

**John (JD) Dewitt, contract Conveyor Engineer working for Planet Corp.,
discusses his career and his experiences at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**

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5Cheryl McQuaid: This is Cheryl McQuaid. It is November 2, 2005. I am with the Lansing
6 Fisher Body Historical Team. We are in the Labor Relations Conference
7 Room preparing to interview JD Dewitt. First we are going to go around
8 and announce everybody that is present in the room.
9
10Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming.
11
12Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter.
13
14Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith.
15
16Doreen Howard: Doreen Howard.
17
18Cheryl McQuaid: [00:25] JD, would you state your name, spell your last name, and state
19 your address for the record?
20
21JD Dewitt: My real name is John D. Dewitt. I go by JD. I live at 16765 Austin Way in
22 East Lansing, Michigan.
23
24Cheryl McQuaid: [00:43] JD, are you married?
25
26JD Dewitt: Yes, I am.
27
28Cheryl McQuaid: [00:45] Do you have children?
29
30JD Dewitt: I have two sons.
31
32Cheryl McQuaid: [00:49] Did you ever serve in the military?
33
34JD Dewitt: Yes, I did. United States Navy.
35
36Cheryl McQuaid: [00:56] And what, um, when did your first come into this plant? What
37 year?
38
39JD Dewitt: I came in here in 1990 around 1990 in May.
40
41Cheryl McQuaid: [01:06] May of '90?
42
43JD Dewitt: May of '90.
44
45Cheryl McQuaid: [01:07] Was it, what was the name of this building at that time, was it
46 Fisher Body BOC?
47

1JD Dewitt: It was BOC. It had just, uh, turned into BOC. It went from Fisher Body I
2 think to Buick Olds Cadillac Group.
3

4Cheryl McQuaid: [01:24] And what, why did you come into this plant?
5

6JD Dewitt: Well, I was, uh, asked to come to, uh, help facilitate installation of new
7 equipment at model change and, uh, the request to come here was by a
8 close friend, Jim Zubkus, who was previously our plant manager here.
9

10Cheryl McQuaid: [01:50] And what kind of reception to you meet when you came in here?
11 Did the people on the floor or, um, skilled trades or, I mean were they kind
12 to you or ...
13

14JD Dewitt: Uh, everybody in the UAW has been great here. Uh, as in all your work
15 and your career you run across a few people that, uh, don't get along with
16 you, but, uh, 99% of all of the people have been great and, uh, I've tried to
17 work with them also.
18

19Cheryl McQuaid: Excellent. [02:31] So what can you tell us about this plant? Some of the
20 changes that you've seen in this plant.
21

22JD Dewitt: When I came here the plant was being readied for, uh, a new model
23 change. That was the, uh, Pontiac Buick, uh, Oldsmobile car, the end car I
24 guess and, uh, we were making changes to body, paint, trim, and, um,
25 primarily the work that I was involved in is the conveyor rearrangements.
26 The plant used to have a number of long conveyors and we broke those up
27 into, uh, numerous different conveyors to facilitate, uh, uh, the build
28 schedule and, uh, quality.
29

30Cheryl McQuaid: [03:25] How much conveyor is in this plant? I've heard that it is miles.
31

32JD Dewitt: It's approximately 28 miles in the, in this building and Plant 1.
33

34Cheryl McQuaid: 28 miles.
35

36JD Dewitt: Yeah and there's various types of conveyor from chain on edge to
37 overhead power and free to electrified monorail.
38

39Cheryl McQuaid: Michael Fleming.
40

41Michael Fleming: Hi JD, um, I see you were a, uh, a Navy Aviation electrician. [4:00]
42 While you were in the Navy can you talk about when you were in the
43 Navy and any, anyone you might have went into the Navy with that you
44 work with now? Any acquaintances that you came in from the Navy with?
45

