

**MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY – SHAWN NICHOLSON**  
**WALTER BENNEFIELD, AN AFRICAN AMERICAN, DISCUSSES HIS CAREER**  
**AS A UAW PRODUCTION WORKER AND GM PRODUCTION MANAGER**  
**AT THE FISHER BODY PLANT IN LANSING, MI**

[clanking]

Cheryl McQuaid: This is Lansing Fisher Body Historical Team. Today is May 1, 2006. It's approximately 12 noon. We're at the UAW Local 602 Frank Dryer Greenhouse. First we'll introduce the team.

John Fedewa: John Fedewa.

Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith.

Cheryl McQuaid: And I'm Cheryl McQuaid. Today we're interviewing Walt Bennefield.  
[0:22] Would you please state your name and spell it for us?

Walter Bennefield: Yeah. My name is Walter L. Bennefield and that's spelled W-A-L-T-E-R and the last name is spelled B-E-N-N-E-F-I-E-L-D.

Cheryl McQuaid: [0:37] And could you tell us what your address is?

Walter Bennefield: My address is 4324 Balmoral Drive and that's spelled B-A-L-M-O-R-A-L, Lansing, Michigan 48911.

Cheryl McQuaid: [0:52] And are you married? [0:53] Do you have children?

Walter Bennefield: Uh, yes. I'm married. I have, uh, 4 children now. Um, 1 deceased. Uh...

Cheryl McQuaid: [1:06] And where were you born and raised?

Walter Bennefield: I was born in Bessemer, Alabama, uh, December 16, 1946.

Cheryl McQuaid: [1:22] And what is your educational level?

Walter Bennefield: I got 2 years of college...

Cheryl McQuaid: [1:29] And were you...

Walter Bennefield: Two year-...

Cheryl McQuaid: ...in the military?

Walter Bennefield: Yes.

1  
2 Cheryl McQuaid: [Inaudible 1:31].  
3  
4 Walter Bennefield: Two years LCC. Uh, I joined the United States Army, uh, in 1968 or –  
5 excuse me, 1965. Uh, after 3 years in the army, I, uh, uh, went back to  
6 Alabama, started, uh, working as a, as a mechanic and a, a truck, uh – oh,  
7 what do they call those truck places, uh, where they had diesel trucks? Uh,  
8 it was like a garage anyway, truck garage and had 18 wheelers. And  
9 worked as a truck mechanic for oh, about 6 months and then my aunt  
10 called me and told me that they were hiring at Fisher Body. So I took the  
11 next thing smokin’ and took the bus and, and came to Lansing and stayed  
12 with her.  
13  
14 Cheryl McQuaid: [2:38] And your aunt lived here in this area?  
15  
16 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. She lived at 109 Huron Street, which is, oh, probably 4 blocks, 5  
17 blocks from the plant. Uh, my uncle also worked there. Uh, his name was  
18 Archie [Skates 2:52]. Her name is [Jessie Skates 2:54], my aunt. Uh,  
19 Archie had been working there for quite a while and then, uh, I started  
20 working.  
21  
22 Cheryl McQuaid: [3:05] So how old were you when you hired in to Fisher Body?  
23  
24 Walter Bennefield: Uh, I think [I was 3:09] 21 years old, right around there. It's got – it's been  
25 a l-, long time, so.  
26  
27 Cheryl McQuaid: [3:17] And do you remember – I, I know your aunt called and told you  
28 about the job but why did you want to work at Fisher Body?  
29  
30 Walter Bennefield: Well the job that I had wasn't really paying that much money. Uh, [engine  
31 humming] and, uh, I had 1 child at the time, actually 2 ch-, children at the  
32 time. Uh, so I kinda wanted to, uh, make a little more money and make it  
33 better for my family, so. Something pays a little more money, sometimes  
34 you wanna move on and, you know, it doesn't take much. You wanna  
35 make sure your family is, uh, okay.  
36  
37 Cheryl McQuaid: So your uncle worked there also. [4:04] Did he help get you hired in?  
38  
39 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. Uh, he took me over there and, uh, I think the interviewer at that  
40 time, his name was Jerry Barker. So he took me in and introduced me to  
41 Jerry Barker and, uh, I went through a small process, uh, filling out  
42 applications and, and an interview and 3 days later, I was working.  
43 [laughter]  
44  
45 Cheryl McQuaid: [4:37] And what was your hire-in date?  
46

1Walter Bennefield: Uh, that was, uh, [inaudible 4:43] September 11, 1968.  
2  
3Cheryl McQuaid: [4:50] Do you remember the very first day when you walked in the doors?  
4  
5Walter Bennefield: Um, boy, it's – that's been a long time [pen clicking] but, it was something  
6 new. It was something different. I was, I was ready for something  
7 different. Uh, I hadn't really been told exactly, you know, how – what they  
8 did. I knew that they made cars and – but I didn't know any of the  
9 processes or what they required or, or anything like that. All I knew is that  
10 I was going to work and [engine humming] and, uh, it seemed a little bit  
11 overwhelming with all of the things that were going on, uh, when I first  
12 got there but it was okay. It seemed l-, to be okay.  
13  
14Cheryl McQuaid: [5:44] What department and what shift did you hire into?  
15  
16Walter Bennefield: I hired in on the dayshift in Trim Department, one of the first areas, uh,  
17 right after Paint and it was, uh, wiring. At that time, it was in the back of I  
18 think it was Building 9, somewhere [but 6:09] I think that was the  
19 building. I can't remember. It's been – like I said, it's been a long time ago.  
20 Uh, but I started out on wire screw down – body wire screw down, uh,  
21 which was, uh, probably the roughest job in that particular department. It  
22 seems like everybody that, that hired in, they always put'm on the roughest  
23 job there to see whether they really had a desire to work or not, so – at that  
24 time. Uh, people coming in later, uh, it just depended on, on where they  
25 needed a person and, and that's where they put'm but at that particular  
26 time, uh, in those old days, you, you got the roughest job. That was body  
27 wire screw down.  
28  
29Cheryl McQuaid: [7:09] Do you remember the people that were working on that job with  
30 you or was it teams or...?  
31  
32Walter Bennefield: There were, there were a couple of people working on body wire screw  
33 down, I think, at that particular time. Uh, I think you did every other car,  
34 [thumping] uh, and it, it – I, I remember, eh, it being [clanking] a, a kind  
35 of a, a, like I said, a rough job because you had to lean in to, to the back  
36 [thumping] of the car [squeaking] to [inaudible 7:44] in to start screwing  
37 down the body wires. Uh, and you screwed'm all the way from the back or  
38 the backseat area all the way to the front of the car. So it was, it was kind  
39 of a rough job but also I remember that, uh, the [clanking] little clips that  
40 held the wires were really sharp and they, [clanking] they really tore up  
41 your hands [coughing] if you didn't hold'm just right. If you didn't got'm,  
42 get'm screwed down just right, [engine humming] so. Yeah, I remember  
43 some of the people that I worked with at that particular time. Uh, they  
44 were quite some characters. I remember, uh, the guy that broke me in. His  
45 name was Charlie Carter, black guy. Uh, he was Utility at that particular  
46 time and I'll never forget Charlie.

