

Lee Richardson III, an African American, discusses his career as a production worker and UAW member at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI

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5Doreen Howard: [recorder clicking] Uh, the-, Doreen Howard on with the Lansing Fisher
6 Body Historical Team. It is [clicking] October 17th, 2005. Um, we will be
7 int-, interviewing Lee Richardson. [0:14] Um, Lee, could you please state
8 your name and spell your last name and your address for the record?
9
10Lee Richardson: My name is Lee Vester Richardson III. My address is 2001 West
11 Kalamazoo Street in Lansing, Michigan [clanking] 48915.
12
13Doreen Howard: Um, can everyone [papers rustling] please state names for the record?
14
15Doug Rademacher: Doug Rademacher.
16
17John Fedewa: John Fedewa.
18
19Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter.
20
21Linda Johnson: Linda Johnson.
22
23Cheryl McQuaid: Cheryl McQuaid.
24
25Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming.
26
27Doreen Howard: And we are at the, uh, Lansing Car Assembly today doin' our interview.
28 [0:53] Um, let's start out with your seniority date. When did you hire in and
29 can you tell me a little bit about that very first day?
30
31Lee Richardson: Yes. Uh, it was September 17th, 1977, and I had a few classes to complete
32 my bachelor's degree and I heard that they were hiring over here. So I came
33 over and I got here a little late and the line stretched from the front a Fisher
34 Body, as we call it, from the front a Fisher Body all the – practically through
35 Verlinden Elementary School, and I said, "Wow," ya know? It looked like
36 an awful long line to me. So you know, I was younger back then, so I says,
37 "Well, I don't know if I wanna wait in line, that big long line. So I says,
38 "There's has to be somewhere closer in the front a the line that I know that I
39 can start a conversation with. [laughter] So I kinda jumped the line a bit
40 and, um, went in and, and made my application, and, uh, not only did I
41 apply here but I applied over, over at, uh, Oldsmobile also.
42
43 So I got called to work for both of them. So I was naïve. At the time, I had
44 started workin' at Fisher Body, and so I says – I got my letter from
45 Oldsmobile that says come in and take your physical and I was like, "Wow,"
46 you know? So I went over there and I was gonna work – and it was for the
47 opposite shift I was workin' at Fisher Body, so I went over, [laughter] I

1 went over, I said, "I'll work at Fisher Body at night and I'll work at
2 Oldsmobile in the day," you know? I was naïve. So [laughter] in the
3 middle of the, of the physical, the lady says, "Do you work at Fisher Body?"
4 I said, "Yes." She says, "Son, you can't work at Fisher Body and
5 Oldsmobile at the same time." I said, "Oh, I didn't know that." So that was
6 kinda, you know – but they were, uh, doin' a lotta hiring back at that, that
7 period of time. [laughter]
8
9 Um, my first impression was, when I got there, I th-, thought that the cars
10 were moving awfully slow, and everything looked real simple and easy to
11 do until I started doin' it. And, um, I, I'd look up and I'm a half a mile
12 down the line, you know? [laughter] So may-, maybe it is movin' a little
13 faster than I thought, ya know.
14
15 Marilyn Coulter: [3:44] Do you remember what your first job was?
16
17 Lee Richardson: Yeah. It was, uh, door wires; the wires that, uh, make the windows go up
18 and down, and all the electrical, you know, wire harness and stuff, and you
19 snapped'm and just ran it through the front and plugged it, you know, pop
20 the rubber conduit in and then you would reach in there and straighten the,
21 the, the wires out and snap'm in their appropriate positions, you know. And
22 they weren't really big on, on, um, equipment, [papers rustling] safety
23 equipment back then, [you know 4:20], reach your hand in there, and I had
24 scratches all up and down my arm, you know, I was first day.
25
26 Michael Fleming: [4:25] You were reaching your hand inside of...
27
28 Lee Richardson: Inside a metal door, ya know.
29
30 Marilyn Coulter: [4:30] Did you receive any safety equipment when you s-, when you first
31 started working?
32
33 Lee Richardson: A pair a gloves.
34
35 Marilyn Coulter: Pair a gloves? [4:35] No glasses?
36
37 Lee Richardson: And glasses. Yes. Glasses. And uh, I had somethin' really impressionable
38 that happened to me, um, and I was cured of, of not wearing glasses from
39 then on. Uh, a guy had a bundle full of, of, um, uh, molding, uh, aluminum
40 molding, and he turned like this, turned to his left, and I had my glasses on,
41 thank god, 'cause prior to that, you know, I would forget or sometimes
42 wouldn't wear it. I had'm on, and I – as he turned to the left, I turned to the
43 right, and I could see that, that metal comin' straight for my eye and I [see it
44 5:17] [tsk], ya know, stopped right on my glasses. I was like, "Ah," and I
45 was startin' right at that metal, and I was "Oh, thank you God for havin' my
46 glasses on." So, ya know, I was always a stickler for glasses after [a while