1JD Dewitt: Not really because I went into the Navy from Akron, Ohio, and then I
2 went to, uh, Norman, Oklahoma, where I went through recruit training and
3 then, uh, I went on to Aviation Electrician School. From there I was
4 transferred to the Naval Air Station in Brunswick, Georgia, and I became
5 one of the crew members in the Lighter than Air, uh, squadron there.
6 Lighter than Air stands as most people know it's blimps and I spent my
7 whole tour of duty flying in airships, uh, from Brunswick I went from
8 there to, uh, Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and then, uh, I finished up at
9 Lakehurst, New Jersey.
10
11Michael Fleming: [04:58] So if I understand you, you are a blimp aviator?
12
13JD Dewitt: Right.
14
15Michael Fleming: I don't think I've had the opportunity to meet one of you all. [05:11]
16 Could you talk to me just a little bit about, uh, blimps and how that works?
17
18JD Dewitt: Blimps at the time I went in had, uh, some primary functions where
19 LRAN, Long Rang Air Navigation equipment and then also in the later
20 years when I went to, uh, Lakehurst, New Jersey, it was for Airborne
21 Early Warning. We used to take these airships up and go out and patrol the
22 New York Air Defense sector and you monitor planes, uh, through those
23 areas and if they don't have a flight pattern filed for travel through there
24 then we used to call up the Air Force base there and they would scramble
25 the jets out to investigate or make an interception or whatever might be the
26 case.
27
28Michael Fleming: Well, I'll be damn.
29
30JD Dewitt: I don't know if that tells you a little bit about...
31
32Michael Fleming: Well, what it tells me is that it – you're a very unusual individual. You run
33 across aviators, but not very many that, uh, that go that fly blimps.
34
35JD Dewitt: Well, blimps, you know, are helium and as they burn off fuel they become
36 lighter and lighter so you have a winch on there, a hydraulic winch, that
37 you go out over the ocean you drop it down and you picked pick water and
38 pump it into these tanks to create ballast to maintain your level of flight.
39
40Michael Fleming: Wow.
41
42Doreen Howard: Doreen Howard. [06:46] Um, how did you get to Lansing, Michigan?
43 From all of your travels you were in quite a few different states.
44
45JD Dewitt: I, yes, I, I, uh, um, after I came out of the Navy I went to work for, uh,
46 Pittsburgh Glass Company in Barberton, Ohio, and from there I went to

1 work for Goodyear and I went to their engineering school of engineering
2 training and then I got transferred to Motor Wheel Corporation and when
3 into the foundry there, that's the old centrifuge foundry, first as a
4 maintenance foreman and then as a superintendent of maintenance and
5 when I left there, uh, to go into, uh, this line of work I was the plant
6 engineer. It was the last job at Motor Wheel. Of course, Motor Wheel is
7 no longer in business, um, but, uh, it was great organization.
8

9Doreen Howard: [07:50] And is that when you hired into General Motors when they...

10

11JD Dewitt: No, no. I went into this conveyor work, started working for various
12 conveyor companies and then I used to be Vice President and General
13 Manager of Warwick Conveyor, which is a division of Hall Industries.
14 There I went to Bristol Steel, kind of freelanced with a number of
15 companies; Jarvis B. Webb, the ACO, Conveyormatic. Most conveyor
16 people are somewhat transient because they move around the country with
17 these various jobs.
18

19Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. JD, you mentioned that your good friend Jim Zubkus.
20 [08:42] Would you like to talk about that relationship in, uh, the Fisher
21 Body time that you had here?
22

23JD Dewitt: Well, we, uh, became friends, uh, through being members at Walnut Hills
24 Country Club playing golf together and, um, was he was playing golf with
25 a guy one time and he told him that I had a lot of experience in conveyors
26 and he approached me and wanted me to come to work here and, um, I
27 said, "Well, I've got a job right now." I was out in Provo, Utah, putting in
28 a steel mill conveyor and he asked me if I could help on the weekends, so
29 I started here working like Saturday and Sunday and, and when I finished
30 that job, uh, I came here as a promise that I would stay 3 months and now
31 I've been here 16 years.
32

33Cheryl McQuaid: [Chuckle]

34

35Michael Fleming: That story sounds so much as some of the individuals that come in to
36 work. They, they usually come in to work at our facility for, you know, a
37 year or 2 and they end up staying 30. [09:58] Um, is there anything about
38 the culture at Fisher Body that you noticed that might be a little different
39 than some of the cultures that you worked in?
40

41JD Dewitt: Not, not really. Uh, of course when you work in a labor plant the labor
42 people stay together and I think that's the way it should be, but, uh, I, I felt
43 that the Lansing organization, uh, with all due respect to other companies
44 that I worked for, have I was I always felt that Lansing was very labor-
45 management oriented. They seemed to participate together and try to solve
46 problems jointly and so that was a that's my thoughts on them.