1  
2 Uh, after about 2 day of working, working with Charlie, you know, he'd  
3 make sure I was all right, get me started in the morning time and switch  
4 off and on with me [tapping] back and forth during the day to get me  
5 acclimated and used to the job. And, and, uh, oh, about the third day, I was  
6 working along and started to get tired and I looked over and on the bench  
7 there, which was adjacent to my work area, was – there was Charlie laying  
8 on the bench about half asleep and, [laughter] and, uh, I said Charlie. I  
9 says aren't you gonna help me with this job [inaudible 9:29] down the line.  
10 Charlie looked up from me about half asleep and says well, that's your  
11 job, not mine [laughter] and he says – so at that particular time, I said to  
12 myself, well if I want this job, I guess I'm gonna have to speed up and, and  
13 get going, so – and that's what I did. And, uh, uh, later on that day, uh, the  
14 supervisor, Tom, which was Tom Brown, was my supervisor at that  
15 particular time on that shift, he came through and I was sitting down on  
16 the bench and he looked at me and he says, uh, how's it going. Oh, I says  
17 it's going fine. You know? We're doing good.  
18

19 And, uh, Charlie was still laying over on the bench sleeping. He says are  
20 you missing any cars or anything. I says no, I'm doing just fine. And he  
21 wondered – he says, uh, Charlie, is everything all right – asked Charlie is  
22 everything all right. Charlie said yeah, it's just fine. He was wondering, uh,  
23 why was I sitting on the bench and being a rookie on the job, usually the  
24 rookies are always down the line running trying to catch up and here I was  
25 up ahead, you know, on my job, so I could take a couple a seconds to sit  
26 down on the bench. So I was doing really good on the job. So that was  
27 some of the earlier memories. Uh, something I'll never forget when he told  
28 me that was my job and not his. That really stuck in my mind, [laughter]  
29 that if I wanted that job, then I had to go to work, so.  
30

31 Uh, but after that, eh, you know, it – I was never one to not be able to  
32 catch on to a job pretty easy, so. It wasn't very long after that I, uh – they  
33 saw that I was pretty handy, uh, didn't take me very long to start catching  
34 on to doing jobs and, uh, so they asked me to be Utility. So I started  
35 working, uh, on Utility. It paid a little more money, which, uh, that's  
36 exactly what I was there for, so. But it was really, really hard at that  
37 particular time because, uh, usually the, the Utility guys usually got the  
38 harder jobs because the people that were doing the harder jobs was the  
39 ones that usually were – didn't come to work or usually the ones that were  
40 sick or out a work because those hard jobs, eh, or they'd quit because of  
41 those hard jobs. Uh, so u-, Utility people really they, you know, they  
42 usually got the rougher jobs. Every once in a while, unless somebody was  
43 on vacation or something like that and they, they got easier jobs then  
44 but...  
45

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [12:43] So being a Utility person, did you break in a lot of the new people  
2 when they came in being that you were on those harder jobs? [thumping]  
3

4 Walter Bennefield: Um, [pause] usually in, in your particular area, once you learned the jobs  
5 in your area, then you-, you'd break people in [tapping] on those particular  
6 jobs. Uh, but more often than not, you were either doing other people's  
7 jobs that, uh – in different areas. You would go to, uh, [engine humming]  
8 other areas rather than, than in your particular area most of the time doing  
9 jobs rather than breaking people in. Uh, most of, most of the people came  
10 to work at that – like I said, unless they were either sick or vacation or hurt  
11 or something like that.  
12

13 Cheryl McQuaid: So the body wire job sounded very physical. [13:51] Do you remember the  
14 aches and pains of being a new hire?  
15

16 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. Um, your, your back was the first thing that started aching.  
17 [papers rustling] Your hands, uh, f-, like I said, from those little wire clips,  
18 uh, were cut up, uh, because they – the little clips had burs in'm and, uh, it  
19 was almost physically impossible to do that job and wear gloves at the  
20 same time because [coughing] you had to use little screws to screw the  
21 body wires down and you had the thumb screws and, and then reach in  
22 your pouch to get those little clips and it was really, really hard to do that  
23 job without, uh, wearing gloves. So your hands took a beating. Your back  
24 took a beating. Uh, other than that, it wasn't that bad as far as, as, uh,  
25 being physical on your feet or legs. Uh, being in the army or just getting  
26 out of the army, uh, my legs and, and feet never really hurt me that bad.  
27

28 Cheryl McQuaid: Used to all that marching. [laughter]  
29

30 Walter Bennefield: Yes. Yes. Marching. [laughter]  
31

32 Cheryl McQuaid: [15:11] Did, um – [coughing] can you tell us a little bit about the  
33 environment inside the plant? [15:16] Um, what did you do for lunches,  
34 breaktime? [rattling] Um, you mentioned that you had another black man  
35 that worked with you. [15:26] Were there many, uh, African-Americans,  
36 uh, Hispanic people in the Trim Department at that time?  
37

38 Walter Bennefield: Uh, there wasn't a lotta blacks or Hispanics at that time. There were a few.  
39 Uh, [rattling] but there wasn't really a lot of'm at that particular time. Uh,  
40 [engine humming] there were 2 Hispanic guys that, [rattling] uh, installed  
41 the wires in the car, uh, which I had to screw down but there wasn't really  
42 that many Hispanics or blacks working there then. Uh, and for whatever  
43 reason, I can't remember the name of the guy that I worked with at that  
44 particular time because he quit and somebody else hired in or he went to a  
45 different job. Uh, usually, like I said, if, if they hired in [coughing] new,  
46 new people, they took and brought those new people [rattling] to that

1 particular job, so. I think I was on that wire screw-down job for maybe 6  
2 months. Then I went to, uh, the Windshield Department where they  
3 installed windshields.  
4

5 Cheryl McQuaid: [16:53] Was that a better area to work in, better jobs or...?  
6

7 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah, that was a better, better area. [background noises] It wasn't s-,  
8 as physically demanding as, as the body-wire job but it was little better, a  
9 little easier on your hands. And, uh, I remember I was installing the  
10 [background noises] chrome tri-, trim that went, uh, around the windshield  
11 glass [clinking] and, and the back window glass at that particular time.  
12

13 Cheryl McQuaid: [17:29] Was that back when they used to use like paddles to paddle the  
14 chrome strip on? [17:33] They were like clipped [background noises] in  
15 there holding it or...?  
16

17 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. You had to install the clips and then, uh, put the chrome trim  
18 molding on [coughing] and those were kinda hard on your hands because  
19 you had to pound the clips on [background noises] and that was kinda hard  
20 but it was okay. It was a little better than the wire-clip job. I tell you that.  
21 [laughter]  
22

23 Cheryl McQuaid: [18:01] Do you remember were there any new hire initiations or pranks  
24 pulled on you when you first hired in or as you got used to the jobs, were  
25 there any pranks that you pulled on other people?  
26

27 Walter Bennefield: Boy, I'm sure there was, [background noises] uh, but I just can't really  
28 remember, [tapping] uh, remember any at this particular time. Like I said,  
29 it's been, [background noises] been quite a while ago. [background noises]  
30 So I can't r-, really remember any of the pranks. I know there used to be a  
31 lotta kiddin' and [papers rustling] joking around or, or they might, uh, fill  
32 your glove up full a urethane or something like that at that particular time  
33 and after you'd come back from a break and, uh, you put your hand in  
34 your, in your glove and it'd be full of, [background noises] [you know  
35 19:01], some of the white cream that they used... [laughter]  
36

37 Cheryl McQuaid: [Inaudible 19:05].  
38

39 John Fedewa: [Inaudible 19:05].  
40

41 Walter Bennefield: ...uh, to lubricate the, uh, the rubbers, something like that or, you know,  
42 simple stuff and everybody'd [background noises] stand back and watch  
43 you curse and, [laughter] and laugh, snicker.  
44

45 Cheryl McQuaid: [19:23] So it was all done in fun [inaudible 19:24]?  
46

1Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah, all done in fun. Uh, get the new guy. You know? But, uh – and  
2 I'm sure I got a f-, a few other people myself, so. [background noises]  
3 [throat clearing] As a matter a fact, I'll never forget, uh, we had a foreman;  
4 his name was D-, [Dwayne Reese 19:45], uh, so we used to take and every  
5 once in a while put, [background noises] uh, [engine humming] the grease  
6 that we used, uh, to grease some a our bolts with, we used to take that and  
7 rub it on the earpiece on his phone and, uh, somebody would go to a  
8 different area and call back to his phone and he'd reach up, grab the phone  
9 and stick it to his ear and [laughter] hello, hello [laughter] and everybody  
10 would just die. [laughter] Well I remember one day I got caught greasing  
11 up his phone, so he sent me to the office for greasing up [background  
12 noises] his phone. Uh, and they gave me a, a reprimand and I'll never  
13 forget that but, eh, it wasn't so funny once I went to the office for a  
14 reprimand. But, eh, you used to play pranks like that [background noises]  
15 on each other. You know? [tapping] Different stuff but [tapping] it was all  
16 done in fun. [thumping]  
17

18Cheryl McQuaid: [21:01] How did you pass the time, the pranks? [21:04] Did you listen to  
19 radios?  
20

