

**C. Richard (Dick) Bennett discusses his career as a production worker, UAW
committeeman and Local 602 Bargaining Chair at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**

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5 Cheryl McQuaid: This is the Lansing Fisher Body Historical T-, Team. Today is March 14,
6 2006. It's approximately 10:20 a.m. We're at the UAW Local 602 Frank
7 Dryer Greenhouse. [coughing] First, we'll introduce the team.
8
9 Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter.
10
11 John Fedewa: John Fedewa.
12
13 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher.
14
15 Gary Judy: Gary Judy.
16
17 Earl Nicholson: Earl Nicholson.
18
19 Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith.
20
21 Cheryl McQuaid: And I am Cheryl McQuaid. Today we're interviewing Richard Bennett.
22 [0:31] Dick, will you please state your name and spell it for us?
23
24 Richard Bennett: Well, I went by C. Richard Bennett when I was [chuckle] working in the
25 plant. C stands for Charles, C-h-a-r-l-e-s, Richard, R-i-c-h-a-r-d, Bennett,
26 B-e-n-n-e-t-t.
27
28 Cheryl McQuaid: [0:51] And what is your address?
29
30 Richard Bennett: Currently living at 11954 South Star Lake Drive, Baldwin, Michigan
31 49304.
32
33 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:04] And are you married?
34
35 Richard Bennett: Yes, I am.
36
37 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:07] How many children do you have?
38
39 Richard Bennett: I have six, uh, children of my own and four stepchildren.
40
41 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:15] Where were you born and raised, Dick?
42
43 Richard Bennett: Well, I was born in Hastings, Michigan, and I was raised in many places.
44 [chuckle] My dad was a metallurgist in the missile industry and because of
45 the type of work he did, we, we did a lot of moving. I went to 14 schools
46 in 13 years, but most of it was in Michigan, uh, but I did live in North

1 Carolina for three years and those were probably my most formative years
2 were those three years I lived in North Carolina.
3
4 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:47] What is your educational level?
5
6 Richard Bennett: I graduated from high school in Hastings. I wound up back in Hastings
7 and graduated from there. [chuckle]
8
9 Cheryl McQuaid: [1:59] And were you in the military at all?
10
11 Richard Bennett: No. I had gotten in a bad automobile accident and I wasn't able to go in
12 the service.
13
14 Cheryl McQuaid: [2:08] Could you tell us a little bit about your work history before hiring in
15 to Fisher Body?
16
17 Richard Bennett: Well, I started working on farms for all the farmers around the area when I
18 was about 13 years old and I stayed busy pretty much every day of the
19 summer all my, all the time I was off from school.
20
21 And I, when I was 15 years old I hired in to a place in Battle Creek called
22 Springhill Nursing Home. It was a brand new facility at that time. I hired
23 in there as a dishwasher in the kitchen. I worked there a few months and
24 they asked me if I'd be interested in going off and starting working on the
25 floor as an orderly, so they trained me as an orderly and I started working
26 there. And from there, they asked me if I'd be interested in, in working in
27 phys-, physical therapy, so I did that [throat clearing] for a while up until
28 the time I quit there and that was, I had been there about 16 months when I
29 quit, grand total.
30
31 And when I quit there, I went to work for a burial vault company in Battle
32 Creek called Wilbert Burial Vault, so I went from trying to save lives to
33 burying people. [laughter] And, uh, I worked at Wilbert for just a very
34 short time and I had an opportunity to start working in construction, which
35 was considerably more money, so I went to work for Fastdecks
36 Construction Company out of Walled Lake, Michigan, and we built ramp
37 parking lots at that time. And I worked there up until I got laid off for the
38 winter and at that time I had to, I was graduated from high school but I
39 had to lie about my age 'cause I was only 17 and you had to be 18 to work
40 construction, so oddly enough I had to keep dodging the, the union guy
41 that kept coming around checking on things, making sure they didn't have
42 no illegal workers. [chuckle] But anyway, I survived on that job up until
43 they laid me off for the, for the winter months.
44
45 And after that, [throat clearing] I started working for a fellow by the name
46 of Chuck Doxtater. He had his own business laying carpet and so I

1 worked with him and we worked together for quite a long time. We had
2 23 different carpet suppliers we had supplying us with the carpet and
3 suddenly Teamsters went on strike and we couldn't get any carpet for
4 three weeks. And I had a wife and a child to support at that time and I
5 couldn't go three weeks without working 'cause I needed the money, so
6 after three weeks I started looking for a job but in the meantime a friend of
7 mine was working at Fisher Body in Lansing and he brought me home an
8 application.
9

10 Well, I had gone ahead and filled that out and sent it back with him. And
11 Fisher Body had sent me what they call a Mailgram and, um, I ignored it
12 because in the meantime I had already been hired in and out of Grand
13 Trunk Railroad in Battle Creek and I had also been hired in and out of
14 [chuckle] Eaton Manufacturing in Battle Creek, and Clark Equipment in
15 Battle Creek. All three good jobs but when they x-rayed me they'd see
16 where my, my pelvis was all smashed to pieces when I was in that
17 accident, so they wouldn't take a chance on me and hire me so I just
18 figured there was no sense in going to Fisher Body because they're going
19 to do the same thing so I just ignored it.
20

21 Well, by the time the Teamsters were on strike and I had been out of work
22 for three weeks, Fisher Body had sent me three Mailgrams, one a month
23 for three months. Well, Chuck Doxtater who I was working with, had
24 worked for Chevrolet over in Flint years before that, so he said "Well,
25 let's go up there to, to Lansing." He said "I'll take you." I said "I don't
26 even know where Lansing is at. I have no idea where that's at." [throat
27 clearing] He said "Well, I'll take you up there." And he said "Maybe
28 they'll let me put in my application while we're up there." I said "All
29 right." So we came to Lansing. They gave me a physical. They didn't x-
30 ray me. And they took his application. And when I got done going down
31 to the plant hospital and getting my physical, I went back to the
32 employment line there and they were interviewing a number of people and
33 I talked to, I can't think of Jeff's last name. He would up be in
34 suggestions later on.
35

36Cheryl McQuaid: Andros.

37
38Male: Andros.

39
40Richard Bennett: Jeff Andros, yes. I talked to Jeff Andros and he hired me and asked me if
41 I wanted to go to work on nights that night or days the next day. I said "I
42 need a job right now. I'll go to work on nights tonight." He said "Okay.
43 Come in tomorrow morning." [laughter] That was my first taste of how
44 things go at Fisher Body. [laughter] So I, I started there April 30, 1968,
45 and worked production line. It was interesting because the first thing they
46 put me on was cleaning up cars at the end of the line, just wiping them

1 down with oleum, taking – kind of spot cleaning them and getting them
2 ready to ship over to Oldsmobile to have the body and the chassis put
3 together, so, uh, I worked about a week with a bunch of older folks. They
4 had kind of what they called the old folks' home there. That's what those
5 people did. And we had two lines running parallel to each other at the
6 time. So they liked the way I worked with them so they, when they was,
7 when management was going to put me over on the regular production
8 line and put me on a regular production job they tried to fight that. They
9 tried to keep me there at the old folks' home but that didn't work out too
10 good.

11
12 With a new hire they're going to put you to work, so I went over and I was
13 up in Building 3X Second and just kept going from job to job until they
14 finally, finally get me a job. And once I landed on a regular job, I decided
15 I didn't like doing the same thing over and over every day so then I went
16 to Utility voluntarily. A lot of people didn't like Utility but I liked it
17 'cause I got to do something different every day. I got to meet a lot of
18 people that way and got to learn a lot of jobs.

19
20 Cheryl McQuaid: [9:19] Dick, why did a lot of people not like Utility?

21
22 Richard Bennett: Well, because you had to do something different every day. Some people
23 are not really adaptable to doing that. Some people just want to learn a
24 job. Those jobs are very difficult. People don't realize or didn't realize at
25 that time, and still don't I think, just how difficult it is working in an auto
26 assembly plant, you know. You hear about that and you, you hear some of
27 these, well, like there was an old country song talking about being the #1
28 washer crammer in the whole shock absorber division, you know. It
29 sounds so simple, stuff like that. It wasn't simple. You had to do a whole
30 lot of hard work. Anybody that worked there knew that. And you had to
31 be able to adapt if you had to do a different job every day, you're using
32 different muscles every day, you're having to do all different kinds of
33 things, learn different kind of things, deal with somebody new not only in
34 management but production, on the production line, so it was, uh, it was
35 difficult for a lot of people but I liked doing that kind of stuff. Other
36 people like just learning one thing and sticking to it. [throat clearing]

37
38 Cheryl McQuaid: And you mentioned that you worked in 3X Second. [10:30] Could you
39 tell us a little bit what is 3X Second?

40
41 Richard Bennett: Well, at that time, I guess 3X Second was the, the newest building that had
42 been built on at Fisher Body and I guess it was about 16 years old at that
43 time. Um, but 3X Second was where they did the soft trim, the, the – of
44 course, the job started down in the basement in the body shop at that time
45 and then they went on up, uh, into the paint shop and then they went from
46 the paint shop on up into what we call Trim Hardware and then finally

1 they went up into 3X Second where you did all the soft trim, the interior
2 trim, things like that, the final trim before it was sent over to Oldsmobile
3 to be married to the chassis.
4

5Cheryl McQuaid: Doug Rademacher.
6

7Doug Rademacher: [11:21] Dick, you said you came up here with a partner. Did he happen to
8 get hired in?
9

10Richard Bennett: No, he didn't. He was 50-something years old at that time and Vietnam
11 War was going pretty good still and they had a need for people but they
12 really weren't I guess looking for older people. When there was younger
13 people available that's what they wanted.
14

15Doug Rademacher: The other thing I was going to ask you is you mentioned that you walked
16 into the plant and they gave you cleanup. You said you worked with
17 oleum. [11:53] What exactly was oleum?
18

19Richard Bennett: Well, I don't know what the chemical makeup of it was [throat clearing]
20 but it was I guess some kind of a solvent or something that would, they
21 would wipe the bodies down on the car but I know it'd really eat at your
22 hands if you didn't wear rubber gloves. You didn't want to do, do too
23 much work with it barehanded.
24

25Doug Rademacher: [12:16] And were the gloves you mentioned, were they supplied or did
26 you have to request them or was it, was there a concern for people at that
27 time?
28

29Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] we had an elderly lady at that time, her name was
30 Sally, that worked in that area and part of her responsibility, she was kind
31 of overseeing, she had to work on the line with us but she kind of overseen
32 that whole thing as well. We didn't really have a foreman that did a lot
33 around there for us so it kind of fell, fell on her and every day when we
34 got to work she would go ahead and get the gloves that we needed for the
35 day and all that kind of stuff and then she would make sure you had all
36 those whatever it is you needed, the oleum, the gloves, anything that was
37 necessary for the job.
38

39Doug Rademacher: Now you said you didn't know where Lansing was and you found out
40 through your partner, he brought you up here. [13:08] Um, you told the
41 guy you wanted to work nights, I'm assuming that you were ready to
42 work, but what shift did you end up on and how far did you drive and how
43 did you get here, did you carpool, things like that?
44

45Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] I drove at that time. It was about 48 miles one way.
46 And, uh, it was kind of interesting because I didn't know where Lansing

1 was and I was trying to remember how we got there 'cause Chuck didn't
2 get hired in, so the next morning I took off real early to make sure I was
3 going to be here in plenty of time and it was a good thing because I come
4 in on 27 between Charlotte and Lansing and I knew I had to go left on
5 Waverly Road so I got to the light, I went left. The thing I had forgotten is
6 we turned right on Saginaw Highway. I didn't realize that and I went
7 clear to the end of Waverly Road and wound up there by the airport, so
8 now I'm starting to panic. I don't know where I'm at or how I'm going to
9 get back to where the plant is. I don't know how to get there. And here's
10 my first day, I don't want to be late 'cause I'm thinking they're going to
11 fire me for sure.