1
2Michael Fleming: Sure.
3
4Cheryl McQuaid: [10:44] Did you ever meet anybody in the plant that just kind of stuck out
5 and you just became great friends and do you have any friendships in this
6 plant?
7
8JD Dewitt: Oh many, um, probably one of the friends that I am very close with is
9 Jerry Morse. I knew Jerry from before. Asa Bigelow used to work for me
10 when I had an electrical contracting firm, he used to be my field
11 superintendent, and, uh, those are two that stand out to me. Jerry is a very
12 close friend. I became great friends with Bill Nemanis and, uh, Chad Hunn
13 and probably because they were assigned to work with me and learn about
14 conveyors and it's great to see they've moved on to the Lansing Delta
15 plant and they're both going to be involved in conveyors there, but, uh,
16 there was a lot of, a lot of skilled tradespeople in here that, uh, I just too
17 many to name one or two, but, uh, most of them that I got regular dialogue
18 with was involved in what was called our conveyor task force and if you
19 want me to elaborate on that I can.
20
21Cheryl McQuaid: I didn't know there was a conveyor task force. Please.
22
23JD Dewitt: When, uh, shortly after I came here and we got the plant up and running
24 from the model changeover, there were many problems with regard to
25 conveyors, you know, couldn't get funding, couldn't get the maintenance
26 work done, couldn't get it scheduled and we organized a conveyor task
27 force that involved, uh, quality people. It involved, uh, millwrights,
28 electricians, pipefitters, the safety people, [Benny Wright 12:52] was
29 involved in that for a long time, uh. Dale Kramer, um, the predictive
30 people, um, so we would meet every Wednesday and, um, I remember our
31 some of our early meetings we started in, uh, and people came and then it
32 kind of dwindled a little bit in attendance and I talked to Jim Zubkus about
33 this and he showed up one morning with his coat and tie on and said, uh,
34 told everybody how important and this is a must meeting and it was, it was
35 very helpful to have him come and tell the people how important it was to,
36 uh, come to these meetings and we started creating a matrix of work and,
37 um, then we would prioritize it and, and from there we would, uh, solve
38 these problems and as they were solved they would come off of the list
39 and new ones would go on and the problems were varied and many from
40 safety, uh, issues, um, breakdowns, uh, root causes of why it broke down,
41 um, couldn't get funding and, uh, the management here was always
42 supportive of me.
43
44 It seemed like I was always the one to go up front and ask for money but I
45 was not very bashful because if, if we build a good case they, they always
46 got us the money and I think that's why, uh, we were successful in the

1 amount of cars we built here in Lansing because we got money to repair
2 things, to schedule, and that, uh, to my knowledge, uh, right now the Delta
3 Township has already started a conveyor task force. I went to Lordstown
4 last week and had the opportunity to tell them the benefits of this and
5 they're in the process of creating a conveyor task force group.
6
7 Cheryl McQuaid: Excellent.
8
9 Doreen Howard: Doreen Howard. You talked about going to other facilities and discussing
10 this task force. [15:21] Is our plant the first plant that had this type of a
11 group?
12
13 JD Dewitt: I think, I think Lansing was the first one to really ever official call it a
14 conveyor task force and involve that many people. Uh, my experience is
15 one of the things you have to do is you have to let the UAW be involved. I
16 mean I went last week and told how important it is to interview people,
17 you can have a labor guy and a management guy, I don't care if it's your
18 shop committee man or whoever. Pick some people to be on it. You have
19 to involve the UAW. You cannot do it with just engineers. The work has
20 to – you have to get the involvement of the UAW or it will not succeed.
21
22 Doreen Howard: [16:16] Since you have been to other facilities, how does our facility
23 compare to other ones that you have been in as far as the amount of
24 conveyors that they have and the types of systems that they have?
25
26 JD Dewitt: Well, I would say, uh, we probably have more conveyor than almost any
27 plant. Buick City had a lot, I worked over there, but because of the two-
28 plant system here, you know, Body and then trucking the bodies over the
29 Chassis, uh, we probably had as many conveyors as any plant that I've
30 worked in. Lordstown has a lot of them, but there's a lot more employees
31 there. I don't even think Lordstown has as many conveyors as Lansing
32 cars anyway.
33
34 Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. JD, you mentioned the fact that you were always the one to
35 go up front and confront the management concerning, uh, the money
36 issues that you had. [17:21] Was it as easy in other plants to go and have,
37 ask for funds and procure funds as it appeared to be when you went here
38 to get things done? Was it different?
39
40 JD Dewitt: Well, I really, uh, never worked in other plants the way that I – Lansing
41 was the first plant that I worked in where I was really their person under
42 that and orchestrating, uh, getting this work done so I can't tell you. Uh,
43 all my other experiences were as a contractor, you know, and the
44 paperwork processed internally by some GM person.
45