21Walter Bennefield: Yeah, we could – you could play radios at that particular time when they  
22 starting letting'm come in. The, the union, uh, [engine humming] they  
23 [background noises] fought to get radios [tapping] in to kinda help the  
24 boredom. So once the, uh, the radios start to come in and it was, it was  
25 okay. Uh, that would help a little bit on boredom. But really at that  
26 particular time, you really didn't, didn't have that much that, uh, to do  
27 [background noises] because you were usually working usually from one  
28 job to the next and unless you were really, really good at that job where  
29 you could take your time and, and, uh, maybe read, uh, a little bit.  
30 [clanking] You could read the paper sometimes on your job if you, like I  
31 said, if you got really, really good at doing your job, you could, you could  
32 get up the line a little bit. And [rattling] by getting up the line, I mean do  
33 your job ahead enough so you could read.  
34

35Cheryl McQuaid: [22:17] So like a paragraph at a time?  
36

37Walter Bennefield: Maybe a paragraph. Yeah. [laughter] A couple sentences. Uh, [clanking]  
38 you could read a book [clanking]. [laughter]  
39

40Cheryl McQuaid: [22:27] Did you view your coworkers as brothers and sisters?  
41

42Walter Bennefield: No, not really. I just – I viewed [background noises] my coworkers usually  
43 as coworkers. Uh, I, you know, I'm not – [background noises] no, I didn't  
44 really view'm as c-, as brothers and sisters. I just viewed'm as, as  
45 coworkers. You know? [engine humming]  
46

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [22:57] And how long did you do that glass job, [engine humming] the –  
2 actually it was, uh, [clicking] the moldings around the glass?  
3

4 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. Maybe, maybe another 6 months because right after that I, I, like I  
5 said, I went to Utility. So I was all over, uh, all over the shop usually, uh,  
6 in Trim that is being Utility. Uh, [pen clicking] my, uh, what is called an  
7 MC, uh, or a, oh – what's the terminology for MC, eh?  
8

9 John Fedewa: [Inaudible 23:43].  
10

11 Cheryl McQuaid: Manufacturing coor-.  
12

13 Walter Bennefield: Manufacturing...  
14

15 John Fedewa: Manufacturing Coordinator.  
16

17 Walter Bennefield: ...Coordinator. Back in, back in the day, they used to call'm a general  
18 foreman but it's a Manufacturing Coordinator now. [tapping] Uh, anyway,  
19 uh, his name was John Powers and, uh, he's the one that asked me if I  
20 wanted to go on Utility and, and, uh, at that particular time it wasn't that –  
21 really that many black guys on Utility but I'd say maybe 3, maybe 4 black  
22 guys on Utility in Trim at the most. But I went from, uh, from that glass  
23 job to Utility.  
24

25 Cheryl McQuaid: [24:36] And was that Utility within that same department...  
26

27 Walter Bennefield: With-...  
28

29 Cheryl McQuaid: ...the Glass Department?  
30

31 Walter Bennefield: Within that – within the Glass Department but then I went [background  
32 noises] to other departments. Uh, I went to the – from the Back Glass  
33 Department to the gl-, Door Glass Department. Over the years, I've, I've  
34 probably up until the time that I was – [background noises] went to a  
35 supervisor's job, I probably was in 4, maybe 5 areas in the Trim  
36 Department and that was over a span of about 10 years from the, from the  
37 date I hired in. I went to, uh, supervisor after, after working about 10  
38 years.  
39

40 Cheryl McQuaid: [25:34] So what made you want to be a supervisor?  
41

42 Walter Bennefield: Less work, more money. [laughter] Uh, at that particular time, uh, one of  
43 my friends, uh, his name was Robert Vaughan, he, uh, he went to, uh,  
44 Supervision and, and they were looking for some more black people to  
45 become supervisors. Uh, they were complaining about not enough black  
46 people being supervisors at that particular time, so [engine humming] they



1 were looking for some other people to become supervisor. [coughing] And  
2 I don't know why he ever chose me because at that particular time, I was  
3 sort of a, a rebel but, uh, they asked me if I wanted to be a supervisor and I  
4 thought it over and [background noises] I said, uh, why, why not; I'll give  
5 it a try anyway. So I tried it and it worked out for me.  
6

7Cheryl McQuaid: [26:37] Was the application p-, uh, period for that, was it pretty extensive  
8 or...?  
9

10Walter Bennefield: No, not really. Not for supervisor at that particular time. You basically had  
11 to have a knowledge of, of the process in your particular area, uh, the jobs  
12 in your area and for whatever reason, usually when you started on  
13 supervisor at that particular time, they usually [background noises] put  
14 you in your own area, which was actually harder because you had to work  
15 with and/or discipline or – the same guys that you worked on the line with  
16 at that particular time, so it was, it was harder. And that kinda, eh, made  
17 you or, or it broke you at that particular time because you could either  
18 handle it and deal with it – like I said you had to, uh, be able to discipline  
19 the people that you worked with, so it was kinda rough.  
20

21Cheryl McQuaid: [27:49] Do you have any memories of when you first became a supervisor,  
22 something that happened that, uh, that sticks in your mind?  
23

24Walter Bennefield: Well I – probably the first time that I had to fire somebody for whatever  
25 reason, that was probably the hardest thing that I have ever done because I  
26 – it was hard for me to discipline people anyway. You know? Uh, and I  
27 don't know if it was because I was just a softie by nature or, uh, or caring,  
28 if you wanna call it caring or being soft or whatever but I always kinda  
29 cared about people and, uh, never really wanted to see somebody lose their  
30 good-paying job to go out on the streets and have to figure out some other  
31 way to make a living but some of the guys made it, made it really, really,  
32 really hard for you not to, to be able to supervi-, uh, discipline'm, I mean,  
33 because they for whatever reason, whether they didn't come to work or  
34 whether they didn't do their job or whether they were drunk all the time.  
35

36 There was quite a bit a drinking back at that time. And a lotta guys came  
37 to work and they were either still half drunk from the night before or  
38 they'd get drunk at work or, or whether they didn't come to work, you  
39 know, you'd, you'd have to discipline'm but that was for me one of the  
40 things that sticks in my mind. The first time I had to, uh, fire somebody for  
41 – and that was for drinking but before, uh, it got to that point, that person  
42 had to go through an extensive amount of discipline for – at that particular  
43 time for him to be at that point where they would fire'm for drinking. So  
44 that was something hard for me.  
45

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [30:06] But, eh, because they had to go through quite a, quite a lengthy  
2 process to get fired, they must've had a pretty bad problem...  
3  
4 Walter Bennefield: Yeah.  
5  
6 Cheryl McQuaid: ...with the drinking? [coughing]  
7  
8 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. [coughing]  
9  
10 Cheryl McQuaid: [30:18] And was there anything...  
11  
12 Walter Bennefield: Yeah.  
13  
14 Cheryl McQuaid: ...in place to help, eh, [papers rustling] those employees out or...? [papers  
15 rustling]  
16  
17 Walter Bennefield: I – they, they later had Employee Assistance and I can't remember whether  
18 at that particular time whether they had a – an employee assistance  
19 program in place. I know later on they did. But at that particular time, I  
20 don't think that they really had an employee assistance. I can't, eh – it's  
21 hard for me to remember. [clanking] But, uh, I, you know – I'm not sure  
22 whether they had it at, at that particular time. But it was, it was hard.  
23  
24 Cheryl McQuaid: [31:00] What were some other for instances [rattling] of what a supervisor  
25 would have to discipline employees for? [rattling]  
26  
27 Walter Bennefield: Oh, uh, not doing their job, uh, [rattling] [pause] making unnecessary  
28 scrap, uh, being late for work or being late coming back for – from lunch  
29 or not coming to work, uh, [clicking] [tapping] the usual shop things or  
30 most of the things that in everyday life any, any other place would, would  
31 discipline a person for. Uh...  
32  
33 Cheryl McQuaid: Jerri Smith?  
34  
35 Jerri Smith: [31:50] There was, eh – they had to have done it more than just once,  
36 though, before they were disciplined, right? [31:55] Just like now, I mean,  
37 it would take more than just one time?  
38  
39 Walter Bennefield: Uh, yeah. Usually they got a – the first time, they got a – what they call a  
40 verbal warning. [engine humming] That's just where ya – you'd sit'm  
41 down and tell'm hey, you're, you're screwing up or you're not doing what  
42 you're supposed to do and, [background noises] and be doing – I should  
43 say – and, and then they'd give'm a verbal warning a-, as their initial  
44 [coughing] thing and then from there, they'd, they'd get a written warning  
45 or a couple a written warnings and then they would start getting time off  
46 after that, so. Yeah. It'd be more than 1, 1 item before they got fired unless