12
13 So I turned around and I just kept driving slowly until I got back to
14 Saginaw. Of course, that was a wide, wide road so I decided, well, that,
15 that might have been where we turned, so I turned left and went on down
16 there and by golly, there was Fisher Body up there on the right. But then I
17 didn't know where to go to park, so I parked out in front of the plant and
18 fortunately, I don't know why but they, I didn't get a ticket that day but I
19 was parked out in front of the plant. So I didn't know how to get in the
20 plant other than the front, front entrance 'cause that's where I had to go to
21 get interviewed and hired. Well, after I got in the plant and started
22 working that first day, I said "How do I, how do I get to my car [throat
23 clearing] when the shift is over?" And they said "Just follow the crowd,
24 follow the crowd, they're going right out to that parking lot." Well, up in
25 3X Second everybody parked out here in the, the South Lot. I was parked
26 out front, so I followed the crowd and wound up in a big old strange
27 parking lot, then I didn't have any idea where the world I was at.
28 [chuckle]

29
30 That plant was huge to me. I mean later on it became a lot larger because
31 they kept adding on but at that time it was like a whole city within itself.
32 And take a little country boy like me, I was just lost. [chuckle]

33
34 Doug Rademacher: Well, that was my next question is that you had a vast amount of work
35 experience outside before you came in. [15:47] Can you just share that
36 feeling of when they walked you out to the assembly line, what did that
37 look like and, and can you describe that?

38
39 Richard Bennett: Well, I'll tell you, years later I went to New York City and it was kind of
40 the same feeling. [chuckle] When, when I walked out there that, in that
41 plant and seen how big and this was only 3X Second I was looking at. But
42 they, when they walked me up through Hardware to get to 3X Second, I
43 thought wow, this is enormous. I hadn't even seen the body shop or the
44 [coughing] paint shop or the cushion room at that time because at that time
45 we still had the cushion room, so I didn't even see half of the plant but I
46 thought it was just like a whole new other world, it was huge.

1
2 Doug Rademacher: [16:34] Were you a little bit afraid of working on automobiles or what was
3 your feeling?
4
5 Richard Bennett: Well, I was real, real nervous, you know. I had never done that kind of
6 work before. I had never worked in a factory. In fact, years before that I
7 said I'll never work in a factory. I loved being outdoors. I loved working
8 outdoors. I loved working hard and so I couldn't see myself ever being in
9 a factory. So yeah, I was, I was real nervous and especially 'cause I don't
10 know anybody, I don't know the town, I don't know the plant and it was
11 just completely new. Everything was completely new to me.
12
13 Doug Rademacher: [17:10] Now with that in mind, did you make that 48-mile trip one way
14 every day by yourself or did you say 58 or 48?
15
16 Richard Bennett: Forty-eight.
17
18 Doug Rademacher: Okay.
19
20 Richard Bennett: Mm-hm. I did it for about two years by myself and there was a supervisor
21 at that time that I became friends with. His name was George Ruffner and
22 George lived over by Hastings so George and I started carpooling. And he
23 usually worked, I always wound up working the long line, whichever line
24 worked the longest. Back in those days we didn't have any restrictions on
25 overtime but there was a State law that wouldn't let women work I believe
26 it was over 54 or 56 hours a week, so come Saturday we had already
27 gotten the hours and women couldn't come in and work Saturdays
28 normally because they had already gotten their 54 or 56 hours in. So they
29 would shut one production line down [throat clearing] on Saturday and
30 shift everybody over to the other one 'cause normally we were, at that
31 time, we were working like between 11 and 11.4 hours a day on the
32 production line and that was six days a week.
33
34 Sometimes on Saturdays we'd get out in eight hours but [coughing] I'll
35 never forget the first day I worked eight hours it was like I only worked a
36 half a shift. I, I couldn't believe it. In fact, I blew my truck up going
37 home that day. I left the shop and it was so early in the afternoon, I wasn't
38 used to that and I thought I'm just, it was a beautiful sunny day and I
39 thought I'm just going to take my time and drive slow. I had an old beater
40 Dodge truck at that time [throat clearing]. It looked like a semi. It was a
41 cab over the engine job. I probably didn't go over 45 miles an hour all the
42 way home, I just took my time. And I got in to Hastings and all of a
43 sudden the water shot up the stack and I busted the, or I had cracked the
44 block and blew the truck up. But that's, I put some long hours in back in
45 those days.
46

1 Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter. [19:16] Dick, um, outside of the size of it, was there
2 anything else about the plant that might have shocked you or surprised you
3 when you came in there?
4

5 Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] back at that time I can tell you, there was,
6 [coughing] there were women that worked there but very few younger
7 women. There was quite a few ladies that were elderly or I figured elderly
8 at that time. Of course, if you was 55, 60 years old at that time I thought
9 you were elderly. I don't think that way anymore. [laughter] But a lot of
10 them ladies had hired in back during the wartime when they couldn't get
11 men and then there was quite a, quite a long period of time I guess that
12 they didn't do a lot of hiring as far as women were concerned but they had
13 just started hiring some women at that time so there was a few women in
14 there probably around my age but not very many and I thought that was
15 kind of strange, you know, for that big of an operation. And I couldn't get
16 over the amount of people that worked there. I mean, I just, I never
17 imagined that many people working in one place. I wasn't used to
18 working with over, you know, a few dozen people at the very most.
19

20 Doug Rademacher: Earl Nicholson.
21

22 Earl Nicholson: Earl Nicholson. Uh, so you hired, so you hired in. You're in this huge
23 factory. You didn't see a whole lot of women. [20:45] Did you see any
24 other minority groups? Did you see, did you see blacks? Did you see
25 Mexicans? Did you see Asians?
26

27 Richard Bennett: Uh, there were blacks and, uh, Mexicans, not too many, but other than that
28 no. I mean Asians and stuff like that you didn't see a lot of that, not at that
29 time but later on, of course, that changed.
30

31 Earl Nicholson: [21:14] So how, how was the interaction with, um, with, between the
32 different groups?
33

34 Richard Bennett: Well, you know, I guess to me I, I got along with everybody I ran into
35 pretty much until I started getting political and getting involved with the
36 union, then sometimes you don't get along with people 'cause you can't
37 do everything [chuckle] they want you to. [throat clearing] But, uh, as far
38 as the interaction between myself and others, I, I really got along great.
39

40 In fact, it was – I worked production for nine years before I ever decided
41 to get involved with the union. And it happened that a friend of mine, uh,
42 who was a Mexican and I was working on the big station wagons at that
43 time, 88s, Olds 88 station wagon and there was three of us assigned to put
44 in the second seat and the rear seats and that rear seat was a real rough job.
45 You had to take it off of a monorail and load it in the back end of that
46 wagon [throat clearing] and do all the bolting down and so forth and all

1 the trim work around it and it was real heavy and there was, so there was
2 three of us working on that. Well, at that time, about every sixth job that
3 would come down the production line was an 88 station wagon, so by the
4 time you got out of that, got that one done and got out of it, you had to
5 hurry back up the line and start catching the next one.
6

7 We had a coffee wagon back at that time [throat clearing] and what that
8 was was a cart that they brought around once in the morning and once in
9 the afternoon and it had coffee and doughnuts and milk and so forth and
10 the line would shut down for six minutes and that was strictly a Fisher
11 Body thing. Fisher Body had that negotiated years and years before that.
12 But that, when they shut that line down this one particular day, we had
13 gone from when I first hired in there we used nothing but electric motors.
14 Well, we had gone to pneumatic motors at that time and somebody, and I
15 don't know which one of us, one of the three of us had left the motor in
16 the back of the station wagon that we had just finished 'cause the line shut
17 down, we went to the wagon.
18

19 When we got back to the job a little bit late, the line had already started
20 and that rubber hose had stretched to the max because that motor lodged in
21 that seat and that rubber hose was stretched out and when it finally caught
22 loose it completely went over the top of the next job, landed on the roof of
23 the next car, smack, smacked that in, it put a big old dent in it, bounced to
24 the next car and took the windshield out, [whistle] smashed that out and
25 wound up way back up the line six jobs where we were supposed to start
26 on the next station wagon.
27

28 Well, a friend of mine, Oscar Vela, at that time I was working with him
29 and a fellow by the name of Wayne Neveu and they come over there and
30 the foreman just about went nuts and raising Cain and they ushered Oscar
31 right over to the office and they started interviewing him. And we had a
32 committeeman at that time that later became our financial secretary, as a
33 matter of fact, of the Local and that was, um, Wayne Kinney. And Wayne
34 was our committeeman and I, I thought the world of Wayne and I thought
35 he did a real good job. But anyway, Wayne went over there, tried to
36 defend Oscar, and they threw Oscar out. They disciplined him, threw him
37 out for I think it was three days at that time. And they never took me or
38 Wayne Neveu over and interviewed us. Well, when the foreman come
39 back and we found out that they put Oscar out and never even interviewed
40 us to find out what happened, I didn't know what to think to start with. I
41 thought, well, maybe he told them that he did that or something but really
42 none of the three of us I don't think at that time really realized who did it,
43 we just was interested in going to get something off the coffee wagon.
44

45 So I got a hold of Wayne Kinney, the committeeman, and I said "Wayne,
46 what in the world is going on? What happened to Oscar?" He said "Well,

1 they put him out.” And I said “For what?” He said “Well, they put him
2 out for smashing the roof of the car and smashing the window out of the
3 other one.” I said “Well, did he say he did it?” And he said “No. He said
4 he wasn’t sure who did it.” I said “Well, they’re going to, they’re going to
5 interview me or Wayne?” And he said “No. I don’t think so. I guess
6 they’re going to leave it at that.” I said “You’re kidding me.” He said
7 “No.” Right then and there I decided that I was going to do something
8 about getting involved with the union. [throat clearing] And so I told
9 Wayne, I said “Hey, I don’t know if it was me. I don’t know if it was
10 Oscar. I don’t know if it was Wayne. I have no idea which one of us did
11 that but it’s not right. They should have took us all three over there and
12 interviewed us and either one of us admitted to and took the rap, fine, or
13 all of us or none of us, but this isn’t right.” He said “Would you give me a
14 written statement to that effect?” I said “You bet I will.” So I sat down
15 and wrote out a statement, signed it.
16

17 And to tell you the truth, I don’t remember now if, if they ever did make it
18 right with Oscar but I knew that certainly was not right. But that wasn’t,
19 at that time that was not out of the ordinary the way that things were done
20 with certain managers. Now they wasn’t all that way, but certain
21 managers over there was that way.
22

23Earl Nicholson: Fantastic. So one other thing, um, you’re newly hired into the factory.
24 You, you know, you’ve been, you’ve been trained on your job, you know.
25 You’re getting to the point where you know your job well. [27:25] Did –
26 were there any initiation pranks, uh, any, any hazings? [chuckle]
27

28Richard Bennett: [throat clearing] Well, that’s interesting you say that or ask that question.
29 Yes, in fact, um, I was putting on an armrest on this one job and we had to
30 reach way up, way, way up above our heads so you couldn’t see where
31 the, where the stock was in the boxes and stuff to get the armrest out, and
32 so I reached up there one time getting an armrest out and four glasses of
33 water dumped all over me. One of the guys had filled up four paper cups
34 with water and put it on that top box and when I flipped that box over
35 [chuckle] water come dousing me. [throat clearing]
36

37 Uh, they used to grease the guns an awful lot back then. And like I said,
38 we had elec-, electric motors. They were slow. They were cumbersome.
39 They were heavy and you had to unhook from a rail and then hook up.
40 You had to keep unhooking and hooking them up. And what the guys
41 would do is they would grease the, the motor. You had a drill and you had
42 a driver. And it’s kind of dangerous. A lot of people, I, I drilled my pant
43 leg and my legs I don’t know how many times because the drill sometimes
44 wouldn’t shut off and you’d drop them down and they’d drill your leg.
45 But anyway, so you go to pick up one motor and they might have greased

1 it and so you got all this black grease all over your hands and stuff and you
2 had to clean all that up.