1 5:30], even later on, you know. Some guys thought I was kinda, ya know,
2 hard on'm about glasses when I was doin' [inaudible 5:38].
3
4 Michael Fleming: [5:38] So what department and shift was that on?
5
6 Lee Richardson: That was first – that was the second shift in the Trim Department.
7
8 Michael Fleming: [5:45] Is that where you stayed? How long did ya...
9
10 Lee Richardson: I've been in Trim my whole career, my whole time...
11
12 Doreen Howard: [Oh 5:50].
13
14 Lee Richardson: ...here. Yeah. Never had a desire to work anywhere else.
15
16 Doreen Howard: Hm. What...
17
18 Doug Rademacher: [5:56] Lee, where'd ya go to high school at?
19
20 Lee Richardson: J.W. Sexton High School.
21
22 Doug Rademacher: [6:00] And where's that located [to 6:02]?
23
24 Lee Richardson: On the west side of Lansing, right across the street from Fisher Body.
25
26 Doug Rademacher: [6:07] So you saw this place all through your high school days?
27
28 Lee Richardson: Well, ya know, it's, it's kinda funny, because actually this place has been a
29 part of my life for, I don't know, as long as I can remember, actually. Even
30 as a child, I used to walk over to Westside Field over here, which is acr-,
31 right across Saginaw here, and played, you know, little league baseball, and
32 we had to walk from Michigan Avenue all the way down, you know, to the
33 end of Fisher Body and on across, and we used to call it the longest building
34 in the world. You know, to a, [laughter] to a kid, you know, and you're
35 walkin', it didn't seem like we'd ever get to the end of it. They had
36 windows in the front of it, uh, back in those days, open windows. The guys
37 would hang out the windows, they'd throw us gum and stuff, you know.
38 [laughter] Well, we probably were beggin' for gum, but [laughter] they'd
39 throw us gum and – yup.
40
41 So and, um, uh, we m-, moved from, from across the expressway here to
42 closer to Fisher Body, ya know, along Kalamazoo Street. So I could see the
43 building, you know, from, from our house and from our backyard. So it's
44 always, it's always been around, you know, and so my life's kinda been like
45 one circumambulated – don't use that word – experience from – or I lived in
46 my house here, the high school, the parking lot ran up to my backyard, and

1 then right in front a that is Fisher Body. So, you know, it's always been
2 there.
3
4 Marilyn Coulter: [7:45] Outside of thinking that it's the longest building, was there anything
5 that you ever thought about the work that went inside the building?
6
7 Lee Richardson: I just knew they were building cars, you know. I never – uh, and then later
8 on, I never expected to actually work there. Ya know, that wasn't the, that
9 wasn't the program, you know.
10
11 Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm.
12
13 Lee Richardson: You know, um, but you know, it's been a blessing, though, uh, in, you
14 know, overall, ya know.
15
16 Marilyn Coulter: [8:11] Lee, what was it like growing up in an environment where there's a,
17 a, a factory right next to your house? Did it affect your yard, your house, or
18 your goings on in your community?
19
20 Lee Richardson: Well, the biggest thing that sticks out is the, back in the, well, it would have
21 to be late '60s, early '70s, was the smell, the paint smell.
22
23 Marilyn Coulter: [8:39] Can you describe it for us?
24
25 Lee Richardson: Kind of a sweet smell. It was s-, a s-, real sweet, sugary smell, um, in the
26 early days. You would think a lotta times that it was, uh – in the spring, you
27 would think that was apple blossoms or somethin' like that, okay, and as
28 time went on and different processes in the paint [throat clearing] got goin',
29 the t-, the smell changed, uh, from sweet to, yeah, I don't know, [caustic
30 9:11], uh, kinda chemically-type of smell, you know? And it wasn't
31 constant. Lot of it depended on which way the wind was blowin' and, ya
32 know, uh, whether – lotta times the clouds would keep the smell down so it
33 couldn't escape, escape or somethin', and it cha-, it turned to that. And, um,
34 I guess it was kind of, uh, we had one period there where there was an, an –
35 I would liken it to an acid rain experience where something in those
36 chemicals came, came down and landed on everyone's cars in the
37 neighborhood and pee-, actually peeled the paint. So, ya know, it was the
38 questions of, well, if it's peelin' the paint on the cars, I wonder what, uh,
39 kinda human, uh, damage it's doin', you know. Ya know, there, there was 3
40 or 4 guys along Kalamazoo Street that, uh, had can-, died of cancer and had
41 blood disorders, you know, and you kinda, you know, ya kinda wondered
42 was there any kind of a correlation – don't use that word – between the two,
43 ya know, so. [laughter]
44
45 Doreen Howard: [murmuring] [10:25] Um, you touched base on, um, your educational
46 background. You said you went to Western?
47

1Lee Richardson: Yes.
2

3Doreen Howard: [10:32] So how did you go from bein' in college to Fisher Body?
4

5Lee Richardson: Well, I had a couple of classes to complete at Western for my bachelor's
6 and, uh, I really needed some money too, and, uh, I heard they were [throat
7 clearing] hiring. So my, [throat clearing] my plan was to work at Fisher
8 Body, uh, for a period of 6 months to a year and make some money and go
9 back to school and finish my degree, but sometimes life becomes life, and I
10 remember my mother sayin', "You're gonna get hired in there and you're
11 not gonna complete your degree," and I told her, "Mom, I may not do
12 anything else in life, but I promise you I'll complete it," and I did. I was
13 workin' night and I was drivin' to Kalamazoo in the daytime, takin' classes
14 and studyin', you know, in between takin' some stuff to work and study at
15 lunch, lunchtime sometime or break time or whatever, whatever I could
16 squeeze in. And so it wasn't, [throat clearing] it, it wasn't in the plans to be
17 a, ya know, a career, uh, type of thing, but I remember the fellas, I told'm
18 my plans, and I says, "Well only gonna be here 6 months to a year." They
19 go, they said, "Oh no, you'll be here."
20

