

1 **Ken Slate discusses his career as a production worker, skilled trades electrician**
2 **and UAW member at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**
3
4

5Doug Rademacher: Hello. This is Doug Rademacher. I'm with the Fisher Body Historical
6 Team and we are interviewing Ken Slate today. It is, uh, October 10th,
7 approximately 10 minutes to 10 in the a.m., and we are in the Labor
8 Relations Conference Room of the Fisher Body Plant. Good morning, Ken.
9 [0:26] Would you please state your name, address for the record?

10
11Ken Slate: Uh, Ken Slate, 2205 West Tamarack Road, Lake Odessa, Michigan.

12
13Doug Rademacher: [clicking] [0:37] Are you married?

14
15Ken Slate: Yup.

16
17Doug Rademacher: [0:39] Do you have any children?

18
19Ken Slate: Three kids. Five grandkids.

20
21Doug Rademacher: [0:46] And your years of education?

22
23Ken Slate: Uh, got a BS in education from Central.

24
25Doug Rademacher: [0:56] Central being Central Michigan University?

26
27Ken Slate: Yup.

28
29Doug Rademacher: Okay. [0:59] And did you have any military service?

30
31Ken Slate: No.

32
33Doug Rademacher: Okay. We're going to, uh, ask questions about your life or the history of
34 your life at Fisher Body. [1:09] I'd like to ask you about your hiring in. Do
35 you, uh – would you share your seniority and your hire-in date?

36
37Ken Slate: Uh, I hired in in September '76. I, um, I actually moved back to Michigan
38 [tapping] from Florida and was gonna go to teaching [tapping] and I found
39 out they were hiring here, [tapping] so I applied and they hired me the
40 following week. So I started out [tapping] on the line, up in Trim, on the old
41 Cutlass line.

42
43Doug Rademacher: So ya hired into Trim. That's the department in which you hired in. [1:46]
44 Which shift did ya hire on to?

45
46Ken Slate: Uh, second shift.

47

1 Doug Rademacher: [1:52] Can you tell me about your first day on the job, walkin' into the
2 plant?
3

4 Ken Slate: Uh, that seemed kinda massive to start with. Like I'd try to memorize how,
5 how to get to where I was supposed to go the next day, but the, uh – it was
6 different. I'd never, never been in a factory before, so. Little scary, I guess.
7

8 Doug Rademacher: [2:17] Do you remember your first job? What assignment did they put ya
9 on?
10

11 Ken Slate: First ass-, well, I don't – I think they moved me around just a little bit, but
12 then the first job they wanted me to learn, really, was, uh, put the rubber
13 tape on the windshield of the Cutlass.
14

15 Doug Rademacher: [tapping] [2:33] So what was the purpose of the rubber tape?
16

17 Ken Slate: Well, the rubber tape [tapping] at that time held back the urethane and
18 [tapping] keep the water out when you install the windshield. [coughing]
19

20 Doug Rademacher: [2:46] The, um, area, did, did it have robots at that time?
21

22 Ken Slate: No robots.
23

24 Doug Rademacher: [2:52] So it was all done manually?
25

26 Ken Slate: All manual.
27

28 Doug Rademacher: [3:01] Did you, uh – I heard you just say that you came from Florida, and
29 something about teaching? Can...
30

31 Ken Slate: I taught in Florida for 5 years; mathematics. Couple years in junior high and
32 3 years in a senior high. Decided to come back to Michigan 'cause I'm
33 from here.
34

35 Doug Rademacher: Okay.
36

37 Doreen Howard: [3:22] Did you have any relatives that worked here?
38

39 Ken Slate: No.
40

41 Doreen Howard: [Mm-hm 3:28].
42

43 Ken Slate: I had a relative in Lake Odessa. That's how I ended up there.
44

45 Doreen Howard: [Mm-hm 3:31].
46

1Ken Slate: I grew up in Hesperia. It's over, uh, north of Muskegon about 20 miles.
2
3Doug Rademacher: [3:43] So tell us about, uh, the department in which you worked. You said it
4 was – it sounds like the urethane area.
5
6Ken Slate: Uh...
7
8Doug Rademacher: What were the people like? Did they treat you – when you were new, were
9 – did they treat you, uh, friendly or what was the atmosphere in which you
10 found yourself working?
11
12Ken Slate: People were friendly. Uh, the one funny thing I remember is there was a
13 lady there that was ex-military, and apparently it was her job to check the
14 new guys' bellybuttons. [laughter] Or maybe all the new hires, I'm not sure,
15 but [laughter] I don't – that just a jokin' around thing they did, I guess.
16 She's still here. I, I don't know where she's assigned to, but she...
17
18Doug Rademacher: [4:30] You remember her name?
19
20Ken Slate: I can't remember her name.
21
22Doug Rademacher: [4:32] Did she check your bellybutton?
23
24Ken Slate: She checked everybody's bellybutton. [laughter]
25
26Cheryl McQuaid: [4:36] Is that Sarge? Nancy?
27
28Ken Slate: Yup, that's who it was. She's still workin' here, isn't she? I...
29
30Cheryl McQuaid: Yeah.
31
32Ken Slate: ...saw her not long ago.
33
34Cheryl McQuaid: Yup.
35
36Doug Rademacher: So again, so you had, uh – that must a been interesting [laughter], for
37 someone to want to see your bellybutton. [laughter] Here you thought you
38 were comin' to build vehicles. [4:57] Uh, do you remember which vehicle
39 you started building?
40
41Ken Slate: Cutlass.
42
43Doug Rademacher: Cutlasses? [5:05] Did ya ever purchase a Cutlass?
44
45Ken Slate: No, I don't think I've ever had a Cutlass.
46

1 Doug Rademacher: Just wondered if you built the product that you made. [5:15] Um, tell me
2 about, um – you said you hired in on the second shift. Lake Odessa, uh, is
3 about 30, 40 miles out.
4

5 Ken Slate: Yeah, about 45 minutes.
6

7 Doug Rademacher: [5:26] So what was it like to work the second shift and your family life?
8

9 Ken Slate: I didn't see the kids much during the week 'cause they would be off to
10 school still [chair squeaking] when I left and in bed asleep time I got home.
11 That was kinda hard on them, I guess, but I made pretty good money to
12 make a livin' on, so.
13

