

**Lyle Birchman discusses his career as a production worker  
and UAW member at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**

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4  
5 Jerri Smith: This is Jerri Smith and we're doing a interview for the Fisher Body  
6 Historical Team. We're at Local 602 Union Hall in the conference room  
7 and today we're interviewing Lyle Birchman and the date is December 15,  
8 2005. It is 12:48 and we're going to go around the table and introduce  
9 everyone here and then we'll start with Lyle's interview.  
10  
11 Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter.  
12  
13 John Fedewa: John Fedewa.  
14  
15 Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher.  
16  
17 Cheryl McQuaid: Cheryl McQuaid  
18  
19 Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming.  
20  
21 Jerri Smith: [0:36] And Lyle, we'd like you to say your name and spell the last name.  
22  
23 Lyle Birchman: Lyle Birchman, B-i-r-c-h-m-a-n.  
24  
25 Jerri Smith: [0:47] And your address, please.  
26  
27 Lyle Birchman: 14777 Cutler Road, Portland, Michigan.  
28  
29 Jerri Smith: Okay. [0:53] And what we'd like to know, uh, are you married?  
30  
31 Lyle Birchman: Yes.  
32  
33 Jerri Smith: [0:59] Do you have children?  
34  
35 Lyle Birchman: Three.  
36  
37 Jerri Smith: Okay. [1:02] And what was your hire-in date at Fisher Body?  
38  
39 Lyle Birchman: August 23, 1976.  
40  
41 Jerri Smith: [1:09] And what department did you hire in at?  
42  
43 Lyle Birchman: Trim.  
44  
45 Jerri Smith: [1:12] Have you always stayed in Trim?  
46  
47 Lyle Birchman: Hm, no.

1  
2Jerri Smith: [1:17] What was your first job?  
3  
4Lyle Birchman: Installing center post trim on Delta 88s, 98s, and windshield post moldings  
5 on Toronados.  
6  
7Jerri Smith: Okay. [1:28] How long did you stay in Trim?  
8  
9Lyle Birchman: A number of years. Um, my wrist started going bad, so I transferred to  
10 QC, uh, and that still was out in the Trim Department working in the water  
11 test booth.  
12  
13Jerri Smith: Okay. [1:42] And how long did you stay on that job?  
14  
15Lyle Birchman: Probably, uh, up until the late 80s.  
16  
17Cheryl McQuaid: Cheryl McQuaid. [1:55] Lyle, when you first walked into the plant, how  
18 did you feel about walking into the factory? What did you think?  
19  
20Lyle Birchman: Oh, I was wide-eyed. It was, uh, nothing I had ever experienced before.  
21 Nowadays, folks go through like a week of orientation. We went through  
22 our interview process and they told you you had the job, you came in and,  
23 uh, there was a brief, you know, uh, uh, I remember laughing about this.  
24 Uh, the fellow that did the orientation referred to it as a career and I never  
25 intended to work here any longer than till the next layoff then I was going  
26 to go on and do somethin' else and here I am almost 30 years later. But I  
27 remember at that point I, I, I kinda chuckled, I thought I'm not gonna stay  
28 here very long. [chuckling]  
29  
30 And, and th-, it was funny, uh, I even wrote this one down. Uh, they, they  
31 herded us like cattle almost. They took us out and the bosses would point  
32 to "I'll take that one, that one, and that one." They didn't even ask you  
33 your name or anything and, and then after they took you away they asked  
34 you your name and, uh, uh, they assigned me to a job and I learned it.  
35 And I remember it was being August it was so hot. And, you know, I'm  
36 just a kid right outta high school and it was so hot and I had no idea what  
37 was going on in that plant and I, I even asked the boss, I said, "Do they  
38 have to heat this place in the summer or I mean in the wintertime?"  
39 'Cause of course we all know they had to but, uh, yeah, I remember that.  
40  
41Cheryl McQuaid: [3:30] Why did you hire? Why did – whatever made you put your  
42 application in at Fisher Body?  
43  
44Lyle Birchman: I wanted to make money. They were paying \$7 an hour, yeah.  
45  
46Marilyn Coulter: Lyle, Marilyn Coulter. Just so that they know, [3:46] how tall are you?

1  
2 Lyle Birchman: Uh, 6' 5".  
3  
4 Marilyn Coulter: [3:49] And how did that affect you when you came in here [inaudible]  
5 3:53] insofar as working on the line?  
6  
7 Lyle Birchman: Well, I was thankful that I had that center post trim job and that I could  
8 stand up and from my height the, the leverage was very – I was well suited  
9 for that job. I, I, I like to think maybe the boss actually put me there out of  
10 the goodness of his heart. I have no idea, um, but that worked out real  
11 well. Getting in the Toronados was kinda tough, uh, 'cause you had to  
12 lean in there and take another, uh, you had to take a drill and drill the hole  
13 out. They didn't have anything like self-tapping screws in those days, so  
14 you had to lean in there, right underneath it and because I am tall, I was  
15 right up, up on f-, right up to that windshield post and drill the hole and  
16 then drive the screw and then get back out of the car. And I remember this  
17 older fellow, heck, he was old, he, uh, coached me that day. I was, I, I'd  
18 get in the car and sit down and try and pry that on and he said, "Son, you  
19 always want to try to stand up while you do this. It'll be quicker and  
20 easier for you." He was right in the end. Yes, sir?  
21  
22 Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [5:00] Who was your first foreman at [coughing] the Trim  
23 floor and how was he to work for?  
24  
25 Lyle Birchman: Well, I worked for, uh, [Jim Marshall 5:06] and [Tex Ross 5:07]. You  
26 know, they would rotate back and forth and they were both really good  
27 guys. They were the best, never bothered you. Um, I will make a  
28 comment though. In, in, in those days, uh, the term ergonomics was  
29 relatively unknown and one of the things they wanted us to do was fit  
30 these plastic trim pieces. Um, I did fail to mention that on the two-doors I  
31 had to install the quarter panel trim and that kinda led to my wrist  
32 [coughing] screwin' up, uh, over the years. You literally had to pound that  
33 in and catch it on some clips that were, uh, hidden. And being that the  
34 customer sees this stuff, you had to make it look as nice as possible. So  
35 that was an issue and I complained about it after, well, this was quite some  
36 time later, maybe a year or two later, um, my wrist started to really [throat  
37 clearing] suffer from that and I was given this ridiculous plastic h-, uh,  
38 headed hammer that all it was going to do was damage the part. Uh, you  
39 know, Jim looked at me and I looked at him and, [coughing] and he was  
40 such a nice guy. I just took it and kept going back to doin' the job. But to  
41 this day, you know, that wrist clicks. You all hear that?  
42  
43 Michael Fleming: Lyle...  
44  
45 Female: Mm-hm.  
46

1Michael Fleming: ...you said that you were only going to work here until your next layoff.  
2

3Lyle Birchman: Yep.  
4

5Michael Fleming: [6:33] Were, were you ever in any layoffs?  
6

7Lyle Birchman: Uh, only when the entire plant shut down.  
8

9Michael Fleming: [6:40] Was that for any amount of time?  
10

11Lyle Birchman: Well, you know, you had, uh, different shutdowns for renovations, you  
12 know, when they added new equipment. I think back in '99 we had, uh,  
13 some downtime. But as far as, uh, layoff according to seniority due to  
14 tough times, it never happened to me, never, in all these years. I, I, I guess  
15 the reason why is back in '73 all the folks that hired in then were laid off  
16 and they were off for so long, so you'll see on the seniority list there's a  
17 big jump. You either have '70 or '71 seniority and then it jumps to '76, so  
18 there had been, uh, quite a stretch of time [coughing] before anybody was  
19 hired into the plant and this group of people with '76 seniority, we  
20 basically enjoyed, uh, a tremendous amount of opportunity as far as  
21 putting in for jobs and not going through the layoffs. Uh, however, some  
22 of those folks did get laid off. I know in '78 they went to one shift I  
23 believe and I still hung in there on that. I stayed on days, uh, almost 90  
24 days and then I went to nights.  
25

26Marilyn Coulter: So – Marilyn Coulter. [7:54] Lyle, when you came in, you're 6' 5", you  
27 come into the plant, were there any kind of new-hire initiations or pranks  
28 that were played on you when you first came in?  
29

30Lyle Birchman: Uh, not that I want to really go into here. [laughter] Uh, at the 90<sup>th</sup> day  
31 but, um, I'm not going to go into that.  
32

33Marilyn Coulter: You don't want to share that one?  
34

35Lyle Birchman: No. We'll leave that one out. Yeah.  
36

37Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [8:19] Lyle, how about strikes? Have you ever been in  
38 any strikes that they've had through, uh...?  
39

40Lyle Birchman: Well, there was that one where, uh, it was pretty exciting. They handed  
41 [throat clearing] out the signs. And I forget the date. It was just a few  
42 years back. We all went out and with our picket signs right out the front  
43 door there and that was kind of cool. It didn't last very long. That, that's  
44 good.  
45

46Michael Fleming: [8:41] Do you know – do you remember what it might have been for?

1  
2Lyle Birchman: No. [chuckling] I really don't. Uh, it was – uh, I think they t-, it was  
3 about work role or safety. They, they – but it had something to do with  
4 something else and, dang, I'm a little embarrassed [inaudible 9:00].  
5  
6Michael Fleming: [9:00] Do you have any family members that work here, Lyle?  
7  
8Lyle Birchman: No. Um, I did have a family member that worked here. I met my wife  
9 here.  
10  
11Michael Fleming: Really?  
12  
13Lyle Birchman: Yeah. She hired in, uh, and we were married back in 1980 and she  
14 worked for a while and then our kids started coming along. And, and I  
15 asked her, I said, "Look, uh, you were working here before you ever met  
16 me and if you want [coughing] to keep workin', we'll work it out." And,  
17 you know, many people do that very successfully; however, uh, you know,  
18 we did have a couple years where we didn't have any kids and we were  
19 able to save some money and get ahead and, um, I told her, I said, "You  
20 know, it's your call. If you want to stay home with the kids, I'm cool with  
21 that." So she did but this is where we met. We met up in 3X up in the  
22 Trim Department.  
23  
24Michael Fleming: [Inaudible 9:48].  
25  
26Lyle Birchman: Mm-hm.  
27  
28Michael Fleming: So...  
29  
30Lyle Birchman: Little Fisher Body romance.  
31  
32Michael Fleming: [9:52] Did she retire, Lyle? Did she just leave of absence, quit? What did  
33 she do?  
34  
35Lyle Birchman: Oh gee, she just quit.  
36  
37Michael Fleming: Just quit.  
38  
39Lyle Birchman: Yeah. Right after our, our daughter Monica Lynn was born.  
40  
41Michael Fleming: [10:02] How, how long had she worked here p-, prior to quitting?  
42  
43Lyle Birchman: She hired in in '78.  
44  
45Michael Fleming: '78.  
46

1 Lyle Birchman: And, um, she quit in late '82, about 4 years, [coughing] yeah. Yeah,  
2 Cheryl?  
3  
4 Cheryl McQuaid: Cheryl McQuaid. Lyle, you said you met your wife at Fisher Body.  
5  
6 Lyle Birchman: Mm-hm.  
7  
8 Cheryl McQuaid: [10:22] Did you experience any problems with dating her with just being  
9 in the plant all day together?  
10  
11 Lyle Birchman: Well, fortunately, uh, soon after we were married her, uh, her wiring job  
12 that she did got moved clear to the [chuckling] other end of the plant, so  
13 we weren't on top of each other all day long, you know. And we'd drive  
14 in together and, uh, she had her time and I had mine and so that, that was  
15 probably pretty good but we're still married so [knocking] it's workin'  
16 out. It's been, uh, it's been 25 years now.  
17  
18 Michael Fleming: Great.  
19  
20 Cheryl McQuaid: [10:59] When you went to the second shift you stayed on the center pillar  
21 job?  
22  
23 Lyle Birchman: Yeah.  
24  
25 Cheryl McQuaid: Okay.  
26  
27 Lyle Birchman: Probably shouldn't have stayed on that one job that many years but it was  
28 a, it was a really good job and I was tall and if – I, I know everybody here  
29 is pretty familiar with Trim operations and you know the alternatives that  
30 were available to a tall guy so, uh, [chuckling] you know. Marilyn, you  
31 brought up a very good point, ergonomically speaking there's no way I  
32 could have done that headliner job. Remember that old headliner job  
33 where you had to climb in? Impossible. So I kinda stayed where I could  
34 relatively do the job without getting hurt.  
35  
36 Marilyn Coulter: So Lyle – Marilyn Coulter. [11:41] Were you from Portland when you  
37 came to work here in L-, in Lansing?  
38  
39 Lyle Birchman: Uh, I lived not too far from there. I lived in Wacousta. [throat clearing]  
40  
41 Marilyn Coulter: Wacousta. [11:50] Coming from Wacousta and coming into Lansing, uh,  
42 what was that like for you? Were there any kind of big surprises?  
43 Anything that was different that you were unaccustomed to when you  
44 came in?  
45