3
4 I remember one time one of the guys I was working with decided that he
5 was going to douse me with a bucket of water. The restrooms were
6 between the floors, between the second floor and I guess you call it the
7 third floor where 3X Second was, so you had to go down between the
8 floors, down the stairway to get to the restrooms. Well, he had gone down
9 there, he knew, he was on break and he knew I was the next one on break
10 so he went down there and he drew a bucket of water and he was waiting
11 for me to come down the stairway. I was coming down the stairway and
12 he could see my legs so he'd know it was me and as soon as I rounded that
13 corner, he'd douse me with a bucket of water but the only thing was in the
14 meantime the general foreman from the body shop had came up the stairs
15 and he beat me into the restroom and he doused the general foreman.
16 [laughter] And that guy was mad. I mean they had plant security running
17 up and down that line the whole rest of the, the night, the rest of that shift
18 to try and find out who did that because as soon as he seen what he did, he
19 took off on a run. He got back up there on that line and went to work.
20 Nobody squealed on him so he, he got away with it.

21
22 Uh, a lot of times, uh, we used, we used to have to wear screw aprons and
23 they would touch your apron strings on fire with a cigarette lighter or
24 something and it would, it would smolder and they would burn slowly the
25 material that they had. And I remember one time this one fellow I was
26 working with his name was Howard Houghton. He touched one of the
27 guy's apron strings off and this, this fellow's name was Homer
28 Cummings. He had just gotten back from Vietnam. He was a Vietnam
29 Vet. And Homer had never seen that happen so he didn't know what was
30 going on. Well, there's smoke all over the place so he's turning around
31 and around in a circle like a dog chasing, chasing his tail trying to figure
32 out what's wrong, where's that smoke coming from. It's his apron strings
33 and that burned all the way up to his britches [throat clearing] before he
34 finally figured out what in the world it was and got that apron off. And I
35 mean everybody of course was laughin'.

36
37 Or they would take your lunch bucket and screw it down to your bench
38 and you'd grab your lunch bucket at lunchtime and pull the handle off or
39 something because you catch it on a dead run. The doggone thing would
40 be screwed to the bench. [chuckle] It was just things like that.

41
42 Another time we had, we had a general foreman back then his name was
43 Beaver Fisk. Beaver was down in the, in the restroom. He was in one of
44 the stalls and going to the bathroom and one of the guys took a bunch of
45 water, a cup of water, a large cup, and threw it over the top of the stall and
46 doused him and I remember him, I was just happened to be down there at

1 the time so he was cussing and swearing "You son of a gun, I, I'll, if I can
2 get my pants up in time I'll get you." [laughter] And he was pretty wet
3 when he came upstairs. [laughter] But he never did find out who did it
4 because he couldn't get his pants up in time. [laughter] But a lot of things
5 like that went on back then.
6
7 Earl Nicholson: Now you mentioned your apron strings and your, and your belt pouches.
8 [32:35] Could you tell me what type of safety equipment were you issued
9 back then?
10
11 Richard Bennett: Oh, I'll tell you, [throat clearing] we didn't – back at that time I was doing
12 a lot of trim work around the, the back glass and, and the front glass or the
13 windshield and back in those days you didn't, you could wear safety
14 glasses if you requested them but you didn't have to and I never did like
15 the things. They were hot, so I usually didn't wear'm. Later on I got a
16 little wiser. Of course, they forced us into wearing them years later but for
17 a long, long time there wasn't a lot of safety standards and we didn't have
18 to comply with a lot of safety standards or rules.
19
20 And a lot of times you really had a rough time even getting gloves to
21 protect your hands or your fingers or anything. I mean it was like pulling
22 teeth to get the things that you, you really needed and you avoided the
23 things you probably should have had that you didn't want to deal with just
24 like I did with the safety glasses until they finally made it a plant rule.
25 And a lot of people got disciplined for failure to wear their glasses for a
26 long time after that. It was something that, you know, it was something
27 being imposed on you. I guess it's just human nature you don't like to be
28 told what you have to do, so a lot of people resisted, including myself. At
29 that time, I watched out for the supervisor to make sure he didn't catch me
30 with my glasses off but anytime I could work without them, I didn't work
31 with them.
32
33 Earl Nicholson: [34:06] So was your, was your, your environment was fairly safe then
34 you'd say?
35
36 Richard Bennett: In that area of the plant, yes. It wasn't anything like the body shop. We
37 didn't have no spot welders going off all the time and all that kind of stuff.
38 It was, that was one of the, the cleaner and the safer areas of the plant to
39 work in.
40
41 Earl Nicholson: [34:26] So do you, do you recall any workplace injuries?
42
43 Richard Bennett: Oh yeah. There was a lot of, a lot of workplace injuries. And, uh, well,
44 just like that incident with the station wagon, somebody could have gotten
45 hurt very seriously if they would have been in the path of that gun.
46 Fortunately, there wasn't anybody at that time. But we had a lot of people

1 that had a lot of different kind of injuries over, over the time that I was in
2 there. And, of course, when OSHA come in to play and things became
3 more stringent, I think that probably helped our injury record an awful lot.
4

5Marilyn Coulter: [35:10] OSHA?
6

7Richard Bennett: Mm-hm. Oh, excuse me. Occupational Safety, I can't remember what.
8

9Male: Hazard Agency.
10

11Richard Bennett: Yeah, Hazard Agency I think that's what it is, yeah. I ought to know that
12 well too. When you get away from that stuff you tend to just start
13 forgetting things. But anyway, anyway, the law, the OSHA law, uh, I
14 think certainly helped but unfortunately even then we had a lot of injuries.
15 We still had a lot of things that went on that could have been avoided.
16 They say every accident can be avoided but I couldn't believe that. Like I
17 said, I finally wised up. When I finally got involved with the union and
18 found out what really needed to be done and started to actually kind of
19 trying to get other people to comply with things that I should have been
20 complying with all along myself, then I started realizing the necessity of
21 safety and the importance of it and all of a sudden it became my job not
22 only to start looking out for myself but others as well and that kind of
23 changed my attitude a whole lot.
24

25Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter. [36:31] Dick, now did you work in Trim, um, through
26 your whole, um, GM career?
27

28Richard Bennett: Well, I worked all over the plant but I, my, I was reporting to Trim every
29 day for the most part. Uh, I finally became a final repairperson, back at
30 that time they called it Group 25. But while I was a utility person, which
31 was for quite a few years, I worked in the body shop, I got shipped out to
32 the paint shop, I, I worked all over the plant but I reported to Trim and
33 then they'd ship me around all the different places and that's while I was
34 in Production.
35

36 And, um, then I got involved, like I said, with the union and I got involved
37 with a lot of other things and became, I got, became quite active in the
38 union and I was very fortunate I got elected as an alternate district
39 committee person. And then I decided I wanted to see what the executive
40 board was all about, so [coughing] I ran for a trustee job and I was
41 fortunate enough to get elected to that, so I became a trustee. And then I
42 got to go to the executive board meetings and find out more about what
43 this Local was all about and the UAW. And then I ran for district
44 committee and I won that position and later on was appointed as district
45 shop committee. And from there, I became a zone committee person,
46 shop committee person if you will, and eventually after three tries

1 [chuckle] became chairman of the bargaining committee and that was
2 when Louie Schultz went on UAW staff and then I was elected again.
3 And shortly after that, I was asked to go on staff with International Union.
4 Ruben Burks at the time was our regional director.

5
6 And so my last 10 years was spent as a UAW staff member for Region 1C
7 but I was very fortunate 'cause I had a lot of positions in Local 602 and
8 people were really good to me and I just, things I never, never, ever
9 imagined would ever happen to me. It was just a wonderful experience.

10
11 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher. Dick, I want to take you back into the plant. A lot of
12 people come in to the Fisher Body plant and just like you said when you
13 first came in, you didn't know where you're at. You go to your job, you
14 go to the parking lot, you go home, you go to your job. You said you got
15 to work all over the plant. [39:40] Can you tell me the first day you saw
16 the body shop and the diverse differences in jobs? You were in an area
17 that was somewhat safe and clean. What was your thoughts when you saw
18 people who had came in and did jobs that you saw down there? Can you
19 share some of that thought?

20
21 Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] I would say I probably worked there I'm going to
22 say maybe two months before I really got introduced to the body shop,
23 excuse me, [throat clearing] and I got shipped to the body shop. Of
24 course, I didn't know where exactly it was or where I was going so they
25 sent somebody down there with me to take me down where the body shop
26 was to the supervisor's area where they were sending me for the day. I got
27 down there and I mean there's – they, they called it the jungle. There was
28 this place where they had all these welders, people welding like crazy all
29 over the place, welding on the bodies, sparks are flying every which
30 direction [throat clearing] and they were flying clear out into the aiseways
31 and everything. And I didn't know whether to walk down the aisleway or
32 not. I didn't know if I was going to get burned or what was going to
33 happen to me.

34
35 But anyway, that was, that was kind of a scary thing down there for the
36 very first time. You go down there in that body shop and I mean it, it was
37 hard, hot, and looked like really dangerous work to me. And quite
38 honestly, I never ran spot welder. To this day, I've never ran a spot
39 welder. I never did get assigned to a job where I had to run a spot welder
40 but I did get assigned to a lot of different jobs in the body shop,
41 fortunately spot welding wasn't one of them.

42
43 Doug Rademacher: [41:33] You can see my, my question is I guess did you see how fortunate
44 you were and do you recognize – you said there was thousands of people
45 working there and here you were blessed with this great opportunity in the
46 job and, and here people come every day and face that job you can't

1 hardly fathom. What did you think about people that did that, faced that
2 struggle every day?
3
4 Richard Bennett: Well...
5
6 Doug Rademacher: Now that you went on to represent them.
7
8 Richard Bennett: I think, I think it took a lot of stamina, a, a, a lot of stick-to-itiveness to
9 even work in that body shop. I, I admired everybody that ever worked in
10 the body shop. That was some tough place to work.
11
12 In fact, I'll tell you, [throat clearing] my brother hired in there probably a
13 year or maybe year and a half after I was working there and they assigned
14 him to the body shop immediately. And three days later, he called me up
15 about 5:00 in the morning and he said "Can you clear me out when you go
16 in this morning?" He said "I quit." I said "What? This is a good job.
17 You don't quit a job like this." He said "There is no way in the world I
18 am going to work my life like that." He said "I ain't intending to die
19 young." He said "People got to be nuts to work in that body shop." He
20 said "They got me running six spot welders and I ain't going to do it." So
21 I said "Well, yeah, I guess I can clear you out." And I did that day, I went
22 to Employment and told him he quit and they said "Well, if he ever wants
23 a job, tell him to come on back, we'll hire him." Which he never did want
24 to go back 'cause he never wanted to be in that body shop. [throat
25 clearing] But yeah, that, that took some kind of an individual to be able to
26 deal with that body shop.
27
28 Doug Rademacher: Thank you. [43:25] And so were there any other family members that
29 worked in, in the plant or came to Lansing in the General Motors?
30
31 Richard Bennett: No. I never had any, like I said, my brother, he worked there three days.
32 That's the only family member I ever had that worked there.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: Just a minute. I wanted to – so early on I asked you about the shift you
35 got put on. You said you were married with a child that's why you took
36 the job. [43:53] How did that work out?
37
38 Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] it didn't work out real good. [chuckle] Like I said,
39 we, we worked long, long hours and, uh, my marriage didn't last too long.
40 I was only married for two years, wound up divorced. In fact, and I know
41 I'm out of the ordinary because I was married five times during the time I
42 worked at Fisher Body, so. [chuckle] And probably a lot of it was due to
43 the fact that I wasn't home much. I wound up spending most of my time
44 at Fisher Body. That was pretty much my life, like a lot of other people,
45 so.
46