1 it was something that was really, really, really, really bad and I can't think  
2 of anything that... [engine humming]  
3  
4 Jerri Smith: [32:54] I was gonna say did you have anybody that was really, really,  
5 really bad? [background noises] [thumping]  
6  
7 Walter Bennefield: Uh, no, not, not really. Not really.  
8  
9 Jerri Smith: [Inaudible 33:03].  
10  
11 Walter Bennefield: Usually, usually I had a pretty good bunch a people that I worked with and  
12 they kinda knew me and I kinda knew them and, like I say, I was kinda the  
13 softie, so I'd give'm a little bit more than, than most people would I guess,  
14 chances, I mean.  
15  
16 Jerri Smith: Yeah.  
17  
18 Walter Bennefield: Give'm a few more chances than most people would but, you know, you –  
19 in order for you to keep doing your job – for you to keep getting paid for  
20 doing your job, you had to do your job and, and sometimes that entailed  
21 disciplining people.  
22  
23 Jerri Smith: [33:37] And you were mostly in, uh, Trim Shop in C Trim as a supervisor  
24 [pen clicking] then?  
25  
26 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. C Trim as a supervisor. [Inaudible 33:46].  
27  
28 Cheryl McQuaid: [33:46] Now is that when both lines were together – sorry, Cheryl  
29 McQuaid – or was that after the lines were split up?  
30  
31 Walter Bennefield: Uh, this was when the lines were running together. I started being a  
32 supervisor before the – before they split the lines from one floor to the  
33 next floor. So it was quite a while ago. Uh... [clanking]  
34  
35 Cheryl McQuaid: You've seen a lotta changes in the plant. [34:16] Anything that  
36 [background noises] sticks out [clanking] more than others? Uh, like we  
37 were just saying that the – both lines used to be on one floor and they  
38 changed'm. [34:25] How about, um, stock, that type of thing, what – can  
39 you remember any of the differences with the Material Department in how  
40 they presented stock to you?  
41  
42 Walter Bennefield: Material, [engine humming] [pause] I can't see really a major, major  
43 change in anything that, uh, Material – the only major change material-  
44 wise was they didn't have as much in the plant over the years as they used  
45 to. Used to be they'd have more material on hand. Uh, later, uh, [engine  
46 humming] in the process, they started where they, they just-in-time

1 stocked. So, uh, a lotta times we went home because we didn't have that in  
2 – [clicking] just-in-time stock there. So, uh, that was a learning process  
3 and, you know, growing pains on that particular, uh, thing but usually they  
4 had all the stock and it was always presented to the line, to the employee,  
5 uh, so that you could, you could do your job whether it was boxes or bins  
6 or, or whatever. But that I think is probably the, the main thing. They went  
7 away from having all the stock in the plant to, uh, just in time.  
8

9 Cheryl McQuaid: [36:03] Could you walk us through a typical day of a supervisor's  
10 workday? [36:08] I mean, were there meetings, audits? [36:11] Um, what  
11 type a things did you have to do being a management person?  
12

13 Walter Bennefield: Okay. Uh, usually supervisor usually was there, uh, before everybody or  
14 [coughing] they wanted'm there at a certain amount of time before  
15 everybody else got there, so they, they could get their headcounts in, uh,  
16 make sure they had enough people to run their particular area. Uh, you'd  
17 call in your headcount to your MC or General, General Supervisor. Uh,  
18 after that, uh, it was process of making sure that you had quality jobs  
19 going down the line. Uh, that was always, uh, something that I tried to do,  
20 is make sure that we had good quality cars going out of our particular area  
21 and you had to make sure that the cars coming to you were, were in good  
22 shape too because everything coming – all the cars coming to ya usually  
23 connected in some way with your particular area.  
24

25 So if their job wasn't done right, then you couldn't really do what you had  
26 to do and, uh, there – every once in a while, there were jobs coming down  
27 the line that weren't complete that you had to let continue going down the  
28 line at that particular time so they could continue to get built but – and  
29 you'd have a meeting about 10:00, before lunch. And they'd sit down and  
30 talk about absenteeism and what are you doing to curb absenteeism or if  
31 your particular area had defects and then you had to take, eh, the  
32 information that they were giving you from Repair, go back to talk to your  
33 people about what, what they were doing wrong on that particular day or,  
34 or you'd be on the phone quite a bit from the supervisors that were down  
35 line from ya, calling ya and letting ya know whether you had something  
36 wrong on, uh, particular cars or whether your quality wasn't like it should  
37 be.  
38

39 Uh, then you'd have lunch and after lunch, you'd have to worry about  
40 people coming back and, [laughter] uh, that weren't, uh, quite able to do  
41 their jobs, whether they were a little inebriated or, or not. I remember, uh,  
42 some – before I was a supervisor, I was working, uh, the nightshift and  
43 every once in a while at lunchtime we'd go out and [engine humming]  
44 we'd – somebody would take a carful of us and we'd go over to the s-, the  
45 party store and get, uh, a big 40 ounces of beer and come back in the  
46 parking lot and sit out there and drink 40 ounces of beer or 32 ounces of

1 beer and the guys would drink some beer, get out the car, run around the  
2 car and burp beer [laughter] so they could drink some more beer [laughter]  
3 before they, [laughter] eh, you know – to keep yourself from being so full  
4 [clinking] of carbonation, you'd, you'd drink beer and then, uh, [engine  
5 humming] go back in and go to work. So I've – I had done some of that  
6 too. So I knew that, I knew that the guys did that. So you had to kind of  
7 [laughter] watch out for the guys that'd go to work [laughter] and, and had  
8 just a little too much to drink at that particular time.  
9

10 Cheryl McQuaid: [40:24] And speaking of, uh, drinking a little bit of beer, do you – did you  
11 ever or did any of your employees ever visit the establishment across the  
12 street, Harry's or – oh, there was a couple of'm – Irish Pub?  
13

14 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. Oh, yeah. [tapping] At that particular time, we used to have about  
15 40 minutes for – 42 minutes for lunch. Uh, so they – those guys could get  
16 a lotta drinking done. Uh, I know they used to go to Harry's but that  
17 wasn't really for me. I didn't really like going over to Harry's or any of  
18 the other – Irish Pub or [tapping] over at The Shop Stop. That was  
19 [rattling] another name for one of the, the local establishments. But I  
20 didn't really like going to those. So if we had anything, we – when I was  
21 working on the line, we usually – either you brought your liquor in to  
22 work with ya – yeah. [laughter]  
23

24 Cheryl McQuaid: And [inaudible 41:23]. [clanking]  
25

26 Walter Bennefield: And they used to have like a, [coughing] a – the guards at the gate, they'd  
27 check your, check your, uh, lunchbox and make sure you didn't have any  
28 bottles of alcohol coming in but you had found little ways to hide your  
29 alcohol, little pints of whisky and some of your – [ringing] [tapping] you  
30 wanna stop that? [recorder clicking] And...  
31

32 Cheryl McQuaid: I always heard that when they put you on supervision and put you in the  
33 department where you worked that it was a way for them to figure out if  
34 you could make it [engine humming] or not as a supervisor.  
35

36 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. Because, uh, the people that you work with, they know that –  
37 [coughing] they know what kinda guy you are. They know you as a  
38 person. They went out drinking with you or whatever. So they know you  
39 and it's – and they kinda make it hard for you because it's hard to supervise  
40 people that you know. It's just like renting to your relatives. You know?  
41 [laughter] Uh, if you're renting to relati-, renting a house to relatives, it's  
42 hard to, to throw'm out or collect your money, you know, so. [clanking]  
43 But you have to deal with it. It's, it's hard. [rattling] Uh, just, uh, we were  
44 talking about a second ago, uh, about ways of, of getting your liquor back  
45 in. Uh, w-, most ingenious thing I've ever seen was a guy that [clicking]  
46 sealed his alcohol in little plastic bags. He'd have little plastic bags that