14 Doug Rademacher: [clicking] 'Kay. [6:02] Did your, uh, time in the plant – you had a place –
15 we had a time when we changed, uh, names from Fisher Body to the BOC.
16 Do you remember that time? And what was your feelings when ya lost the
17 name Fisher Body? Did it have an impact on you?
18

19 Ken Slate: You still had to call it Fisher Body or nobody'd know what you were talkin'
20 about, so it really didn't matter. Ya still call it Fisher Body if you want
21 somebody to know exactly where you were.
22

23 Cheryl McQuaid: [6:33] How long did you do the urethane job?
24

25 Ken Slate: Mm, I would guess a coup-, well, no, I only did it until I got my 90 days in,
26 'cause then I got laid off for the weekend or somethin', and then I leveled
27 off and ended up in the Body Shop, Grind and Solder, 50, 50-grit or
28 whatever they called'm. Uh, stayed right there until, uh, return rights got
29 me outta there, got me back to Trim.
30

31 Doug Rademacher: [7:07] So were you glad to have return rights back to Trim or did...
32

33 Ken Slate: I was glad to get outta there, yeah. The next morning after I first run that
34 machine I couldn't open my hands up. You had to pry'm open with your
35 other hand.
36

37 Doug Rademacher: [7:19] So'd ya ever think about the people that worked that job on a day-to-
38 day basis compared to you up in the urethane department?

40 Ken Slate: Yeah, I after I left. Ya had to have regular, uh, blood tests to make sure
41 there wasn't s-, lead in your blood and [chair squeaking] had to wear a hood
42 with air blowin' on ya. I didn't like the job, but...
43

44 Doreen Howard: [7:40] For the people who don't know what [papers rustling] that booth is
45 and what you actually do in there, could you describe the booth and the

1 protective equipment and things that you needed to have in order to go into
2 that booth and what the people actually did in there?
3
4Ken Slate: Outside the booth, they put hot solder on the seam between the quarter panel
5 and the roof. It's about, uh, probably a foot long. And then the – soon as
6 you got into the booth where you had [chair squeaking] – well, ya had water
7 underneath and then air cyclin' down through it that tried to suck the lead
8 outta the air, and the first job was to run a 50-grit sander and try to shape it
9 some, and then the next job was, uh, fire sand to get it more of a finished
10 look. You had to wear a hood, came down below your waist, and then ya
11 had to hook it up to an air outlet and it blew air for ya to breathe inside. I
12 know when I first did it, it blew the air right in my eyeballs and dried'm out
13 so bad they were all scratchy. I thought somethin' was in there, so I ended
14 up goin' down to the hospital and had it all checked out. There wasn't
15 nothin' in there; it was just dried out from the air blowin' on it.
16
17Doreen Howard: [8:54] So this is definitely not a job that was a highly, uh, sought after job.
18
19Ken Slate: Job that somebody would get off of as soon as you had the chance to get an
20 opening or something. One a the pranks they used to do in there was to put
21 a little water where you hook up so when ya hooked up ya got sprayed right
22 in the face. People thought it was funny, I guess. I don't know.
23
24Doug Rademacher: [9:18] Did ya ever do that to anybody? Payback?
25
26Ken Slate: Uh, yeah, I think I paid people back probably. [laughter] Wasn't like a
27 floodwater, but enough to – where ya had to take the hood back off and dry
28 things out so you could see.
29
30Doug Rademacher: [9:34] So they'd heard that your eyes were dry down at the hospital so they
31 somebody put a little water in your hose, huh?
32
33Ken Slate: Fix ya up, yup. [laughter]
34
35Doug Rademacher: Oh. So you were glad to get back to Trim. [9:45] Did you go right back to
36 the, uh, the sealer or did you just get return rights back to the Trim
37 Department?
38
39Ken Slate: Just back to Trim Department.
40
41Doug Rademacher: [9:51] Then what'd you do?
42
43Ken Slate: Um, first job after I got back I think was when they – that first area where
44 they came outta Paint; somethin' to do with wiring or – either wiring or, uh,
45 that molding that goes on the outside edge a the door. I'm not sure which

1 one I got first. Not long after that, I ended up on Utility so I could move
2 around and not do the same thing all the time.
3
4 Doug Rademacher: [10:21] You volunteered for that or were you put on that?
5
6 Ken Slate: Volunteered for that.
7
8 Doug Rademacher: [10:25] So you went for variety so you weren't doin' the same thing?
9
10 Ken Slate: Somethin' to kill the boredom, yeah.
11
12 Doug Rademacher: [10:32] So I know that, uh, it says here that you had moved into Trades after
13 a few years, but can you tell me, when you were on the line, what was the
14 best job you had on the line?
15
16 Ken Slate: Best job. [tapping] I don't know what that would be.
17
18 Doug Rademacher: Could you tell me your worst job?
19
20 Ken Slate: Worst job. Worst job, I guess, was reachin' in the doors and tryin' to hook
21 things up in there 'cause it was sharp. But, uh, all – no matter what job you
22 got on, after you were on it for a while, it got pretty boring and your mind
23 goes somewhere else and they ya wonder if ya did that job, so ya have to run
24 back, look, and – [laughter] you've probably done that before, haven't you?
25
26 Doug Rademacher: Oh, definitely. [laughter] Always start second-guessin' yourself. If, if you'd
27 gain a few moments ahead, you had to wonder whether you did that last job.
28 That's, uh – definitely. [11:32] Did you, uh, experience the wagon? Was
29 that here when you, uh...
30
31 Ken Slate: They had the wagon, yeah. Shut the line down and go buy somethin' from
32 the wagon.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: [11:42] Can ya share a little bit about that? Lotta people in the – lot of
35 assembly plants and people that are gonna listen to this, uh, don't
36 understand what that was.
37
38 Ken Slate: It was just a total shutdown on the line so everybody could take a break all
39 at one time, and the cafeteria people had little carts and brought it out with
40 sandwiches and sweet things and chips and whatever they could get on there
41 they thought you might like. [scratching] It was kind of a good idea, I
42 thought.
43
44 Cheryl McQuaid: That's kinda pre-vending machine days.
45