1Lyle Birchman: Probably the only thing that I found really weird is these guys goosing  
2 each other. To this day I just think it's ridiculous behavior. It's something  
3 I don't agree with and that was probably the only thing that bothered me.  
4 As far as Lansing, I had the good pleasure of selling Kirby vacuum  
5 cleaners while in high school, so I drove all around Lansing anyhow and  
6 met people of every walk of life. In fact, I was able to sell a Kew-, a few  
7 Kirby vacuum cleaners that first year to some coworkers at an excellent  
8 price I might add. [laughter] I gave'm some great deals and, uh...  
9 [coughing]  
10

11Marilyn Coulter: [12:42] For those people who like yourself had never been around that,  
12 can you please explain to people with goosing is?  
13

14Lyle Birchman: Oh. Well, you know, guys grabbing each other's behinds or fronts. It was  
15 pretty – uh, to this day I just, I don't go along with that and I don't think  
16 that's one of the reasons why, you know – Lansing has got a, a great  
17 culture as far as building quality cars and something we're all very proud  
18 of and that has no bearing on it at all. It's just a limited few and I  
19 happened to be working with them at the time.  
20

21Marilyn Coulter: So those are just some of the pranks [chuckling] that some people did do.  
22

23Lyle Birchman: Oh yeah. I had a guy come up to me with a broom, ol' [Harvey 13:20]  
24 there and man he hurt me, [throat clearing] you know. He, he was  
25 terrified, you know. [laughter] No, it wasn't like you think, Doug, but he  
26 just came up and poked me and, uh, dang, I went right to the floor. If I  
27 could have got up, I probably would've went into him, you know. It hurt.  
28

29Cheryl McQuaid: Cheryl McQuaid. [13:40] How old were you, Lyle, when you hired in?  
30 [clicking]  
31

32Lyle Birchman: Uh, I was 18 years old, been outta high school just a couple months.  
33

34Cheryl McQuaid: [13:49] And what was – in the early years, what were, um, some of your  
35 typical lunch, what did you do for lunch?  
36

37Lyle Birchman: Eat. [chuckle] I, uh, sometimes...  
38

39Cheryl McQuaid: [13:59] Did you pack a lunch?  
40

41Lyle Birchman: I know, uh, uh, that first couple years, you know, I just ate lunch. But  
42 there was one summer where I would, uh, I was living with a bunch of  
43 buddies and I had a big garden and I'd bring all this homegrown food in.  
44 And my dear friend Marilyn Coulter one day she said, "Lyle, what you got  
45 there?" And, uh, I said, "Well, I have some carrots." And I had just  
46 yanked'm outta the ground, threw'm in a bag. I didn't even bother

1 cleaning'm up and she was kinda horrified that I had this dirty carrots that,  
2 uh, I wasn't even gonna, you know, wash. I said, "Oh, you just wipe the  
3 dirt off and eat'm." But uh, lunchbreak, uh, you know, I had a lot of  
4 different things going on. [throat clearing]  
5  
6 Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [14:48] Lyle, uh, so [throat clearing] where, where did you  
7 go after you, you left Trim, you went to what department?  
8  
9 Lyle Birchman: Water Test.  
10  
11 Female: QC.  
12  
13 Michael Fleming: In Trim?  
14  
15 Lyle Birchman: In Quality Control.  
16  
17 Michael Fleming: [15:01] In Trim?  
18  
19 Lyle Birchman: It was – yeah. The, the water test booth was located in the Trim  
20 Department.  
21  
22 Michael Fleming: [15:05] Uh, did you all, did you spend the rest of your time in Trim?  
23 Where did you end up eventually? Did you move someplace?  
24  
25 Lyle Birchman: The body shop.  
26  
27 Michael Fleming: The body shop. [15:12] Talk about the body shop. How did you like that?  
28 What, what was going on down there?  
29  
30 Lyle Birchman: I thought the body shop was by far the, uh, the most interesting experience  
31 as far as working, uh, in the manufacturing side of it all. Um, I still to this  
32 day am just flat out amazed at the technology that we employ.  
33  
34 Michael Fleming: [15:32] So what did you do in the body shop in Quality Control?  
35  
36 Lyle Birchman: Weld integrity.  
37  
38 Michael Fleming: [15:36] What's that?  
39  
40 Lyle Birchman: Can I share a little bit about that with you?  
41  
42 Michael Fleming: Sure.  
43  
44 Lyle Birchman: Okay. Um, [throat clearing] a lot of folks in Trim were rather intimidated  
45 by the body shop. And what happened is, um, in a cutback, my weld – my  
46 Water Test [throat clearing] position was gradually eliminated and I ended



1 up being forced back to, um, the production line and I worked for a while  
2 working in the glass area, setting glass. I'll get to Body in just a second,  
3 okay? And, uh, I worked there for a while and ended up setting  
4 windshields, back windows, and being a relief person out there. And one  
5 day they came around and, uh, boy I'm gonna, I'm goin' way out here but  
6 I, I'll bring it on back, okay? Um, they, they were talking about these  
7 nontraditional jobs that were gonna open up and one of'm was a, a plant  
8 tour guide and I didn't think I'd [throat clearing] get it because I had  
9 interviewed for other jobs as well. And they, uh, asked me, "Why do you  
10 think we should give plant tours?" And I'm convinced that's probably the  
11 reason why they, uh, asked me to do it, uh, I just without mi-, missing a  
12 beat, "To sell cars." So I did tours for a while but that was an on-again,  
13 off-again thing and I'd always have to go back to Production. Uh,  
14 sometimes I was installing door panels or sometimes I was setting glass or  
15 whatever.

16  
17 And one day they came up to me and said, uh, "Th-, there's been an  
18 opening. You have return rights back to Quality Control, unfortunately  
19 it's out in the body shop." Well, I'd driven that tr-, tour train all over the  
20 plant and I'll never forget this one fellow, uh, out in the, out in the body  
21 shop, he'd always wave at us but some days he wouldn't wave and I, you  
22 know, couldn't figure it out until I realized he had mastered the art of  
23 sitting there looking like he was doin' something and he was sleeping with  
24 sunglasses on and, uh, I, I realized what job he was on. Well, they told me  
25 what job it was and, uh, I, I said yeah, I'd be, you know, more than  
26 willing. It was Weld Integrity. Not that everybody sat-, slept on Weld  
27 Integrity. It was a very high-stress job.

28  
29 However, uh, a funny story, [throat clearing] uh, a number of my Water  
30 Test coworkers had been given that same offer. They, ultimately, uh, the  
31 – to go back a step or two, they, they eliminated the Water Test  
32 Department completely, so we all were dispersed. They, they transferred  
33 that over to the chassis plant. So these guys from Trim, they washed out  
34 really quickly, so when I showed up the, uh, he was an old stool-, uh, old  
35 school boss and, uh, [Dan Wood 18:26], he, uh, he did not want to see my  
36 face. All he knew that I was from Trim and that I would probably wash  
37 out just like all the other guys and they got all intimidated from the noise,  
38 the smoke, and everything in the body shop. Well, I knew better. I did  
39 tours out through there and I knew there was some great opportunities and  
40 Weld Integrity was one of'm. And I looked him right in the eye and I told  
41 him, I said, "Dan, I will do you the best job possible and you're going to  
42 be happy with me." And I think if you asked him today, he probably  
43 would say yeah. And I did that job off and on for 10, 12 years.

44  
45 Michael Fleming: So [Dan Wood] had a brother [throat clearing] I think. [19:07] Did you  
46 know his brother?

1  
2 Lyle Birchman: Yeah, I did.  
3  
4 Michael Fleming: [Inaudible 19:08].  
5  
6 Lyle Birchman: I, I never really got to know him that well other than “Hey, how you  
7 doin’?”  
8  
9 Michael Fleming: [19:12] Um, here’s a question, most folks didn’t seem to get along with  
10 Dan or his brother Bert. You, you got along with them pretty well then,  
11 huh?  
12  
13 Lyle Birchman: Let me ask you, how, how did you get along with them, all right?  
14  
15 Michael Fleming: Excellently.  
16  
17 Lyle Birchman: Same here.  
18  
19 Michael Fleming: I, I welded. Dan would ask for me to come weld for him as a matter of  
20 fact. When, when you as a Weld Integrity individual, you would be a dog  
21 catcher, whatever you’d be, if you had welds missing...  
22  
23 Lyle Birchman: Yep.  
24  
25 Michael Fleming: ...I’d be the guy to come get’m. So yeah, we got along well. [throat  
26 clearing]  
27  
28 Lyle Birchman: And I did that dog catcher job off and on for years and years. And, uh,  
29 yeah, it’s important to have someone like you that can step right up and,  
30 uh, make, make it happen. Back to Dan, yeah, you know, he had a way of  
31 rufflin’ people’s feathers and there was a time or two that he kinda  
32 disappointed me but all in all we got along just fine.  
33  
34 Michael Fleming: One more thing while you’re on it. There was a specific weld that was  
35 missed that was cause for darn near discharge. You had government  
36 welds or something like that that if you missed those...  
37  
38 Lyle Birchman: Yeah.  
39  
40 Michael Fleming: [20:07] Can you talk about that? What, what happened there with those  
41 situations? [throat clearing]  
42  
43 Lyle Birchman: Well, MVSS welds th-, that was a really, really critical thing. You had to  
44 make sure that those welds were in the right location and that they were  
45 holding. And over the years, uh, I don’t know if you want me to elaborate  
46 on that.

1  
2 Marilyn Coulter: [20:26] Can you tell us what MVSS [inaudible 20:27]?  
3  
4 Lyle Birchman: Uh, Motor.  
5  
6 Jerri Smith: [20:28] And Integrity Weld and [throat clearing] the dog thing what you  
7 said.  
8  
9 Marilyn Coulter: [20:32] What, what does MVSS mean first?  
10  
11 Lyle Birchman: Oh yeah. Um, Motor Vehicle Safety Standard and the, uh, Weld Integrity  
12 it's, it's a, a process of monitoring weld quality. There's two things that  
13 we would do. We would take a hammer and chisel and place the chisel  
14 between the welds and drive, uh, hit it with a hammer and, and drive that  
15 in between so it forced the metal and that's a, kind of a crude way of doin'  
16 it but it's still a very effective way of monitoring weld quality. Uh, the  
17 other thing we would do is take a perfectly good car off the car track line,  
18 which is, uh, an assembly line where they weld the sides of the car to, and  
19 the roof of the car and the floor pan together and they take that car and  
20 measure every weld and cut all the welds apart and peel them back.  
21 Remember the old style tuna fish cans? Um, the guys they called'm can  
22 openers. Basically it was like a T wrench you'd lock on to the metal  
23 [throat clearing] and spin that metal off and peel that metal away and in  
24 that manner we would, uh, monitor the weld quality.  
25  
26 The dog catcher, uh, that Mike was referring to, what the dog catcher, uh,  
27 position was is if you're under, uh, out working in the underbody or on the  
28 car track line or in the side frame line and you had a weld come up bad, it  
29 was the dog catcher's responsibility the, as those cars made it to the final  
30 body shop line, they would continually check until those bad welds came  
31 and then we would have a repair person repair those welds right on the  
32 line, so that's what the dog catcher would do. Yes?  
33  
34 Marilyn Coulter: Um, Lyle. Marilyn Coulter. Actually, I want to come out of the body  
35 shop and go back to Trim when you first came in.  
36  
37 Lyle Birchman: Sure.  
38  
39 Marilyn Coulter: [22:20] And, um, you did the jobs and I wanted to know what type, what  
40 was the environment in Trim like? What types of things – now you were  
41 on days for 90 days, correct?  
42  
43 Lyle Birchman: Mm-hm.  
44  
45 Marilyn Coulter: [22:31] And you were on nights for how long? In – well, how long  
46 [coughing] were you in Trim after...?