21Marilyn Coulter: [11:49] So what was your field of study?
22

23Lee Richardson: Well, communication arts and science and a minor in business marketing.
24 And, uh, so the guys said, "Oh, you'll be here." I said, "No, I won't." So
25 then I came to them and I told them I was getting married. They said, "Oh,
26 we know you'll be here." [laughter] Then I got married and my first child
27 came. And [throat clearing] they said, "Oh, now we know you'll be here."
28 So really, the, um, you know, the, the time, you know, the time just went by,
29 and the next thing I know, I looked up, you know, I had 10 years' worth a
30 seniority in here, and I says, "Wow," you know? [I'm free to leave 12:30]
31 with 10 years of seniority, you know. And I said, but, you know, I got 10
32 years vested, so I, I stayed, you know.
33

34Doug Rademacher: [12:40] Did you say your mother didn't want you to work at...
35

36Lee Richardson: No.
37

38Doug Rademacher: ...General Motors?
39

40Lee Richardson: No, she just thought I wouldn't – I would get distracted with the money
41 and-, that I was making and not complete, complete it, you know? They
42 were professional people, but they always figured, you know, an honest
43 living, whatever you're doin', if it was honest, there's nothin' wrong with it,
44 you know, and I always appreciated that, that and, um, and so.
45

46Linda Johnson: [13:07] What kind of jobs have you had here in the plant?
47

1 Lee Richardson: Well, well, mostly in Trim and Production, and, um, a little bit of, uh, I was
2 an EPG Leader at the time, Employee Participation Group Leader, um,
3 personal minister to some people, in a way. I'm on a little personal mission
4 of helpin' people, encouraging people and that kinda thing. Um, people felt
5 that they could come to me and confide in me and talk to me, and so. Um,
6 and also I've had, [throat clearing] uh, a couple a times where I was, [door
7 closing] uh, a supervisor and, um, so, you know, I've seen, [throat clearing]
8 I've seen, um, I've seen it from both sides, ya know. And I, I still get teased
9 about it and everything, you know. Uh, well, I always tell people that my
10 jury on that issue were the people that had, had worked, um, worked for me,
11 you know, and um...
12

13 Doreen Howard: [14:13] Tell a little bit about the transition that it took to go from a
14 production person – and you were a per diem?
15

16 Lee Richardson: Mm-hm. [throat clearing]
17

18 Doreen Howard: [Inaudible 14:21]...
19

20 Lee Richardson: Well, um, you, you see – first thing that dawned on me was that, you know,
21 you don't see the business side of, uh, of this, ya know, if you're hourly, you
22 know, you, you don't even have a clue. You know, you have, you have
23 conceptions of what, you know, you think the other side is like and, ya
24 know, it's kinda like anything else; until you've been there, you don't really
25 know, you know. And [throat clearing] some a the issues that management
26 had were legitimate, s-, and, uh, some a the issues that hourly had were
27 legitimate. So the, the, the problem sometimes was finding a balance
28 between the two and working it, workin' it out between the two, you know.
29 Uh, I always thought that they, they should have a program where hourly
30 people could shadow, uh, the supervisor for a week, maybe 2, and actually
31 let them, uh, participate in some a the things that, that they do and some a
32 the things that they go through. I think that that was – I always thought that
33 that would promote a better understanding between the two sides so that
34 they could see things [clinking] and, you know, vice versa. You know, let
35 them, let them come and, uh, work on the assembly line for, for a good week
36 and let them break [in 15:48] for 2 or 3 days, ya know?
37

38 Marilyn Coulter: [15:53] Lee, you had a chance to – an opportunity to work on both sides of
39 the table. Um, Lansing Car Assembly, Fisher Body, BOC has always been
40 commended for their outstanding workforce and their quality. What would
41 you attribute that to, being that you've been on both sides a the table?
42

43 Lee Richardson: I don't know, I think the biggest thing [throat clearing] is, um, I, I think it's
44 the tradition of craftsmanship and the work ethic of the, of the hourly
45 workforce. Uh, I think, I think this, this generation was raised in, uh, the
46 work ethic of if you're gonna be a ditch digger, be the best di-, ditch digger.
47 You know, I think all of our parents, you know, have told us that, ya know,

1 um, in one form or another, you know, and I think the work ethic and the
2 tradition of craftsmanship. And, uh, the relationship, also, uh, with the –
3 that union and management has had here, um, you know, it's – compared to
4 some other places and some a the other things you heard and stuff, the
5 people here, uh, tended, for the most part, to try to work together to, uh, put
6 out the best product that they could for, you know, the ultimate consumer.
7 You know, I think that's a...
8

9Marilyn Coulter: [Oh 17:22]. [17:24] Um, when you hired in, were there any special things
10 that happened to you as a new hire...
11