1 he'd seal'm up with – [tapping] it was like a – like your – oh, what is it?  
2 The – what is that thing that they...  
3  
4 Jerri Smith: [43:14] Seal-A-Meal?  
5  
6 Walter Bennefield: ...seals – yeah – Seal-A-Meals. Uh, [laughter] he had his – he'd used to  
7 take and have vodka sealed in little packets in that Seal-A-Meal packets  
8 and I don't know how he, [engine humming] he got it done but he'd have,  
9 uh, uh, little – almost a half a pint of vodka in 2 or 3 of them little, little  
10 bags [laughter] and he'd sneak'm in the plant that way. And, uh,  
11 [background noises] I'll tell ya one of the funniest things I'll never forget.  
12 We were working on the line one night and we were working and we were  
13 working the line back and one of the guys that – I can't remember his  
14 name but he had got snookered during the night. Uh, he made it through  
15 the night but – and he was one of the guys that was helping us work the  
16 line back at the end of the shift when I was working on the line and being  
17 Utility and we got to our department and he was acting kinda goofy,  
18 [background noises] so he was talking about playing football and the  
19 doors on the cars were open, so he got down on, on a 3-point stand like he  
20 was playing football and start going down through the, the line there  
21 knocking the doors closed with his shoulder, [laughter] banging dents into  
22 the doors. Uh, he was just that snookered up and about drunk at the end of  
23 the night.  
24  
25 So the next day, they wanted to know who had banged in all the doggone  
26 doors, all those doors that they had to change, [laughter] uh, because, uh,  
27 because of the dents in the side of the doors and I was on the afternoon  
28 shift and the guy came in to work that day and he says, he says God, he  
29 says, I don't know if I can make it today. I said well what's wrong with  
30 ya? He says my shoulder's just killing me. [laughter] And I said you idiot;  
31 you banged in all those doors. I says you better hope that nobody else saw  
32 you because they're gonna fire you for damaging all those doggone doors.  
33 They had about 10 doors that they had to change this morning on the  
34 dayshift because you [laughter] went down through there banging the  
35 doors in. He says I didn't do that. I says yes, you did and you got a sore  
36 shoulder to prove it. [laughter] Uh, [coughing] but that was just some of  
37 the crazy stuff that went on.  
38  
39 Cheryl McQuaid: [46:01] Now did that happen while you were a supervisor or while you  
40 were hourly?  
41  
42 Walter Bennefield: That's while I was hourly. [clicking] Uh... [laughter]  
43  
44 Jerri Smith: [46:09] What woulda happened if you did – that happened while you were  
45 a supervisor?  
46

1Walter Bennefield: Oh, I probably would've had to discipline the guy for doing that but  
2 [laughter] he would've deserved it because that's just crazy.  
3

4Cheryl McQuaid: Uh-huh.  
5

6Walter Bennefield: Crazy stuff. But over the years, I've seen some people do some weird  
7 stuff, so, uh – but back at that time, they used to work a lotta hours every  
8 day. The plant used to work sometimes 10 hours and then they worked the  
9 lines back so you'd, you'd come in and work 11 hours and sometimes  
10 you'd work 10-11 hours on Saturday when the plant wasn't working just  
11 to, to take care of some of the repairs, uh, before they'd ship the cars over  
12 to Oldsmobile. Uh, that was a lotta hours every, every week because of, of  
13 repairs or things that weren't quite right or they didn't quite get together.  
14 They had to go back and, and repair in the repair hole or the holding area.  
15 The holding area is the – where they hold the cars before they ship'm over  
16 to Chassis. Uh, but there was some lotta – a lotta hours for whatever  
17 reason, whether it was because something broke down, uh, in the Body  
18 Shop and they couldn't make cars or, eh, or whether they ran out of parts.  
19 Then they, they'd work 10 or 11 hours and they'd work Saturdays and  
20 you'd be really whipped by the end of the week, uh, working all those  
21 hours but you made it. I mean, you know, you made good money, so.  
22

23Cheryl McQuaid: [58:15] Have you developed any friendships that extended outside of the  
24 plant?  
25

26Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. Uh, I met a guy that I was a friend with for – since I – almost  
27 since I hired in, uh, guys that used to go and shoot pool together or go  
28 fishing. Yeah. Not a, not a lotta people. I'm, I'm kind of a, a loner. [engine  
29 humming] I don't have a, a lotta friends but a couple, three people that, uh,  
30 you know, I go golfing with or go fishing with or go shoot pool with or –  
31 somebody that's usually got the same interests that I have, you know,  
32 some of the same interests, I should say, over the years but not a, not a lot  
33 of people that – from the shop. [engine humming]  
34

35Cheryl McQuaid: I, uh, just thought of another question I wanted to ask you about being a  
36 supervisor. [49:23] Were there, um, dress codes that you had to follow?  
37 [49:27] Um, any rules that, that were in place that maybe aren't now but  
38 [clicking] used to be?  
39

40Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. They, they always wanted you to, to try to look professional at  
41 that particular time. When I first went on salary, they wanted you to wear  
42 a dress shirt and a dress pants and some sort of like dress shoes and – but  
43 as time went on, they, they, uh, changed where you didn't, didn't really  
44 have to wear ties or anything but they still wanted you to be – present  
45 yourself neat and not wear jeans and – but at – when I first started on  
46 salary, they wanted you to wear your ties and – which I didn't mind. I

1 mean, you know, it was, it was okay but boy, you could really get some  
2 clothes filthy or dirty from urethane or oil or grease or whatever and, uh,  
3 besides losing a tie every once in a while. [laughter] Uh, that was one of  
4 the things, uh, at that particular time when you first went on salary, uh, the  
5 guys liked to – especially the guys that were in the headliner area, they'd  
6 love to catch you leaning over in the car looking to see what they're doing  
7 and [rattling] snip the end of your tie off. [laughter]  
8  
9 Cheryl McQuaid: Yeah. Yeah. [laughter] They'd lose a tie right quick.  
10  
11 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. You...  
12  
13 Cheryl McQuaid: [Inaudible 51:11].  
14  
15 Walter Bennefield: Well what would happen is if every time you'd lean in the car whether it  
16 was that car and when you'd go to the next guy, the next guy would get a  
17 little bit more off the end of your tie [laughter] and reach over and grab it  
18 and cut a little bit more off the end of it and you'd be yelling and  
19 screaming and cursing at'm and they just love that. That just made their  
20 day – [laughter] have a little fun with the guys. I usually got along pretty  
21 good with the guys 'cause, eh, like I said, I wasn't too straightlaced but –  
22 unless I just had to be but seemed to get along pretty good with  
23 everybody.  
24  
25 Cheryl McQuaid: [51:49] So what else creative did the employees do? Um, the...  
26  
27 Walter Bennefield: Oh...  
28  
29 Cheryl McQuaid: ...Seal-A-Meal liquor was really good.  
30  
31 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah.  
32  
33 Cheryl McQuaid: [52:00] What about chairs and couches and beds in the plant?  
34  
35 Walter Bennefield: Oh, they had all kinds of ways of making little chairs from [clapping]  
36 using a – I'm not sure if you know what the little rollers are that – wire  
37 rolls, rolls of wire come on. It's like a s-, a...  
38  
39 Cheryl McQuaid: [Inaudible 52:19].  
40  
41 Walter Bennefield: ...thread spindle. Yeah. And they'd make little seats and take'm and pad'm  
42 and take little bits of the vinyl tops that came out of the vinyl top area  
43 where they had a – they had vinyl. They'd cover those and make chairs out  
44 of'm. Uh, Christmas trees, they'd take chris-, make cardboard Christmas  
45 trees and ornaments out of different, uh, throwaway items like, uh, little  
46 cardboard pieces. They'd take'm and use'm to make bulbs with or help



