

Interview with Al McGregor

Interviewed by Brian McMahon

Interviewed on February 5, 1999

Al McGregor - AM
Brian McMahon - BM

BM: This is Brian McMahon. It is February 5, 1999. I'm with Al McGregor, who is a retired Ford worker. Al has brought me in some wonderful pictures, black and white and color, of some of the changing construction out at the Ford Plant. Maybe, Al, I can ask you a few questions. I believe you started in 1958. Can you tell us how you actually got started there and what are the types of things you did?

AM: I came in there in October 1958 as an hourly worker, working in the trim department in production.

BM: What type of things did you do on the trim line?

AM: Mostly installation of weather stripping on the doors of new vehicles, both cars and trucks, and, later on, did some utility work, which is doing a variety of different jobs.

BM: On the line?

AM: On the line. This continued until 1967, at which time, I became a pipe fitter apprentice. After completing my apprenticeship, I continued and completed my career at Ford as a pipe fitter and retired in 1989.

BM: I want to come back to that apprenticeship but, first, let me go back to the line. What were your impressions of working on the line? Can you describe it? Was it a tough job? Were there better days, worse days, some fun things on the job? How did you deal with working on the assembly line? What are your thoughts on that?

AM: I guess realistically, at the time that I began working there—I think I was twenty-one years old and I've certainly told more than a few people this—that had I not been a married person with a family and responsibilities, I would not have stayed there. However, having said that, once you are there for awhile and learn a job and get into the routine of it, it may not be the easiest thing in the world to do, but it becomes routine after awhile and you just do it. Yes, there's some

boredom involved in doing assembly line work. You can offset that by having conversations with fellow employees who are nearby. The days go by. Not every day was fun, but for the most part, I did not really object to being an hourly assembly line worker. In perspective though, I'd have to say that after I became an apprentice in the Skilled Trades Department, I had no desire to go back to being an assembly line worker.

BM: How did you actually get started at Ford? Did you know somebody that worked there?

AM: Yes, I did. I think that's, perhaps, a common denominator for a lot of employees who were hired there. A good friend of mine, whose wife is a first cousin of my wife, worked on the Motor Line at Ford and he knew that my present employer at that time was not satisfactory to me and he said, "Ford is hiring. If you want to come out there, mention my name and see if you can get a job." So, I went out there and, as a point of fact, walked in the door at six thirty in the morning and by seven-thirty, I was working.

BM: No kidding?

AM: It was quite different.

BM: In what sense? From your previous employer, do you mean?

AM: I was essentially doing receiving, clerk type work at another company and assembly line work is a whole world of difference from that kind of activity. Beyond that, as long as we're talking about it, I can recall that the starting wage in 1958 was something on the order of \$1.90 an hour, plus some cost of living, so it may have driven it up to somewhere in the range of \$2.15 an hour.

BM: Which would have been better than a lot of other jobs around here?

AM: It certainly was, probably about forty cents an hour more than I was making on my previous job, which, in relationship, given those dollar amounts, is a significant increase.

BM: When Ford hired you, what did they look for? Did you have to fill out an application? Did you have to have any kind of prior assembly experience? Did they look for any particular things?

AM: I don't think that they looked then for any particular things as far previous abilities or skills anymore than they do today. They have a tendency to choose, I think, people who they think will be good employees and they will teach them.

BM: How did they teach you? Did you have any kind of a training period before they put you to work on the line?

AM: No. In truth, I would have to say that I considered myself to be a slow learner when I started there. I didn't really care for what I was doing and, again as I say, without responsibilities, I would have left it within the first week.

BM: Who was teaching you? Your fellow line workers there or did they have a foreman come over and show you the ropes?

AM: I don't recall specifically, but it would probably have been one of the hourly workers, perhaps a utility man or a relief man or somebody, who showed me the job. I learned more slowly than I probably should have; but, after a few days, I was able to do the job.

BM: A few days is pretty much the break-in period for new people working there?