1  
2 Lyle Birchman: Fifteen years. [chuckling]  
3  
4 Marilyn Coulter: [Inaudible 22:36] [coughing] 15 years. [22:37] In that 15 years, can you  
5 tell me what working in the trim shop was like? What types of things did  
6 you do for lunch? What types of things, did you guys do things special for  
7 holidays? Were there any special types of things that you did to pass the  
8 time?  
9  
10 Lyle Birchman: Um, I know for a while there, um, we would play chess and, you know,  
11 you'd work [inaudible 23:06] and make a move and it took all day to do it  
12 but it, it, it at least keep your mind functioning. Playing a little harmonica,  
13 I'd do that too in between breaks and go down in the stairwell where it  
14 would echo so well. To this day, I still love parking ramps, uh, stairwells  
15 where you get a great echo. I still play it today. And funny story, uh, this  
16 one boss I had, I was comin' out on break and she saw me comin' up out  
17 of the stairway and she assumed I'd been in there [coughing] smoking or  
18 drinking and she wanted to burn me for it but I, I tried and tried to explain  
19 to her that well, [throat clearing] it echoed so well, I was practicing my  
20 harmonica in there.  
21  
22 Uh, one of the things, uh, that I remember about Trim is that I, I did like  
23 the fact that you could, uh, up in 3X there you could look out the window  
24 and I used to joke that I had a office with a view. Uh, the, the lower row  
25 of windows were clear and then the upper ones were opaque. Uh, over the  
26 years one had been broken and they replaced it with a clear plane of glass.  
27 Standing at my bench I could stand right there and see the Capital Dome  
28 illuminated in the night sky, uh, so that's why I joked I had a office with a  
29 view.  
30  
31 Um, one of the, there was a couple things that I thought was just awful.  
32 Um, the loud wheels on the, on the carts and what I guess was the most  
33 frustrating part was the guys on Material at that time had time to go slow  
34 and they had a total disregard for the health and wellbeing of their fellow  
35 workers. They would roar by there and it was deafening and that  
36 continued for years. I, I used, I had earmuffs that I'd try and put'm on  
37 when the, when they came by. But that, I always thought that was rather  
38 insulting that some – I guess in life you're gonna run into people who have  
39 a selfish attitude and that's kind of unfortunate for the rest of us.  
40  
41 Um, I remember another guy, not to beat up our friends on Material 'cause  
42 I have a tremendous amount of respect for them but I remember, uh, an, an  
43 episode, it's always stuck in my head, this old guy named Sarge and he  
44 had to deliver these, uh, upper rails. You know, as years went by, my job  
45 changed and we used to refer to it as rails, a trim piece that went along the  
46 headliner and the door opening and would attach to the windshield post

1 molding trim piece. And he would, uh, sit there on his fork truck and he  
2 would, he insisted that he could only deliver these to one station, so I  
3 would have to in between doin' the job on the line, because I was young I  
4 would have to go get that other box from another location and bring it  
5 down and I, I always thought that was just the most appalling thing and  
6 the boss never did anything about it. It was just kinda one of those things  
7 where, uh, I've never forgotten.

8

9Marilyn Coulter: Um...

10

11Lyle Birchman: But it was always nice and for the most part quiet. You work out in the  
12 body shop you, you plan on wearing earplugs the whole time.

13

14Marilyn Coulter: [26:22] So while you were working in Trim for those 15 years, did you,  
15 um, develop any, any other lasting friendships outside of your wife that  
16 you, that...?

17

18Lyle Birchman: Oh, lots of friends.

19

20Marilyn Coulter: ...that extended outside the workplace?

21

22Lyle Birchman: Yeah. Lots of people everywhere, I mean to this day. You know, that's  
23 one of the nice things. Um, I think that's one of the reasons why General  
24 Motors has built two plants in Lansing is, uh, just excellent people. Please  
25 don't get me wrong on those two instances of selfishness [coughing]  
26 'cause for the most part everybody was the most giving, friendly people  
27 you could ever meet. And I've always appreciated that fact that, you  
28 know, Lansing for the most part is a small town. You can't go to the  
29 lumberyard or a grocery store or a mall or, you know, half the time you're  
30 going to run into somebody you know and that's kinda nice about  
31 Lansing. It's big enough where there's a lotta neat stuff but small enough  
32 where you still, it's like a small town. Comparing to metro areas, it is a  
33 small town. Uh, want me to go in a little bit of Water Test on that Trim  
34 stuff?

35

36Marilyn Coulter: Um, if you'd like, please.

37

38Lyle Birchman: Uh, we used to, uh, water test the cars. They'd go through a four-minute  
39 spray booth and they would put chemicals in the, the water so it would  
40 react to a black light. So you had this two-bay station. A bay is, uh, the  
41 length of a car. So you had two lengths of a car that was a, a booth. It  
42 was all painted black and you'd use these black lights and you'd shine it in  
43 there and the water would actually glow so you could determine where  
44 you had a water leak. Our job was to monitor the water leaks in the car  
45 and if there was no leaks in the car, well, that was good. You did every  
46 fourth car and so you, you were able to do your job and if you did have

1 leaks then you, that's why you did every fourth car. Uh, a, a year or so  
2 later they moved it to every third car and then every other car as the, the  
3 quality, uh, or the leak issues went away.  
4

5 But one of the things that, um, always concerned me was the fact that, uh,  
6 these chemicals, this water is drippin' on you. You lean in the car and it  
7 drips on you and you just had to [coughing] wonder, you know, what are  
8 the long-term health effects? And then on Monday mornings, the booth  
9 would stink to high heaven because you had some bacteria that was  
10 thriving in that water. So on top of the dye that they would put in the  
11 water, they had all these bacteria sites that they would add too. It was a  
12 real witch's brew of some really bad stuff and it always ate at me that I'm  
13 thinkin', you know, I hope I don't die from this.  
14

15 Pr-, probably [throat clearing], uh, one of the more appalling things, uh,  
16 about Water Test was the fact that, uh, after you made a repair, some of  
17 the sealer was, uh, clear, some of it was a black gooey stuff, some of it  
18 was urethane and if you got this on the, the car, you, you were expected to  
19 clean it up. So they had these cans of oleum and cotton and you'd just  
20 reach over and plunge that cotton in there and clean it up. Well, years  
21 later, uh, thanks to the UAW, uh, prompting the government to, uh,  
22 encourage safe use of some of these chemicals, they told me that I might  
23 as well have been drinking that oleum because it absorbs right through  
24 your skin and it harms your liver, so hopefully the old liver will last the  
25 rest of my life but, uh, I think of the years where it was a known issue and  
26 it had, was not addressed. And even to this day I still see people on the  
27 outside in various walks of life that think nothing of cleaning up their  
28 hands in gasoline or – and for that I'm grateful that I was at least  
29 instructed at that early point 'cause there's folks that have been doin' it all  
30 their lives and then when they develop cancer in their 60s they wonder  
31 how they got it, [throat clearing] well. Yes, sir?  
32

33 Michael Fleming: Uh, Mike Fleming. [30:24] So that, that you're talkin' about led to what  
34 we have as the, um, the MSDS, Material Safety Data Sheets, which could  
35 you talk about that? Do you know [inaudible 30:35]?  
36

37 Lyle Birchman: Well, other than what you just said there. Um, and I thought it was a, a, a  
38 great thing and, you know, one of the things that I'm very grateful is, uh,  
39 the efforts of the UAW to bring that sort of safety to it. Uh, ergonomics,  
40 you know, you walk through the Trim Department, you have ramps, you  
41 have areas where the product is elevated, this is all in an effort to, uh,  
42 encourage better production. It's a twofold thing. You get better quality  
43 and people [throat clearing] don't get hurt.  
44

45 Uh, it's rather troubling that we have Republican lawmakers today that are  
46 trying to roll back some of this and it's very appalling [throat clearing]

1 that George Bush one of the first things he did upon taking office was to  
2 weaken ergonomic standards on an nationwide basis. This is coming from  
3 a man who, uh, well, during a photo op for the post Katrina disaster he  
4 was seen, uh, I saw him on TV attempting to drive a nail in a Habitat for  
5 Humanity house and the guy held the hammer like a big sissy. He was  
6 choked up on it. He was hittin' it like a little, little kid. It probably took  
7 him 12 hits to drive a 8#, uh, #8 nail into a piece of OSB. And so the, the  
8 height of hypocrisy comin' from the leadership of our country as regard to  
9 [throat clearing] working people, this is a man that never worked a day in  
10 his life, can't even drive a nail for cryin' out loud yet. So enough of that  
11 but, uh, talkin' about ergonomics, I'm very thankful for the progressive  
12 approach that ergonomics [coughing] has been dealt with in, in the plant.  
13

14Marilyn Coulter: Lyle, um, question to you. Marilyn Coulter. Um, we had the ergonomics  
15 you talked about and the safety standards and then you also said that you  
16 had a nontraditional job of being a guide. Um, during your time here, we  
17 had a number of different training type programs and different programs  
18 that allowed the employees to get involved. [32:34] Um, can you say how  
19 and when you got involved in those types of programs?  
20

21Lyle Birchman: Well, um, they, they used to call'm Employee Participation Groups and I  
22 was workin' in Water Test at the time and none of the old guys wanted to  
23 have anything to do with this thing. They're just trottin' out a new  
24 program and, uh, I thought, well, I'll do it. So I was the, the EPG leader  
25 and, uh, I actually was sent away for a week for a training seminar. It was  
26 great. They taught you communication skills and, you know, I came away  
27 with a better understanding. Of course, it has to be a two-way thing and  
28 over the years I think every one of us has grappled with the one-way type  
29 of communication. They trot out a program and say it's gonna work and  
30 then they never held up that end of it. Uh, I think over the years that's  
31 gotten better. I know it has.  
32

33Marilyn Coulter: [33:28] Do you feel that these programs have helped to make Lansing the  
34 Capital of Quality?  
35

36Lyle Birchman: Oh yeah. Yeah. One of the programs I had a [throat clearing] tremendous  
37 amount of respect for is the Suggestion Plan. You know, I'm a firm  
38 believer in, um, incentives. And out, out in Weld Integrity, I, once I found  
39 out that they'll actually pay you to come up with ideas, well, I was looking  
40 at everything and I came up with all sorts of ideas, everything from safety  
41 to weld positions, you know, welds that we didn't really need and welds  
42 that should be moved or eliminated and it was fascinating.  
43

44Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [34:12] Due to some of the ideas you come, came up with,  
45 did your suggestions fly? Did you get...  
46

