to have so many inches clearance
22 between the top a your rack and the ceiling or the pipes, and they didn't
23 always have the clearance we needed, so it was kinda hard to fire anybody
24 for that because they were breakin' one a their own rules.
25
26Cheryl McQuaid: [23:56] Debra, I kinda jumped the gun here...
27
28 [throat clearing]
29
30Cheryl McQuaid: ...and I really wanna go back to Amer Brooks and you finding him in the
31 shape that he was in. What did that do? I mean, how did you feel about
32 that?
33
34Debra Burpee: Made me a little more cautious about bein' around the shuttle. I mean, I
35 knew that he, I knew what he did was wrong when he stepped in there
36 without lo-, usin' his lockout procedure that they were spose to use. And
37 then I know that he thought he could just get in there and lay this rail right
38 back in there without bein' touched, but in the process, he didn't know
39 what the people down at the other end, whether they were gonna hit the
40 buttons when they got all their parts loaded in. So that made me a little
41 more leery about being around it.
42
43Cheryl McQuaid: [24:41] So do you think that he did that on purpose?
44
45Debra Burpee: Hurt himself? No.
46

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [24:46] It was just unfortunate.
2
3 Debra Burpee: Yeah. It was very unfortunate. Even though he made a joke out of it later,
4 he called us back and asked us who got the bacon off the shuttle that he...
5
6 [laughter]
7
8 Debra Burpee: ...left behind.
9
10 [throat clearing]
11
12 Cheryl McQuaid: [25:00] Gary.
13
14 Gary Burpee: Yeah. Lockout procedure in that place was obviously corporate policy, but
15 many times you would see where Management would more or less tell
16 people we can't have the line shut down. So wouldn't come right out and
17 say don't use the procedure but basically would discourage people from
18 doing it.
19
20 Cheryl McQuaid: [25:22] So if you can do it without using shuttin' down that line...
21
22 [coughing]
23
24 Cheryl McQuaid: ...[inaudible 25:26]?
25
26 Gary Burpee: Exactly.
27
28 [coughing]
29
30 Gary Burpee: And there's many a people got hurt in there by doing that, and they felt
31 pressured by the company not to lock somethin' out. Happened all the
32 time. The only time they'd ever, the only time they'd ever come back hard
33 on the worker's and try ta enforce their policy was obviously when
34 somebody got hurt.
35
36 Debra Burpee: It's like their little pull cord system. You had a certain area to get your job
37 done. If you couldn't do it, you'd pull that cord, and you, you'd have to try
38 to fix it. And somebody was sponse to come down to help you fix it once
39 you pulled the cord, but the car would stop after it reached a certain area if
40 it wasn't fixed in station, everybody got their rear ends chewed over
41 stoppin' the line. But that was sponse ta happen. That's what that was set up
42 for. If you couldn't do your job and do it right, you're sponse to pull the
43 cord for help. And we didn't always get the help but we got chewed out a
44 lot.
45
46 [laughter]

1
2Debra Burpee: That's why a lotta things would – if they didn't show up, you'd pull the
3 cord, you'd just take a marker and mark on the side a of the car and send it
4 down the line.
5
6Cheryl McQuaid: Don't shut that line down.
7
8Debra Burpee: Yeah, basically that's what we were bein' told. And...
9
10Gary Burpee: Well that was drilled into ya from the beginning.
11
12Debra Burpee: Yeah.
13
14Gary Burpee: The day you hired in, that was drilled into ya. Do not shut the line down
15 for any reason. I seen'm drag people off the line that had a heart attack.
16 Just drag'm out of the way and keep the line, just to keep the line runnin'.
17
18Cheryl McQuaid: I always heard about that...
19
20Gary Burpee: Yeah.
21
22Cheryl McQuaid: ...but I never saw it.
23
24Gary Burpee: It happened. So...
25
26Debra Burpee: Yep.
27
28Cheryl McQuaid: [27:00] What would you say was your best job in there? In Fisher Body?
29
30Debra Burpee: Material.
31
32Cheryl McQuaid: [27:08] Material? You enjoyed, enjoyed drivin' the truck?
33
34Debra Burpee: Yeah, I do. You know, the guys didn't want us to do it, so they wouldn't
35 tell us how easy it was, they'd always tell us all their aches and pains.
36
37Cheryl McQuaid: Yeah, my back.
38
39Debra Burpee: Oh yeah. You have a lot of back problems and, you know, neck problems,
40 and stuff like that, but once us women found out how easy it was, we
41 started tellin' the other women.
42
43 [laughter]
44
45Debra Burpee: It's a good job, you better get on it. [laughter]
46