AM: Yes. Another way to put it into perspective . . . I think after I'd been there a couple of weeks, they had some extra help one day so they sent me—this was more than a couple of weeks—to the glass operations where they made flat sheet glass. It had been a shut-down for a number of months and they restarted it at one point, I think in 1959. One day, they had some extra help and they said, "We're going to send you over to the Glass Department to work for the rest of the day." Let me tell you, that was a whole different world over there. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.

BM: Really?

AM: I mean, the comparison between the kind of line work that I was doing and whatever job it was they had me to doing for a half a day in the Glass Department, I said, "I'd like to stay here."

BM: And?

AM: Of course, that was not to be. It was not long after that that they shut the whole operation down. The glass, in 1959, stopped.

BM: The line work, was it that it was physically difficult, arduous, and hard to do or was it more that it was boring?

AM: The boring aspect certainly becomes involved in it; but, irrespective of whether it's boring or not, you still have to be able to complete your assigned task within that work envelope that you should stay in. Initially, at least, I had difficulty staying within that work envelope. I found myself drifting down the line.

BM: Could you describe how that was explained to you? Did they give you any written or visual material saying, "Here's how you put this part on? Here's the tool you use? Here's the time frame that you have to do it? Here's the motions that you go through?"

AM: What I'm talking about was installing door weatherstrips. It's not the kind of thing where they give you an air gun and some screws and bolts and say, "Put these in." They either are in or they're not it. This door weatherstripping was glued on. There was some skill involved in doing a proper job about it and I guess, eventually, I became very good at it, but initially, I was not too good.

BM: Obviously, once you've been doing it for a week or so, your productivity goes up?

AM: Yes.

BM: After awhile, as you were saying, you managed to get into the apprenticeship program. Could you explain how that process works?

AM: At Ford, they have had apprenticeships, I think, since about 1941—perhaps, earlier than any of the other Big Three. They established apprenticeships at Twin City Ford in 1965, I believe.

BM: Later than the other Ford plants?

AM: Later than some of them at least. The feeling was, both by the union and the company, that they wanted to upgrade the professional level of the skilled trades people that they had and, at least one method of doing that was application of apprenticeships and teaching people in a graduated way how to be competent journeymen. When they first said they were going to have an apprenticeship test in the cafeteria—this was probably 1965—some of the coworkers of mine had asked me, "Are you going over and take the test?" I said, "No." They said, "Why not?" I said, "My understanding is that we're going to have to work afternoons."

BM: After your normal work shift to study the classroom?

AM: No, no. If you were selected as an apprentice, having gone to work, they would establish you on the afternoon shift not on the day shift. I thought, I don't want to do that. It ended up that that was the wrong train of thought. I liked that. It's not a good thing for family life, but I liked working the afternoon shift. At any rate, they gave the first test and I was not a part of it.

BM: It was a written test?

AM: Yes.

BM: No manual dexterity kinds of things?

AM: I do not remember any manual dexterity with it. There were some cognitive things where you had to decide how mechanical things worked but there was no hands-on mechanical things. After they had given the first test, one of my coworkers that I had worked with on the line, became an apprentice over there. I guess I kind of looked at that and I thought, gee! he's there

and I'm here. Maybe I really should have looked at that. So, they gave another test some months later, which I did take. Eventually, they placed me on a waiting list and, fortunately, I was number one on the list. Unfortunately, it was many months after that before they elected to put me on as an apprentice.

BM: So, there was a training period then when you were paired with a journeyman? Is that how it would work?

AM: Yes. When you go on as an apprentice, they usually assign you to one journeyman for a period of time and you work as best you can with that individual. I'm sure it's a learning process for the apprentice and, also, for the journeyman. Some of us are good craftsmen but poor teachers and vice versa. I was fortunate to work with some very good people.

BM: Now, in addition to working right on the job and in the field there, did you also have a classroom type of training?