1Ken Slate: Yeah, you didn't lose your money in the [laughter] [inaudible 12:22] and not
2 getting [anything 12:22] back for it. [laughter]
3

4Doug Rademacher: [12:26] Um, you said a moment ago about getting your 90 days in. Were
5 you under any stress at that time prior to getting your 90 days? Was there
6 ever a time where you were, uh, led to believe you might not get your 90
7 or...
8

9Ken Slate: Several times, 'cause they kept bringin' over someone to learn my job so
10 that then they could lay me off, but they brought over the wrong people and
11 they had too much seniority; they didn't have to take that job. They'd go
12 somewhere else and then [they'd 12:57] start again.
13

14Doug Rademacher: [12:59] What's the significance of 90 days?
15

16Ken Slate: In the union, locked into a job, unless there's a big layoff or somethin'.
17

18Doug Rademacher: [13:11] Did you ever have a layoff?
19

20Ken Slate: Well, I actually got laid off after I got my 90 days and had to level off,
21 ended up in the Body Shop, but I didn't lose any time. I got laid off
22 changeovers and stuff when I was on Production. What else did I take? I
23 took a voluntary layoff one time on the Trades, but that was only like a
24 week. I've never missed more than a week or two I don't think.
25

26Doug Rademacher: [13:41] So was there ever a break in your seniority?
27

28Ken Slate: Nope. Kept right on goin'.
29

30Doug Rademacher: [13:49] And did ya ever take part in a strike?
31

32Ken Slate: Yeah, we were on strike, what, part of a week that time? That's the only
33 time I remember. I know it didn't get to my turn to walk the picket line; we
34 were back to work already.
35

36Doug Rademacher: [14:09] Do you remember the cause of the strike?
37

38Ken Slate: Contract, I guess. Um, I don't know what the big issue was then.
39

40Doug Rademacher: [14:21] What was your feelings about going on strike? Did you support it or
41 were you against?
42

43Ken Slate: No, I supported it.
44

45Doreen Howard: [14:32] You said that you, um, went from the Production over to the Skilled
46 Trades arena?

1
2Ken Slate: Mm-hm.
3
4Doreen Howard: [14:41] Um, what is your trade and how long have you been in that arena?
5
6Ken Slate: Electrician of 24 years.
7
8Doreen Howard: [14:51] Are you still actively...
9
10Ken Slate: [banging] Still an electrician...
11
12Doreen Howard: ...an electrician?
13
14Ken Slate: ...yeah.
15
16Doreen Howard: Okay. [14:54] So y-, are you getting additional training at this time to, uh,
17 go to the Delta?
18
19Ken Slate: Training and the meetings on new equipment. That's what they got us doin'
20 now.
21
22Cheryl McQuaid: [15:08] Were you a fac-, are you a Facilities electrician or are you out of a
23 s-, particular department?
24
25Ken Slate: Right now I'm GA. Didn't have enough seniority to go to Facilities. There
26 are only, uh, like 3 on each shift or somethin' [at the new plant 15:23].
27
28Cheryl McQuaid: [15:23] What is GA?
29
30Ken Slate: Trim.
31
32Cheryl McQuaid: [Inaudible 15:26].
33
34Ken Slate: General Assembly. Trim, chasse, filing. My area's gonna be, uh, Wheel
35 Room and, uh, Filing Line. Unless they change their mind before that.
36
37Doreen Howard: [15:39] How, how will your job change, um, in comparison to what you did
38 here in the facility, um, compared to what the expectations are at the new
39 facility?
40
41Ken Slate: Well, it's back to troubleshooting again. I spent, uh – after I got outta the
42 apprenticeship, I started out in the Body Shop on the, uh – laid out side
43 frame with a guy named [John Phillips 16:07]. He's retired now. And then
44 I went to the – they tore that out and I switched to a trunnion side frame
45 system. I was there the whole time that was in, and they tore that out. Then
46 they went with, uh – oh, what'd they call that third system? And it's just a

1 side frame [thumping] area and they had carriers that moved the parts
2 around instead of, uh, instead of the trunnion system. Worked there on
3 several different [cars 16:39] and then I got off a that into the building
4 maintenance part, which is the [chair squeaking] Facilities. Did that for 5 or
5 6 years, and now I'm back on a Production job again. [tapping] Facilities
6 has less stress to it. You're not holdin' the line up. Everybody's wantin'
7 you to get it done right now, right now. Kind of a different atmosphere, I
8 guess.
9

10Doreen Howard: [17:09] When you s-, talk about, um, the Body Shop and the trunnion and
11 the side frame areas and things like that, um, could you tell me a little bit
12 about the work that you did there versus what you mean by Facilities
13 maintenance and the type of work that that particular group did?
14

15Ken Slate: The Body Shop stuff was all keep it runnin', keep it runnin' so production
16 can keep goin'. Workin' with robots and automated machines, and the first
17 line had hydraulic robots and then, um, kind of a rail system that lifted up
18 and picked up the side frame and shuttled down and lowered back down,
19 and, and that, that was just, uh, all production, how to keep it running, how
20 to make it bang 60 an hour out without fallin' apart all the time, beefin'
21 things up, makin' it so it didn't rub, learnin' what repairs you had to do on
22 the robots. Sometimes it was just a matter of where to kick it to keep it
23 goin'. [laughter]
24

25Doug Rademacher: [18:12] When you say that, knowing that, uh, Lansing Car Assembly was
26 [chair squeaking] one of the highest productivity plants in America, how
27 could that – ya know, looking at the way you said, uh, where ya had to kick
28 it to keep it runnin' or – did ya ever think about what it must be like to work
29 in some other plant that if we were the, if we were the best and highest
30 productivity, how could that possibly be?
31

32Ken Slate: Yeah, that crossed your mind quite a bit sometimes. People go out
33 somewhere and then they come back and say boy, they're glad to be back,
34 it's just a mess over there [thumping] where they went. [thumping] And ya
35 knew what kinda mess you were workin' with, you – it was kinda hard to
36 understand.
37

38Doreen Howard: [18:56] And, um, you said you moved into the Facility Main-, in
39 Maintenance. What exactly is Facility Maintenance?
40

41Ken Slate: Building Maintenance is, uh, runnin' pipe and pullin' wire to, to install
42 things. It's, uh, [tapping] lighting, it's, uh, [papers rustling] some trouble
43 caused with the pipefitters on pumps and things that aren't workin', but
44 mostly it's not related to production, unless it's a, uh, ceiling [chair
45 squeaking] light or, or somethin' like that, but it's, there's nothin' that holds
46 the line.