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [27:33] So it wasn't hard on your back, your neck?
2

3 Debra Burpee: No. Well, you'd [inaudible 27:35] a little, your neck a little bit, but I didn't
4 think my back hurt except for sittin' all day. You just sit so long, your
5 back's gonna hurt. But no, I didn't have them problems. I still don't.
6

7 Cheryl McQuaid: [27:46] Do you have a favorite supervisor in there?
8

9 Debra Burpee: Do I have a favorite? I had...
10

11 Cheryl McQuaid: Or did you?
12

13 Debra Burpee: ...a lotta favorites. I had a lotta favorites.
14

15 Cheryl McQuaid: [27:52] You didn't have a problem working with management team?
16

17 Debra Burpee: Not really. There was a couple that I really didn't like, and one was the old
18 sourpuss when I first hired in, Earl Satler. He never smiled and you didn't
19 know if he was gonna bite your head off from one minute to the next.
20

21 Cheryl McQuaid: [28:08] Was a screamer?
22

23 Debra Burpee: No, he'd just lecture ya a lot. [laughter] But he, he actually wasn't as bad
24 as if you thought just by lookin' at him, but he was actually a nicer man.
25 But yeah, he lectured ya, but he always looked like he was gonna bite.
26 [laughter] And then his opposite was great. [Inaudible 28:28]. He was
27 fantastic. But I had a lotta good supervisors. I mean, Tom...
28

29 Gary Burpee: [Inaudible 28:34] Walt Beech.
30

31 Debra Burpee: Walt Beech and Don Ray and...
32

33 Gary Burpee: He was a screamer.
34

35 Debra Burpee: ...Dick Thomas. Dick Thom-, no Walt was all, he was a blowhard.
36 [laughter] But Dick Thomas. I mean, I had a bout with Dick Thomas, and
37 we settled it, but he was a good supervisor. I mean anything you asked for
38 he'd try to get it that was in his power. But I really hadn't had any bad
39 supervisors until I got into it with his supervisor. [laughter] I didn't like his
40 supervisor.
41

42 Cheryl McQuaid: [29:05] What did your supervisor do to her Gary Burpee?
43

44 Gary Burpee: Ask her.
45

1Debra Burpee: [laughter] He tried to get me banned out of the area because somebody
2 had a girl workin' across from'm, and she had to be the center of attention.
3 And if she wasn't the center of attention, she started trouble. So her and a
4 boss become like this, they try to get me banned from goin' in the area,
5 and it didn't work. And then no matter what happened, we got that issue
6 settled, but no matter what I did about goin' into that area, he had a fit.
7 Like I left the gate open to long or I, you know, he started takin' things out
8 on Material, period, not just me...
9
10 [laughter]
11
12Debra Burpee: ...because he couldn't get away with it. But he'd start causin' trouble for
13 Material. And now he's Material supervisor. [laughter]
14
15Cheryl McQuaid: Oh.
16
17Debra Burpee: Yeah.
18
19Cheryl McQuaid: [30:30] Um, do you remember, in Trim when, back in the 70s, the lines
20 were together, A and B line.
21
22Debra Burpee: Mm-hm.
23
24Cheryl McQuaid: Was it like that in the Body Shop?
25
26Debra Burpee: No actually. Well, I think they [inaudible 30:17] kind of both ended up
27 goin' together, well they didn't join. There was always A line and B line,
28 but the way they went around in there it was like a big jigsaw puzzle. They
29 just wound in and out of each other over there. So that wasn't [bad 30:35].
30 I mean, we always knew where we were goin'. They run right next to each
31 other, you know, basically.
32
33Cheryl McQuaid: I don't, I only worked in the Body Shop for a very short time, and I
34 thought it was kinda like half the building was one and half the building
35 was the other.
36
37Gary Burpee: You know, segregated. They still had their own individual areas.
38
39Debra Burpee: Yeah.
40
41Cheryl McQuaid: [30:56] Speaking of segregation, did you notice any racial problems, any,
42 other than [inaudible 31:01] you already told us a little bit about the
43 harassment issues. Anything else that you remember that you'd like to
44 share with us on all that?
45

1Debra Burpee: Ah, not so many racial problems. There were a lot of black people always
2 tryin' ta hit on the white women in there. Yeah. You just had ta tell'm the
3 way it was and they basically left ya alone. So I haven't seen and other
4 racial problem. I didn't pay too much attention to it. As long as they left
5 me alone, I was fine.
6

7Cheryl McQuaid: [31:33] Did you – was there very much music in the plant, in the Body
8 Shop?
9

10Debra Burpee: Yeah, we all had a lot, when we were workin' on the line, we usually had a
11 radio sittin' close by. Somebody always played a radio. It contributed to
12 the noise, but it was a better noise than the noise you had to listen to.
13 [laughter]
14

15Cheryl McQuaid: The bangin'...