1Lyle Birchman: Oh yeah.  
2  
3Michael Fleming: ...compensated?  
4  
5Lyle Birchman: Uh, I remember, well, there's a number of safety ideas that I came up  
6 with. Uh, out in the body shop, it's, it's really a different world and I  
7 guess that's why those guys washed up, uh, when they came out to Weld  
8 Integrity there. Uh, it's dangerous [throat clearing] if you don't know  
9 what you're doin'. You know, you have robots, uh, they're protected by  
10 three different modes of protection though, you have pressure sensitive  
11 mats, you have light screen technology where if you break that light  
12 screen, a beam of light is reflected around, uh, a given area, it  
13 automatically shuts the system down, and the most obvious would be  
14 fencing but [coughing] nonetheless there's still a lot of opportunities to get  
15 hurt. Uh, one of which is I have about a 2 inch scar on my wrist and then  
16 there's about a 1 ½ inch scar right next to it. It almost looks like an  
17 anchor doesn't it?  
18  
19 Um, I was on my tour guide job at the time and one of my friends from  
20 high school yelled over to me to come back after I got done with my tour,  
21 so I went out there and there was water on the floor. You know, they were  
22 doin' what's called wet deck sanding. They were doin' some light  
23 sanding and the problem was is there was oil mixed with that water. It's a  
24 very slippery [throat clearing] surface and there was really no notice  
25 given, no yellow paint on the floor warning you, there was no fencing, no  
26 anything. Here I am unfamiliar with the area, I slipped and I went to catch  
27 myself and I caught my wrist on that metal flange that you appl-, you  
28 install the rubber gasket around your trunk...  
29  
30Marilyn Coulter: [Inaudible 36:04].  
31  
32Lyle Birchman: ...on every vehicle but out in the body shop that wasn't there so it ripped  
33 me wide open on my wrist and I thought I was gonna die that night. You  
34 know what though? It was my lucky day, [throat clearing] I'll tell you  
35 why. Uh, I just missed that main artery. By the grace of God I just missed  
36 that main artery and so it didn't, the bleeding wasn't as severe as it really  
37 should have or could have been, so I'm very grateful for that. But you  
38 know, there, there was issues with safety out there.  
39  
40 One safety issue, I was able to convince management to put up a fence.  
41 Um, there was a stairway that would come down from the bathrooms and  
42 we had an electrified rail that was part of a, a new conveyer system that  
43 was installed back in '99 out there in C Underbody and you can literally  
44 reach out and touch this rail and, uh, we, we were, we were, we put a  
45 fence up over that and it's there to this day so, you know, electrocution  
46 was avoided. Uh, there was other times when were able to eliminate



1 welds that were not needed or move welds in, into a better location. In  
2 the, in the world of Weld Integrity you have to realize there's a, a whole  
3 school of engineering that goes into that. You have different layers of  
4 metal. You have galvanized metal versus bare metal. These all need to be  
5 taken into consideration when designing a weld schedule to weld these  
6 little different layers of metal together, so there was a lot of opportunity to  
7 improve upon a process. Um, many of my coworkers on Weld Integrity  
8 came up with good ideas. Even though we weren't engineers, we, uh,  
9 there was a lot of us that knew exactly what was going on and how to  
10 better the product.

11

12Michael Fleming: [37:49] So Lyle, um, what was the most you've ever gotten awarded  
13 through the suggestions?

14

15Lyle Birchman: \$2700.

16

17Michael Fleming: Very good. [37:57] Have you ever worked any changeovers, Lyle?

18

19Lyle Birchman: Uh, the, the '99 changeover I worked some of that. Um, bein' that they  
20 were – if you think about it, they were, they were installing new robots  
21 and mind you [throat clearing] it isn't the robot that does the welding. The  
22 robot just moves a weld gun and so they needed some people to work and  
23 help, uh, qualify we would call it, qualify these guns to make sure they  
24 were up to snuff and to make sure everything was going to be, uh, the, the,  
25 the welds would be in the right location when production came up to  
26 [inaudible 38:31].

27

28Michael Fleming: [38:34] So was that a long time that you worked that change of hours-  
29 wise? What did – talk about [inaudible 38:40].

30

31Lyle Birchman: Well, it was 40 hours a week. We didn't work any, uh, [coughing] uh,  
32 long, uh, hours then but I did work a lot of weekends. I, I had the pleasure  
33 of working with UAW Local 602 electricians many, many weekends.  
34 Funny story, you want to hear a funny body shop story?

35

36Female: Sure.

37

38Lyle Birchman: Some [throat clearing] – we all have our gifts and I won't name names  
39 because I really like both those guys. They were wonderful people but,  
40 uh, I was working on days and, uh, Dan, uh, Dan Wood he always felt like  
41 – I mean he was an old school manager and felt like it was his money so  
42 he, he wouldn't just let people come in and work weekends unless he was  
43 absolutely sure. Well, we were programming, uh, Station 34 out on the  
44 car track line. That's the one where you weld the sides and the, the floor  
45 pan together. And we were, we were, the, the electricians were  
46 programming for the trunk area, the 34 does that, and the one guy worked

1 and worked and worked on that for like eight hours and there was nobody  
2 coming in on the night shift 'cause Dan never brought anybody in, so we  
3 ended up staying. But just a funny story, uh, he had worked and worked  
4 and tried and tried to get the gun. Uh, fortunately, on the night shift one of  
5 the electricians came in who was very good at programming and I kid you  
6 not, 20 minutes later he had that thing moving like a ballerina. [laughter]  
7

8Michael Fleming: [40:11] Lyle, Lyle, did you notice when you were in the body shop and  
9 shift changed, quality changed or, uh, per se one, one shift might have ran  
10 smoother than the other?  
11

12Lyle Birchman: Sometimes. Uh, s-, some areas [throat clearing] ran better. Uh, talking  
13 about quality, in the old days when I first came on Weld Integrity, uh, if  
14 you had a malfunction, um, there's like, uh, uh, a anywhere from 12 to 18  
15 inch long cable that's like 1 ½ inch thick. We used to call it a jumper. It's  
16 on a weld gun. And as that gun makes these welds, this thing is moving  
17 the whole time as the gun opens and closes. You can see how this would,  
18 this cable would move each time. Over time, that's going to wear out.  
19 Well, in the old days, uh, as that would deteriorate, it would have an effect  
20 on weld quality and if you had a weld breaking, uh, sometimes it was that.  
21 Sometimes it was a whole host of other things but if you had a, a,  
22 occasionally a jumper will just burn up and then you're very concerned  
23 because you had no idea how many welds were bad up until your last  
24 check. And with the, uh, emergence of new technology the, and  
25 computerization they were, they've been able to take that whole issue out  
26 of the equation.  
27

28 Last summer I was working out in Underbody or a year ago last summer  
29 and we had a jumper burn up and, uh, um, my first thought is, okay, I  
30 better check the bank [coughing] of cars that we have. 'Cause every area  
31 has a bank of cars so if you have an issue you have a bank so your  
32 production continues. And I'll have you know that that was the only job  
33 that was bad, that one and it was only that one spot. They've, they've  
34 actually improved the technology to a point where that computer in the, in  
35 that weld controller will c-, uh, it will actually consider what's goin' on  
36 and up the voltage and compensate for any, uh, wear and tear that that  
37 jumper might be suffering. I mean this kind of technology has, has  
38 improved weld quality dramatically. Uh, tip dresser technology as well  
39 where the, the, the [throat clearing] accumulating weld slag would gather  
40 on the weld caps and they would, this was something that they installed  
41 back in '99 and perfected over the years, after the robot gets done welding  
42 it goes to the home position; however, after 200 to 300 welds, depending  
43 on the severity of the welding, it would go in and grind the debris off the  
44 cap. I don't know if I wanted, you wanted me...  
45

46Michael Fleming: One more...

1  
2Lyle Birchman: ...to go there or not.  
3  
4Michael Fleming: One more question while we're talking about the technical stuff [inaudible]  
5 43:03] in the body shop.  
6  
7Lyle Birchman: Uh-huh.  
8  
9Michael Fleming: [43:05] You know, y-, y, you worked down there for like 10 years or  
10 more...  
11  
12Lyle Birchman: Yeah.  
13  
14Michael Fleming: ..in the body shop? You're familiar with the C-line and the M-line.  
15 [coughing]  
16  
17Lyle Birchman: Mm-hm.  
18  
19Michael Fleming: And when they changed the M line over and the C line we're talking  
20 specifically underbodies now [43:20] and, uh, how did it affect your job  
21 when the M line would not run so well and it started taking all these cars  
22 from the C line, uh, and, and pullin' them over so these guys would work  
23 more? Are you, are you familiar with that kind of stuff at all?  
24  
25Lyle Birchman: That didn't bother me too much because I was doing quality control  
26 [coughing] but yeah, that, that had [coughing] potential issues. Uh, one  
27 of, from our perspective is we had to be able to discern whether it was a C  
28 line or a M line underbody and...  
29  
30Michael Fleming: [43:49] Once you [inaudible 43:49] you mean?  
31  
32Lyle Birchman: Oh yeah. And oh my gosh from a, like a dog catcher per-, uh, perspective  
33 or if you're running repair, you had to know where the right stampings  
34 were on e-, each one to know whether it was a C or a M body and, yeah,  
35 just, uh [coughing] changed the equation somewhat.  
36  
37 Talking about technology, can I share this one little thing? When I hired  
38 in [throat clearing] there was none of the technology there. It was like old  
39 times. The body shop had all hand guns. They didn't, uh, bring in the car  
40 track process and a lot of the heavily, uh, automated stuff till the  
41 changeover in '84. But I'll never forget this, I – and at the time I just went  
42 huh but, uh, it's always stuck in my mind. Uh, the summer of '77 we went  
43 down for changeover and I used to walk out through the body shop every  
44 day to the parking lot and there were these two guys that were working on  
45 floor pan. They'd load a part in it, hand weld it. Well, they weren't there  
46 after I came back through and they had a hard automatic doing the

1 welding. A hard automatic is a weld gun that moves into a position and it  
2 only weld one or two spots and then pulls back but that was like the, that  
3 was, I saw that and I went hm. And you know, at one point, uh, the  
4 Lansing Car Assembly Body Plant formerly known as Fisher Body  
5 probably had the greatest concentration of robots anywhere in the world  
6 because we were essentially two assembly plants under one roof, upwards  
7 of 650 robots. In fact, I would share that fact w-, with folks when we did  
8 the tours.  
9

10Marilyn Coulter: Um, going away from that, you just said Lansing Car Assembly formerly  
11 Fisher Body. We've went through a lot of name changes at Fisher Body.  
12 [45:41] How did you feel about that?  
13

14Lyle Birchman: I thought BOC was stupid, you know. We, we didn't even build  
15 Cadillacs. You know, it's one of those really ridiculous things from the  
16 mindset typical of Richard, uh, Wagoner today, you know. We had  
17 different [coughing] CEOs that cook up these things. Kind of like George  
18 Bush doesn't know how to hammer, I think we had some CEOs that didn't  
19 have a clue on how to manage things and they'd come up with something  
20 ridiculous like BOC. You guys want to hear a story?  
21

22Marilyn Coulter: [Inaudible 46:12]. [chuckling]  
23

24Female: Sure.  
25

26Lyle Birchman: This is a classic. [throat clearing] Uh, you know, we've won all these  
27 awards and this is just a few years ago w-, working for John Rosendahl,  
28 uh, they would have him do anything and everything and being that we  
29 worked for him with the tours, we were the guys that did a lot of this stuff.  
30 [throat clearing] Uh, we had won a quality award, the J.D. Power Quality  
31 [coughing] award and we all received coats. Well, we were to set the coat  
32 distribution up in the Skill Center, which was on the second floor. We had  
33 to use a freight elevator behind the cafeteria. So what we would do is  
34 bring up all these boxes through this freight elevator, load'm on a little  
35 gurney and then push it through what was called, well, formerly the  
36 executive dining room which was at the time, you know, three years ago,  
37 four years ago, it was the, we called it the Special Function Room. And  
38 we had pushed some tables and chairs out of the way and we're movin'  
39 through, through that area out over to the Skill Center to set up our  
40 distribution room for the coats.  
41

42 Well, there's this middle-aged gal in there and we're moving coats  
43 through and I said hi to her and she was still there when we came back  
44 through and she was moving chairs and stacking'm against the wall and  
45 we kept moving and finally I asked her, I said, "Is there something I can  
46 do for you?" You know, I'm just kinda what's goin' on here type of thing

1 'cause it was kinda strange. It turns out she was concerned because this,  
2 there was a new GM program they were rolling out. Uh, evidently the  
3 new protocol coming from, uh, guys like Richard, uh, Rick Wagoner and,  
4 uh, the, their ilk, uh, h-, they had determined that you could not stack  
5 chairs more than three deep and because we had moved some tables and  
6 chairs, she was concerned that these were not stacked more than three  
7 deep. Now comin' from the body shop where you have light screen  
8 technology, you have fences, you have, uh, pressure sensitive matting and  
9 the potential to get injuries like the wrist injury, I just thought that was the  
10 most hilarious [throat clearing] and ridiculous thing I had ever heard of.  
11 Uh, here they're payin' this woman lots of money [throat clearing] to  
12 worry if the chairs are more than three deep [coughing] stacked.  
13 [laughter]

14  
15 You know, while I'm on that subject, can I share one more thing with  
16 you? [laughter] We used to have segregation when I first hired in. And  
17 what I mean by segregation is we had segregated parking. If you were  
18 hourly, you had to park further out. If you were salary, you had a special  
19 parking lot up close. And if an hourly person parked in that salary parking  
20 area, they would tow your vehicle. You were subject to disciplinary  
21 action as well. We also had segregated [coughing] eating areas. We had  
22 the executive dining room, the salary cafeteria, and then the hourly  
23 cafeteria, each with a declining level of quality of food. And at the time I  
24 didn't think anything of it, you know, it's all a matter of perspective and if  
25 you don't know any better. Uh, looking back I think it's kind of ironic in  
26 a, in a good sort of way that the former salary cafeteria was turned into our  
27 Skill Center which was open to both salary and hourly people to use the  
28 computers and the library and the executive dining room was used for  
29 special functions. I got off on that when I told the story about bringing the  
30 coats through there.