12Lee Richardson: Um.
13

14Marilyn Coulter: ...in terms of pranks, initiations?
15

16Lee Richardson: Mm, well, no, um, we were naïve and they knew it. They would just tell us
17 all kinda things; ya know, it's like, "Go get your turkey down at the garage,"
18 [laughter] that kinda thing. Uh, the discipline system, um, s-, discipline
19 proc-, procedure, to me, was – I – ya know, know it was kinda hard for me
20 to believe that [there was 17:59] – I thought that high school, the discipline
21 procedure in high school's a lot tougher than the one over here, and they use
22 a verbal, a verbal warning, a written warning, um, 3 days of somethin'. You
23 know, so I thought that that was kinda lenient. [laughter] Um, I said, "Oh,
24 they give you that many chances?" [laughter]
25

26Doreen Howard: [murmuring] [18:27] Um, so you said you always worked in the Trim
27 Department? Did you work in the same areas? Did you, uh, go from one
28 job to another?
29

30Lee Richardson: Just basically from one job to another. Ac-, when it was all said and done,
31 had just about practically done everything that, you know, could be done in
32 Trim Department.
33

34Marilyn Coulter: [18:46] Which role would you consider was your best job?
35

36Lee Richardson: Any job that involved every other car, you know, instead [coughing] [papers
37 rustling] instead of one car after another.
38

39Marilyn Coulter: [19:01] And why was that?
40

41Lee Richardson: Because you could, [papers rustling] you could, [coughing] you could pace
42 yourself. You could, uh, you could, you could get so proficient at your job
43 that you would do that car and you would have a gap of time in between.
44 My how things have changed, you know. Now you don't have time to –
45 every second is, is accounted for, you know; every step, every movement.
46

47Marilyn Coulter: Now your body doesn't have recovery time.

1
2 Lee Richardson: N-, y-, yeah, bodies are 51 years old now and they don't recover like they,
3 like they [inaudible 19:39], you know.
4
5 Doreen Howard: [19:40] So was that due to changes in processes that hap-, occurred in the
6 Trim Department that made, made the – so that you had less time to do your
7 job? Or what was the changes that happened within...
8
9 Lee Richardson: Well...
10
11 Doreen Howard: ...within the department that...
12
13 Lee Richardson: ...you know, I th-...
14
15 Doreen Howard: ...made it...
16
17 Lee Richardson: ...General Motors had quite a, quite a bit a people workin' for them, so
18 sometimes they had people, uh, you know, on top a people, and then as
19 times changed and with the [door squeaking] market, market-driven
20 economy that we [papers rustling] have and, uh, shareholders', uh, concerns
21 and stuff and, uh, the dollar being the bottom line, then it, uh – they cut out a
22 lotta people [chair squeaking] and they added work and, um, you know, it
23 basically, uh, sacrificed people's bodies for, you know, for the dollar,
24 shareholder concerns, and so.
25
26 Doreen Howard: [20:35] So the, the, the changes that were made, um, were not good for the
27 employees as far as...
28
29 Lee Richardson: [clicking] No.
30
31 Doreen Howard: ...the, the, the amount of work that they had to do increased?
32
33 Lee Richardson: Right. Physically, [clicking] [you know 20:50], faster. [clicking] Faster and
34 more work, you know, and repetitive and fast and – now Ergonomics came
35 in and it helped with, with some a that, though; that was really important.
36 You know, I, I used to put side-body moldings on and, uh, and put door
37 panels on, and another fella and I were talkin' about this the other day; I
38 said, "Man," I said, "can you believe that we used to put side body molding,
39 moldings on?" That we'd snap'm up underneath the hooks, and all we had
40 on was gloves, and we would take, we would take our hand and go pop, pop
41 and pop'm on with our hands, you know. You can imagine...
42
43 Marilyn Coulter: You had to use your hands...
44
45 Lee Richardson: ...what that...
46
47 Marilyn Coulter: ...as hammers.

1
2 Lee Richardson: ...was doin' to our wrists. Yeah, basically. And, uh, then they progressed
3 from that to they gave us these padded gloves. It had padding on it, you
4 know, but you're still – the force is still hit-, you know, jarrin' it, anyway.
5 So, Ergonomics was, was really, that was, that was great. Um, one early job
6 I had which I, I, I walked in on, it was, uh, putting wheelhouse moldings on,
7 the trim that went around the wheel, the s-, silver, aluminum, whatever,
8 chrome, and there was a, there was a metal floor and they'd have little carts
9 that were on the floor, and I walked up and I saw those guys sitting down on
10 those little carts down on the floor in the little metal runway and scooting
11 like that and rolling and I thought that was the funniest thing I had ever
12 seen, [laughter] down on the ground doin' that and the car goin' by and
13 goin' like that, you know. So this wa-, this was pre, uh, Ergonomic days,
14 you know, and, uh, they weren't into elevating the lines and that thing where
15 you [inaudible 22:38] [coughing] just stand up and as it came by, you know,
16 you could s-, actually just stand up and do your job. So I thought that was
17 kinda, kind of amusing. [laughter]
18
19 Marilyn Coulter: [Yeah 22:47].
20
21 Doug Rademacher: [22:47] Did you get to do that job?
22
23 Lee Richardson: Oh yeah.
24
25 Doug Rademacher: Oh, so you did do the scoot, scoot, scoot, with the...
26
27 Lee Richardson: Oh yeah, I... [background noises]
28
29 Doug Rademacher: ...with the little car?
30
31 Lee Richardson: [laughter] Yeah.
32
33 Doug Rademacher: About the size of a, uh, a shoe shine car. [laughter] I remember well myself.
34
35 Lee Richardson: [Yeah 22:59].
36
37 Doug Rademacher: With the clamps and the screws and...
38
39 Lee Richardson: Yeah, that was quite a, quite a job.
40
41 Doug Rademacher: [23:03] Lee, you are a black man. Uh, I would like you to share the
42 environment that you faced when you hired in. Was there, uh – were you
43 accepted or was there, uh, any challenges with the, uh, people, and has it
44 changed over the years that you've worked here?
45
46 Lee Richardson: Um, see, there were – th-, at the time I hired in, [throat clearing] there was
47 still a couple of, you know – there were a few [throat clearing] old school,