1Earl Nicholson: Earl, Earl Nicholson. [44:41] So would you, were you, were you starting
2to think of the people you worked around as like members of your family?
3

4Richard Bennett: Oh, there's no doubt. You'd be, you were like a family. [throat clearing]
5You took care of each other. When you were in there, I mean you all had
6common ground. You all were working in the same plant. It was all hard
7work. You may have had the cleaner, I may have been in a safer, more
8cleaner environment but it was still real hard work and you still had the
9same struggles day in and day out as everybody else did, maybe not quite
10so much when you had the opportunity to work where I did but you
11became a family. In fact, that's why I decided to get involved in the union
12because I had seen things going on in the family, if you will, that I didn't
13think was right and I thought maybe I could help make a difference.
14

15Doug Rademacher: Dick – Doug Rademacher. You, uh, said you were a country boy who
16came to the city and, uh, you saw a few women and a few minorities.
17Now you say that people became your family. [45:52] Did that break
18down the walls of, that you had? I'm sure you hadn't seen many
19minorities. When you started working on them, working with them and
20counting on them, did that break down the walls of, of, uh, [throat
21clearing] you know, growing up in an all-white environment?
22

23Richard Bennett: Well, I grew up pretty much in an all-white environment but as soon as I
24started working, when I worked in Battle Creek I worked with a large
25number of, well, I say a large number, at that time I thought it was a large
26number, of people that were blacks and some Hispanics and, uh, I got to
27be very good friends with a lot of them, did, you know, went to outside
28activities and things, so I really – I was always taught not to be
29discriminatory. I mean a person is a person, you know. It's the person,
30regardless of skin or nationality or whatever, my folks raised me that it's
31the person that counts and so that was my belief in the beginning, so I
32probably didn't have to overcome a lot of things that some people may
33have had to when they hired in to a place like that. So to me, we were all
34family in a short time because, like I said, we all had the same problems
35and we all shared the same types of work and had to come to the same
36place and all that.
37

38Marilyn Coulter: Dick – uh, Marilyn. I just want to go back a couple of places. [47:23] By
39you being, uh, a utility person and you were a vacation replacement, you
40went all over and you went in the trim shop and the body shop, did you
41also work in the paint shop?
42

43Richard Bennett: Oh yeah. I not only worked in the paint shop, I was fortunate enough to
44get elected as committeeman for the paint shop even though I had never
45been assigned there at that time. [throat clearing] And, uh, so yeah, I had
46worked a number of jobs being shipped out to the paint shop and the

1 cushion room. I worked in the cushion room and, uh, basically all over
2 the plant.
3

4Marilyn Coulter: [48:00] So in terms of working and there's a couple of questions, like in
5 terms of working, would you say that, where would you say like the best
6 jobs were and what would you say the worst jobs were? Were Trim the
7 preferred jobs at that time?
8

9Richard Bennett: Oh yeah, obviously. Trim was definitely the preferred jobs.
10

11Marilyn Coulter: [48:16] Now did you find that you had more minorities in the body shop
12 or the paint shop or the trim shop?
13

14Richard Bennett: Oh, there's definitely in, more in the body shop I think than anyplace and
15 then the paint shop, mm-hm.
16

17Marilyn Coulter: [48:30] And now when you worked in the paint shop, was there special
18 health equipment that you had to wear also there?
19

20Richard Bennett: In the paint shop depending on what the job was, what area you were
21 assigned to, as to what you had to wear. But in the paint shop you had to
22 wear, particularly later on in years, you had to wear a lot of special things
23 for the quality of the job. They were worried about the paint and the
24 quality of the, of the product. They weren't so much worried for a long
25 time I think about the people as they were the quality. It's just like when
26 robotics came in to play in the, in the plant. It used to get just beastly hot
27 in there. It, it would be 115, 120 degrees in there in the summertime and
28 that was all right. They weren't going to shut no lines down [inaudible
29 49:20] like that. But when the robots came in to play, they wouldn't work
30 under those conditions, they shut the line down. [laughter] So they, they
31 paid more attention there for a long time I think to worrying about their
32 robots than they did their workers. [throat clearing] But yeah, that was, in
33 whatever part of the plant you worked in, there was specific things that
34 you needed to, to wear as far as clothing or protective equipment, things of
35 that nature, the paint shop included.
36

37Marilyn Coulter: [49:51] Now in terms of having your coworkers being seen as your work
38 family, your brothers and sisters, how did you, how did you handle things
39 like holidays? Were special things done? And then not only that, was the
40 communication the same in all the different areas or were some more
41 friendlier than others because of the environment?
42

43Richard Bennett: Well, again, I, I really didn't have any trouble as far as getting along with
44 anybody in any, any particular area. I really didn't notice so much
45 difference myself, so I can't really say as far as the environment, um, other

1 than I will say in the body shop it was a lot harder to communicate
2 because it was so doggone...
3
4 Marilyn Coulter: Difficult environment.
5
6 Richard Bennett: ...noisy down there and you couldn't move around much because you had
7 sparks flying everywhere, so you didn't get to go around and communicate
8 with other people like you could in other areas of the plant. The body
9 shop was more restrictive, much more restrictive.
10
11 Marilyn Coulter: And the paint shop had the booths, yes.
12
13 Richard Bennett: In the paint shop they had the paint booths and, of course, that was
14 restrictive too, mm-hm.
15
16 Marilyn Coulter: [50:58] Now in terms of the plant, which department was the largest
17 department?
18
19 Richard Bennett: Uh, I believe the body shop was the largest department.
20
21 Marilyn Coulter: [51:09] In terms of people or size?
22
23 Richard Bennett: Its size.
24
25 Marilyn Coulter: [51:11] But in terms of people, you had your largest congregation of
26 people?
27
28 Richard Bennett: I'm not sure. [throat clearing] I'm not sure if the body shop, if you – I
29 guess if you put Hardware and Soft Trim together it was probably the trim
30 shop.
31
32 Marilyn Coulter: The trim shop.
33
34 Richard Bennett: Because it was the nature of the jobs there being they're, you know,
35 trimming everything out.
36
37 Marilyn Coulter: [51:36] Now physically I know as far as environment now you could,
38 could you not almost be on one side of the trim shop and almost see all the
39 way through to the other side as opposed to the body shops and the
40 [inaudible 51:48] shops?
41
42 Richard Bennett: Oh yes. [throat clearing] Yes. In Trim, of course, you didn't have all the
43 obstructions of spot welders and big machinery and all the kind of things
44 you had to deal with there, you know, presses or whatever it may, may
45 have been. [throat clearing] In the trim shop it was real wide open and
46 you could see, other than the racks. I mean, you had stock racks that was

1 naturally in the way but other than that, yes, you could definitely see more
2 people for a further distance.
3

4 Marilyn Coulter: And, and my, my last question for right now, um, now you said you were
5 married five times and a lot of it was due to working and stuff like that.
6 [52:30] Did you have a tendency to work nights for a long period of time?
7 Did you work day shifts or both shifts and was one more conducive to
8 marriage than the other?
9

10 Richard Bennett: Well, like I said, when I hired in they, they started me out on days. They
11 kept me on days for six months. They had another fellow who had more
12 seniority than me kept trying to bump me but he didn't put in his what
13 they called a shift preference so he didn't have a right to bump me off my
14 shift. And at that time you could put in a shift preference twice a year, so
15 he had to wait for six months before he could put one in and bump me.
16 [throat clearing] In the meantime, my supervisor on the day shift liked me
17 and he wanted to keep me there so he tried every kind of way to keep this
18 guy from bumping me [chuckle] and putting me on the night shift, but
19 after six months I got bumped to the night shift. And after about two
20 years, at that time in the trim shop I could have gone back to days and I
21 could have probably held days for years but I chose not to.
22

23 It was kind of funny because when I went to the night shift, like I said, I, I
24 have always been kind of a country bumpkin so I wasn't in to all that
25 hippie stuff back in those days and the long hair and I guess some of the
26 stuff that went on, smoking the dope or whatever and all that but [throat
27 clearing] so I go over to the night shift and it's a whole different world.
28 You have your supervisors around there but you don't have general
29 foremen, you don't have nobody in the office to deal with, you don't have
30 the plant manager walking out on the floor, you just got each other.
31

32 And I'm going over on this night shift and the first night I walked in there,
33 I mean these long-haired, goofy-looking people and [chuckle] talking this
34 crazy jive stuff and I'm thinking what in the world. [throat clearing] How
35 am I ever going to survive this? So to start with, I kind of kept to myself
36 for a short time until I started kind of seeing what was going on and
37 everything and then I started opening up a little bit and I found out, you
38 know what, they ain't no different than anybody else. They're the same
39 people. [laughter] They just dress different and things like that but they
40 didn't – and the thing I liked about the night shift is you work. You were
41 more like a family on the night shift. You didn't have all that interference.
42

43 I remember the first plant manager when I hired in there was named Tom
44 [inaudible 54:54]. He was a big, tall fellow. They called him High
45 Pockets. And, uh, I remember him coming out on the production line on
46 the day shift and just getting mad over nothing and he would start yelling

1 and cussing and he would pick up the nearest thing to him and just start
2 throwing it at people. That's the kind of plant manager they had back at
3 that time. Now I'm not saying he was a bad guy. I don't really know the
4 guy but I know how he acted out there on the plant floor and it just
5 flabbergasted me to think a plant manager would be acting like that.
6
7 Gary Judy: G-, Gary Judy. You said he started throwing things at people. [55:30]
8 Were, were these hourly people or supervisors that he threw things at?
9
10 Richard Bennett: He didn't care. He, he just started throwing things. If you was in the way,
11 too bad, watch out because if he hits you, he hits you. That's the way it
12 was.
13
14 Gary Judy: [55:42] Did he hit anybody that you know of or?
15
16 Richard Bennett: Well, you know what, I know he hit one person in the foot. I can't tell you
17 who it was. I can't remember the name.
18
19 Marilyn Coulter: [chuckle] So working nights it was...
20
21 Richard Bennett: Working nights it was, it was a much more peaceful atmosphere. Like I
22 said, there was a lot more camaraderie if you will and you didn't have all
23 that management interference [coughing] I guess you can call it. [chuckle]
24 You kind of took care of each other and got the job done however you had
25 to get it done. If you needed to talk to somebody like a general foreman or
26 somebody from the day shift or need some, something down in the office,
27 you had to come in on your own time and, and do it 'cause they weren't
28 going to accommodate you.
29
30 Marilyn Coulter: Hm.
31
32 Doug Rademacher: Dick, you said nights was completely different, had a different group of
33 people. [56:34] Did music come to play in the daily [coughing] work life?
34 What was the difference? Did days listen to other things and what did
35 nights do?
36
37 Richard Bennett: Well, on the day shift back at that time having radios was almost out of the
38 question. If you were fortunate enough to be able to have a radio, you was
39 keeping that thing low enough where just you were hearing it and if a
40 supervisor came around you better hide it 'cause you weren't supposed to
41 have it. Uh, but sometime later it got to where they were allowing radios,
42 now this is on the day shift, uh, as long as nobody complained about it. If
43 there was any complaints, then they would make it, make you take the
44 radio out or they would take it away from you. On the night shift on the
45 other hand, you'd walk in there and they'd have music going and radios
46 going and as long as nobody complained, it was still a privilege but it was

1 a more allowable privilege on the night shift. And so, you know, things
2 were just more relaxed and, and you could do things that you couldn't do
3 on the day shift.
4

5 Male: [Inaudible 57:48]. [recording clicked off]
6

7 Marilyn Coulter: Uh, Dick, you said that you got involved with labor because you wanted to
8 make life different and better for your brothers and sisters at work. Um,
9 during your time there I know you were very instrumental in making some
10 changes that helped to change the work life of the employees at Fisher
11 Body, the UAW workers. [58:13] Do you want to tell us a little bit about
12 your involvement in some of those programs and how it changed the way
13 we did business and the type of employees involved?
14