31  
32 But yeah, we used to have segregation in the old days. Now everybody  
33 gets – I used to joke with people on the tours. I'd tell'm, uh, now  
34 everybody is subject to the same lousy food. [laughter] But you know  
35 what, uh, our, our office for the tours was in the back of the cafeteria and I  
36 can't say enough about the wonderful folks that worked in the cafeteria up  
37 there. They're all great folks and really the food wasn't that bad. I  
38 thought their biscuits and gravy were some of the best.

39  
40 Michael Fleming: Lyle, Mike Fleming. [50:08] What, what would you consider would be  
41 one of your best memories of Fisher Body? [pause].

42  
43 Male: [Inaudible 50:25].

44  
45 Lyle Birchman: Oh, lots of good memories. I mean meeting my wife and obviously that's  
46 the most significant thing, uh, that could have come out of this whole, uh,

[throat clearing] – but I, I tell you what, some of'm that are happy, really happy memories was some of the times just sittin' and talkin' with people and sharing, uh, good, good times, uh, jokes and deep conversations. I had a dear friend, [Ed Worgul 50:52]. I used to play harmonica with him. He's passed on. He, he retired a number of years ago but he used to play that thing constantly and, uh, I also, I often wondered if he didn't drive his partner crazy. They were Skilled Trades and they were tinnerns, tinsmiths, and they would drive around on the – Lloyd would drive and, and Ed would play that harmonica and I thought to myself, you know, I play these things but even that would drive me bananas listening to it [laughter] all day long. And, uh, you know, we had some great times, great conversations.

I'll never forget, um, probably, uh, another real significant thing that happened in my life was the old, uh, UAW GM Talent Shows. And 19 years ago, we, uh, we – I didn't have anything to do with it. A guy named Don Loomis came up to me, approached me and he approached everybody and we put a, a band together for this. At the time it was a talent contest and, uh, we didn't win. We, I think we took second or third. Uh, [Joanne Moore 51:59] she always would win because she's such an amazing singer. I just loved to hear her sing. And that, that night, though, we had such a good time and we had a great time practicing, we've been together ever since. In fact, after we realized that, hey, this is kinda fun, we put together a bluegrass gospel band and we played, uh, just one song and we, we had a great time and we got together and continued playing. We've been playing ever since but the first time we ever played as a group outside of that talent show was right here in the UAW Local 602 Hall.

And, you know, coming from a rather conservative church background, uh, and these guys was, were all pretty much, uh, they came from a, a background where you testify and you praise the Lord, raise your hand and let it all hang out. Picture this, you know, I'm, I'm playing with these guys, I don't know'm that well and we're right here at the UAW Local 602 Hall and [Doug Prater 53:02] he's a Pentecostal, boy, he, uh, he, he had broke a string, so it's time to do some talkin'. If you have a string break, why it's time to talk, you know, so you can't just stand there. Everybody's wide-eyed and he says, "Lyle, how 'bout a testimony of what the Lord's done for you?" And, you know, I never said anything in public like that in my whole life. [laughter] So I mumbled, uh, this and that and got through it but I, I'll never forget that one. And I know it doesn't have anything to do with building cars but it does because our group [throat clearing] uh, you know, we literally got our start here and, uh, Don Loomis and I [throat clearing] and [Bruce Pettinger 53:39]. Uh, [Larry Lepard 53:41], uh, bless his heart, he passed on 11 years ago, he had cancer, and great guy. E-, even to this day, I hear, uh, I'll Fly Away, I think of Larry, good guy.

1  
2 Doug Rademacher: Lyle, it's Doug Rademacher. I worked with you also over the years and,  
3 uh, you blew harmonica and it was, it was a pleasure for people but, uh, I  
4 remember very vividly that, uh, there was a gentleman that played guitar  
5 and he looked like John Denver and he'd bring his guitar in and you would  
6 hook up. [54:17] Can you tell some stories about what you'd do for  
7 people on your breaks and lunches? Uh, were you ever requested to do  
8 things for retirement parties or anything like that inside the facility?  
9  
10 Lyle Birchman: Well, that was Greg Smith. I always called him Guitar Greg and this guy  
11 can play anything from the 40s, 50s, 60s. He even learns these songs that  
12 kids are listening to today, you know. Uh, I used to joke about it a few  
13 years ago, I, I never in my wildest dreams thought I'd be playing a Green  
14 Day song for instance but I did playing with Greg. And we would have  
15 some great times. I, I first met him when I was working Underbody and  
16 this is probably about, oh, 10, 12 years ago and I saw this guy carrying a  
17 guitar and, uh, you know, I was fascinated and, you know, we, we got  
18 together on lunchbreak. But one of the problems you had out in the body  
19 shop it was so noisy even when you're not buildin' cars, all the ventilation  
20 systems, all the equipment that's, uh, conveyers and we used to have to,  
21 you know, play over that noise but a lot of times we'd get in break areas.  
22 I, I, I remember we had these team rooms, one was painted blue and we  
23 used to joke that we were playing at the, the Blue Room Lounge.  
24 [laughter] Remember that one, Doug? And, uh, we, we had some good  
25 times. [pause] [click]  
26  
27 Doug Rademacher: Lyle, you, you [throat clearing] mentioned Greg a little bit. [55:44] Again,  
28 uh, was there a time when anyone asked you [throat clearing] to play  
29 inside the plant for, uh, a dinner or anything, uh, somebody retiring?  
30  
31 Lyle Birchman: Off and on, yeah, we'd do that. Um, I remember one year, uh, the guy I  
32 played guitar with he's no, he's not in UAW Local 602. He's a good  
33 union man, fixes elevators here in Lansing but he came in the plant and  
34 Bruce and I and he, uh, we, uh, we played, uh, for I, I don't even  
35 remember the guy's last name, [Vern 56:17]. He was a electrician. He  
36 retired and we played a short set of bluegrass gospel music just for him.  
37 That was pretty cool.  
38  
39 Male: [Inaudible 56:25].  
40  
41 Lyle Birchman: Another thing along with the same line of playing music, [throat clearing]  
42 one, one of those memories that's, uh, forever seared in my mind, uh,  
43 there's, there used to be a fellow by the name of [Billy Harper 56:35],  
44 Work Material over by train dock in the, out in, in Trim. Uh, you know,  
45 the, the, the train dock right there, he had a little office and I'm not really  
46 sure what he did but, uh, we were all on break at the time and [Bruce



1                   Pettinger came out with his banjo, Don had his mandolin, I had a  
2 harmonica, and Billy had a fiddle and we had one other guy join us  
3 playin', uh, beatin' out a rhythm on the flattop and that little room was just  
4 packed and we were playin' bluegrass music and we still laugh about it  
5 today.  
6

7Doug Rademacher: [57:10] Lyle, you have, um, can you talk about your union a little bit?  
8 Over the, uh, the years, have you had to use the union? Did you have a  
9 time where you appreciated the UAW and do you take time to vote?  
10 [throat clearing]  
11

12Lyle Birchman: Yes, yes, and yes. [throat clearing]  
13

14Doug Rademacher: [57:29] Do you want to elaborate [inaudible 57:30] little bit on something?  
15 When you hired in, did the union support you when you first hired in?  
16 Did you ever need them early on?  
17

18Lyle Birchman: You know, I wasn't involved at all when I first hired in. Um, actually I  
19 ruffled a few feathers back in '79. I, I've always been kinda political and I  
20 always knew what side the bread my, you know, bu-, the butter was on. I  
21 always was appreciative of my union benefits but, you know, I didn't  
22 regularly get involved in a lotta stuff early on. I was just a kid, you know,  
23 18 years old, livin' my life but I also had a sense of political right and  
24 wrong and I was involved in the antinuclear, uh, movement of the 70s and  
25 there was 5000 of us marched down at Midland back in '79 or '78 right in  
26 there. And, uh, you know, the Midland Nuclear Power Plant never did,  
27 uh, come in to being, you know, due to grassroots concern.  
28

29 And I'll never forget it, the Board of Water and Light at the time was  
30 [throat clearing] going to buy into Midland Nuclear Plant and I don't even  
31 remember the fellow's name but [throat clearing] there was a guy who was  
32 a UAW appointee on the, on the Board of Water and Light or on the, on  
33 some committee. It's been so long ago and this just hit me. I should have  
34 researched this before I showed up but, uh, I remember getting up at the  
35 union meeting and, and chastising, saying, you know, "Why, why is this?"  
36 'Cause he, he hadn't been instructed to vote one way or the other but  
37 that's about the only time that I really had a run, uh, and at that point that,  
38 that vote was corrected and that led to the Board of Water and Light not  
39 buying into the Midland Nuclear Power Plant, which was a financial  
40 boondoggle.  
41

42 Here's the Board of Water and Light by virtue of their independence has  
43 been able to provide the Lansing area with affordable electricity and there  
44 were people that did not have the, the goodwill of the people in mind  
45 when they tried to do that merger and that poor guy, he didn't know what  
46 was going on, he was just there 'cause they appointed him, you know.



1 But, uh, I felt pretty good about that one. We were able to keep them –  
2 unfortunately they did get, uh, the Board of Water and Light did lose  
3 [throat clearing] some of their independence. Uh, they were, they hooked  
4 up with Edison on a coal flower – coal fire plant and to this day I still  
5 think the Board of Water and Light should have done everything they  
6 could to maintain their independence to better serve Lansing. And that  
7 has a bearing on General Motors as well because by proving a, a good  
8 affordable steady source of electricity and steam, uh, that, that was a big  
9 plus for the Grand River Assembly Plant being located, uh, right there by  
10 the, the power station and they were able to make the best use of that.  
11 And the new Delta plant, if you think about it, it's right there by the other  
12 Board of Water and Light Power Station.  
13

14Marilyn Coulter: Lyle, [throat clearing], given your...

15

16Doug Rademacher: Marilyn Coulter.