1 old school type of thinking, um, you know, [whites 23:46] that were in here,
2 guys, or good ol' boys as they would call'm, you know, as we would call'm,
3 and that was code for, you know, they, you know, a little prejudiced or
4 somethin'. You know, and some of it was just, it was just subtle things, you
5 know. Um, you know, just they would ask, "What time is it?" and you
6 might say, "It's, it's 10:12," and that might not be good enough and they
7 would turn to another – to a white person and say, "Well, what time, what
8 time do you got?" You know, I'd say, "Hey, I just told you it was 10:12."
9 Things like that. Um, I can hon-, I can say, for the most part, there wasn't a
10 lotta that; you know, just maybe little subtle things and stuff. Um, there
11 were some people that were my age and, you know, it was, it was a culture
12 shock for them, because some of'm were comin' smaller communities, they
13 had, had, had never had much, um, interaction with, you know, people of
14 color or anything.
15
16 So, you know, and I kinda, kinda just felt like, you know, it was, it was kind
17 of a opportunity to, you know, to educate or, or to teach and stuff, you
18 know. And then, I, I would just – I've seen people, um, turn around, uh,
19 recognize that, you know, where it's just a person, you know, um, but, uh,
20 there's, there's just – there was just – I would say there was just a lotta
21 subtle, subtle things, differences; uh, you know, the way someone would
22 look at you or, you know, or think you were, you know, dumb or somethin'
23 like that.
24
25 Marilyn Coulter: [25:33] Lee, in most a your departments that you worked in, [coughing]
26 were you ever – at ever times the only person of your race working in areas?
27 Or did you get to work...
28
29 Lee Richardson: Uh...
30
31 Marilyn Coulter: ...with a lotta people like yourself?
32
33 Lee Richardson: ...no, most-, usually it was just either like 1 or 2, you know, blacks in a
34 department. Uh, and maybe a, maybe a Mexican person or somethin'. But
35 no, it was mostly – it was, you know, pretty much just either couple of us,
36 you know. I used to – actually, I used to, I used to count how many, how
37 many black people [or somethin' 26:13] and I wouldn't, I wouldn't just start
38 with my department, but I would start from Trigger Point all the way to the
39 end a the line, and I would, you know, [call up 26:21] with the whole of
40 maybe about 8, 10, 12 at the most, and I remember gettin' in a discussion
41 with a Caucasian fella about – and this was back when the, the quota thing
42 was comin' up, you know, there was a big issue of quotas and stuff and, and
43 just giving, you know, blacks jobs to meet the quota and so forth and said,
44 told him, I says, "Look at this whole Trim Department." I said, "It's not
45 quotas." I says, "No one's takin' anyone's job," and stuff. I said, "I don't
46 see a whole lotta black people up and down this line," ya know? [coughing]
47

1 Marilyn Coulter: [26:58] Do you think that there's much of a change [throat clearing] [today
2 26:59]?
3

4 Lee Richardson: Um, no, not really. Um, and there – I'll – there's a number of factors, I, I
5 would think, that, that would probably lead to that, and I know there were
6 some that had opportunities but didn't stick, and, um, it's, uh – the numbers
7 are, are down, you know. Um...
8

9 Marilyn Coulter: [27:25] But by and large, after 28 years, not much has changed.
10

11 Lee Richardson: No, no, not really. No.
12

13 Michael Fleming: [27:31] Um, back to you said Trigger Point. Why don't you tell us what
14 Trigger Point is? To the end a the line. And you mentioned 12, um, that
15 you counted 12 individuals. Out of a number of how many?
16

17 Lee Richardson: Oh, geez, I don't know. There's, there was about, what, 6 – they had about
18 6 departments with about 40, 30 or 40 people to a department, so about –
19 we'll just say about 300 people in all a Trim or somethin' [clicking] and, uh,
20 12 blacks out of 300 and...
21

22 Female: [Inaudible 28:04].
23

24 Lee Richardson: ...maybe, maybe 12. One time it was...
25

26 Female: [Inaudible 28:06].
27

28 Lee Richardson: ...below 12, 'cause I was keepin' count, you know. And, um, you know, no,
29 uh – we've, we've made some gains in this country, um, you know, race
30 relation-wise, but we still have a, a long way to go. A lot of, uh, racism a
31 lotta times is not, [throat clearing] isn't, is not overt racism but it's, it's, it's
32 could be covert racism or underneath racism. Um, and then a l-, some of it
33 is it's not that people are out to be mean or anything, but [throat clearing] a
34 lotta times, the-, you know, if you are pickin' someone for a job or
35 somethin', it's quite natural to pick someone who is like you, you know,
36 who looks like you and that kinda thing, ya know, and you might overlook
37 someone that doesn't look like you, you know. Uh, and so I think that's a
38 part of it too, you know.
39