16

17Debra Burpee: Yeah.

18

19Cheryl McQuaid: [31:55] And what about dinners? Did you have dinners...

20

21Debra Burpee: Oh yeah.

22

23Cheryl McQuaid: ...in there?

24

25Debra Burpee: Yeah. All the departments had dinners on birthdays or, not so much
26 birthdays but on holidays...
27
28 [throat clearing]
29

30Debra Burpee: ...or retirements. Yeah, they all had dinners.

31

32Cheryl McQuaid: [32:09] Who would usually set that all up or...?

33

34Debra Burpee: Usually the, um, oh Intermittent Relief man and then it went to the First-
35 Time [Build 32:17] man or if they didn't wanna do it, they usually, they
36 picked somebody off the line and they'd run their job and...
37

38Cheryl McQuaid: [32:25] So that person could go around...

39

40Debra Burpee: ...so that person

41

42Cheryl McQuaid: ...and talk to'm.

43

44Debra Burpee: Yeah.

45

46Cheryl McQuaid: Okay. [32:29] Did you participate in those?

1
2Debra Burpee: Oh yeah.
3
4Cheryl McQuaid: [32:33] Was it the type of thing where they would tell you what to bring,
5 or would you bring a favorite dish from home or...?
6
7Debra Burpee: They'd ask you what you wanted to bring, and usually you asked them
8 what they needed. Some areas probably told you what to bring. I didn't,
9 we didn't have a problem with that downstairs. You usually brought what
10 you wanted to.
11
12Cheryl McQuaid: [32:53] Do you remember when they changed the plant from smoking to a
13 non-smoking plant?
14
15Debra Burpee: [laughter] Yeah.
16
17Cheryl McQuaid: [33:00] And what was the attitude of people, nah, it's hard to talk for
18 someone else. But what did you think the attitude was in the Body Shop?
19
20Debra Burpee: Well I figured the people decided they were gonna do what they wanted to
21 do, 'cause I seen a lot of'm hiding cigarettes and stand over and they'd run
22 to the material area where the stock was up...
23
24 [throat clearing]
25
26Debra Burpee: ...and they'd take [inaudible 33:20] their cigarettes or they'd run down in
27 the train well when they thought nobody was lookin' and they'd smoke
28 their cigarettes or they'd – Some, most, there was a lot of'm that would go
29 out back and smoke just outside the door, but it still didn't help 'cause it all
30 came right back in at us. And we couldn't wait for'm to get break areas.
31 But yeah, I seen a lotta people still smokin' in there. They would just cup
32 their cigarette and kinda keep it down at their side, and if they seen a boss,
33 they'd just smash it or drop it or just go about their business. They...
34
35Cheryl McQuaid: [33:50] Did you ever see anybody get reprimanded for smoking [inaudible
36 33:53] when they weren't spouse to be?
37
38Debra Burpee: Yeah. I did. They were told if they were caught again they'd probly be
39 fired.
40
41Cheryl McQuaid: Well, yeah. [34:06] Were you very involved in the union?
42
43Debra Burpee: No.
44
45Cheryl McQuaid: [34:08] Did you, you didn't go to union meetings?
46

1Debra Burpee: Uh-uh.
2

3Cheryl McQuaid: [34:11] Voting?
4

5Debra Burpee: Nope. I voted, but I didn't go to the meetings.
6

7Cheryl McQuaid: [34:08] You voted in the department? [laughter]
8

9Debra Burpee: Yeah. I voted, oh, in fact, I had my book, well they'd give ya their little
10 paper pamphlets that they wanted you to read, but it didn't have all the
11 facts in it, so you still didn't know what you were voting for. You know?
12

13Cheryl McQuaid: [34:37] What is your most appreciated **bargain** benefit?
14

15Debra Burpee: My most appreciated **bargain** benefit. Now that's a good one. Well seein'
16 as I'm so close to retirement, I'd think it would be my pension.
17