15 Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] I guess there was a number of things I got involved
16 with. Uh, we had what we called employee participation groups under
17 QWL, which stood for Quality of Work Life. And I was fortunate enough
18 to be on the committee when that first Quality of Work Life I'm going to
19 say attempt [chuckle] happened in our plant. [throat clearing] And we had
20 a number of union officials at that time that was involved with it. Our
21 bargaining committee was handed up for the union and it was risky
22 business, especially politically for those individuals that were in leadership
23 positions at that time. [sneezing] This was something totally new and it
24 was actually trying to work together with management for the benefit of
25 everybody.
26

27 And I remember we had a two-day offsite, Don Chenoweth was the plant
28 manager at the time we had this two-day offsite. [throat clearing] Don
29 Brown was the chairman of the bargaining committee. And we had a two-
30 day offsite with [coughing] management and we basically kind of aired
31 our differences and decided that – we spent a great deal of time just
32 forming a mission statement so we could decide what it is we wanted to
33 do, what direction did we want to head in in this plant for the benefit of
34 everybody. And we had to do a lot of soul searching, both, both sides and
35 the one thing I think was we all understood and we knew was that we had
36 to do business differently than what we had in the past.
37

38 When I hired in that plant probably the best way to get things done was if
39 you could out-scream and out-cuss the foreman or if the foreman could
40 out-scream and out-cuss you, one of you was going to get your way,
41 whichever one could be the most obstinate I guess. And we realized that
42 kind of way of doing business just wasn't the way to do business anymore.
43 [throat clearing] So we knew we had to turn the corner but we weren't just
44 sure how we were going to do it and we asked for some, some help from
45 outside consultants and eventually we had some trained consultants within

1 the plant of which I went through all that consulting training over the
2 years and stuff too. I, I felt very proud of that.

3
4 But anyway, [throat clearing] so we started through Quality of Work Life
5 and it was difficult because when you were in your meetings and
6 everybody was talking about this is the way we want to do business and
7 then you go back out on the plant floor and nothing out there changed, so
8 you kind of fell backwards into the old style of doing things and then as a
9 result of that you reacted the same way you used to, management and
10 union people a lot of times. And so each other was kind of holding the
11 other hostage saying QWL is never going to work because nothing has
12 changed. Well, I was one of those guys. I wanted to see it changed but
13 when it, when I was out on the plant floor I didn't see things changing.

14
15 In fact, I stood up at one of the union meetings and read a five-page
16 challenge if you will that I had put together. [throat clearing] I upset some
17 of the members of the bargaining committee at that time by doing that but
18 basically what my intentions were is to draw attention to some of the
19 things that was going on that was not in line with what we said we were
20 doing for QWL and let's make a decision here, are we going to do what
21 we say we're going to do or are we going to continue talking one way and
22 doing something another way? And I kind of ruffled the feathers on some
23 of the leadership but I, I did that every now and then myself anyway, so.
24 And I had others do it to me later on and that was all right too. But, um, I
25 felt very strongly that we all put our pants on the same way, we all had a
26 common goal and that's to make a living out of that plant and if was going
27 to continue then we needed to do things differently but I also felt strongly
28 that we needed to do things differently. We needed to start doing things
29 differently other than just having umpteen meetings and talking about it.
30 [coughing]

31
32 Well, in the meantime, when I became a zone committeeman, I wasn't
33 exactly happy with some of the things that I had seen our own leadership
34 doing so I decided that I thought I could do a better job so I ran for
35 chairman and I lost out on that. [throat clearing] This is sometime later
36 after we had been involved in this Quality of Work Life process for some
37 time. But anyway, I went back to the production line and I had been off
38 the production line for about 10 years and the first thing I was told by the
39 supervisor when I got back [coughing] on the production line is "Well, we,
40 we know you haven't done anything, you know, as far as working
41 production stuff for 10 years so you just take it easy and you, [coughing]
42 you know, we'll just give you some easy jobs and let you break in easy."
43 I said "Whoa, wait a minute. I can do the same thing anybody else out
44 here can do. Don't be babying me. I can do my job." And so they said
45 "Well, you know, you don't have to." I said "Yeah, I do have to."
46

1 Because even though I went back to production, I wasn't in a leadership
2 position if you will, I didn't feel any differently. I mean still it was all the
3 same. I was no different than anybody else. And I was on utility again,
4 that's where I went back to, so I told them I don't want to be no different
5 than anybody else. I wanted to do my job. I'll do my best. I always took
6 pride in doing my best whether it was on the production line or whatever
7 because I had to live with myself. I'm not saying I always did the right
8 thing but I always tried to do the right thing. Anyhow, so they didn't baby
9 me [throat clearing] and I got along just fine.

10
11 But fortunately – and Louie Schultz was the chairman at that time that I
12 had run against and lost and, uh, Al Presley was the president of the Local
13 at that time and Louie asked me up to his office one day. I had been back
14 on production I think about four or five months and he asked me if I
15 would consider taking a job, that he was going to make an appointment
16 pretty soon and he wanted to know if I'd be interested in it. And I said
17 "Well, it depends on what it is." He said "Well, we need somebody in, in
18 training. We need a production training coordinator." And I said "What's
19 that?"

20
21 So he started explaining the, you know, somebody to kind of work with
22 some of the management people and the union people involved in the
23 training and kind of oversee the thing for production people, not for
24 skilled trades but for production. And I said "Yeah, I might be interested."
25 [throat clearing] He said "Well, it would be kind of foolish for me to
26 appoint somebody that might turn around and run against me again,
27 though, wouldn't it?" I said "Well, that's your choice, Lou." I said "I'm
28 getting along just fine on production line and I don't have no problem
29 being there." I said "If you're looking for a commitment out of me, you
30 ain't going to get it because I'm going to do what I think is right at the
31 time." I said "If I think I should run again, I'm going to and if I don't
32 think I should, I won't."

33
34 Well, so I didn't hear no more until I had been on the production line for
35 about 10 months and Louie and Al Presley came on the production line,
36 pulled me into the supervisor's office, had me covered with a relief
37 person, and offered me that production coordinator job. In fact, that's how
38 I met Cheryl McQuaid because she worked down there with the training
39 folks at the time. And so anyway, I, I was offered the job. I took it, no
40 strings attached, and I had a lot of training to, to help me do my job, a lot
41 of expensive training and I felt real fortunate to do that. [throat clearing]

42
43 And it was a while later, I think I was production training coordinator
44 about a year or maybe a little more or something like that, when they got a
45 hold of me and wanted to know, specifically I guess it was Louie Schultz
46 got a hold of me and wanted to know if I would get involved with

1 something else. They wanted me to, it was a new position they really
2 didn't know too much about and he, he told me quite frankly he said "It's
3 an impossible job. We know that nobody can do it but on the other hand
4 we figured if anybody was to try, you would." So he said "We got a new
5 job coming up called simultaneous engineering rep and we want to know
6 if you'd be interested in it." I didn't even know what the heck that was, so
7 I said "Well, what is it?" [throat clearing] He said, so he explained "Well,
8 it's getting hourly involvement in future products." And I said "Well, I'll
9 give it a try if you want me to, no strings attached." [chuckle] So he said
10 "Okay." So anyway, I wound up taking that, they appointed me to that job
11 [throat clearing] and I worked with a number of people.

12
13 We had what we called product development teams and what that was is
14 PDT is the acronym we used and what that was we jointly selected people
15 to, to work on forward planning projects for future cars that were getting
16 built or somebody was going to build, hopefully us, that was the whole
17 thrust of it. And our hourly folks went down and spent a lot of time down
18 at Warren with the engineers and we had what we called 19 product
19 development teams [throat clearing] when I left that particular position
20 and I was real proud of that. We held meetings weekly, usually couple of
21 meetings a week, and it was my job just to coordinate it. Um, we had a lot
22 of very, very good, dedicated people on the hourly side that were selected.
23 We, we used a selection process that we thought was a fair process. In
24 fact, we selected people that I never thought, knowing some of those
25 people I never thought we would select them for anything and there's
26 other people I didn't know naturally you'd think they weren't getting
27 selected for something but those are the people who did get selected
28 because we used a process and we found out, fortunately, I found out how
29 important user processes are when I was in the training department.
30 [throat clearing] User processes is very important.

31
32 But anyway, [throat clearing] so we started gaining a lot of recognition,
33 our plant, because of working so closely with the engineers down in
34 Warren and it was all because of these people and their involvement and
35 their dedication. And when I say dedication, they were, they were
36 dedicated to the product and dedicated to the people in the plant. And it
37 was really a great thing [throat clearing] I think when Jim Zubkus became
38 our plant manager because Jim Zubkus invited me to his staff meetings.
39 He had staff meetings every day and as chairman he invited to those staff
40 meetings. I didn't make them all but I made as many of them as I could.
41 And he told me when he invited me, he said "There's going to be things
42 said in there you're not going to like, you're not going to agree with."
43 And he said "I'm not asking you to." He said "All I want you to do is be
44 open and honest." He said "There's things in there that you're going to
45 say we're not going to like as managers." But he said "That's how we're
46 going to do business because we need to communicate and we need to go

1 forward and the way we're going to make things better is to bring things
2 out in the open and deal with them." And he was true to that. That's the
3 kind of thing he did.
4

5 In fact, Jim Zubkus was out on the floor all over that plant a large amount
6 of the time while he was plant manager. I had a lot of respect for, for Jim
7 Zubkus. I think he genuinely was interested in not only the product and
8 furthering the plant but the people. He, he understood the people is what
9 made that, that plant.
10

11 Marilyn Coulter: [72:14] Do you feel that having those types of programs and having hourly
12 workers doing non-traditional jobs and being involved in non-traditional,
13 um, what I would say decisions, is that something that you feel that was
14 instrumental in making Lansing the capital of quality [inaudible 72:33]?
15

16 Richard Bennett: Well, [throat clearing] I think it was, in that, in that timeframe I think it
17 was absolutely a necessity. I don't think we would have survived if we
18 hadn't done some things differently. [throat clearing] And the engineers –
19 our, our people gained a lot of knowledge working down there in Warren
20 with those engineers and interacting with the engineers as well as the
21 management folks in the higher echelon I guess you would say in our
22 plant. And they learned, they gained mutual respect for each other
23 because they started gaining knowledge of each other's ways and, and
24 how they interrelated just how much alike we were rather than how
25 different we were. [throat clearing] And the whole focus of course was on
26 the product but that focus turned out to be a little more intimate between
27 people than what just the product was.
28

29 And it was great. I remember the first time that we brought engineers into
30 the plant to work out on the production line with the hourly people out
31 there. Because those engineers they, they were down there and they were
32 kind of untouchable to the hourly workforce and they were doing the best
33 job they could but they didn't realize when they were engineering
34 something in Warren what kind of effect that had on a person that actually
35 had to build the product back there in Lansing. And they really had some
36 eye openers when they went out there on that production line and started
37 working on things that they had engineered and they said how in the
38 world, you can't twist your wrist four different kind of ways to do this.
39 Well, that's what we've been trying to tell you guys. We're going back
40 and re-engineer this thing. It was great. It was great for the product. It
41 was great for the union-management relations. Everybody started I think
42 gaining a whole lot more respect for, for the others.
43

44 Marilyn Coulter: [74:28] Again about the Lansing workforce, do you think that, um,
45 because we were that unified family, slightly different from other workers,

1 did the [inaudible 74:40] the way we treated each other, the way we
2 interacted with each other, did that have an impact on that type of project?
3

4 Richard Bennett:

5 It had an impact I think not only on that particular, that project but all
6 projects. It didn't matter where I went. It didn't matter if I was sitting in a
7 meeting in Warren, Michigan with managers or if I was sitting in a
8 meeting in Detroit [throat clearing] with the higher ups in the International
9 Union or where I was, you heard nothing but good things about Local 602
10 and Lansing, and Lansing workforce in general. It wasn't just Local 602,
11 it was Local 652, it was 1618. Lansing was looked at very favorably and
12 it was because we had actually shown the rest of the industry if you will,
13 at least within Michigan, how management and union could cooperate
14 with each other and could be successful doing that and we gained a lot of
15 recognition. The people in the plant I don't think ever really realized just
16 how important those things were [throat clearing] and just how much that
17 helped to secure their, their future. We still had people that sat back and
18 lobbed grenades if you will and you got to expect that anyway, but overall,
19 Lansing was looked at so favorably.