17

18Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter. [60:38] Given your activity that you just spoke about  
19 and are you active in your union currently? And if so, do you hold a  
20 position? And if so, what position is that?  
21

22Lyle Birchman: Well, uh, a little background. Uh, each political election – I, I, I have to  
23 go way back, okay? Uh, back when, uh, Ronald Reagan [throat clearing]  
24 won the first time, I was heartbroken. I'll never forget this. I – the, the  
25 returns came in and I went over to Harry's Bar to drink a double, I was so  
26 depressed. And I'm sittin' there right next to some guy, a fellow  
27 autoworker, who was happy, obviously an idiot. And we all know the,  
28 the, the damage that Ronald Reagan's, uh, regime brought to working  
29 people. Uh, fast [throat clearing] forward to, uh, the last election, that  
30 broke my heart again and I decided to run for our Citizenship and  
31 Legislative Committee and it's been a real honor to serve, uh, the, the  
32 Local. I think we have a lotta work to do. We're entering the most  
33 important 11 months of our political lives leading up to the 2006 elections.  
34 We've got some congressmen that we need to vote out of office and get  
35 some State reps in office that are more labor friendly. We've got a lot of  
36 work to do and I'm honored to be in that, serving in that capacity.  
37

38Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher. [62:05] Lyle, the, um, [throat clearing] as you just  
39 said, we're, we're in a fight. Lansing has been called the Capital of  
40 Quality and they've built 19 million vehicles I guess out of this particular  
41 facility and General Motors has reinvested in Lansing, Michigan, no place  
42 else in North America since the Saturn plant of the, I believe the 80s. So,  
43 um, can you talk about that? Wh-, why is Lansing the Capital of Quality?  
44 What makes it happen?  
45

1 Lyle Birchman: I think it's the people. Uh, one of the things that they mentioned when  
2 this new Delta plant was comin' on that they're actually going to bring  
3 anthropologists in to study the culture of Lansing and what makes it so  
4 unique to the rest of the North American workforce. I mean think about it,  
5 we were the only plant left that was trucking bodies from one building to  
6 another, yet Harbor and Associates ranked our two assembly lines 1 and 2  
7 for efficiency. That speaks of the people. [throat clearing] Uh, I used to  
8 be fond of, uh, uh, expressing that when we did plant tours. I'd talk about  
9 what a great organization we have, uh, from the, the men and women on  
10 the production to the, our friends on Skilled Trades and even the  
11 managing, everybody working together has made Lansing what it is today  
12 and it's a longstanding tradition that we're going to continue on with  
13 Delta.  
14

15 Doug Rademacher: [63:36] Could you share one more thing, uh, what about the Skilled  
16 Trades, what sort of relationship that you've experienced with Trades and  
17 the production line?  
18

19 Lyle Birchman: Well, it was a real pleasure and a privilege working with a lot of those  
20 folks. Uh, uh, working in Weld Integrity what our job would do is we  
21 would monitor weld quality. If we found something going on that needed,  
22 uh, to be addressed, we would contact the area electrician, so I got to  
23 know'm all and you learned who had, uh, the skills for varied, we all have  
24 our gifts and some folks are better than others at different things. And I  
25 really came to respect a lot of the electricians, a real pleasure working  
26 with'm. Yes, sir?  
27

28 Doug Rademacher: Mike Fleming.  
29

30 Michael Fleming: [64:22] Lyle, um, [throat clearing] being, um, a local union official and  
31 have, have really gotten into, um, giving back to your membership, what  
32 would you consider your most appreciated bargain benefit by the UAW?  
33

34 Lyle Birchman: Wow. Um, seniority is huge. The, the wages we make it's, it's  
35 wonderful. Uh, without the UAW I would not been able to be the  
36 productive member of our, of the community which I live. I, I wouldn't  
37 have been able to buy a home. I wouldn't have been able to support my  
38 school district. Uh, I wouldn't have been able to do a lot of things for my  
39 kids. And thank goodness for the, the benefits that UAW negotiated for  
40 me and everybody else. Lansing is a, a good town because of it. You  
41 know, I, I like to share this with folks. I don't bank offshore. I don't have  
42 an offshore bank account. All my money stays right here in this  
43 community. It, it goes right back into the community and the community  
44 is better for that, so I'm very grateful for, uh, everything that's been  
45 negotiated on my behalf. My kids take advantage of the tuition assistance  
46 for, uh, dependents. I have two kids in college. And, um, to go political

1 right now, I'm flabbergasted that guys like Congressman Mike Rogers  
2 voted to cut \$14 billion dollars out of the student loan program but thank  
3 goodness that the UAW still has a little, has, has that benefit for the, for  
4 the students. [throat clearing]  
5

6Michael Fleming: Um, you know, we just negotiated some, um, changes within our national  
7 contract which allows, um, our retirees to keep their healthcare which they  
8 pay a portion of and active employees to pay, to defer a portion of their  
9 raises going forward. [66:29] How do you feel about that, Lyle?  
10

11Lyle Birchman: It's all about sticking together and taking care of those who, uh, could use  
12 some help. You know, there's a courageous group of individuals down in  
13 Grass Lake, Michigan that the company they work for, Tenneco, was  
14 going to unilaterally take the meager benefits that their pensioners were  
15 going to get and just say, well, this is all for healthcare, you're not getting  
16 anything. And it was illegal, it was immoral and after a year of litigation,  
17 the company finally backed off but only because of the, uh, e-, efforts of  
18 the UAW Local 660. Uh, since then, r-, retribution has been relentless  
19 perhaps due to the fact, uh, of bruised egos on the part of some key  
20 managers. I don't know why but they've been, they've been forced out on  
21 a unfair labor practice strike for eight months and all for the same reason,  
22 they were [throat clearing] standing up for their pensioners, their retirees.  
23 And some of these senior citizens are World War II, Korean, and Vietnam  
24 vets or their widows. So yeah, it's an honor to be able to help our sisters  
25 and brothers of the UAW who really needed assistance in that regard.  
26

27Michael Fleming: Lyle, it sounds to me as though you really get it. [67:44] Uh, can you  
28 agree or disagree that you feel within the United States right now labor is  
29 under attack?  
30

31Lyle Birchman: Oh certainly, all-out, it's all-out war. Warren Buffett, the billionaire of  
32 the, uh, what's that – uh, Hathaway Mutual Fund. [throat clearing] He  
33 says the war between the, the, the rich and the poor and right now the rich  
34 are winning it hands down. And you know I'm, I'm reminded of what our  
35 friend Mike Huerta said the other day. He, he was relating how every  
36 benefit out there was because of organized labor stepping up, whether it  
37 was a 40-hour work week, whether it was safer working conditions, basic  
38 dignity, the UAW and other labor organizations have lead the way. So we  
39 have a lot of work to do.  
40

41Marilyn Coulter: Lyle, once again coming back to – Marilyn Coulter – coming back to  
42 UAW and Fisher Body. Thank you for what you do. Uh, currently you're  
43 doing something that's special that's actually been something  
44 unprecedented that, um, the UAW and GM have been doing as we close  
45 the doors of our old plant and open the new. [68:59] You want to speak a  
46 little bit about that and the impact of GM, UAW on the community?

1

2Lyle Birchman:

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Sure. Uh, about a year ago our chairman, Steve Bramos, called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to coordinate, we have what's called a Jobs Bank and it's a negotiated benefit, uh, been around for years through the UAW. And one of the things that, uh, we wanted to do was to coordinate a Jobs Bank Community Service Program where members of UAW Local 602 could go out in the community and help nonprofit organizations with many worthy causes. It's probably been one of the most rewarding experiences in my life in that we've been able to establish a relationship with over 250 agencies not only in the immediate Lansing area but the greater Lansing area extending out into other counties beyond the Tri-County area. Uh, folks like the Charlton Park Historical Village, we've, uh, been able to provide them with a number of volunteers who have been doing everything from archeological digs to reconstructing Potawatomi Indian Villages to painting buildings, replacing roofs. [Bill Ford 70:16], one of my favorite pictures from that is he, he's dressed up in union blues portraying a, a union soldier and what he has been doing is he portrays a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse with a wood stove right smack dab in the middle. It's just like the old days.

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And they bus kids in from all over. It's a fieldtrip thing and they, they see all the different buildings. And Bill will actually portray a teacher and these kids sit through a, uh, uh, a session of one-room schoolhouse experience and this guy loves it so much that he intends to continue volunteering there whenever he can as he returns to Delta. It's stuff like that that other folks are, uh, some are [throat clearing] dressing up as, uh, a husband and wife, uh, inn and they actually greet the kids and they'll feed'm soup. Uh, uh, Brenda, she'll cook up the soup and they feed these kids soup made on a, a wood stove, a wood cook stove. And the, the amount of good they've done just in that one area but there's so much more, a lot of great proactive programs such as the Capital Area Literacy Coalition. Uh, [Gilbert Cuellar 71:39] for example, this guy has gone to immigrant labor camps to help teach kids how to read, help teach illiterate folks how to read in the Lansing area, folks that are from around here. It, it's a very great program. Uh, Head Start, Julie Kepler, we've been working with her, providing Head Start volunteers in the classrooms. This is all about proactive helping children making right decision at an early age, America will be better for it.

40

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45

And I could go on and on and on and on, the organizations that we've been able to help. Currently, uh, probably at this point we could safely say we've placed over 750 UAW Local 602 members in different positions, uh, off and on throughout the past year. Currently, we're around 450 that are out there in the field.

1 Doug Rademacher: [72:34] So Lyle – Doug Rademacher – on that you’re saying that this  
2 bargain benefit with the Fisher Plant closing May 5 of ’05, these people  
3 have the choice to sit and be paid their wages but they choose to volunteer  
4 in their community?  
5

6 Lyle Birchman: Yeah. And many others are going to school. Uh, just a sidebar to all this,  
7 when, when the plant closed on May 5, it was probably the, the – leading  
8 up to that and then immediately following was probably the craziest time  
9 in my entire career at General Motors. I went for four or five weeks  
10 without even a lunchbreak and it wasn’t just me. We had a great team of  
11 folks. Uh, I want to thank Doug for helping out and a lot of others. There  
12 was a lot of people that came in to the picture and left as Delta fires up,  
13 people come and then they go back to, to work and there’s a lotta people  
14 that were very instrumental in implementing the program. It wasn’t just  
15 me. It was a lot of people working together. [pause] And Mike too,  
16 thanks Mike, sorry.  
17

18 Marilyn Coulter: [73:41] Is there anything that you’d like to talk – Marilyn Coulter – is  
19 there anything that you’d like to talk about that we haven’t touched on?  
20

21 Lyle Birchman: Can I go on a little bit on tours?  
22

23 Michael Fleming: Sure, Lyle. Talk about the tours. [73:53] You were the plant tour...  
24

25 Lyle Birchman: Yeah.  
26

27 Michael Fleming: ...guide, right?  
28

29 Lyle Birchman: Yeah.  
30

31 Michael Fleming: [73:57] Um, first shift was that?  
32

33 Lyle Birchman: Well, I did the tours on the night shift too.  
34

35 Marilyn Coulter: Yes, Lyle. Please go ahead and tell us about the plant tours.  
36

37 Lyle Birchman: Back in ’91 the, the word went out that they were going to interview for a  
38 nontraditional j-, job called Plant Tours and I was really honored to be  
39 able to be part of that program. [Dave Pardee 74:19] and I, he came on  
40 several months later and worked with John Rosendahl and a number of  
41 others and it, it was really, uh, an amazing experience to set the program  
42 up right from the beginning and to learn by the seat of your pants.  
43 Nobody showed me how to do a whole lot of anything other than John has  
44 a wealth of experience. John Rosendahl, my former boss there, has a  
45 wealth of experience in public speaking and PR, so I learned a great deal  
46 from him and for that I’m grateful.

1  
2 We were, uh – a funny story – can I share a, a, a funny story about  
3 culture? One of the first tours we had was, uh, the AvtoVAZ. It was the,  
4 the Russian auto industry at the time. Remi-, remember this is back in '91  
5 and [throat clearing] things have changed a great deal since then but, uh, it  
6 was like the Lee Iacocca equivalent of the Russian auto industry visiting.  
7 There was four dignitaries and they had their translator and we're  
8 walking'm around and showing'm the plant and obviously they didn't  
9 have anything like what we had. This was probably one of the most  
10 techniclo-, technologically advanced body shops in the, in the industry at  
11 the time. And we're all talkin' through interpreters and obviously the  
12 conversation was pretty slow but he had made a joke and we all laughed  
13 [throat clearing] and I gave him a big thumbs up and then right when I did  
14 it I was horrified. I thought, oh my gosh, I don't know if I just gave this  
15 guy the finger in Russian culture or not. And fortunately they all laughed  
16 and everything was smoothed over but I, I'll never forget that little, uh,  
17 moment there.

18  
19 And we had folks from, uh, you know, the head of Pontiac and all, all the  
20 different, uh, head honchos that were, uh, we built the cars for, they c-,  
21 they'd come through. Uh, I'll never forget when John Middlebrook was  
22 coming in, they had an advance person come and this was a big important  
23 tour and, uh, John Rosendahl paged me. I had a pager at the time and I  
24 didn't have a phone right nearby so I ducked in and asked the oilers, we  
25 had, we have a team that oils all the different equipment, if I could borrow  
26 their phone. And they're great guys. I'd talked to them for years and I, I  
27 went in there and I called John, he says, "Yeah, she's down at the other  
28 end, the advance person, you need to meet her." I said, "Great." Well, I  
29 hung up the phone and the guys say, "Hey Lyle, before you leave, can you  
30 play a song for us on the harmonica?" So I said, "Yeah, sure." So I  
31 grabbed the harp out and wail on it and give'm a quick tune and we're all  
32 cuttin' up laughin'.