1
2Doreen Howard: [19:30] So in the, um, electricians' arena, a Facility Maintenance would
3 probably be one of the more preferred jobs?
4
5Ken Slate: High seniority.
6
7Doreen Howard: [Thank you 19:42].
8
9Ken Slate: I, I didn't go for a long time [banging] because if I was the low-seniority
10 over there with all the high-senior, [banging] then I'd be the one shipped out
11 [thumping] to cover somebody that was gone or somethin', so I just stayed
12 in the Body Shop. [background noises]
13
14Doreen Howard: [19:54] Now, did you work as a team in your group or as a grou-, as – or
15 more than two people or were you, uh, working alone with maybe another,
16 uh, Skilled Trades...
17
18Ken Slate: On the...
19
20Doreen Howard: ...at another, from another arena?
21
22Ken Slate: ...first assignment at the Body Shop, there was two electricians that worked
23 together [chair squeaking], plus a pipefitter and a toolie. And the next
24 assignment we had, I think we started out with 4 or 6 electricians and time I
25 left, there was only 3, along with a pipefitter and the millwright, or a toolie.
26
27Doreen Howard: [20:31] And that was for the whole entire Body Shop? [banging]
28
29Ken Slate: Just...
30
31Doreen Howard: Or just for your particular...
32
33Ken Slate: ...just for my area.
34
35Doreen Howard: ...area?
36
37Ken Slate: Just my area.
38
39Doreen Howard: [20:37] And, and how many areas, uh, as far as production area, [banging]
40 how many s-, actual supervisors' areas did you cover under your area?
41 They – did they have like...
42
43Ken Slate: Just one production supervisor.
44
45Doreen Howard: W-, just one production supervisor? Okay.
46

1 Cheryl McQuaid: [20:56] So you didn't have to like maintain all of the Body Shop; it was just
2 one specific area.
3

4 Ken Slate: Just – well, yeah, it was just one side a the car we built. Most a the time it
5 was on, um, we built the right side. [thumping] The left side was just a flip-
6 flop of it.
7

8 Doreen Howard: [21:11] And how many groups like that, like you were involved with, how
9 many different groups was there for one whole department?
10

11 Ken Slate: You got left and right side frame, that's 2 different areas, and you got 2
12 different lines [thumping], so you got 4 just side frame areas, and you got
13 the 2 car [banging] track areas. I never worked in [banging] underbody.
14

15 Doreen Howard: [21:39] So you're talkin' about quite a few...
16

17 Ken Slate: Quite a few...
18

19 Doreen Howard: ...[quite a few people 21:42].
20

21 Ken Slate: ...areas, [background noises] yeah.
22

23 Doreen Howard: [21:42] Now, will that change? Will the numbers change when you go out
24 to the Delta Plant or are they gonna continue to do the same as far as, uh,
25 working in groups and having, um, as many groups?
26

27 Ken Slate: I think the Body Shop's set up the same, but it'll only be one line this time.
28 But I don't know how they're dividin' up 'cause I'm not out there yet.
29

30 Cheryl McQuaid: [22:08] Do you have a favorite partner? And why do you have partners?
31

32 Ken Slate: Uh, a lotta times you have a partner because you got one person out there
33 movin' somethin' and somebody else lookin' to see if it's makin' a
34 difference over here, see if you're getting' a signal back or – besides, it's
35 [background noises] safer in case somebody gets hurt if you got somebody
36 else right there. Plus you got a 2-heads-better-than-1 idea. And it depends
37 on the size of the area too. Sometimes one guy just couldn't cover it,
38 couldn't be there. [chair squeaking] Different thing about the Trades and,
39 uh, [chair squeaking] Production arena is the better you do your job, the
40 better it runs, the less they need you. [banging] So if you worked all the
41 bugs outta somethin', pretty soon you lose a man and ya keep workin' bugs
42 out and ya lose another man and – just the way it is, I guess.
43

44 Doug Rademacher: [23:07] Is that in Trades or Production?
45

1Ken Slate: Trades. Production probably does too [inaudible 23:12] get jobs moved
2 around so that it [chair squeaking] works better.
3

4Doreen Howard: [23:20] You said that you work as, um, together as partners for safety. Has
5 – have you, in your time here, um, experienced any, um, thing at all that
6 would relate to the safety, either n-, good or bad, I guess, um, things that
7 may have [thumping] happened in your experiences?
8

9Ken Slate: Knock on wood, I've never been hurt, but, uh, I did put a production
10 manager's hair out, got the fire out of it one time. Those hairdos that are
11 poof things, full a hairspray. It was burnin', so I...
12

13Doreen Howard: Oh no.
14

15Ken Slate: ...used my glove and [thumping] patted it out, and I think she ended up with
16 a little burn on her neck.
17

18Cheryl McQuaid: Oh, I had heard about that in the Body Shop, because of all the sparks.
19

20Ken Slate: Yup, a spark got in that hair. Uh...
21

22Doreen Howard: Caught her hair on fire. Hm. [laughter]
23

24Doug Rademacher: I'm sure she's grateful. [laughter] [24:18] So you'd notice, uh, an increase in
25 the interest of safety over the years from when you first hired in?
26

27Ken Slate: A lot more safety conscious than they [inaudible 24:29]. Uh, lot more that
28 they insist you lock things out instead a just wantin' ya to get it fixed right
29 now, worrying about safety later. [thumping] There's a lot more – way more
30 safety conscious than they ever were.
31

32Doug Rademacher: [24:45] Is lockout something that they do in every department or can you
33 explain what lockout is and, and how that, uh...
34

35Ken Slate: Lockouts just...
36

37Doug Rademacher: ...[inaudible 24:54]?
38

39Ken Slate: ...put a little lock on somethin' so it can't move, [thumping] blockin' out the
40 air and electricity, or puttin' a post in so s-, gravity can't make it – let it
41 drop, so you can't get pinched or electrocuted or [inaudible 25:12].
42

43Doreen Howard: [25:13] As, as an electrician, have – do you know anybody that's ever had
44 problems with being electrocuted or somebody forgetting to turn, ya know,
45 [clicking] things off and – or anything like that? Have ya ever seen
46 anything like that?