1Michael Fleming: Okay. So that might be one of the reasons why you stayed here as long as
2 you did. You kind of enjoyed the fact that you were getting something
3 accomplished.
4

5JD Dewitt: Oh definitely. It was, the work has always been challenging and any time
6 that you work with conveyors it's challenging, but if you think about it the
7 conveyors are the lifeblood of a plant. When the conveyor stops, there's a
8 lot of people that are idle. It involves productivity, quality, and the longer
9 you can keep those conveyors operating and avoid breakdowns and
10 stoppages the more profitable you should be and the more quality you
11 should have.
12

13Michael Fleming: JD, talk about some of the holidays that you spent here and what you all
14 did as a group on the holidays around Fisher Body.
15

16JD Dewitt: It's an amazing thing. I think up until the last few years the only days,
17 holidays that I ever had off were Christmas and maybe New Year's and
18 because you have that time between Christmas and New Year's you could
19 always bank on you're going to be working either doing maintenance
20 work or rearranging the line or equipment to, uh, facilitate, facilitate, uh,
21 the requirements of either Body, Paint, or Trim with regard to conveyor
22 path changes or new equipment or maintenance work, but you could
23 always figure on working during the holidays.
24

25Michael Fleming: [19:59] Did you all have any, um, like celebrations inside the plant?
26 Dinners or whatever, you know, around the holidays?
27

28JD Dewitt: Well, I think everybody that worked at Fisher Body never went hungry at
29 Thanksgiving or Christmas. They were always, uh, as far as I don't think
30 there was any official company-sponsored. Numerous times at the end of
31 projects, uh, one person that came to mind was Leonard Borman. He
32 would always have a some kind of a luncheon brought in for people and to
33 show appreciation for getting all of this work done during the down time,
34 but, uh, it as far as an officially sponsored dinner I don't, I don't ever
35 recall that other than people brought something in.
36

37Michael Fleming: That's more of what we're speaking of. [20:59] Did you have potlucks
38 and...
39

40JD Dewitt: Oh yeah. Everybody brought in a dish and my dish was always Cowboy
41 Beans.
42

43Michael Fleming: Cowboy Beans. [21:08] What was that like?
44

1JD Dewitt: That, that's a story. I'm a Western fan and, you know, I've got a home out
2 in Arizona and, uh, I would bring those in and you could almost bet every
3 time that somebody half a dozen people want that recipe.
4

5Cheryl McQuaid: [21:29] What are they?
6

7JD Dewitt: [21:30] Hmm?
8

9Cheryl McQuaid: [21:31] What, what is Cowboy Beans?
10

11JD Dewitt: Cowboy Beans are, uh, red beans cooked in bacon and onions and a few
12 other specialties that I throw in there, green peppers and they're cooked in
13 with, you know, tomato paste and I think you've had them.
14

15Doreen Howard: Yes, I've had them. They were very good.
16

17Cheryl McQuaid: Hmm. Sounds good.
18

19Doreen Howard: [21:56] JD, are there any other fun stories that you'd like to share with us?
20

21JD Dewitt: Well I'm sure that there's a lot of them. I can't think of any one in
22 particular that is...you can probably think of some...[laughter]
23

24Doreen Howard: [Laughter]
25

26JD Dewitt: [22:17] Can you?
27

28Doreen Howard: You've been all over the plant. I...
29

30JD Dewitt: I wouldn't say there's any one thing that was...I've always tried to do a lot
31 of laughing. It makes the day go by and, uh, since the plant's gone down
32 I've probably laughed more every day with Jerry Morse and these guys
33 because we take time to laugh and, um, it's there's not a laughter, a lot of
34 laughter when plant, when this plant was operating and you come in at
35 4:30 in the morning and you've gotta push buttons and expect 28 miles of
36 conveyor to start up, especially when it's below zero and your paint shop
37 conveyors are full of paint and they don't want to start. I'll mention one
38 other person that I thought was, um, and I should mention him because he
39 was a great guy. It was Dale Faulkner in Paint. He, uh, was a great guy
40 and a hard worker and, uh, probably like me a little bit short fused, but ...
41

42Cheryl McQuaid: [Laughter]
43

44Michael Fleming: [Laughter]
45

46JD Dewitt: ... he always wanted to do the right thing.