40 Doreen Howard: [29:07] Now you came in in '77. Um, was there a lot of females here at that
41 time?
42

43 Lee Richardson: Uh, there were, there were a few, and more of them came, I think, [inaudible
44 29:23] [throat clearing] started coming more and more into the workforce
45 and stuff, you know. I, I could relate to them, because they were, you know,
46 in a sense, a minority too, and, uh, they had to deal – they had different
47 issues which they had to deal with. Not only were they a minority group but

1 they were also a w-, uh, they were also women, you know. And, uh, a lotta
2 your misconceptions of what a woman is like or what a woman could do, ya
3 know, came into play; sexism came into play. Uh, but, uh, they, uh, they
4 were good workers. They worked just like any man, ya know?
5

6Doreen Howard: [30:07] Um, were you ever involved in any layoffs or any strikes in the time
7 frame that you were here?
8

9Lee Richardson: Ya know, one strike, I got-, uh, I've only been laid off I think maybe twice
10 in all that time, and there was one strike that lasted for a few days, if I'm
11 correct. Uh, this workforce has, has, has been lucky, uh, compared to a lotta
12 other ones. And there's not been very long periods of work, not for our
13 group, anyway, the [77s 30:42] group, a work stoppage, you know.
14

15Marilyn Coulter: [30:46] Have you gotten many s-, um, longstanding relationships from
16 inside the plant insof-, insofar as friends?
17

18Lee Richardson: Yeah, um, uh, I'd say a couple, yeah.
19

20Marilyn Coulter: [30:59] And what are some a the types of things that you do outside of
21 work?
22

23Lee Richardson: Well, I'll go, go over and actually go actually see'm outside a here; ya
24 know, play golf with some people, actually, you know, go to their house,
25 you know, saw their children grow up, you know, but usually it's just [your
26 31:20] – it's pretty much through a few, few [inaudible 31:23].
27

28Marilyn Coulter: Mm-hm. [31:24] Did, um, where you work at, did they have dinners? How
29 do they do their holidays? What types a things happened in your area?
30

31Lee Richardson: Well, it's always been kind of like a, a family, you know, and we had
32 dinners, someone's birthdays. People h-, around here always, you know,
33 wanted to recognize a person's, uh, you know, birthdays and, you know, if
34 there's – if they had a child, you know, they made sure – if there was a death
35 in the family, you know, and...
36

37Marilyn Coulter: [31:56] What types a things would they do for people when they had deaths
38 in the family?
39

40Lee Richardson: Well, um, they would, um, go around and collect, uh, money and put it in a
41 envelope with a card, you know. Not just in our department, but they would
42 go all over and "Did you know so-and-so's dad died?" You know. That's
43 what they did for me when my father passed. You know, I told'm they
44 didn't have to do it, I didn't want the money, [throat clearing] but, uh, it, it
45 was, it was a nice gesture.
46

47Doreen Howard: [32:31] So everyone treated everyone as family?

1
2 Lee Richardson: Yeah, pretty much, yeah. I, I had my 50th birthday party. I came in and,
3 and [throat clearing] there was a table with crockpots and baked beans and,
4 and chicken breast and, uh, vegetables, so I says, “Huh.” I says, “Now ain’t
5 this somethin’? Um, they coulda told me they were havin’ a dinner; I
6 woulda brought somethin’.” [throat clearing] And then I went to my, [throat
7 clearing] went to my bench and they had a button about somebody bein’ 50
8 and they had the black balloons above my [laughter] – and you coulda
9 bought me for a nickel. Ya know, I was like, “Aw,” you know. And, uh, I-,
10 really, I was, I was really touched, you know. My eyes almost watered.
11 [laughter] Well, they did, but I didn’t want anybody to see that. [laughter]
12 I’m such a softie, you know. I’ll cry at a drop of a dime and stuff. So yeah,
13 that was, that was really touching, you know, all day long, you know, and
14 that was just, that was – I just thought that was outstanding that they would
15 think so much of me to go through all that trouble to have such – [that was
16 an 33:38] extravagant birthday party for me, yeah.
17
18 Michael Fleming: [33:42] Lee, I’d like [throat clearing] for you to talk about some a the things
19 you do, um, outside of Fisher Body just for a moment. You did say some
20 things earlier, but [throat clearing] you are a member of a fraternity...
21
22 Lee Richardson: Yes.
23
24 Michael Fleming: ...and you do things with kids, if I’m not mistaken. Would you...
25
26 Lee Richardson: Yes, I...
27
28 Michael Fleming: ...talk about [that 34:02]?
29
30 Lee Richardson: ...I’ve been involved with Big Brothers and Big Sisters and stuff, and I’ve
31 had a couple of, of, um, of, of children and, um, tried to have a positive
32 influence on their life and, uh, we used to keep in touch but I haven’t,
33 haven’t heard anything within the last couple years, but they, you know,
34 they graduated from high school, both, both the young men graduated from
35 high school, uh, didn’t get in, into any legal trouble, ‘cause both of’m were
36 from single, you know, single-parent household, and they graduated, and
37 one went to the military and stuff and [background noises] seemed to have
38 done fine in life. That was a, that was a good experience. I’ve been a
39 Commissioner on the Martin Luther King Holiday Commission; I did that
40 for a number of years, and appointed by the mayor to go be on that
41 commission, worked with that. Uh, and, um, currently I’m president of
42 Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated. It’s the, uh, oldest black
43 [curricular 35:08] organization.
44
45 Um, started – it was started in 1906. We will be celebrating our 100th
46 anniversary next year. It was founded at, uh, an I-, at an Ivy League school,
47 Cornell University in Ithaca, New York by 7 young, black, uh, black males,