1
2Ken Slate: Well, let's see. There was a contractor who got hurt pretty bad on a bus he
3 was workin' on and then come back from break and it was hot. There was
4 another one that was installing a bus plug and got a hot bus and that blew up
5 on him.
6
7Doreen Howard: [25:45] Wha-, what is a bus?
8
9Ken Slate: Bus is your 480 volts runnin' along in the ceiling, you know, all over the
10 shop that you hook all your power to. The rules are now you can't hook a
11 bus plug up with the bus hot. It's gotta be shut off. It used to be you would
12 megger the, the bus plug and put it in hot. That's the way everybody did it.
13 They went from everybody doin' it hot to you didn't have to do it hot unless
14 you wanted and you had to wear a suit, and then now we're sayin' don't do
15 it hot at all; shut it off. If nothin' shorted out there was no problem, but if
16 somethin' shorted, either between the two, two a the wires or to ground, it'd
17 make a big fire and melt things.
18
19Doug Rademacher: You could become the, uh, conductive...
20
21Ken Slate: Yup.
22
23Doug Rademacher: ...component, huh?
24
25Ken Slate: You could get a big ball a fire come right at ya.
26
27Female: [thumping] [Inaudible 26:39].
28
29Ken Slate: But I never did that [inaudible 26:42].
30
31Doreen Howard: [thumping] [26:45] There's a lot of, lot of danger inherent to y-, to your job
32 if you are not, um, aware of your surroundings and, and keeping up with all
33 the proper safety?
34
35Ken Slate: Mm-hm. Can be dangerous.
36
37Doug Rademacher: [27:03] What was your feeling about working with, um, women and
38 minorities?
39
40Ken Slate: I never had any trouble workin' with women or minorities, really, if they
41 could do the job. The – there were women teachers when I was teachin',
42 there was always women in college when I went. It wasn't, uh, an ingrained
43 thing or somethin' I was used to not bein' around women or anything.
44
45Doug Rademacher: [27:34] Did you consider your coworkers brothers and sisters, as the union
46 calls them?

1
2Ken Slate: Yeah, brothers and sisters or close friends. Pretty much.
3
4Jerri Smith: [27:50] How long do you plan on working? Do you plan on retiring in the
5 near future or do you plan on keep on working?
6
7Ken Slate: Well, I'm thinkin' 3 to 5 years more. I'll only be 58 when I get my 30 in
8 next year, so somewhere between there and 62 probably take – unless I'm
9 havin' too much fun or somethin', I guess. [laughter]
10
11Doreen Howard: [28:20] Is there any, um, special [banging] friends or relationships [banging]
12 that you've devel-, developed over your time frame here that you've, um,
13 extended out-, to do activities outside of the plant with some of the
14 coworkers?
15
16Ken Slate: I've got a few friends here. Some I just see occasionally, others do projects
17 together and – or how are-, some a them are in Lake Odessa and help each
18 other out when we have somethin' goin'. Get together and visit'm. Got
19 kinda close to John Phillips. He was the first journeyman that I worked with
20 after I finished my apprenticeship. Taught me a lotta stuff about the
21 welding; how to run weld cables and things you could change on a weld gun
22 to make it work better.
23
24Doreen Howard: [29:14] W-, when you first, um, [banging] became an electrician, did they
25 have any, [banging] um – oh, can't think of the word...
26
27Doug Rademacher: Initiation.
28
29Doreen Howard: ...yes, initiations that, that they pulled on the, uh, [papers rustling]
30 electricians? Was there somethin' that they did to [papers rustling] the new
31 ones coming in or something that, ya know, they told ya to go look for a
32 particular, um, job or a particular area and there was no such thing or, or, or
33 any kinda pranks or things that they did to anybody?
34
35Ken Slate: I don't remember being pranked a whole lot. I know that John Phillips that I
36 worked with for so long, he always knew who was jumpy and who wasn't
37 and he liked to make'm jump. He would come up behind somebody and
38 touch'm, and the one guy used to say "chingawa" just real loud, and I never
39 did [inaudible 30:11] what it meant but [laughter] he would yell that out,
40 and then they would have a snake, he had a little snake that was, uh, wood
41 and it was wiggly and he would make different people jump. One guy he
42 would touch on the throat and he would say somethin' and stick his tongue
43 out real quick. He knew everybody that had any kinda little twitch like that,
44 would get'm whenever he got a chance. [laughter] He'd take a roll a tape
45 and roll it down, then it'd come hit somebody in the foot and they'd jump up
46 in the air and they would just switch [inaudible 30:42] do that too.

1
2Doreen Howard: Mm-hm. [30:47] Was there, um, anything s-, at lunchtimes? I know a lotta
3 groups on the line would get together and, and have, um, bible studies or
4 cards or, um, book clubs or, ya know, different things like that. Was there
5 anything that you were involved with at lunchtimes, ya know, that outside
6 of...
7
8Ken Slate: Um...
9
10Doreen Howard: ...the norm?
11
12Ken Slate: ...c-, doin' crossword puzzles...
13
14Doreen Howard: Crossword...
15
16Ken Slate: ...[inaudible 31:16]...
17
18Doreen Howard: ...puzzles?
19
20Ken Slate: ...different people. Played cribbage for a while. Some kinda card game, but
21 I don't remember what it was. We'd play at lunchtime and different crews
22 would play, and after a while, there would be computers sometimes you'd
23 play games on it.
24
25Doreen Howard: Mm-hm.
26
27Ken Slate: I learned that solitaire is not really [banging] solitaire in Skilled Trades
28 'cause everybody helps ya [laughter] [inaudible 31:39]. You don't really
29 play it alone.
30
31Doreen Howard: [31:43] And did you guys have, um, dinners and things like that where you
32 guys would celebrate? Maybe somebody's birthday...
33
34Ken Slate: Retirement dinners we had a lot.
35
36Doreen Howard: Retirement dinners? Mm-hm.
37
38Ken Slate: Ended up, probably the last 6 or 8 years, helpin' organize'm; orderin' the
39 food and deciding what to do and run and get paper plates and collected
40 money for it.
41
42Doreen Howard: [32:08] So, so that wa-, so re-, a retirement dinner was somethin' that most
43 of the employees would go through? You would contact their family
44 members and have'm come in for the day and, and...
45
46Ken Slate: Somebody else actually did that part, but yeah.