1
2 Cheryl McQuaid: He was a good guy.
3
4 Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter. [23:33] Um, are there any, um, major successes that you
5 were really proud of while you were here, your time being here, or
6 something that you were really [inaudible 23:45]
7
8 JD Dewitt: I, I give all my credit to the workers who did the work. Yep, I'd give all
9 the credit to them. Sure, I may have a lot of ideas and things, but it takes
10 people to do it. I give all the credit to them.
11
12 Cheryl McQuaid: Well JD, I really appreciate this opportunity to interview you. Um, I
13 appreciate it. Thank you.
14
15 JD Dewitt: It was great.
16
17 Doreen Howard: I had one extra question. You said you started work at 4:30 in the
18 morning.
19
20 Michael Fleming: That was Doreen Howard.
21
22 Doreen Howard: Um, thank you. [24:21] What time did you leave here on a normal day?
23 How many hours would you work in a normal day?
24
25 JD Dewitt: Well, normally I would be coming in at 4:30, uh, Monday through Friday
26 and, uh, of course if you start that early you should finish early, but, uh,
27 back in those days it was common to work 10 or 11 hours a day and I
28 think for the first 7 years that I was here I mean it was rou, routine was 7
29 days a week.
30
31 Doreen Howard: That's a lot of hours. Alright.
32
33 Cheryl McQuaid: Thank you.
34
35 JD Dewitt: Okay.
36
37 Michael Fleming: We thank you sir.
38
39 JD Dewitt: Yeah. Thank you.
40
41 Michael Fleming: [25:03] Uh, JD, how was the, uh, your, in your view what was the safety
42 like in, in the plant?
43
44 JD Dewitt: Uh, I'd like to comment about the overall safety here at the Lansing Car
45 Assembly. I think it's, uh, probably as good as any, uh, safety, uh, policy
46 between the UAW and management is just incredible. They, they, they've

1 really worked and, uh, should take great pride in, uh, what they've
2 accomplished here with regard to safety, um, it's been, uh, a pleasure to
3 work in a plant where you people think about safety and I'm hopeful that
4 they will continue these practices on into their new plants that they're
5 building because it has been a lot of benefit to the people and to, uh, the
6 employees and contractors, uh, for working safely.
7
8Michael Fleming: You know, and I have to concur with you, uh, our safety record is second
9 to none, [26:13] although as a conveyor person I'm sure you've heard of
10 the incident that we had in the plant due to conveyors?
11
12JD Dewitt: Yes, I, I was working that day and, uh, an individual went up into 3X in
13 the Trip Shop in the Trim Shop area up there in 3X by the door line and
14 then, uh, went up on a lift and went up in between the trusses and the...
15 after break the conveyors start automatically and, uh, he was out of
16 position and ended up, uh, pushing him and his lift into a truss and it
17 turned into a fatality.
18
19Michael Fleming: [26:52] Uh, JD, that individual was, was he a outside vendor? Was he an
20 inside employee? Do you have [inaudible 26:59]
21
22JD Dewitt: No, he was...this was during these model new model new start-up time
23 from changeover to a new model and he was an outside contractor with
24 pipefitter. So, it's an unfortunate thing I know. One of the dark days for
25 me when you have a fatality.
26
27Michael Fleming: Certainly, certainly and we realize that, uh, we, we would never want that
28 to happen, but again I think, um, when we look at our overall record,
29 [27:32] what would you have to say about that?
30
31JD Dewitt: Well, I, I think if you look at Lansing Car Assembly and the organization
32 here with what UAW and management have done and the millions and
33 millions of hours that are worked and, uh, very few lost time accidents and
34 its, uh, it's taken a lot of work and it will continue to, uh, need, uh,
35 attention as they move forward into a new plant and they should, uh, just
36 keep doing what they've been doing.
37
38Michael Fleming: Well JD, I thank you for your comments because we really work hard at
39 safety at LCA.
40
41JD Dewitt: Thank you.
42
43
44/cv