1 uh, who saw a need for banding together t-, basically for comr-, uh,
2 comradery and basically to survive, you know, the academic world back
3 then, ya know, and there weren't – uh, I think there were – there weren't
4 that many blacks in colleges back in 1906, you know. There were only, uh,
5 I think, uh, maybe 1,000 at that time. And so, um, we worked with a group
6 of young men called Gentlemen of Distinction, and we run them through
7 modules on everything from resume writing to personal responsibility
8 [coughing] and things like that, and, uh, that's, um, good. I've been on, uh –
9 I was a Westside Neighborhood Association, um, board member and
10 actually I was on when, um, they were, um, we were tryin' to work out a
11 compromise with General Motors, uh, about the air quality, uh, and working
12 with the neighborhood, uh, with that, and um, that was an interesting
13 process.

14

15 Um, they, uh, they, they worked fairly well with the neighborhood and, um,
16 you know, but it, it wasn't, it wasn't, you know, automatic or easy, but we
17 thought that they should live up to their corporate responsibility that they
18 had to the neighborhood, and since they, uh, instituted those, those – uh, the
19 new smoke stacks or, or stacks that emit the, you know, the, the stuff into
20 the air, uh, it's been markedly, um, different and pleasant; almost
21 undetectable. But, you know, I always wondered why, ya know, why, if you
22 knew that was a problem, why would ya take so long to do it and why would
23 you have to be prodded to do it, you know? Uh, bottom line, it's money,
24 you know. Everything's money.

25

26Michael Fleming: [37:35] Back to the fraternity real quick. Don't you all give awards out
27 yearly?

28

29Lee Richardson: We give, uh, [throat clearing], um, Martin Luther King, uh, Citizenship
30 Award to, ya know, outstanding students that have contributed to the
31 community and community work. Um, we give a scholarship to, uh,
32 Davenport University to students that are matriculating from, from, um, high
33 school or, or, um, [adult ed. 38:04] to, uh, Davenport University and LCC,
34 you know, uh, and that's what we do.

35

36Marilyn Coulter: [38:12] Lee, given the fact that you're a resident of this community, that
37 you've grown up with Fisher Body, Lansing Car Assembly in your
38 neighborhood, how do you feel as a resident knowing that this building, that
39 this longest building is gonna be leavin' your neighborhood?

40

41Lee Richardson: Well, for me, it, it's, it's, it's nostalgic, you know, and it really didn't dawn
42 until a few weeks after we shut down, May 6th, you know. I started kinda
43 lookin' at the place kinda like, you know, reminiscing and, uh, and it's
44 funny because once it was over and you looked at the building and you
45 started reminiscing, it was interesting that you didn't think about the, the,
46 you know, the bad things that, that happened or tough times that you had in
47 it or interpersonal wars that you had with some supervisors or individuals on

1 the line, you know. All of-, all I thought about was, was the g-, were the
2 good things, you know, and I thought that was good that if you could – after
3 28 years you could – you were leavin’ and you’re only thinkin’ about, you
4 know, the good things that happened, you know. I thought that was, that
5 was good. Um, I’m lookin’ forward to s-, to them developing [that 39:34]
6 and, uh, workin’ with the neighborhood and, uh, comin’ up with something
7 that will be good, you know? S-, maybe some type of mixed housing, you
8 know. I was talkin’ to a gentleman that’s aspiring t-, for a certain political
9 office yesterday about that, and I really hammered home with him that, you
10 know, ask the people what they want.

11

12Doreen Howard: [40:00] What’s your favorite [throat clearing] memory?

13

14Lee Richardson: My favorite memory? Of being here? I don’t know if I have any one
15 [throat clearing] particular favorite memory, um, but just a collection of, uh,
16 of good memories. Uh, I think the relationships that, you know, I’ve had
17 with, with, with people here and stuff, uh, and some a the conversations that
18 you’ve had, uh, s-, uh, some – uh, the support, there was really a lotta
19 support here, really. Uh, if you had problems or challenges, you know,
20 maybe at home or with your children or something, there were people here
21 that, you know, you knew who you could actually go to. Uh, uh, you say,
22 “Well, come on, man,” you know, “let’s, let’s, let’s go out to lunch and
23 we’ll talk about it,” you know, uh, that kinda thing.