1 string the lights and that kinda stuff but – oh, yeah. They were very, very  
2 creative but, uh, they were also pretty good people. They also tried to help  
3 people charity-wise [and that's] [inaudible 53:11]. Fisher Body people  
4 were always charity cons-, charity conscious and always tried to help  
5 people, uh, that were kinda down on their luck or having problems but –  
6 yep. They were very, very ingenious.  
7  
8 They were always figuring out a way how to do something. A lot of the,  
9 the tools that we used [clanking] were, uh – [papers rustling] to make your  
10 job easier came from a lotta the guys that worked right there on the line  
11 because they were always looking for a way to help themselves do their  
12 job easier, so a lotta tools or innovations, [clanking] uh, in the factory  
13 [papers rustling] that come right from the guys. And, and the Suggestion  
14 Plan helped a lot too. Uh, when they started paying a certain amount of  
15 money through the Suggestion Plan, [background noises] [engine  
16 humming] the guys would help'm. Uh, they made quite a bit a money and  
17 it was innovative for General Motors. It would always help to reduce cost  
18 or, uh, something like that.  
19  
20 Cheryl McQuaid: [54:24] You mentioned, uh, Christmas trees and it has me wondering did  
21 you participate in some of the Christmas dinners or...?  
22  
23 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. We always – everybody always participated in Christmas  
24 dinners. You either you brought a dish to pass and, [rattling] and, uh,  
25 whatever. You had to – somebody'd go through and get a list of who was  
26 brining what and, and we always had a Christmas dinner and  
27 Thanksgiving dinner and any excuse to eat was a good excuse, so.  
28 [laughter]  
29  
30 Cheryl McQuaid: That's how I remember it too.  
31  
32 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. But, uh, it just kinda helped the camaraderie of the area, you  
33 know, as a group working together and so, oh yeah, it was good.  
34  
35 Cheryl McQuaid: I asked you about developed friendships that extended outside the plant  
36 and we all know that there was definitely one. Um, you met your wife in  
37 the plant.  
38  
39 Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah.  
40  
41 Cheryl McQuaid: [55:29] Could you tell us, uh, about, eh, she was an hourly? [engine  
42 humming]  
43  
44 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. Um, [pause] I was – that was in 1978. Matter a fact, uh, she hired in  
45 in September right or about the same time that I hired in but just in – 10  
46 years later. I hired in '68. She hired in in [tapping] '78 around the same

1 time and, [tsk] uh, I was a supervisor at the time. I had just started being a  
2 supervisor and, like I said, it was about 10 years between the time when I  
3 started working there till I started being a supervisor. And I was new at  
4 being a supervisor and I was working in 3X at that particular time in the  
5 headliner area and they had just – over our changeover period and our  
6 changeover period is where they take and, uh, go from one model to the  
7 next year's model. That's why they, they call it a – the changeover. [It was  
8 a 56:46] process. But, yeah, we changed areas at that particular time and  
9 we were in 3X and so, uh, she hired in and [tapping] they brought her in  
10 into my area and at that particular time she was installing wiper motor, uh,  
11 or – yeah, wiper arms and wiper – excuse me – wiper transmissions and  
12 that's the, the apparatus that runs your wiper arms. They call it a wiper  
13 motor transmission. But, yeah, um, she started working for me and, uh,  
14 just kinda started from there.  
15

16Cheryl McQuaid: [57:38] So were there any problems with you being a salaried person and  
17 her being hourly? [57:43] Did upper management frown on that at all? I  
18 always heard they did, so I, I don't know.  
19

20Walter Bennefield: Well they, they kinda sorta did but we didn't really, really have any – I  
21 didn't really have any problems. Uh, nobody really said anything. If they  
22 said anything, they probably said it behind my back but I didn't really,  
23 really have very many problems. Like I said, I usually got along pretty  
24 much with everybody. Uh, but, uh...  
25

26Cheryl McQuaid: That may have been...

27

28Walter Bennefield: I'm sure. Yeah. I'm sure...

29

30Cheryl McQuaid: That could've been older management that [inaudible 58:27].  
31

32Walter Bennefield: Eh, well, yeah. Uh, you had some prejudice, uh, you know, in the plant at  
33 that particular time, uh, and I'm sure that, that, uh, they probably said  
34 things but they wouldn't come right out and, and say to ya because they  
35 figure if they – well if we come right out and say it to'm and then we have  
36 to fire'm, maybe he'll sue us for – because, uh, saying that we're  
37 prejudiced, you know, and they were – at that particular time, it was oh, a  
38 lotta things were happening with civil rights and all that kinda stuff, so.  
39 No, they never really said anything because I wouldn't a listened to'm  
40 anyway, you know. [Inaudible 59:21] what's my business is my business  
41 as long as I, I wasn't showing favoritism or, [clicking] uh, not doing my  
42 job because, you know, of it. I didn't see where it was any of their  
43 business or not, so. You try to do what you're supposed to do and do your  
44 job and you usually didn't have any problems, so. [clanking] But, no, they  
45 really didn't want you to fraternize with the employees but [clanking] –  
46 and I don't see why because [banging] they were some of the biggest

1 offenders, you know. We find out later that [laughter] the guys that  
2 were...  
3  
4 Cheryl McQuaid: [Inaudible 1:00:03].  
5  
6 Walter Bennefield: ...upper management was some of the biggest offenders of [throat  
7 clearing] fraternizing with the employees. They just kept it quiet.  
8  
9 Cheryl McQuaid: Uh-huh. [rattling]  
10  
11 Walter Bennefield: Or they wanted to. [coughing] Yeah. [background noises] If they got mad  
12 at you, it was because they wanted to do it themselves and [background  
13 noises] didn't have a chance. But we got along pretty good, so – and, uh,  
14 we didn't really, really, really start, uh, seeing each other until she started  
15 working for a different supervisor, so. [background noises] I mean we  
16 were kinda close. We'd see each other every once in a while but didn't  
17 really, really start getting serious until we s-, started working for a  
18 different, uh – or she started working for a different [background noises]  
19 supervisor.  
20  
21 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:00:59] What in your opinion made a good or a bad supervisor?  
22  
23 Walter Bennefield: Being able [background noises] to look past the obvious, uh, and caring  
24 about your people and caring about making sure you had good quality jobs  
25 leaving your particular area. Uh, I mean and it's, it's easy to, to blame a  
26 person for not doing his job but it's hard to, [engine humming] to go in and  
27 really investigate why that person wasn't really doing their job, you know,  
28 whether it's because of the equipment or whether it [background noises]  
29 was the material or whether it was that person just having a bad day  
30 because of his family, some family [background noises] problems.  
31 Because I've had, I've had guys that, that missed things on the car and I  
32 know that they're the type of person or that normally wouldn't do that but  
33 in order to discipline that p-, person for, for not doing his job, which they  
34 wanted you to do some-, sometimes, you, you really had to figure out  
35 [background noises] why that person wasn't doing his job. Is it because  
36 he's just [engine humming] not there that day, whether he's having family  
37 problems and he can't really concentrate on his job because that, that really  
38 has an effect on, on people, uh, sometimes, family things. So I think  
39 looking inside to see what, what's really the cause of problems or – and  
40 make – like I said, making sure that you've got good quality cars going  
41 outta your area and, yeah, I think that's probably some of the better things.  
42  
43 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:03:17] What type of a relationship did you have with the Skilled Trades  
44 arena? [1:03:21] Did, did any Skilled Trades people do any government  
45 work for you or...?  
46

1Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. They all did government work for everybody, for supervisors,  
2 uh, and, uh, for the people that's probably translating, it's by government  
3 work, uh, [which'll 1:03:39] probably means that, uh, doing jobs for you  
4 that weren't really related to factory work or building cars. Uh, [coughing]  
5 let's say if you needed a lock or a personal locker built, uh, then the guy –  
6 that would be considered government work or you need a special tool  
7 made so that you could pick your golf balls up outta the, [clicking] the  
8 cup, that, [laughter] that would be considered [knocking] government  
9 work. Uh, yeah. So, yeah, I – I've had guys that were really, really, you  
10 know – people that I've dealt with over time that, that I became associates  
11 with or, uh, that made things for me or did things for me that were over  
12 and beyond what their normal job description called for. Yeah. But usually  
13 you kinda did things for them one way or another, you know, whether it be  
14 to help'm go over and, and, uh, help'm do something around their house  
15 or build something for'm or if they're building a deck, you know, you go  
16 over and drink beer with'm and, [clanking] and do stuff for'm and help'm  
17 with it and [background noises] they – if you needed a locker built, they'd  
18 be more than happy to build a locker for ya. Say, yeah, no problem, Walt,  
19 I'll build ya one.  
20