20 I remember when we negotiated the, the J car agreement [throat clearing]
21 and they were going to roll it out so they held a special news conference.
22 And I remember Steve Yokich came to town for that and he is sitting up
23 on the stage. We hadn't even ratified the agreement yet and he didn't
24 know that. He thought it was a done deal, ratified and everything, and
25 here we're making, they're making a big news flash all over about what
26 Lansing just did to, to get the J car. And something was said when Yokich
27 was up there and he turned around and he says "We do have this
28 agreement ratified, don't we?" We said "No, not yet, but we're going to
29 have." [chuckle] He didn't know what to do at that point because he, he
30 wouldn't have been there without a ratification. [laughter] But we felt
31 strongly enough, you know. I mean it was, it was, it was ratified. It was
32 nip and tuck. It wasn't by a whole lot. I think it was like 51%, 52% or
33 something like that.

34
35 But the whole shop committee went right out on the floor [throat clearing]
36 and we held meetings day and night and met with all the departments, all
37 the people and explained all of these things. You could take it for what it
38 was worth to you as an individual but at least we was going to go out there
39 and let you know about it and let you make an informed decision on
40 whether you wanted that or not but we felt very strongly that was the
41 future of our plant in our hands and we had to do whatever. And we
42 didn't give up a lot I want to say, if you want to take a look at it in the
43 long run. But the J car and the N car were things that were very
44 controversial when we had to negotiate agreement to get those things.
45

1 I remember they brought – they wanted to negotiate, management wanted
2 to negotiate with 602 and 652 together. Well, 602 and 652 we worked
3 together but on the other hand we didn't want to negotiate our agreements
4 together. We were two separate groups and we wanted to stay two
5 separate groups. We wanted to stay two separate local unions [throat
6 clearing] so we were reluctant but on the other hand we knew we had to
7 do something. If management wanted to negotiate that way, we had to do
8 something because we needed th-, that agreement to get that product. So
9 we met together and at that time Art Baker was chairman at 652 and I was
10 chairman at 602 and so when we got in at the bargaining table and we sat
11 down with negotiations, Art and I had already worked together some
12 anyway. And quite frankly, not everybody was trusting Art from 602 and
13 probably not everybody was trusting me from 652 but we knew we had to
14 do that so we sat down with management.

15
16 And the first thing I, I tried to do is to find out what it is management was
17 looking at, so I started asking questions about what, what is it you want to
18 negotiate on. They started talking about these various things of which
19 [throat clearing] one of the big things was there was a six-minute
20 shutdown time for a coffee wagon twice a day. That was a huge, huge
21 issue 'cause we were the last plant in the world to have that from my
22 understanding and had been a tradition for Fisher Body for many, many
23 years. And originally when management started talking that I said "You
24 mean the 12 minutes or do you mean just pushing the cart out on the, on
25 the floor?" And originally they said "No. We're talking – we're not
26 talking about the 12 minutes. We're just talking about the cart. We, we're
27 not going to take the time away. We don't want to take your time away.
28 What we want to do is keep the production line working and give you
29 more tag-relief time for the six minutes." Well, by the time it got around
30 to sitting down for negotiations, they wanted the 12 minutes [throat
31 clearing] and of course that was a real tough issue.

32
33 In fact, years later I was talking to Don Brown and, over here to the union
34 hall, and Don told me, he said "Well, you know, they came after us every
35 year for that, every, every negotiations." And he said "We, we should
36 have took care of that years, years before." But he said "It was just too hot
37 of a political issue and we just didn't think we could weather the storm so
38 nobody ever, ever dealt with it." [throat clearing] But anyway, during my
39 tenure we dealt with it all right. I didn't like to but we wound up making
40 an agreement whereby we didn't have that 12 minutes, that coffee wagon
41 anymore. And like I said, we had a, we finally got an agreement, reached
42 an agreement, very controversial but we got it and we got the product. We
43 did what we had to do at the time.

44
45 It was kind of interesting to me, though, because we again, we all went
46 out. The bargaining committee, we went all over the plant before we ever

1 signed any of the tentative agreement sheets with management over that
2 issue and we talked to people and we said okay, here's what they want.
3 We knew the coffee wagon was going to be the big issue, the 12 minutes
4 was going to be the biggest issue to deal with. We said "How do you feel
5 about it?" And, and I talked to people that I had worked on the line for
6 years about that issue and they said "To heck with it, give it up. We want
7 product." I said "You mean keep the 12 minutes, just give rid of the cart."
8 "No, no, no. If you get, whatever you got to do, if you got to give up the
9 12 minutes, we want that job. We want a future here." Okay.

10
11 Well, it's kind of interesting because after we finally had signed the
12 agreement and took it out for ratification, those same individuals "You're
13 throwing us down the river." [laughter] I'd say "What are you talking
14 about? I talked to you personally." "Well, I, I didn't ever say that."
15 "Okay. If that's what you didn't say, that's fine but I remember it that
16 way. Regardless, here's what we've got, you can vote for it or against it,
17 it's up to you. And you can believe our future is hanging in the balance on
18 this issue or not, that's up to you too. That's why we have to take the
19 issue back out to you because it's no more my future that it is yours. It's
20 everybody's. You're the ones, no matter what we negotiate,
21 membership's got to ratify it." [throat clearing]

22
23 Marilyn Coulter: [82:32] So is, um, the N car, getting that there under your watch, is that
24 one of the things that you were most proud of as a ch-, bargaining chair?

25
26 Richard Bennett: Definitely, definitely. [throat clearing] I think the, again, like I said, I
27 think to this day I think the future of the plant was really at risk at that
28 point in time and I think we did what we had to do. I think the
29 membership – I mean the reason they ratify those things is 'cause they did
30 realize that. They hate – nobody likes to give up something like that.
31 That was very important. It was very important to me.

32
33 Marilyn Coulter: [83:08] What would you say would be one of your worst memories that
34 you had?

35
36 Richard Bennett: [chuckle] Uh, probably the incident I talked about earlier off record
37 involving a gun incident [chuckle] in an interview when I was a district
38 committeeman. Uh, there was an individual that had come from another
39 plant and came in to this plant and really wasn't used to doing production
40 work if you will and had quite an attitude about it and fortunately wound
41 up going back to his previous plant when all was said and done. I'm
42 thankful for that. But anyway, this particular incident what happened is
43 [throat clearing] this individual had done something wrong, I don't even
44 recall what it was now, in management's eyes but they had held an
45 interview. They were going to discipline this person, so they called me to
46 represent him and I, I got over to the office and they got in a, between the

1 general foreman and the individual they got in a heated name-calling
2 contest which totally shocked me, particular with the general foreman
3 because I had known him for years and he was really an easy going, soft-
4 spoken, nice guy. I had never seen him react like this. But they got into
5 name calling and pounding fists on the desk and, and threatening each
6 other and all kinds of stuff.
7

8 To make a long story short, when the whole thing ended up, this guy ran
9 out of the plant [throat clearing] and I followed him. He was parked out in
10 front. When I walked out the door he was popping his trunk open. I ran
11 over to where he was, he was standing. He reached in a bag and pulled
12 out a pistol. And I told him he wasn't going to go back in that plant and
13 he wasn't going to use that pistol and all this kind of stuff 'cause he had
14 threatened to kill this general foreman. This general foreman had
15 threatened him different things. [throat clearing] But anyway, fortunately,
16 like I said, I was kind of talking to him like a preacher at that time but he
17 finally cooled down enough, he put the gun back away, he closed the
18 trunk. He said he wasn't going back in the plant, which I was glad that
19 time. First, I told him he had to come back to the plant or they was going
20 to fire him but after I see what he was doing I didn't want him back in the
21 plant. But anyway, and he drove off and I don't recall exactly whatever
22 became of that whole thing at Fisher Body but I do remember that he got,
23 shortly thereafter got called back to his previous plant and he didn't lose
24 his job, so.
25

26Marilyn Coulter: [86:07] Was that type of incident, uh, a rare occasion? Is that a really
27 isolated incident, things like that happening in the factory?
28

29Richard Bennett: Well, I don't want to say it was necessarily isolated but I'm going to say it
30 is, it was rare things like that happening to that extent. I know there were
31 other, other incidents that someone, I wasn't involved with where [throat
32 clearing] there were things that could have turned out violent.
33

34 I remember one time we had one of our members that had called in and
35 threatened to kill myself and everybody in the work center in the plant and
36 the president over at the union hall and [throat clearing] so the plant had
37 gotten a hold of the police department. The police department had told
38 them to get a hold of us and they called us in labor relations and they
39 notified us of the threat, told us to stay away from this person and they,
40 they had police around the plant trying to apprehend this person if they
41 tried to enter the plant and all that. Nothing ever happened that, during the
42 shift that day so when I, [chuckle] when I walked out to my vehicle after
43 the end of the shift, [throat clearing] I went to unlock the door, this
44 individual that had made the threats come out from behind my car and
45 naturally startled me. I didn't know, I didn't know if he had a gun or what
46 but as it turned out it was another thing that it didn't turn out bad. He

1 didn't do anything bad as far as hurting anybody. We got him some
2 counseling and he went on to eventually retire, so something that could
3 have been bad turned out okay.
4

5 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher. [88:00] Dick, um, one, I want to touch on you were
6 talking about the J and the N car. This was – Fisher Body and Lansing is
7 also known for an Olds Town. Can you share the change of those
8 particular car models that had a huge impact? Um, what exactly were
9 these products and, and wasn't that a piece of the problem was what we
10 were going to be breaking away from our heritage?
11

12 Richard Bennett: Yeah, that was a big piece of the problem too because historically we had
13 built Oldsmobiles. In fact, from the time I hired in, that's pretty much all
14 we had built was Oldsmobiles. We built the 88, the 98, the F85 station
15 wagon, the F85 Olds, the 88 station wagon, we built the convertibles. Um,
16 and I mean this was, this was Oldsmobile. Lansing was known for
17 Oldsmobile and we had Oldsmobile headquarters here in town and
18 Oldsmobile was everybody's bread and butter for all those years and
19 suddenly everything shifted from large cars to small cars and we didn't see
20 where at that time where that was going to be such a good thing for us.
21 First of all, from a work standpoint, supposedly those small cars took a
22 whole lot less manpower which means we were going to lose a lot of our
23 membership so that was a concern for us because we didn't want to see
24 our, our friends or family members, if you will, get laid off, lose their jobs.
25 [throat clearing] Secondly, because even from the, the local union
26 standpoint, that could be a real financial problem for us with less union
27 dues coming in, so that was another big concern from the Local
28 standpoint.
29

30 But just the idea of having to make that change was something that again
31 people lot of times resist change and that was a huge change. That was a
32 huge change for, for anybody that had worked for any length of time here
33 at Fisher Body and other areas of the plant or other areas of town too, of
34 course, so it was kind of a natural resistance to that. We were going in to
35 some uncharted waters and we just didn't know if that was the right thing
36 to do. Particularly people I think out on the floor, they didn't, they didn't
37 know if that was a wise decision. What they really wanted to do was keep
38 doing what we've always done, build big cars and make good cars and just
39 keep plowing forward but naturally the corporation didn't have that in
40 mind. They had other things in mind. They were going to, they were going
41 to put small car products somewhere and if they were going to go to small
42 car products, we wanted to be the ones that was going to get it. If they
43 were going to phase out the big cars, we wanted the small cars, from a
44 leadership standpoint anyway. [throat clearing]
45