33  
34 And, uh, I'm, I'm prepared to go and one of the guys accidentally bumped  
35 one of his oil guns and I kid you not, I got a blast of grease right on my  
36 crotch right before. [laughter] I kid you not, my, these dress pants, I got  
37 this big ol' spot and I'm going, oh my gosh, what am I going to do? I  
38 have to meet this woman in just a matter of minutes and, you know, I  
39 show up and I got this and I explained to her the whole situation. In the  
40 meantime, I had phoned my wife. Bless her heart, she was able to bring  
41 me another pair of pants. So by the time the, the tour came off [coughing]  
42 uh, I was sportin' a different pair of pants and no, nobody was none the  
43 wiser; however, she, she, she made sure everybody knew.

44  
45 And, [laughter] and, you know, that's one of the things when you work a  
46 group, you, somethin' happens kind of a, a, a temporary sense of

1 community takes shape and they, you [throat clearing] get to know even  
2 though these are people that probably truth be known you're nothing more  
3 than a, you know, nothing to them because they, they have such a slanted  
4 point of view of working people. But at the time, we, especially that  
5 particular group of people, uh, we, we, we were all joking and she brought  
6 that up right in front of everybody and we all shared a laugh. But, uh, we  
7 – the guys in the, in the oiler room we joked about that one for years.  
8 And, uh, a side bar to all that, they, they, he, he, he, the guy felt so bad  
9 about it, it was not intentional and he offered to use some of that hot  
10 thinner to – and I said, "No, not there." [laughter] Yes, sir?  
11  
12 Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. Lyle, you were talking [coughing] about your tours.  
13 [78:46] Can you talk about how you got from one area to the next?  
14 Because if you, our plant is layered and you got the body shop on the very  
15 bottom floor, you got Paint on the very top floor, uh, did you do that?  
16 How did – what did you do, Lyle?  
17  
18 Lyle Birchman: That's an excellent question. Um, our tours were primarily on the main  
19 floor even when we initially we did walking tours and when we did – let  
20 me reph-, take that back. When we did walking tours, I would always try  
21 to get upstairs a little bit and show'm a little bit of the M system 'cause I  
22 felt the need to, to show. But for so many years we, we had this  
23 refurbished train from the 50s. This thing is vintage and I hope that we'll  
24 be able to have that at the Delta plant. This thing is cool lookin'. It's old,  
25 it's vintage and it's been outfitted with a PA. Uh, one person drives and  
26 one sits in the back and does the talkin' through a microphone.  
27  
28 And the nice thing about that in that particular facility, realize that, that,  
29 that plant was built in 1920. It's an o-, original Durant [throat clearing]  
30 plant and the support posts are fairly close together and the ceilings were  
31 low but it was those posts that posed such a problem because we're  
32 buildin', heck we're the leading producer of automobiles year in, year out,  
33 year in, year out, we, uh, b-, build more cars than anyone else. That meant  
34 that our friends on Material Handling had to be delivering this stuff. So  
35 here we are with this group of people, last thing you wanted to do was do  
36 it on foot with fork trucks coming this way and that way, flatbeds, it was a  
37 safety issue. So we were very grateful that we had the train and we would  
38 take the folks on the train.  
39  
40 But I always, always loved doin' the foot tours because you could take'm  
41 up close to the equipment, you know, get'm right by the fence and they  
42 could see how, uh, some of the intricacies of the manufacturing process  
43 especially out in the body shop and I'd always point out to them that, you  
44 know, high tech is only as good as the men and women behind it and that  
45 our UAW Local 602 electricians did an outstanding job at keeping this  
46 equipment running. And when the people left, I was convinced they came

1 away with a better point of view of, uh, the, the brothers and sisters of  
2 UAW Local 602. Uh, can I keep goin' a little bit on some of these stories?  
3 'Cause I really got a kick out of some of this tour stuff.  
4

5Doug Rademacher: Yeah, why don't you...

6

7Female: Doug.

8

9Doug Rademacher: This is Doug Rademacher. Why don't you continue on? [81:15] Would  
10 you share the diversity of the groups that came through...  
11

12Lyle Birchman: Oh. We had people from all over...

13

14Doug Rademacher: ...[inaudible 81:19]?  
15

16Lyle Birchman: ...all over the planet. Uh, and we'd get a lot of tourists in the  
17 summertime. [clicking]  
18

19Male: There we go.

20

21Lyle Birchman: We would have folks come in from all over the planet. Uh, and I always  
22 realized that people from other countries they weren't going to buy our  
23 vehicles, uh, but it was important that they heard our story. But I also took  
24 it very seriously when we could sell the idea of our product 'cause nothing  
25 happens until the product is sold. I'm a salesman at heart and I firmly  
26 believe that sales and marketing is critical to any venture and I always  
27 took it very seriously that I always told all, all the, the best I possibly  
28 could about, uh, what we were doing and I took it very seriously. We had  
29 people come in from all over.  
30

31 Uh, a funny story about the Netherlands. Okay, you know, here in  
32 Michigan everybody holds up the hand and you can say, well, I'm from  
33 here or there, you know, it's a Michigan thing. You talk to somebody  
34 from Montana or somebody from Texas and they look at you like why are  
35 you holding your hand up? Sad to say, uh, many of our fellow  
36 countrymen don't even realize that Michigan, at least the lower peninsula  
37 part, is a hand. And I, I got this phone call and this woman is calling from  
38 the Netherlands. It was the Royal Engineering Society. Uh, they were  
39 talking about 25 to 30 people that were going to be coming in and touring  
40 America and they were going to travel from Chicago to Detroit and they  
41 were going to, while they were in Detroit they were going to tour an auto  
42 plant.  
43

44 Well, one of the things I, I take great pride in the fact that as I, I was on, in  
45 that position as scheduler f-, for the tours is I would try to promote  
46 Lansing. I'd love it if somebody would buy a car but I'd also appreciate it



1 if I was able to talk them into renting a motel room, [coughing] spending  
2 the night, that meant they were going to take in a meal, maybe a movie, go  
3 out and spend their dollars in Lansing and that's what being a neighbor is  
4 all about. We had people coming in to see our facility and I always  
5 wanted to share Lansing. I developed a relationship with the Lugnuts, the  
6 local minor league sports team and I had that schedule right there and if I  
7 could tell'm, "Hey, there's a ballgame that night, you really should go.  
8 Have you ever been to a minor league ballgame?"  
9

10 But back to the Netherlands, so that promoter in me kicked in and I got her  
11 to hold up her hand and explain to her that between Chicago and Detroit is  
12 Lansing and that we could probably, uh, put her in touch with our friends  
13 at the Lansing Convention and Visitors Bureau with whom I had a  
14 relationship. I like to work with them and get as much promotional ideas  
15 from them as possible. And I got her holding up her hand, talking to me  
16 from the other side of the planet for crying out loud, and I talked her into  
17 coming to our tour and I put her in touch with folks at the Lansing  
18 Convention and Visitors Bureau. And they didn't – they stayed not one  
19 night but two nights and that was like 15 motel rooms. So they, they  
20 stayed two nights, they loved our plant tour but they also took in, uh, other  
21 things in Lansing and I always thought that was a homerun for, uh, the, the  
22 people of Lansing. I always liked to promote Lansing.  
23

24 Folks came here for their vacations. Uh, I had this one fellow, he was a  
25 real likable guy. I just took to him right away. He'd just slap you on the  
26 back, friendly sorta guy. Turned out he owned a string of funeral parlors  
27 out in Montana. Well, at the time, Dave Pardee, my partner and I, [throat  
28 clearing] we had secured a stack of Pontiac Grand Am posters and we had  
29 handed out a few to our friends and, uh, but we were supposed to be just  
30 handing'm out for tours and that's what we did. Well, I'm realizing that  
31 this guy and I also realized that many of the people who were impressed  
32 with our tours, this is something that I felt strongly about, they would talk  
33 about what a great organization Lansing Car Assembly was and, oh, by the  
34 way, what do you think of those Grand Ams, aren't they great. It would  
35 sell cars long after they were l-, uh, gone. You're drinking coffee with  
36 your buddy and the subject of cars come up and they'll tell you, they'll tell  
37 how they went to Lansing and toured that automobile assembly plant and  
38 the men and women that worked there [throat clearing] were so friendly,  
39 what a great bunch of people and that, that's a great car they build. You  
40 can't put a dollar amount on that kinda PR.  
41

42 So knowin' this, we've got this fellow from Montana and he's just lovin'  
43 it and he has obviously a, a wide range of influence in his communities  
44 where he has these funeral homes. I sent him home with I think a dozen  
45 of those posters and the reason why is I knew, I knew he would tell our  
46 story each time he gave out one of those posters and then he probably told

1 the, the story even more because we treated him so well. And it was a  
2 mutual thing. I mean we just hit it off so well but he's, he's probably still  
3 telling our stories. We got a card from him and he bought his daughter a  
4 Grand Am and that was really cool.  
5  
6 Uh, uh, one of the other things that [Bill Ross 86:35], a, a, a  
7 superintendent up in Paint, has a motor coach and our vehicles were  
8 towable and a lot of these motor coach people would tow these vehicles  
9 and we would go out and do, uh, a show out in Charlotte with Spartan  
10 Motors and we would do, uh, tell'm about how our vehicles are towable.  
11  
12Male: Excuse me, sir. I'm looking for a printer. [clicking]  
13  
14Lyle Birchman: After we did a couple of those trade shows with Spartan Motors that  
15 builds the chassis for these motor coaches, I, I was now very well  
16 informed on the fact that our vehicles are towable, so I started using that  
17 as a selling point. [throat clearing] And right towards the end there as the  
18 tour program wound down, uh, I was on the phone with a fellow from  
19 Iowa and they had a motor coach and, uh, they, they had heard about our  
20 tours and I, I, I found out that one of the other things I would do was help  
21 steer people toward lodging and they were, they wanted to find a place to  
22 camp, so that gave me the hint, "Oh, what are you runnin'?" And once I  
23 found out he had a motor coach, I told him, "Oh, by the way, did you  
24 know that the Malibu and the Grand Am and the Alero are towable?" It  
25 made my day when we picked him up with the tour train, he held up a set  
26 of Malibu keys. That, that was sweet knowing that I helped sell that car  
27 and we, we like to think, uh, those of us that were with the tour program,  
28 we like to think we sold a lot of cars over the years 'cause that's what it's  
29 all about, uh, tellin' the story, changing people's, uh, perception of auto  
30 workers and if we can, like'm to buy our product as well.  
31  
32Doug Rademacher: [88:17] Lyle, you, um, have done many things over the years but can you  
33 tell me how has the, your relationship with Fisher Body plant carried over  
34 into your own community? Did you do anything for schools? Do you do  
35 anything for...?  
36  
37Lyle Birchman: Oh yeah. Um, yeah. I was pretty busy. Uh, I'll never forget, my, my  
38 daughter was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and that's typically when they start playing a  
39 musical instrument in school band and our next-door neighbor dragged me  
40 to a band booster meeting, you know, okay, I'll go. And I'd been a  
41 volunteer at the, uh, the Eagle Park for a number of years prior to that.  
42 My wife and I both worked at the Eagle Fair. It's a little town outside of  
43 Lansing and the whole facility there, everything from the banquet facilities  
44 to the grandstand, all the buildings, uh, the Eagle Park, those of us in 602  
45 are very familiar with that because we have our annual picnic there. But,  
46 uh, I, my wife and I built a house just north of Eagle back beginning in '81

1 and we got to know all of the friends and neighbors, so we started  
2 volunteering at the park. And, you know, that park is built without a dime  
3 of government money, so I did a lot of work with that.  
4