1
2Doreen Howard: [32:24] So they, they were able to see where their family member worked
3 and...
4
5Ken Slate: Mm-hm.
6
7Doreen Howard: ...the friends that they had...
8
9Ken Slate: Family and some a their friends...
10
11Doreen Howard: ...[made over time 32:32].
12
13Ken Slate: ...and their wives used to come in, and then they'd take'm around and see
14 different areas and visit with everybody.
15
16Michael Fleming: [32:41] Ken, I wanna switch gears here and ask ya a couple questions, uh,
17 about your time here at General Motors from your time you started.
18 Obviously you're an educated individual. What made ya stay at GM, uh,
19 versus going into your, back into education? Um, did – as a tradesman,
20 when until you're recently, I'm sure, ya had to work overtime, we-, and I
21 want ya to talk about the overtime that ya worked, the days on the weekend,
22 if it was Saturdays and Sundays, and, um, I'd also like to know about, um,
23 the benefits that you have now versus those when ya had when ya came in,
24 the differences in those benefits.
25
26Ken Slate: Hm. I don't think the health insurance is as good as it used to be. Used to
27 be if you had Blue Cross, you were covered, but now you gotta make sure
28 the right person does it and you got to, ya know, check ahead a time to
29 where you're gonna pay it or find out how much you have to pay. I don't
30 think it's the same as it used to be. When I hired in on September, I thought
31 I'd be back teachin' school by Christmas. You know what I'm s-, I didn't
32 ever get back. [laughter]
33
34Michael Fleming: Never made it, huh?
35
36Ken Slate: Never made it back, nope. Um, for one thing, I was makin' more money,
37 and then when I got off onto the Trades and got rid a some a the boredom of
38 the 60-an-hour stuff or even better, but I did work a lotta overtime. I've
39 drawn 5 or 6 years [chair squeaking] of 1 or 2 days off, 3 days off a month,
40 maybe. Work 7 days, 7 days. Just, um, [automatically 34:33].
41
42Michael Fleming: [34:34] At the height of your overtime, uh, what would you say was the
43 most you made yearly? What your yearly salary would've been.
44
45Ken Slate: Right around 80,000, 85,000, maybe.
46

1Michael Fleming: That's kinda hard to beat, isn't it?
2
3Ken Slate: Yup, kinda hard to beat that money.
4
5Michael Fleming: Yeah. [34:52] Um, changeovers. Were you workin' changeovers, as well?
6 What'd, what'd, what, where have we come from, where we used to be with
7 changeover to a rolling changeover? Can ya talk about that?
8
9Ken Slate: When I first worked Production, we always got time off in the summer; got
10 4 to 6 weeks off. I'd go to Florida and visit the wife's family, and come
11 back and the garden's all weeds, of course, and, uh, probably after I got
12 [chair squeaking] 4 years in, and then I – part a the gettin' on the Trades was
13 you could work a changeover, and I worked like 10 weeks for 7 days a week
14 with the electricians as a helper. Bought my wife a real nice guitar and a
15 case with some a that money. [laughter] Remember that. But, uh, that's
16 sorta how I got on. I took the – they have a test you take, and then when I
17 worked the changeover, I could take the test again and, uh, I got all the
18 points I could get on it the second time, and then I think I waited another
19 year or 2 before they added enough people on so I could get out. And what
20 was the other part a that? There was more to that question [too 36:07].
21
22Michael Fleming: Um, we, we talked about the benefits parts already. Um, you pretty much
23 covered...
24
25Cheryl McQuaid: Difference in the changeovers, what the changeovers are like now.
26
27Ken Slate: Oh. Well, the changeovers are shorter now. Rolling changeovers [inaudible
28 36:23], but once you're on the trades, that's – you don't get the time off
29 anyway, and that's when you have to work more, so. I don't know what the
30 new plant'll be like. If we're gonna work 5 days, 3 shifts, it seems like
31 we're gonna have to work weekends, but you always hear'm yellin' too
32 about they don't wanna pay overtime, so. It's hard to compare 'cause the
33 last 5 years, I don't think they did much maintenance in this building
34 anyway; they'd let it go, let it go, let it go. Plus, if it was gonna stop the
35 line, they didn't do it. Sayin' they're not gonna do that at the new plant,
36 they're gonna keep things runnin' good, but money gets tight, they cut
37 Trades, they cut your overtime, just let it go till it breaks, until it starts to
38 hurt'm, and then they'll – "Oh, we gotta work you guys now." Kind of a
39 cycle thing that they go through, where you get a new manager and he's
40 gonna save a buncha money by not workin' Skilled Trades, and it works for
41 a little while, and everything falls in a basket somewhere and say "no, we
42 can't do that." Usually that manager's gone by then, [tapping] so a new
43 manager comes in and he takes the brunt of all the overtime he's gotta work
44 to get caught up again.
45

1 Michael Fleming: [37:46] So am I hearing you say that there are times when your preventative
2 maintenance schedule comes around and [chair squeaking] you didn't, you
3 didn't perform that [papers rustling] duty?
4

5 Ken Slate: That's true. There'd be things when you did your inspection, it'd be on the
6 list this time, it was on the list last time, and it was on the list before that;
7 just didn't get on the list to be done. They've done a lotta that. [Inaudible
8 38:15]...
9

10 Doug Rademacher: [38:15] Did you ever do anything special for somebody? Uh, did they,
11 somebody ask a favor of you either from Production or some project that
12 they were doing at home that you were able to help them with through the,
13 ya know, the knowledge of your trade?
14