1 And, um, so yeah, it was a, it was a big, big issue not only for the, for the
2 folks in the union but management people as well. I mean that was their
3 livelihood as well. You had a lot of supervisors and so forth that that's all
4 they knew was building big Oldsmobiles, so they were worried about their
5 future too.
6

7 Doug Rademacher: [91:33] There's another group that we haven't touched on yet and I want
8 you to share the difference and, uh, between the assembly line worker in
9 all those departments and the skilled trades arena and the challenge to
10 move that group of, of workers and I know that had a lot of battles for you
11 there too.
12

13 Richard Bennett: Skilled trades was a, [throat clearing] was a, yeah, it was a battle all right
14 'cause it was a big issue. Uh, skilled trades have what they call lines of
15 demarcation and as things progressed over the years it became a big issue
16 as far as negotiations was concerned because you had electricians that
17 their, their particular jobs were dealing with specific things. You had no
18 right to their particular jobs. They're dealing with specific things and all
19 the other trades as well. We had a number of skilled trades in our plant. I
20 think back at that time I think we had something like 17 clearly defined
21 different skilled trades [throat clearing] and nobody wanted anybody else
22 working in their turf. I mean that was the way it was. You didn't want
23 anybody else taking your work away from you because that was
24 jeopardizing your futures possibly and so that was a big issue when other
25 plants started doing these things. And of course, a lot of non-union places
26 have always done those kinds of things, overlapping.
27

28 And then we had Local 1618 over here. In order to survive, they had to
29 enter into an agreement whereby they broke down those lines of
30 demarcation and they had skilled trades people in there doing all kinds of
31 things that normally they wouldn't have been allowed to do because it
32 didn't belong in their trade, it belonged to another trade. And that became
33 a big issue here in Lansing site, not just Local 602 but Lansing. But
34 [throat clearing] in order to survive they had to negotiate those kinds of
35 agreements, they didn't want to but they had to. They realized it. Their
36 membership realized it. They ratified the agreements. The international
37 union realized it. They, they sanctioned those agreements and it made it
38 tougher on the rest of us that didn't necessarily have to go into those kind
39 of agreements at that time because it put a lot of pressure on us.
40

41 In fact, we had a number of membership meetings where our own
42 members stood up and, and were very upset with the leadership of Local
43 1618 for doing those kind of things [throat clearing] and, you know, we,
44 we tried to explain, I tried to explain to them when I was chairman, you
45 got to put yourself in their shoes. When you're walking in their shoes,
46 what would you do differently and quite frankly I don't think we would

1 have done a bit of things differently. I think we would have been doing
2 the same as what they had to do. And so that pressure was always on us
3 from that point forward particularly after they had finally got it in one area
4 in this, in this town, they wanted to always do that.

5
6 Well, then we realized too some of that stuff just didn't make sense. It
7 didn't make sense for an electrician to stop working on something to have
8 a millwright come out and, and move something that the electrician could
9 have picked up and sat over there two feet. It didn't amount to nothing. It
10 didn't, it really wasn't taking anybody's work away. [throat clearing] So
11 we, we formed a committee. It was a joint committee of our skilled
12 trades' workforce later on and their skilled trades guys selected their own
13 representatives from the various trades, or major trades at that time, to
14 work with management on trying to call out, if you will, those kind of
15 things that didn't make sense to keep clearly defined within a particular
16 trade. And they did a lot of work. It was tough. It was hard for those
17 individuals. It was very political in some, some situations. It made it
18 tough for the leadership.

19
20 Of course, I guess that's one thing you, the committees helped to do was
21 kind of take some of the edge off from the leadership as far as the politics
22 of it all but it still all pointed back to the leadership because those
23 committees were basically doing the work of the leadership. They were
24 doing what the leadership's responsibilities were. If you're going to do
25 the job right, you get the experts involved and that's the people that's out
26 there doing the work. That's one thing we always tried to convince
27 management of. If you really want the job done right, you know, you can
28 either do it management's way or you can do it the right way. [laughter] I
29 used to tell everybody, you know, the, you got a foreman that's giving you
30 a problem, and I practiced this when I was on the production line, you got
31 a foreman who's giving you a problem, the best way to break him down is
32 do exactly what they tell you 'cause they can't live with doing what they
33 tell you.

34
35 Doug Rademacher: Dick, a lot of people don't understand, um, that within the union we're all
36 union representatives but we voted individually, the trades' arena and the
37 general production had separate ballot boxes also. And so those things
38 were – it was very difficult to keep everybody happy, isn't that true, with
39 where they could actually vote in the opposite direction of the – they could
40 hold you hostage is something I guess is what I want to say.

41
42 Richard Bennett: Well, it really wasn't difficult. It was impossible [laughter] to make
43 everybody happy. You didn't have to be in a leadership position very long
44 to figure that out. [throat clearing] You couldn't make everybody happy.
45 The best thing you could try and do is what was best for the majority and
46 hope that the majority carried the ball, ratified your agreements, and lived

1 with your agreements and hope that you could keep management
2 [inaudible 97:52]. You always had to constantly remember, remind
3 management this isn't a union contract. This is a management-union
4 contract. We both agreed. This is the way we're going to do business
5 together.
6

7 And, [throat clearing] you know, Ruben Burks years and years ago, long
8 before I ever went on International staff, said something that always stuck
9 in my mind. We were over here at the union hall, we were in a, in a
10 training class, bargaining class, and Ruben came in and we were just going
11 in to negotiations and it was going to be a tough set of negotiations, we
12 knew that, and Ruben spoke for a while and, and then in his closing
13 remarks something that I will never forget probably until the day I die,
14 [throat clearing] he told us, he said "One thing you never want to do, do
15 not force management into agreeing to something that they can't live with
16 because they won't. You can put it in writing but if they can't live with it,
17 you're going to be the bad guy 'cause you can't make them live with it
18 and all you can do is write grievances and everything and you're the bad
19 guy 'cause you can't make them do what they already said they'd do." So
20 I always kept that in mind when I was in negotiating whether it was
21 grievance settlements or contracts and that is you got to consider their
22 position and what they are able and not able to do at the same time you're
23 negotiating with them. Don't force to win something they can't live with
24 'cause they ain't going to live with it.
25

26 Doug Rademacher: Well, Dick, you, that leads you to a story I think. Groups in the plant
27 could control the work environment or the production and, uh, you talked
28 about, uh, maybe an incident about something in the cushion room where
29 they were able to, they were able to control the flow of the production.
30

31 Richard Bennett: Yeah, the cushion, the cushion room was known as the rowdy group
32 [throat clearing] in the plant for a long time. They had a couple of
33 incidences I, I remember that actually shut the plant down. [throat
34 clearing] One of them was a, was a walkout where they just flat walked
35 out and is what they call a work stoppage, which if you were caught by
36 our agreement, our national agreement, if you were caught leading a work
37 stoppage by the terms of the agreement you could not only be fired but the
38 union couldn't negotiate you back to work. And – but some of those
39 individuals – conditions were not good out there in that cushion room and
40 some of those individuals took it upon themselves to bring it to
41 management's attention by walking off the job. Another incident they had
42 what they called a Blue Monday [throat clearing] and what that was is a
43 bunch of people called in sick on a Monday so they couldn't even start up.
44

45 And in fact, we had two individuals that, that later became well known
46 and I think well-respected union leaders that not only probably p-, played

1 a part in that but were disciplined for that. In fact, they were both on five
2 years' probation as a result of that. Management felt that they had headed
3 that whole thing up and convinced other people to go along with it.
4 [throat clearing] They held a lot of interviews for a long time. And to
5 make a long story short, what finally was agreed to for those two
6 individuals and I always thought this was a strange agreement but it's
7 what came out of it, they did not admit to doing anything like that but on
8 the other hand it was negotiated that what would happen they would be on
9 five years' probation, put back to work, and given their back pay.
10 [laughter] So they were paid their back pay for the time they were off on
11 discipline and put on five years' probation. And, uh, and I have a lot of
12 respect for both those people yet today. [throat clearing]

13
14 In fact, one of them I love her dearly, that's Dorothy Stevens and you
15 probably in these interviews have heard that name more than once.
16 Dorothy was somebody that when I first came on the committee I looked
17 up to. She was an individual that didn't hesitate to let her position be
18 known on something and she didn't hesitate to back it up. And whether
19 she was right or wrong sometimes, she didn't back off until you proved
20 her wrong. And, and Dorothy for as many problems, problems that she
21 gave some management people, was highly respected by management. In
22 fact, there was more than one occasion that I know of for a fact that
23 management tried to convince her to jump over to their side and take a
24 position in, in management. I even had a couple incidences of that myself
25 when I was in there. I was offered a labor relations job one time and I was
26 offered a supervisory job with, with a guarantee within six months I would
27 be a general foreman and, uh, I turned, naturally, I turned them both down
28 because I wasn't interested in being a management person. I was
29 interested in being a union rep. That's what I was doing, that's what I
30 wanted to do but [throat clearing] Dorothy was looked at, looked upon I
31 think as the kingpin of that whole business out there in the, in the cushion
32 room and she paid the price for it and willingly so.

33
34 In fact, I remember a few years later she was, uh, [throat clearing] she was
35 the top committee person, she was the first woman on the shop committee
36 and no doubt in my mind could have been the chairman of this Local
37 anytime she wanted to run, run for it I think after that but Dorothy wasn't
38 interested in any of that. Obviously, she was just interested in trying to
39 take care of the people. That's what she was all about. I remember she –
40 that five-year probation that couldn't be, these two individuals couldn't be
41 involved with anything that even faintly resembled a work stoppage and
42 we had our Olds haul drivers that hauled bodies between Fisher Body and
43 Olds and Dorothy represented those individuals when she was on the shop
44 committee and I remember they were, couple times they were going to do
45 a work stoppage [throat clearing] and of course for her to protect herself
46 she had to tell them you can't do that, I mean, in an official capacity. Now

1 what she did in an unofficial capacity was probably support them
2 individuals [chuckle] but her job was in jeopardy and they didn't want to
3 see her lose her job so they had to kind of work with her on some of those
4 things but Dorothy was highly respected by the people that she
5 represented and by management that she actually negotiated against.
6

7 Doug Rademacher: Dick, you shared that you were offered and Dorothy possibly offered a job
8 in management. [105:32] Uh, it just brings to the mind of mine, I've only
9 heard some stories but what about a guy named Rocky Wright, wasn't he a
10 union activist that did turn the other side?
11

12 Richard Bennett: Yeah, Rocky Wright was a person that was involved with the union. He
13 was a union representative and they had an incident [throat clearing] and
14 the story goes, now I wasn't there, I did talk to Rocky several times later
15 on when he became a management person, [coughing] when he was a
16 general foreman, um, about the incident. Now the story has it that Rocky
17 Wright laid down in front of a truck and wouldn't let them through the
18 gate while they were on a work stoppage and Rocky always denied that
19 but I also talked to people that were there at the time and they say that's
20 exactly what he did. But be that as it may, let's say that he did do that,
21 that was very risky business. He could have easily lost his job but it's
22 kind of ironic because rather than lose his job later on he became a
23 management person, became a supervisor, became a general foreman,
24 eventually a superintendent in the plant.
25

26 Gary Judy: Gary Judy. [throat clearing] I just want to know if it changed their
27 working conditions for the people in the cushion room that did have the
28 work stoppage. [107:04] Did it improve their working conditions?
29

30 Richard Bennett: As a matter of fact, it did. [throat clearing] Now there was some hard
31 cores out there that you weren't going to change a whole lot as far as some
32 of the management thinking out there. They had some, some tough
33 managers out there. They were not good people to work for and that's of
34 course because the [inaudible 107:26] people to begin with [throat
35 clearing] but it did change a lot of the conditions. It wasn't all for not.
36 They were successful [coughing] in helping people out, out there in a
37 number of ways I guess.
38