24

25Michael Fleming: [41:08] I wanna ask you a question. Y-, y-, you graduated from Sexton,
26 which is right next door, and after you were here for a period of time and got
27 comfortable with the plant and knew your way around through Trim ‘cause
28 you never went anyplace else, was there ever a time that you found yourself
29 on the roof or in the windows watchin’ any a the football games or any a the
30 sports activities [inaudible 41:29]?

31

32Lee Richardson: [laughter] Yeah.

33

34Michael Fleming: [41:31] Can you talk about that? Explain to us how that worked.

35

36Lee Richardson: Well, if you went up in 3X and stuff and you could go out on the roof and,
37 uh, look over at Sexton High School and watch, watch the game, ya know. I
38 had a bet with an East Lansing – person who worked here from East
39 Lansing and we’d go out there and look and see what the score was, you
40 know, and, uh, you, you could tell what was happening [inaudible 41:56]...

41

42Michael Fleming: [41:56] Were there more than 1 or 2 people watchin’ the game?

43

44Lee Richardson: Yeah, there’d, there’d be a, there’d be a f-, a n-, a number of people up there
45 watching, [chair squeaking] you know. You’d go and watch as long as ya
46 could and you’d go back and do what ya had to do and you’d come back out

1 and check out what the score was, you know. But it's a, that's a, it's a large
2 area up there on the roof.
3

4Michael Fleming: [42:20] So they got – did that became a Friday tradition [inaudible 42:23]?
5

6Lee Richardson: Yes, it, it was, it was. It was a tradition. Go and – and th-, then, um, some –
7 ya know, you had people here that children went to Eastern, so the Eastern –
8 when Eastern was playin' over there, the Eastern crowd would go up on the
9 roof and look over there, see what the score was. [laughter] Or if a Waverly
10 student, whoever was playin' each other, you had a representative from each
11 school up there, you know, watchin'.
12

13Doug Rademacher: [42:48] Well, Lee, you, you said you looked out the window. Have ya ever
14 thought back about the people – this plant's been here since 1922 and the
15 school's been there for quite some time [papers rustling], and, uh, you grew
16 up in the school. Did you think about the people that looked out the window
17 at you and here you looked out the window at the youngsters today, and this
18 plant's gonna close. There's, there's gonna be nobody lookin' out the
19 window at those kids and there's, ya know – you didn't recognize as an
20 opportunity for a job, you didn't say you ever planned on comin' here, but...
21

22Lee Richardson: Mm-hm.
23

24Doug Rademacher: ...what's, what's your thoughts on that [inaudible 43:28]?
25

26Lee Richardson: Well, that's a, that's a different world that we live in, live in now, you know.
27 [throat clearing] Um, just overall, you know, every-, everyone wasn't meant
28 to go to a, to a 4-year university and go through that process, and actually,
29 um, in the future, that's really not, really not the route to go unless you're
30 really specialized or if you're goin' into business. It's really maybe not –
31 you might not wanna go into business, unless your daddy owns a company;
32 then you can do that. But the world has changed so much now, ya know?
33 It's like, uh, that book [beeping] by Friedman [beeping] called The World is
34 Flat. Now, with all the changes in technology and everything and, uh,
35 business-wise, uh, world is not just, uh, a local economy or a national
36 economy but it's a world economy, you know? And, uh, who knows, 'cause
37 we're in the early stages of it, you know, where it's headed, you know,
38 whether there's either opportunities or threats; depends on how we want to
39 look at it.
40

41 But the jobs in the future are in trades, and whether you're a plumber,
42 millwright, electrician, uh, building, uh, construction, uh, these are the jobs
43 of the future; technical and trades. And we're not talkin' about little money,
44 either; ya know, we're talkin' money that what's considered, you know,
45 middle income earners on upward would be making, you know. Yeah, I, I
46 feel for the children, though. I do, ya know. There's not – they just can't
47 [throat clearing] just go and make, ya know, this kinda money, ya know, and

1 for long periods a time, you know, if it, if you – there has to be some
2 training or schoolin' involved somewhere, ya know? It's tougher on them, I
3 think, than it was for us.
4

5Doreen Howard: [45:31] Is there anything at all that you can think of that you wanna share
6 with us before we wrap things up here?
7

8Lee Richardson: [throat clearing] No. Um, [throat clearing] it's, um, been fortunate to, to
9 have a job, um, that's it may not always been what you want it to be or may
10 not a been too glamorous or anything, but, uh, overall, it's, it's been a g-, it's
11 been a good experience, and, and I've just been blessed to work with a lotta
12 good people; uh, ya know, they more than make up for, you know, some a
13 the other people [clicking] that you may not have had, you know, as, as
14 good of experiences with [at your work 46:16], ya know. It's really – but I
15 think the biggest thing that sticks out above everything else to me, uh, are
16 the people; ya know, salt of the earth, hardworking people with good work
17 ethic, caring people, and I think that's what has, has kept this workforce
18 buoyed is, is that – the support that, uh, the people and the individuals in
19 here that, that we've kept each other buoyed up, supported each other.
20

21Doreen Howard: Thank you.
22

23Lee Richardson: Yup.
24

25Cheryl McQuaid: Thank you, Lee. [background conversation]
26

27Michael Fleming: Thanks, Lee.
28

29Marilyn Coulter: Thank you. [recorder clicking]
30
31
32/rt