5 But back to the band booster thing, um, when we went to the meeting, the  
6 whole board resigned. And the next meeting I went to I ended up being  
7 elected band booster president so, uh, [laughter] that was kind of crazy.  
8 And at the time they had just gone through two band directors. The high  
9 school marching band was down to I think 18 or 20 kids. The uniforms  
10 were old and worn. So it was a, it was an interesting challenge in that I  
11 had never ran [throat clearing] meetings or dealt with irate parents.  
12 Everybody had their own agendas. There was one guy, uh, he, he was  
13 bent, just bound and determined that they were going to still go on that,  
14 uh, every four years they'd go on a Florida trip, as if that was a reason  
15 why you take band. I, I always thought it was to learn how to play an  
16 instrument and have fun playing music, you know.  
17

18 But, you know, dealing with that type of thing it was a real challenge but  
19 we did get the uniforms, uh, smoothed over the whole Florida trip thing.  
20 Because I knew in my heart we need to get these kids decent uniforms  
21 they could wear and be proud of and that would help build the numbers  
22 and rebuild the band and fortunately, uh, a few other people stepped up  
23 and the two in particular stepped up in a big way and we were able to turn  
24 the program around and I feel real good about that. I backed away from  
25 that over the years and took up coaching soccer. My wife, bless her heart,  
26 she kinda inspired me to do that. She's a natural coach. We'll watch a  
27 basketball game or a football game, she points all these things out and I'm  
28 going "oh yeah." I think when our youngest one graduates she'll probably  
29 get back into coaching like teenage soccer. She, she coached like three  
30 years of undefeated soccer for our middle daughter. They, they're, they  
31 just had a great team but they also had a great coach. So my wife and I we  
32 did a lot of coaching and then more recently I volunteered with the athletic  
33 boosters out there in Portland and did a lotta good with that program and  
34 I've since backed away from that.  
35

36 Probably the, the longest running volunteer program I've ever done is the  
37 Bluegrass Revival Band that started 19 years ago, uh, as a result of that  
38 UAW GM Talent Contest and that is a nonprofit thing. All we ever get is  
39 a little gas money and maybe a bite to eat occasionally and it all goes back  
40 into the group to buy equipment and to just maintain expenses, uh, to keep  
41 the microphones up, all that. And that's probably been one of the most  
42 wonderful experiences arising other than being married to Brenda, arising  
43 out of my relationship with General Motors and, and the UAW is the fact  
44 that, uh, you know, uh, this group of union brothers put this band together  
45 and we're still doin' it. And, you know, Don early on he said, "Lyle,  
46 you're going to meet some of the nicest people in the world." And he was

1 right. We've met terrific people all across the state of Michigan and it's  
2 been a wonderful time. Prior to that, I played a lot of bars and, you know,  
3 you have people that had a bit too much to drink and get stupid and  
4 secondhand smoke. Uh, playing these church gigs, you don't have  
5 secondhand smoke or obnoxious drunks and, and a lot of times they feed  
6 you afterwards so [laughter] it's great, you know, and, uh, that, that's been  
7 a wonderful experience. We're working on our sixth album. Uh, we're  
8 going to record another one over the winter.  
9

10 Doug Rademacher: [93:07] Is there any other story, Lyle, that you have wanted to share that  
11 we haven't [inaudible 93:11]?  
12

13 Lyle Birchman: Uh, just, uh, you know, what a great experience doing the tours was and I  
14 felt a deep responsibility to every, everybody in the organization to make  
15 sure that every time – it's like show business. If you go on a stage, it, it –  
16 you do not mention anything if you me-, well, we messed up on this.  
17 Remember the second chorus how we got off key? You don't do that.  
18 [throat clearing] It's show time and I always took it very seriously when  
19 you, you went out there in front of the people and you, you, you gave the  
20 very best every time. If you were sick, if you didn't feel bad, you're  
21 having a bad day, it didn't matter. When you have this group of people  
22 that, that came to your plant, it was such an honor and a pleasure and a  
23 privilege to represent everybody, not just the sisters and brothers of UAW  
24 602 but also the management counterparts, everybody, and the city of  
25 Lansing. And I feel real good about that one because I, I think we did a  
26 lot of good on that.  
27

28 Uh, one of the other programs that came about out of that tour program,  
29 uh, I, I had a call from a school, Union City. It was a little too far to drive,  
30 they didn't have a lot of money for buses, so the idea went off in my head,  
31 well, why don't I bring the tour to you? So we had a, a, a little video that  
32 we would always [throat clearing] play for everybody, a little preview and  
33 I took that video down there and we set up in the, uh, in, in the library and  
34 they herded in two classes at a time. And talk about being on the spot  
35 again just flyin' by the seat of my pants, never had any training on this  
36 thing but, uh, it was a hoot. I just loved workin' with the kids and John  
37 Rosendahl, bless his heart, he gave me free rein to develop that program. I  
38 called it the Classroom [throat clearing] Visit Program and I sincerely  
39 hope that we can implement something along those lines in the future  
40 'cause it, it evolved.  
41

42 Initially, that first day and the following days when – and I started  
43 doing'm more often, I realized I could talk to 250 people by noon whereas  
44 with the tour train, the best we could do is maybe 60, 70 people [throat  
45 clearing] on a given day but by doing two groups at a time. And I would

1 go to them so it would save them money, they didn't have to hire a bus  
2 driver and a lot of these school districts are so strapped.

3  
4 But one of the things that evolved from that whole Classroom Visit  
5 Program is I started to turn it into a motivational seminar to study and to  
6 this day I still get calls from teachers that ask me to come. There's a  
7 career class out, out west of here, a small town, and that guy still calls me  
8 to come and address his class because what I do is I talk about the UAW, I  
9 talk about GM, I talk about what's going on in Lansing but I also talk  
10 about how it applies to each one of those kids. I'll get that board going  
11 and we'll start at one end and I'll have, I'll get that interaction going and  
12 we'll talk about career choices.

13  
14 And, you know, I, I remember the last one I did, this girl held up her hand  
15 and I, or I asked her what she wanted to do. She says, "Well, I want to, I  
16 want to be a hairdresser." And I feel good about this one 'cause, uh, I  
17 happened to talk to her dad a couple weeks later and he just got the biggest  
18 kick out of it. I asked her, I said, "Well, how many chairs do you want in  
19 your shop and how many shops do you want to have?" And what I was  
20 able to do is put it in her mind that she didn't just have to be a hairdresser,  
21 did she? She could own her own shop or a whole string of 'em and it's,  
22 that's what it's all about is encouraging these kids and give 'em, widen their  
23 horizons.

24  
25 And, uh, a lot of times if it was a middle school class, I'd point out the fact  
26 that "Hey, you have four years of free school. Don't spend \$12,000 as a  
27 freshman taking remedial math for instance. Take those math classes  
28 now. Make it count." And I, I always felt really, really good about that  
29 and that, that was a very rewarding experience and I'm grateful for, to  
30 John that he allowed me to go do that. Um, I'm grateful that the UAW  
31 had that program to begin with and, you know, it's just funny how things  
32 will get going and, uh, you can run with it. Uh, a number of years ago  
33 they pulled the plug on the program and that was a sad day to see that  
34 come.

35  
36 Uh, an equally sad day was the, the last day when we had our open house.  
37 The, the plant was about to close. People came in from all over, retirees,  
38 folks I hadn't seen in years, and we did the train and it was – it tugged at  
39 your heart, you know. We did, uh, uh, an abbreviated tour and what it was  
40 is, uh, every year we would do this, Bring Your Child to Work day and  
41 that last couple years they'd at least get me off the line to do Bring Your  
42 Child to Work day but that last Bring Your Child to Work day was  
43 literally an open house for the plant. It was all the end of it and it was, it  
44 was touching, you know. Uh, knowing that it was the last day that you  
45 were out there and we, we ran the train, every 20 minutes we'd have  
46 another group of people and I'd play the harmonica. And [Joe Jodeway

1 98:27] and I, uh, we, I'd make sure everybody gave Joe a big hand 'cause  
2 he, you know, he, he did a great job driving. [throat clearing] And we all,  
3 we had a ball that day. Uh, we did it that day and that night but that was  
4 the last day we ran the train and the plant closed shortly thereafter.  
5  
6 Marilyn Coulter: Lyle, Marilyn Coulter. [98:45] Question, did you bring your harp today?  
7  
8 Lyle Birchman: Yeah.  
9  
10 Marilyn Coulter: [98:49] Will you allow them to hear what we hear, what, what, what  
11 we've heard for so many years, for a brief period?  
12  
13 Lyle Birchman: Yeah. And I'm going to tell you a story, all right?  
14  
15 Marilyn Coulter: Okay.  
16  
17 Lyle Birchman: Can you stop that just a second while I get it off. [clicking] Uh, one of the  
18 things that as tour guide coordinator, uh, again, you know, we had a  
19 relationship with the Visitors Bureau and a lot of folks in Lansing, uh, we  
20 had the, uh, the Automotive History Corridor Program through the [throat  
21 clearing] National Parks Service and attending these meetings they were  
22 talking about recording interviews with senior citizens in a given area and  
23 a year ago, uh, Kevin Beard and I we're, we were coordinating all these  
24 activities for the Jobs Bank program, I, I remembered that, you know,  
25 back when we were doing the National Automotive History Corridor  
26 Program through the Parks Service, they used to meet at the Historical  
27 Museum, they had this program where they would interview senior  
28 citizens and retirees to capture history. Kevin and I talked about it and,  
29 uh, Kevin, probably one of the smartest guys I know, he, uh, knew people  
30 at Michigan State University. Somewhere along the line, Doug  
31 Rademacher was contacted and other people and, uh, this whole history  
32 project has taken shape. I feel pretty good about this one. But Marilyn, to  
33 answer your question about the, playing the harmonica...  
34  
35 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.  
36  
37 Lyle Birchman: ...back in, uh, I, I was on the night shift on the C system in, uh, doing  
38 water test and we used to have this thing called the wagon break and we  
39 were literally the last plant that enjoyed this benefit.  
40  
41 Marilyn Coulter: [100:28] Can you tell us what that was?  
42  
43 Lyle Birchman: And the plant would shut down for six minutes at a given time in the  
44 morning and a six-minute period in the afternoon and the folks from the  
45 cafeteria pushed these little carts out and there would be a coffee, uh, urn  
46 there and there would be a hot water urn and they'd have all sorts of

1 cookies and all sorts of junk food and chips and, you know, we could go  
2 and buy this stuff and have a cup of coffee and this was something that  
3 had always been there, not always but it was a negotiated benefit. And I  
4 really loved the wagon break. We all did. Y-, you could turn that six-  
5 minute break into a little longer 'cause you could work up the line a little  
6 bit.  
7  
8 Well, in negotiations they, uh, that was one of the things that went away.  
9 And it's kind of touching really, uh, they used to have a PA where you  
10 could just walk up to a phone and get on the PA and off and on over the  
11 years I'd play a tune or two, you know, play a Christmas song at the  
12 holidays or play somethin' fired up right before changeover, get the people  
13 riled up out there in C Trim. I worked out there in, in the water test booth  
14 at the time and the, the wagon break, it was the last wagon break in  
15 General Motors and this is what I did. I got on the PA and I said, "Hey,  
16 this is for the last wagon break in General Motors." It was on the night  
17 shift, it was a Friday night, it literally was the last wagon break for  
18 General Motors and in honor of that I did this. [playing Auld Lang Syne  
19 on harmonica] I played the whole song but for this I'll just do that but, uh,  
20 [throat clearing] and that was kind of a moving night, you know, the, the  
21 end of an era. And we've seen a lot of ends of the era, you know, but an  
22 incredible future with this Delta plant kickin' in.  
23  
24 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.  
25  
26 Lyle Birchman: Hopefully they'll let me play something on the PA over there to kick it  
27 off, I don't know. [laughter]  
28  
29 Doug Rademacher: Lyle, it's just been a wonderful opportunity to have your story today. We  
30 appreciate you taking the time to come in and share it with those people  
31 that will hear this and have no clue about what the auto industry was all  
32 about and what goes on inside the four walls of an assembly plant and I  
33 want to thank you.  
34  
35 Lyle Birchman: Thank you.  
36  
37 Marilyn Coulter: Thank you.  
38  
39 Male: Thank you.  
40  
41  
42/mlc