39 Now I didn't work out there at that time with any regularity so I can't tell
40 you all the ins and outs but I do know and I'm going to revert back a little
41 bit to, to Dorothy Stevens as an example. Um, they, they gave her fits
42 afterwards 'cause they knew they had her in a bind following that incident
43 and they even had gone to the extent of [throat clearing] trying to
44 intimidate her in doing things that would try and break her down if you
45 will because she was a very strong-willed lady. She was then and she is
46 yet today but, um, even to the point of I, I remember telling one time about

1 they assigned her, her assignment was to guard the drinking fountain in
2 the cushion room. Now can you imagine staying out there eight or nine
3 hours a day watching a drinking fountain? That's your job for the day.
4 And first, first of all it was meant to humiliate her, intimidate her, and
5 secondly that, that in itself was going to be a long, long day standing there
6 watching the doggone drinking fountain and she had to do this day after
7 day and it was just things like that.
8
9 They tried all kinds of tactics to try to break her down and not just her,
10 other, other leadership I'm sure went through similar things but the
11 cushion room was noted for probably being more innovative with those
12 kind of things because some of the type of management they had out there.
13
14 Male: [109:18] So speaking of management, in your opinion, in different
15 positions that you've held, a wide variety of them, being a union
16 representative, a production worker, International rep, what's makes a
17 good manager, a manager, uh, a manager and a bad manager, can you
18 tell us what the [inaudible 109:40]?
19
20 Richard Bennett: Well, I guess I got, I got to go with the golden rule, [chuckle] you know, if
21 you treat people the way you want to be treated, I think you're going to be
22 a good manager. [throat clearing] If you put yourself in their shoes and
23 you don't ask them to do something you wouldn't do yourself and if
24 you're open to suggestions and if you're willing to look at the individuals
25 doing the work as the expert and giving them some involvement, some
26 input into what's, what's going on in their life, you're going to find out
27 those people are interested in making things work and making it work well
28 because that's their livelihood. They're not out to try and give
29 management a tough time. Management has caused their own problems
30 over the years. That why we have a union is because of management.
31 Bad managers make good unions.
32
33 Now [coughing] to me, I have worked for good managers in that plant and
34 I've worked for bad managers and I've gone out of my way to give fits to
35 bad managers and I've tried to do it in such a manner where I wasn't
36 going to get hurt but they wasn't going to be happy when it was all over
37 and I've been pretty successful in certain instances. On the other hand, I
38 have gone in the other direction for good managers and I've gone way,
39 way beyond the call of duty to try and make them look good because I
40 knew what they were trying to do was for my benefit and the other
41 workers that I worked with and sometimes they weren't even going along
42 with the contract but they were doing it wh-, wh-, when they were
43 breaking the contract they were doing it for the benefit of the workers to
44 try and help them out. [throat clearing] And, uh, that's the difference
45 between a good manager and a bad manager I think. Put yourself – if a

1 good manager puts themselves in the shoes of the person they're, they're
2 managing, they're going to be all right.
3

4Doug Rademacher: Dick, I'm going to move you on to benefits. [111:46] What is your most
5 appreciated bargain benefit that you've, that you've benefited from over
6 these years?
7

8Richard Bennett: Well, I'll say right now my pension. [laughter] Before I retired it was
9 something else, it was my wages and my, my benefits naturally. [throat
10 clearing] And of course, healthcare being the big issue for the last 25 or
11 more years now, that's a, that's a big, big issue. And I myself with all of
12 my medical problems I've experienced over the years as well as my family
13 members, I know that if I had to pay those bills it would be in excess of a
14 million dollars, so healthcare is a big, big issue. But [throat clearing] I'm
15 very thankful for, for the pension that's been negotiated, for the wages that
16 I was fortunate enough to make over the years that was negotiated and, uh,
17 and for the benefits.
18

19Doug Rademacher: [112:46] Did you use the tuition assistance program for your children or
20 aid for the children and their schooling?
21

22Richard Bennett: Well, I didn't, uh, my one, and I can't recall all the details right now. My
23 one son tried to and he was unsuccessful because there was something
24 there he didn't qualify for and I can't remember what it was. Myself, I
25 used the tuition assistance as far as a lot of training that I received from
26 both GM and the UAW, so. As far as my family members, though, they,
27 they weren't either able to or didn't apply for tuition assistance.
28

29Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher again. [113:32] Dick, did you find yourself involved
30 more in the political arena from being a union rep and has it carried over
31 into your community? Can you share some stories and how you've moved
32 on?
33

34Richard Bennett: Yeah, I, [chuckle] first of all, being involved with the, with the union
35 made me aware, attending union meetings made me aware of what was
36 going on in politics both locally, statewide, and on a national scale. It
37 made me aware of a lot of issues and various people's positions on those
38 issues that were running for office that I otherwise probably wouldn't have
39 paid any attention to because I didn't before that. And, uh, [throat
40 clearing] of course now, my kids when it comes time other than
41 unfortunately I got a couple of stepsons that I don't seem to be able to
42 persuade sometimes but my kids it's not unusual for them prior to election
43 calling me up and say "Dad, who are you voting for and why?" You
44 know, and, uh, so I would tell them. I don't tell them how to vote but I tell
45 them who I'm voting for and why and, uh, I think it's had an influence on
46 my children as far as, and as far as their participation because if I hadn't

1 have talked politics and tried to inform them of the importance of politics
2 and stuff, they may not have even voted at all.
3
4 And I remember my, my third oldest daughter when she was going to
5 school she was telling me about the great debates that she got into with her
6 teacher. Lived in a, in a predominantly Republican area, her teacher was
7 obviously Republican and, of course, historically, the, the Democratic
8 platform seems to go much more toward working concerns than what
9 Republican platforms do and so she would, she would debate this teacher
10 on a lot of issues. And she felt confident in debating those issues because
11 I had talked to her about those issues and, and where people stood on them
12 and, and she used to come, she used to come home and say “Dad, we
13 talked about this and that, Teacher said this and that and I fixed him up, I
14 told him he don’t know what he’s talking about.” [chuckle] She said “I
15 corrected him.” [chuckle] So overall, I think it’s had a real positive
16 impact not only on myself as far as politics but my kids as well.
17
18 Doug Rademacher: [116:18] Dick, would you share your, you have a passion, a hobby, and it
19 carries over from the talent shows we’ve had and now I’ve seen you do
20 this particular activity at gatherings in Flint, Michigan and, and now you
21 carry on today, so would you share what that is?
22
23 Richard Bennett: Well, I like to pick and grin a guitar a little bit and other things but I’ve –
24 country music has always been something that’s near and dear to me. I
25 like other kinds of music too but country has been my favorite. I love
26 country and I love gospel. And we’ve had a number of benefits over the
27 years that me and various other people have either had a band or formed a
28 band for specific reasons we’ve performed for. And, um, I played at the
29 Local Union picnic before with a band a couple times, two or three times,
30 I don’t remember. [coughing] Um, we have played for fundraisers.
31 We’ve played for political rallies. And most recently since I’ve retired
32 and moved up north, I’ve kind of fell into a group of people that we’ve
33 played for fundraisers up there to help people out that are less fortunate,
34 particularly people that don’t have healthcare coverage and had some real
35 medical problems and very big expenses. So we’ve been playing for
36 fundraisers trying to help people, like a 15-year-old boy had cancer and
37 his folks couldn’t afford to pay the bill and a lady that suffered with
38 congestive heart disease and a big hospital bill and couldn’t afford that,
39 things of that nature.
40
41 Doug Rademacher: Okay. Well, we, we see this plant close and you’re here today and I know
42 you brought a camera. Uh, Fisher Body is coming down. We’ve –
43 General Motors has invested quite a sum of money out here for a new
44 product and a new plant. [118:37] What’s your feelings on the closing, on
45 the future, and what do you tell young people about the future?
46

1Richard Bennett:

2 Well, from a personal standpoint, I can tell you it's, it's sad to me, first of
3 all, to see the plant having to be destroyed. I mean that's a place where
4 [throat clearing] I – it helped me grow up, let's put it that way. I might
5 have already been grown up so to speak when I got there but it helped me
6 grow up, [throat clearing] all the people that helped me grow up, and so it
7 becomes a real important part of your life going there all those years and
8 so many people that I was fortunate enough to work with, to represent.
9 And I think back of all the people that in fact I've seen a lot of people pass
10 over the years, young and older, that I worked with [throat clearing] and I
11 hate to see it. On the other hand, I also am glad that they're building a
12 new plant that our members are going to have a future in working in that
13 new plant and so it's kind of good and bad, mixed feelings there. But I
14 brought the camera for two reasons actually, to take some pictures of the
15 plant over there and the other is to take a picture of this committee because
16 I think what you're doing is a wonderful thing. [throat clearing]

17 I kind of envy you because I know you already told me you've heard
18 some, some great stories and I know you're going to hear some great
19 stories further in the future as you continue on this process and that's
20 great. [throat clearing] I've been involved with enough things,
21 interviewing people for selection of different positions and all kinds of
22 things that really make you appreciate people and you learn things about
23 people that you never imagine just sitting in your, just being in that plant
24 working with somebody. You don't really know people, you know them
25 from a working standpoint and that's all. When you find out things that
26 they're involved with on the outside or how they really are in family life
27 or things of that nature, it's, you just get a whole different perspective on
28 individuals. I've seen some people that I'll tell you quite frankly I thought
29 pretty rotten people in that plant. I found out they're just wonderful
30 people. It's the atmosphere in the plant that caused them to do the things
31 they do to or act the way they acted because when they got out of there,
32 they're some of the nicest people you ever met in the world. It's a whole
33 different environment. It's a different life for them, so I envy you in a lot
34 of ways what you're going through now. I'm sure you're going to enrich
35 your lives and I'm sure you already have in this process.

36
37 As far as young people, um, I think, and I hate to say this but I think on an
38 overall scale from what I see out there, there's a whole different work
39 ethic today than there used to be when, when I hired in that plant. When I
40 hired in that plant, you knew that you had to work for a living for the rest
41 of your life so you might as well get in there and do the best you can if
42 you're going to make it good for yourself, you're going to have to make it
43 good for somebody else, who's going to make it good for you. [throat
44 clearing] And you knew that and you didn't back away from working.
45 You got in there and you did what had to be done. It wasn't always fun
46 and it wasn't always easy but it's just what you had to do and you did it.

1
2 I see a lot of attitude in some of our young people nowadays and I'm not
3 trying to put everybody in a basket here, the same basket, but I just see so
4 much more of it. I think that they have an attitude that if it's going to get
5 me dirty, I ain't going to do it. If I got to get up too early in the morning, I
6 ain't going to do it. If I'm not going to make big money at it, I'm not
7 going to work at all. And, you know, it's just I don't know what the
8 attitude of why the change and maybe some of it, I think a lot of it
9 probably, I've heard other people say this and looking back they're
10 probably right, but maybe we've done too much, um, for our children or
11 whatever to the point where they think that they don't have to do all those
12 kind of things because we were being, maybe being overprotective and
13 trying to do too much for them so they didn't have to do the things. They
14 didn't have to suffer like we had to suffer. They didn't have to work as
15 hard as we had to work. They didn't have to put up with conditions like
16 we had to put up with, so they don't expect they should ever have to do
17 that and there just may come a time when they have to do that.
18
19 So my, my advice to young people is whatever you got to do, put your
20 mind to it, put your body to it, get in there and get the job done and take
21 pride in whatever it is, I don't care what you do. My folks always taught
22 me, it doesn't matter what you do in life and my grandfather told me it
23 doesn't matter what you do, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing right, give
24 it your best.
25
26 Doug Rademacher: Thanks Dick.
27
28 Jerri Smith: Thank you Dick.
29
30 Male: Thanks Dick.
31
32 Male: Thanks Dick.
33
34 Male: It was a great interview. Thank you.
35
36
37/mlc