21Cheryl McQuaid: [1:05:24] Another question I have about, um, in the plant was what, um,  
22 what did you feel made a good line [tapping] worker? Eh, there were  
23 people that just couldn't do it and quit. [1:05:38] What did you look for in  
24 a person to know you had a good employee?  
25

26Walter Bennefield: It wasn't so much as whether they could or couldn't do that particular job.  
27 To me, my thing was [tapping] [whispering] if that person showed that he  
28 had [whispering] what I believe is, is probably the best quality that he, that  
29 he wanted to, to, to do that particular job. He wasn't the type of person  
30 that would just quit when he's learning a job. You know? That person, to  
31 me, uh, was – I felt was a good quality in an employee that, that made me  
32 want to go an extra mile for that particular employee because everybody's  
33 not suited to do all kinds of jobs but the people that don't give up whether  
34 they're suited for that particular job or not, those are the people that, to me,  
35 made the, the better employees. If they came to work, if they showed that  
36 they were trying to do a good job and didn't give up, then I, I felt that  
37 those were your best employees.  
38

39Cheryl McQuaid: [1:07:08] Do you have a, um, happiest or saddest moment within the  
40 plant? [pause]  
41

42Walter Bennefield: I, I do. Uh, the happiest moment is when I retired. I have never been so  
43 glad to be done with something [and 1:07:41]...  
44

45Cheryl McQuaid: [1:07:40] When did you retire?  
46

1Walter Bennefield: I rehi-, I retired in, uh, June of 2002. But, yeah, I, I was beginning to be  
2 disillusioned with being a supervisor at that particular time because of  
3 some of the things that I felt were going on that, that, uh, shouldn't a been  
4 going on. Uh, so I was happy. I – sometimes you, you, you don't feel like  
5 going in there and when you don't feel like going in there anymore, then  
6 it's best to be leaving. So that to me was one of the happiest moments for  
7 me, the day I retired. But, uh, probably the saddest time was, uh, when I  
8 got fired. I got fired as a supervisor. Yeah.  
9

10Cheryl McQuaid: Well I didn't know that. [1:08:45] You were fired?  
11

12Walter Bennefield: Oh, yeah. I got in a little ruckus. Like I said, I was a rebel, so, uh, I got  
13 into a little altercation with one of the supervisor...  
14

15Jerri Smith: Stop. [recorder clicking]  
16

17Cheryl McQuaid: [1:09:04] Do you have a saddest moment in the plant, Walt? [tapping]  
18

19Walter Bennefield: Uh, yeah. Probably the saddest moment is when I got fired. Uh, me and  
20 one of the other supervisors, uh, [Gary Bobear 1:09:16], had a little  
21 altercation and, and I got fired but, uh – and I was a, a supervisor at that  
22 particular time, so – but for whatever reason, they, they hired me back  
23 after I threatened to sue'm for \$6 million and...  
24

25Cheryl McQuaid: [Oh 1:09:37].  
26

27Walter Bennefield: ...and I feel like if I didn't have a good case besides some of the other  
28 supervisors stuck up for me and told'm that they were wrong for, for firing  
29 me, so they hired me back. I think I probably wish that they gave me and  
30 let me sue'm for \$6 million. [laughter] I...  
31

32Cheryl McQuaid: That was what my choice was gonna be. [laughter]  
33

34Walter Bennefield: Uh, work...  
35

36Jerri Smith: Money. [laughter]  
37

38Walter Bennefield: ...20 more years or \$6 million, \$6 million. [laughter] And at the time, I  
39 was a rebel. I probably would've drank that \$6 million up in a couple  
40 weeks and [laughter] still wouldn't have had no job, so it's probably good.  
41 [papers rustling] [And 1:10:28]...  
42

43Cheryl McQuaid: Now as a – as an hourly employee, if 2 hourly people have an argument, a  
44 fight in the plant, both of those employees get the same punishment.  
45

46Walter Bennefield: Discipline.

1  
2 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:10:39] Eh, is it the same with the salaried employees or...  
3  
4 Walter Bennefield: No.  
5  
6 Cheryl McQuaid: ...were you the only one fired?  
7  
8 Walter Bennefield: Yeah, I was the only one, so...  
9  
10 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:10:59] What about a funniest moment in the plant?  
11  
12 Walter Bennefield: The funniest moment. Um, [pause] probably the funniest moment is, uh,  
13 eh, one of the MCs [pause] had a tail put on him. Uh, [laughter] by a tail,  
14 usually the guy's will take a piece of string or a piece of tape or something  
15 and put a big ole cotton ball or something on the end of it and stick it to  
16 the back of ya. [laughter] So, uh, one of the MCs, which was legendary  
17 for, for, uh, being a, a hardnose, got a tail stuck on'm by one of the  
18 employees and he had that tail on him all day. Wouldn't nobody tell him  
19 about it and every time he'd go down – walking down the aisle and – or  
20 down through the line, everybody would just crack up and roll and  
21 [clanking] [thumping] he had guys, uh, [laughter] laughing so hard they  
22 had tears coming outta the aisle because here [laughter] he was, the big  
23 hard-ass supervisor and he – somebody had tailed'm. So that was probably  
24 one of the funniest times. Of course, I laughed too, so. [laughter]  
25  
26 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:12:24] Did you ever see anybody get hurt in the factory? [coughing]  
27  
28 Walter Bennefield: Um, yeah, a couple times. Uh, uh, one I can remember was a guy got, uh,  
29 part of his finger cut off. Uh, we were installing taillights and, uh, in Trim  
30 Shop. Eh, this was when I was on the line and one of the guys was going  
31 down the line and he was working down the line. Uh, some guys just  
32 weren't as fast as others were in installing the taillights. Well he was  
33 working down the line and still trying to install a taillight to get it done  
34 rather than just, uh, letting it go and, and calling for the repair guy. He was  
35 still trying to get it done. Well the tension in his air hose was pinching his  
36 finger against the edge of the trunk, uh – the metal rim of the trunk and at  
37 that particular time, uh, that was – it was really sharp metal, so. And it  
38 pinched his finger to the point where it cut the end of his finger off  
39 [inaudible 1:13:53] on that metal right there on the trunk. So that was one  
40 of the times I've seen people get hurt.  
41  
42 Uh, other than that, it's, you know, just minor scrapes, bruises, bumps, slip  
43 and falls or nothing really where a person has lost their life or I haven't  
44 seen people have heart attacks. They – I know that there have been  
45 instances where people have had heart attacks or hurt themselves really  
46 bad or – I've seen people put what they call a hog ring through their

1 fingers. And, uh, a, a hog ring is a, is a gun that attached the seat covers to  
2 the wire frames of the seats and [tapping] they used the hog-ring guns to,  
3 to attach those with it and it's like a, uh, a circle [coughing] piece of wire.  
4 Once it's attached, it's almost like a circle, [thumping] so, eh, eh, s-, hence  
5 the name, ring and it's like a hog ring. They – that's what they call it – a  
6 gun. But anyway, I've seen people get those through their hands or fingers  
7 or – and, uh...  
8  
9 John Fedewa: [Inaudible 1:15:20].  
10  
11 Walter Bennefield: ...when they were working there. But other than that [background noises]  
12 nothing really, really, really...  
13  
14 John Fedewa: [Inaudible 1:15:26].  
15  
16 Walter Bennefield: ...major.  
17  
18 Cheryl McQuaid: Before we started the interview, you mentioned that you worked in the  
19 Paint Department.  
20  
21 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. Uh, the last, uh, I'd say 10 – from '91 or '92 until I retired in '02, I  
22 worked in the Paint Department. Uh, Trim Department, I felt that they  
23 weren't giving me raises for [the, uh 1:15:55], for the job that I was doing  
24 and I think that part of that was because of, of them holding a grudge for  
25 having to hire me back. At that particular time, the MC or the  
26 superintendent was, at that particular time, was still the MC. So they asked  
27 for people to go to Paint Department because Paint Department had lost  
28 quite a few supervisors. [coughing] Uh, and through firing, not firing but,  
29 uh, through retirement and one guy got killed in the Paint Department  
30 when they were cleaning out tanks and, uh, he became overcome with  
31 fumes. So they needed a couple supervisors in Paint, so I volunteered just  
32 to get away from that particular, uh, situation and, [coughing] and maybe  
33 start over and make, um, make a little bit of extra money.  
34  
35 That's always been my driving force, is to make a little extra money.  
36 [laughter] But then I went to Paint and, and I did, I started making more  
37 money 'cause I was, I was doing a good job, I felt, in, in Trim and I just  
38 felt I wasn't getting compensated enough. So I went to Paint and started  
39 doing a good job in Paint and – what I felt was a good job anyway. I don't  
40 know how the rest of'm felt but I started making more money.  
41  
42 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:17:44] So you got the raises in Paint that you should've gotten [tapping]  
43 in Trim?  
44  
45 Walter Bennefield: Yeah. That's it.  
46