15 Ken Slate: Yeah, I've done things like that. I had a buddy that wired his own garage,
16 and all – turned the lights on and they were all just a little glow. [laughter]
17 He wired'm in series instead of in parallel, so you get [inaudible 38:42]
18 [coughing] to each one and you don't have any light, really. But it was
19 kinda funny. Another friend wired a switch up and put [coughing] hot wire
20 on one side a the switch and a neutral on the other, and every time ya threw
21 the switch it broke the breaker, so it never did go to the light or wherever it
22 was goin' to. There was always somebody who needed an extension cord,
23 somebody's machine didn't do quite like they thought it should [chair
24 squeaking] so you'd go watch it, see if you couldn't make it work better for
25 them. Or the coffee pot they plugged in kept blowin' the breaker, so ya
26 found a new circuit for it so it didn't blow the breaker. Or they needed a
27 buncha power 'cause they were gonna fry up a bunch – we used to – they'd,
28 uh, make BLTs every now and then. They'd get 10 pounds of bacon, a
29 bunch of tomatoes and lettuce, and a buncha toasters goin', and they had to
30 make sure you had enough circuits to hold all that.
31

32 Doreen Howard: The important things in life.
33

34 Ken Slate: Yeah. [laughter] Yup.
35

36 Doreen Howard: Yeah. [39:45] Was it a common occurrence here to have people bring in a
37 lot of items and, and have...
38

39 Cheryl McQuaid: Cook?
40

41 Doreen Howard: ...breakfast or lunches or...
42

43 Ken Slate: Yeah.
44

45 Doreen Howard: ...things that [inaudible 39:58]?
46

1Ken Slate: It's quite common. Get together and cook somethin' and all eat together,
2 everybody'd either chip in some money or bring somethin', or help get it
3 ready, or – that was fun. Paint Shop did a lotta that, and I did quite a bit of
4 apprentice time in Paint Shop. They, they were always celebratin'
5 somebody's birthday here or somebody's bringin' cake in. DeLuca's pizza.
6

7Doreen Howard: Oh yeah.
8

9Ken Slate: Can't beat that. [laughter]
10

11Doug Rademacher: That was the easy way out, wasn't it?
12

13Ken Slate: Yeah.
14

15Jerri Smith: My favorite.
16

17Doug Rademacher: Throw in and...
18

19Ken Slate: That was the easier retirement, was pizza.
20

21Michael Fleming: [40:33] Ken, talk about how long it took you to – in apprenticeship to finish
22 your apprenticeship and finally get your card.
23

24Ken Slate: I did the 4-year apprenticeship in about 3 and a quarter years, I think, 'cause
25 we had lots a overtime during that time. When I did the apprenticeship, you
26 worked your 8 hours and you did, went to school in the evenin', or if you
27 were on the afternoon shift, you could go to school in the daytime, but the
28 way they do it now, they, they just leave work, go to school, come back to
29 work. It's all different. It really wasn't – the classes you had to take wasn't
30 as structured when I went either. We, [papers rustling] we went over and
31 took a bunch of electronics classes that weren't even on the list at the time
32 and somebody okayed it. I guess now they got a more, uh, fixed program
33 for what classes ya have to take, when you have to take'm; tightened up a
34 little bit. Probably some people in there didn't take what they should've so
35 they decided they had to get the reigns on with that. But at that time, you
36 went to LCC and took your classes at night. There was another two
37 electricians and a pipefitter and I all kinda ended up over there at the same
38 time; go grab a bite to eat after work and get to class after that, get together
39 and study some.
40

41Michael Fleming: [42:04] You – talk to me about your future, the future of, um, uh, Lansing
42 Delta Township Plant. What do ya – what's, what's your feeling about the
43 future of, of, of, uh, the old Fisher Body employees, especially the
44 tradesman, going into, to LDT?
45

1Ken Slate: Uh, I know they're gonna try to run lean. They're gonna try to do what they
2 always [banging] did to Production; they're gonna run with so few people
3 they can't run and then they'll decide they have to have more than that.
4 They've never done that with Trades pretty much before. They kept enough
5 Trades on to do the job. But they – some a the plans that they have, they,
6 they're sayin' they wanna rotate people around and they're not gonna have
7 enough extra people to be able to do that, so I don't know how they're
8 gonna do that part. Um, but they are doin' the training, sendin' a lotta
9 people to all the schoolings. [So that'll help 43:06].
10
11Michael Fleming: Do you feel as, um, an employee from this plant moving into a new plant
12 that we're fortunate to be in that situation?
13
14Ken Slate: Oh yeah. Real fortunate to have a job to go to instead of bein' out there in
15 the area hire or wonderin' where you're gonna have to move to to make a
16 living. The tradespeople, they, they, they try to s-, work in teams, but
17 tradespeople have worked in teams forever, and they've problem-solved
18 forever; that, that's our job. But they'll send us to the same schools that
19 they send production to, but, I mean, if you have a problem when the line's
20 down, you're not gonna go make a graph or, or make a flow chart and try to
21 figure it out; they want it goin' right now. So some a that really doesn't
22 apply, except for maybe a, a long-range problem. But the – we've done that
23 before, tradespeople, yeah. Probably Production has too. If somethin is
24 buggin'm on a job, they're gonna try to get it changed. I – what's weird for
25 me is they keep sayin' that we've got the best tradespeople and the best
26 production people of the whole world and now they wanna say "But you
27 can't do it the way you used to. We're gonna take this Japanese GMS stuff
28 and you're gonna do it that way." Whether it works or not we'll see, I
29 guess. How can they be so good and now you gotta do it different? That's
30 like pattin' ya on the back and kickin' ya in the ass at the same time.
31 [laughter] [Inaudible 44:40]. But you play the game.
32
33Michael Fleming: Oh sure.
34
35Doreen Howard: [44:48] [Inaudible 44:48], um, since you were into the Building
36 Maintenance and that arena, how do you feel about what's going on around
37 us at this point, the, with the plant closing down and everything being
38 removed and, ya know, what's your feelings about that?
39
40Ken Slate: It's just...
41
42Doreen Howard: [I mean, how 45:09]...
43
44Ken Slate: ...kinda sad to see it go, but you realize there's gonna be a day when you
45 drive down Verlinden and the building's not even gonna be here. That – I