18 [laughter]
19

20Cheryl McQuaid: That's a good one.
21

22Debra Burpee: And my medical.
23

24 [throat clearing]
25

26Cheryl McQuaid: A lotta people, well we're known for bein' Capital of Quality.
27

28Debra Burpee: Mm-hm.
29

30Cheryl McQuaid: [35:05] Do you have any ideas why we are what we are? What made us
31 that?
32

33Debra Burpee: The Capital of Quality? Because we all cared about our own jobs. Our
34 quality actually didn't really start goin' down until we ended up with a lotta
35 those people transferring from Flint when they shut down that one plant
36 and we ended up with a whole bunch a people here. And that's when I
37 thought our quality started goin' down because those people really didn't
38 care.
39

40Cheryl McQuaid: [35:33] They didn't have the work ethic?
41

42Debra Burpee: I don't think they did. Now a lot of us noticed that.
43

44Cheryl McQuaid: They're building a new plant for us. Um, you'll be goin' to the new plant.
45 [35:45] Will you be in the Material department?
46

1Debra Burpee: Yep.
2
3Cheryl McQuaid: [35:50] What, um, can you give us any thoughts you may have about
4 leaving this plant, going to a new one?
5
6Debra Burpee: Well I just wish I coulda retired outta this one because this is the plant I
7 hired in at and, I mean, it's like I wanted to change, I mean, somebody
8 asked me where I work, I write Fisher Body. I don't write GM or LCA or
9 anything like that. It's Fisher Body. I don't know what I'm gonna write
10 over there.
11
12 [laughter]
13
14Debra Burpee: But I have a few things about goin' over there. I mean, you're Material.
15 You sit on a truck all day. You're constantly sitting there waiting for your
16 next job. I don't know how it's gonna be over there and how they got'm set
17 up, but they're tellin' me you can't read, you can't drink, I mean, you can't
18 basically get off your [job 36:38]. I carry a bottle a water everywhere I go
19 because I drink a lotta water. Um, I don't know how the rules are gonna
20 be. And I just, I'm not very much for change. I'm set in my ways. I like
21 this job, and I did my job. I don't want nobody botherin' me if I did my
22 job. I just wanna do what I do. And if that means sittin' there readin' a
23 book while I'm waitin' for the next job and it's not hurtin' nobody and I'm
24 not gettin' behind on my job, so I should be left alone. [laughter]
25
26Cheryl McQuaid: And I agree with that.
27
28Debra Burpee: Yeah.
29
30Cheryl McQuaid: [37:07] This is an excellent interview. I wanna thank you very much. Is
31 there anything that you'd like to share with us that we didn't ask you or...?
32
33Debra Burpee: No other than I think the Jobs Bank shouldn't a been there in the first
34 place, um, because basically, the way I see it is they gave a lotta young
35 people a chance just to sit and do nothing and earn money that they
36 shouldn't a had. Because if that woulda been us years ago, we woulda not
37 been sitting in the Jobs Bank, we'd a been out on the streets lookin' for
38 another job.
39
40Cheryl McQuaid: It's costed a lotta money.
41
42Debra Burpee: It has cost, and that's a lotta profit sharing that they could probly gave to
43 use that we didn't even get. And they're sayin' they're not makin' a profit
44 but yet the sales are up and, you know, you, you just don't know. It's like
45 they take our money and build a new plant and then they say they don't
46 have the money to pay us. So, the stories you hear in here are, you know,

1 they drive ya crazy 'cause you know they're makin' a profit. They wouldn't
2 be buildin' cars. And you know all the overtime you work, so gotta be
3 buildin' somethin'. They gotta be makin' money somewhere. So. That was
4 my biggest thing is about the Jobs Bank. I know I'm sitting in it now and
5 I'm enjoying it, but it's about time.
6
7 [laughter]
8
9Debra Burpee: But basically, we would be on unemployment waitin' for this new plant to
10 start. And that's the way it shoulda been. [It's the hold 38:31] on to all
11 these kids for all these years that coulda been lookin' for a job somewhere
12 else. I think they were wrong. I mean, what's this teachin'm? You could sit
13 here and do nothin' and earn this money, why should I go to work? And so
14 when you get'm in here, what kinda quality are you gonna have 'cause
15 they've already got seniority and they're not gonna do what you want'm to
16 do because they didn't have to for so many years.
17
18Cheryl McQuaid: Thank you, Debra.
19
20Debra Burpee: Mm-hm.
21
22Cheryl McQuaid: Thank you, Gary.
23
24Jerri Smith: Thank you, Gary.
25
26
27/kj