1 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:17:49] And what about the environment in Paint? [1:17:52] How much  
2 different was that than the Trim Department?  
3

4 Walter Bennefield: Oh, it was very different, very different, uh, down to, uh, the type of  
5 deodorant that you can use or can't use, uh, in the Paint Department, uh,  
6 because the kind of deodorant that you use can affect the, the paint quality  
7 or whether they'll get what they call fisheyes or, or craters in the paint.  
8 Uh, some of your deodorants with chromium, uh, will cause that, so you  
9 can't lean over the cars or be close to them or certain aftershaves, eh, even  
10 certain lotions or certain soaps that you use, uh, so it's, uh, it's quite  
11 different.  
12

13 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:18:48] Just has like a chemical...  
14

15 Walter Bennefield: Reaction to the paint.  
16

17 Cheryl McQuaid: Wow.  
18

19 Walter Bennefield: Yeah.  
20

21 Cheryl McQuaid: Wow. [1:18:54] And was it stinky, [tapping] clean?  
22

23 Walter Bennefield: Um, the Paint Department to me was a little bit cleaner somewhat, uh, just  
24 depends on what area in the Paint Department you worked but, uh, the  
25 smell of the, [background noises] the paint fumes was different, you know.  
26 Sometimes I think that being around that paint right now is, is part of the  
27 reason why sometimes I have breathing problems. Uh, I know that  
28 smoking all the years that I smoked is, is partly the cause I have breathing  
29 problems but I think being in that paint environment, uh, with the fumes  
30 and the caustic chemicals that they have and they use to mix the paint  
31 sometimes cause me my problems with breathing. But [engine humming]  
32 as far as the smell is concerned, uh, it's just the getting used to the f-, the,  
33 the smell of the fumes, the paint fumes. Uh, other than that, uh, the  
34 process where they dip the cars in before they're painted, it's called, uh,  
35 [Alpone 1:20:20]. That's basically the reason why people think the Paint  
36 Department smells but it's just the smell of the [Alpo 1:20:29] itself, uh,  
37 the chemicals in it that cause it to make it s-, stinky or, uh, less attractive  
38 or whatever you want to call it. You know? But other than that, I – it's not  
39 much different. Uh, if, if the people in the areas keep it clean, Trim is, is  
40 clean and the Paint Department, if they do the same thing, the Paint  
41 Department was clean, so.  
42

43 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:20:59] Did you notice any big difference in the employees between the  
44 Paint ship – Paint Shop and the Trim Shop? [engine humming]  
45



1Walter Bennefield: Well not so much the employees, mostly supervisors. Uh, I f-, I think that  
2 the [tapping] upper management was, was more laid back [thumping] in  
3 Paint par-, Department than in Trim and maybe Body Shop. But  
4 employees, I mean, you know, employees are employees. They – they'll  
5 get away with it [tapping] what you let'm get away with or they'll do as  
6 least as you let'm do, you know, uh, as far as that. I noticed that you had  
7 different, uh, type of, uh, whatever you wanna call injuries from  
8 employees from the difference between Paint and Trim. Usually a lotta  
9 injuries in the Paint Department had to do with hands, uh, and that came  
10 from squeezing the, the guns that they used to apply sealer or the, the  
11 spray guns or their resistance because they're attached to hoses, caused a  
12 lotta hand problems or s-, carpal tunnel in their wrists and forearms. Uh,  
13 where in Trim, you usually got different types of injuries. I mean you got  
14 some carpal tunnel but not quite as much, mostly shoulders and that type  
15 of things I found out in Trim were the problems but in Paint, hands were  
16 problems but that's about the big difference between employees.  
17

18Cheryl McQuaid: Lansing was known as the Capitol of Quality. [1:23:01] Why do you think  
19 it was called that? [pause]  
20

21Walter Bennefield: Um, because Lansing plant usually got a lot of accolades as far as their  
22 quality was concerned, uh, and, and that's because basically everybody  
23 [coughing] wanted to see, you know, good cars. I mean you got, you got  
24 your, your rule of thumb where you got 96 percent or 95 percent [papers  
25 rustling] of the people, uh, are good people and you got your 4 or 5 or 6  
26 percent bad people. [birds chirping throughout audio] But 90-, I felt that  
27 90 percent of the people that were there usually wanted to see a good  
28 product leaving because they – of – whether it was just the pride that they  
29 had or they wanted to see good cars going outta there. Uh, so I think that  
30 Lansing plant got a lotta accolades as far as quality was concerned, uh,  
31 through the media, through the, the, uh, the associations that judge quality,  
32 Lansing got good quality. So [thumping] they call it the – and since  
33 Lansing was the capitol of Michigan, they call it the Capitol of Quality  
34 also.  
35

36Cheryl McQuaid: Walt, I wanna thank you so much for your time. [1:24:44] Is there  
37 anything that I've not asked you that you'd like to share with us? [tapping]  
38

39Walter Bennefield: Um, [tapping] you might wanna [tapping] for your next interviewers  
40 have'm give you a overall picture of what they thought of their experience  
41 up to that particular time with General Motors. Uh, and I would say that  
42 my particular overall experience with General Motors or working for  
43 General Motors, uh, and [popping] working with people from the union or  
44 the union was actually good. My overall feeling is that you had bad people  
45 on both sides of the fence, union and management. You had [engine  
46 humming] a ton more on the good side, union and management, than you

1 did on the bad side. But I think over – all in all, my experience working  
2 for General Motors and working with the union was good. I felt that  
3 everybody pretty much got along. Of course, you can't – even in your  
4 family where you're with your sisters and brothers, you can't get along  
5 with them a hundred percent of the time all the time [clanking] but it was  
6 more – I know you said at the beginning of the interview you asked me  
7 whether it was like sisters and brothers. Well it was similar. I mean, you  
8 know, I called my workers as associates or colleagues but you get along  
9 with people and you might wanna say that that's like being sisters and  
10 brothers but if you get along with people, you know, your overall  
11 experience is, is good.

12  
13 So I would say that overall I enjoyed – [clicking] and, and really General  
14 Motors gave back to me probably twice as much as I gave to General  
15 Motors, uh, because I, I, [clanking] I was able to retire at, at an early age. I  
16 was only like 55, 56 [engine humming] and I'm getting paid to sit on my  
17 behind and [clicking] [laughter] being retired, I was able to, uh, save some  
18 money so that I could retire early. So [coughing] all in all, General Motors  
19 was actually good to me. I don't really have any, [clicking] any qualms  
20 about General Motors. I had some qualms about the people that I had to  
21 work with and some of the things that was done. Uh, but all in all, I'm  
22 happy. Uh, that's why I retired early, because I couldn't handle some of  
23 the things that, that the people were doing, [background noises] things that  
24 they should've been doing right, they weren't doing right, so [laughter]  
25 rather than sit there and fume about it and be a miserable person, I figured  
26 I'd sit on my butt at home and not even worry about'm. But, uh, thanks for  
27 having me. I appreciate your wanting to hear my opinions and, uh, it's  
28 been a pleasurable experience. Thank you very much.

29  
30 Jerri Smith: Thank you.

31  
32 John Fedewa: Thank you very much. [recorder clicking]

33  
34  
35/lo