1 think that's when it's really gonna hit ya, [somethin' happen 45:18]
2 different, it's gone. It's just an end of an era, I guess.
3
4Doreen Howard: Mm.
5
6Ken Slate: Start over again somewhere new. I'd get work like we made this work.
7
8Doug Rademacher: [45:36] What was your funniest moment? Did ya have a moment, either on
9 Assembly or in Trades, that, uh, was humorous enough to – that you hold
10 with ya? Somethin' that happened was funny?
11
12Ken Slate: Other than that bellybutton check, I guess. [laughter] That's the one that
13 stuck in my mind, and the, and all the people that John Phillips would make
14 jump and wiggle and giggle and move around 'cause they were twitchy.
15 Pretty much all that sticks in my mind, I guess.
16
17Doug Rademacher: [46:14] Can you share your happiest and your saddest moment of bein' in
18 this facility?
19
20Ken Slate: Happiest and saddest. I guess I don't know what that would be.
21
22Doug Rademacher: Might not a had one. [laughter]
23
24Ken Slate: [Inaudible 46:33] but I can't think of one right now. [banging] [banging]
25
26Doug Rademacher: [46:39] Did you attend union meetings as a...
27
28Ken Slate: Just some a the special Skilled Trades ones where they had information for
29 votes coming up, and I know I went over there with, uh, [throat clearing] his
30 name was [Art 46:56], [Art Prociuous 46:56]. They just called him Art the
31 Old Fart. I went over to one a those meetings with him and I walked in
32 with him, so I just [background conversation] – and he filed right up to front
33 and he grabbed one a those vote things and filled it out and set it down and
34 he left, so I did the same thing; missed the whole meeting.
35
36 Lotta [banging] the meetings for that kinda thing were more bickering and
37 stuff. If they'd a just handed out an information sheet, I coulda made the
38 vote without listenin' to everybody's bitchin' about it, but I sat through quite
39 a few a the – 'cause I know when they, uh – we used to have [Weemers
40 47:32] in the Body Shop that did the welder maintenance and separate from
41 electricians, and we [chair squeaking] voted 3, 4 times. We kept votin' until
42 we voted the way management wanted to, which was to get rid a Weemers
43 and had just electricians, which just burned them a little bit, but that's the
44 way they wanted it. [banging] 'Cause when ya lost [banging] the Weemers,
45 then you lost – the electricians couldn't touch the water [chair squeaking]
46 and pipe-fitting stuff and ya had to have a pipefitter and an electrician, and

1 somebody else, maybe a toolie or somethin', to do one job where a **Weemer**
2 did it, all that, one group. Somebody in management decided they didn't
3 want'm. I don't know, the union must a went along with it 'cause we kept
4 votin' until we voted it out.
5
6 Doug Rademacher: Just couldn't get it right, huh?
7
8 Ken Slate: Yup.
9
10 Doug Rademacher: [48:21] Now, those **Weemers**, they came out of, uh, a different facility. We
11 didn't have **Weemers** in Lansing originally. Is that right? [tapping] Didn't
12 they bring those guys out of, uh, [throat clearing] Willow Run?
13
14 Ken Slate: We had **Weemers** here when I hired in, but I don't think it was an [banging]
15 apprenticeable trade. I don't know where the **Weemers** had come from, but
16 I know they brought electricians in and they took **Weemer** jobs, but we
17 didn't really have **Weemer** apprentices, and then some people we got from
18 other places were, were **Weemers** by trade and we just made'm electricians.
19 They just waved a wand and said, "Now you're an electrician." Some of'm
20 actually had to be trainees for a while.
21
22 Doreen Howard: [49:05] What is a **Weemer**?
23
24 Ken Slate: Welder Maintenance.
25
26 Doreen Howard: Welder Maintenance, okay.
27
28 Ken Slate: They worked on everything from the, um, transformer or somethin' down to
29 the end a the weld gun. They worked on the water, they worked on the
30 electrical part; whatever need to be done to keep the welder welding.
31
32 Doreen Howard: Thank you.
33
34 Doug Rademacher: [49:28] What would you say to somebody that's just hiring into General
35 Motors if they got the opportunity? What would your message be to a new
36 person in Trades?
37
38 Ken Slate: Uh, new person in Trades. I'd just try to work as safe as you can and, uh,
39 some people, too, that are in Trades don't get along with Production people.
40 I don-, I don't know why they do that, and Production people know that too.
41 I don't know if they think they're better than they are or what, but pretty
42 soon Production – when you go up, the machine's down, there's a guy there
43 that runs it all day long. It didn't make no sense. He could tell ya what's
44 wrong with it, and he could usually tell ya how to fix it if you listen, but
45 some people, they don't want anybody tellin'm their job 'cause they, they're
46 an electrician. [laughter] But just work with people, I guess. Be open-

1 minded. They're gonna keep trainin' ya, they're gonna keep gettin' new
2 stuff. Keeps it kind of exciting, I guess. Keep goin'.
3
4Doug Rademacher: [50:45] Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add to your interview?
5 It's been wonderful, and I just wondered, did we miss anything that you
6 would've liked to share?
7
8Ken Slate: Just been great workin' here, pretty much. It's, um – after you've been here
9 a while, you – the, there's waves of "we're gonna do this" and another wave
10 "we're gonna do that" and then it's dropped, and, and now the new wave is
11 GMS, and how far they go with it we'll find out. I think the place runs
12 because of the people want to make the job better. I don't think it runs
13 because of anything management does. Everybody – Production's got a
14 problem, you go try to help'm with it if you can, and it ends up makin'
15 things better. I don't think it's a big secret. It's mostly people workin'
16 together.
17
18Doug Rademacher: Well, thanks a lot, Ken. It's been a pleasure interviewing you.
19
20Ken Slate: You're welcome. [papers rustling]
21
22Doreen Howard: Thank you.
23
24Cheryl McQuaid: Thank you, Ken. [recorder clicking]
25
26
27/rt