AM: Yes, it was and is an 8,000-hour apprenticeship, which is comprised of 7,424 hours of on-the-job training and 576 hours of classroom.

BM: Where was the classroom training?

AM: At St. Paul Technical [and Vocational Institute].

BM: Oh. You took that outside of the Ford experience altogether?

AM: At that time, it was taken only at St. Paul TVI. Now, I believe, they do it at many different schools and I think the intent is with the new educational facility they are currently completing, that is attached to the Ford Plant, that it will be done in-house.

BM: On your work portion, the on-the-job, you got off the line completely and were now working essentially full-time?

AM: Totally divorced from any production work, working with journeymen and other apprentices on the facility, which was construction of some new things and also repair of existing things.

BM: Which trade were you?

AM: Pipe fitter.

BM: What were some of the kinds of things that you would be working on?

AM: Construction, as I say, of new piping lines. A pipe fitter works with pressures, positive pressures or negative pressures, which is to say vacuum and piping or hosing. These would be things that contain steam, oil, water, air, vacuum tubes.

BM: All relating to ongoing production operations at that plant?

AM: Yes, things that either support production, such as steam and air, and, in many cases, if the things that are in use break down in production. For instance, an operator is using an air hose. If it gets a hole in it, which happens many times, they'll send a pipe fitter over to repair or replace it. Whatever break downs occur, you become involved in. For myself, I don't know if I could divide it into percentages in the twenty plus years that I spent as a pipe fitter. Let's say half the time was doing maintenance and repair work and the other portion of the time was some new construction.

BM: Were there any particularly dramatic, difficult jobs in terms of the maintenance and repair stuff? Any dangerous, hazardous kinds of things that you dealt with in your time?

AM: Yes, there's no doubt that any time you're dealing with steam, it has the potential to kill you. Steam is pretty nasty stuff. At its lowest point, it's at least 212 degrees. At one time, they were running 225 pounds of steam in one line out there, which approaches 400 degrees. If that stuff gets at you, it's pretty dangerous, so you do need to be very careful.

BM: Did you work down in the power plant?

AM: The hydro plant?

BM: Yes.

AM: I spent some time working on various small projects down there, but primarily that place is comprised of electricians. To the extent that there was something that needed to be done with water or sewer or air in the hydro plant, on occasion, I was down there to work, but not very much.

BM: Did Ford basically develop its apprentices all from within their existing work force or did they actually hire people in at a journeyman level?

AM: At the Twin City Plant, they do it in three different ways. One, as we talked about, is apprenticeship. Then, they also have another program, which they call upgrader, which endeavors to promote persons from production in various classifications by sort of paralleling and educating them the same way they do apprentices.

BM: What are the differences there?

AM: The difference would be that they don't have a requirement to have the same number of school hours.

BM: It's not quite as formal in terms of the educational milestones?

AM: Definitely not.

BM: Do they get paid for their training?

AM: Which ones?

BM: The upgrader.

AM: The upgraders do not. The upgraders get paid journeyman wages less about twenty cents an hour while they are upgraders. Apprentices start in at a wage that is very slightly above the hourly wage that they were making when they worked in production and incrementally, like every thousand to two thousand hours, they get raises along the way. In addition to that, the schooling that they take is compensated at the hourly rate that they're making every three months, I believe.

BM: Your tuition, in effect, was paid?

AM: Those 576 hours of schooling that I put in were compensated times the hourly rate I was making at the time.

BM: Interesting, which it probably would have covered the full cost of the tuition?

AM: The tuition was paid for by the Ford Motor Company.

BM: Plus, you got your hourly wage?

AM: That's correct. To the extent that I needed any books or materials, that was not then and is not now a covered expense. That's out of the pocket by the individual. In addition to that, apprentices also get a tool allowance. It is true that, in many cases, the Ford Motor Company has available and will provide tools for apprentices. If they are available in their general stores, you can have them.

BM: Ford has a general store at the plant?

AM: Yes, they do.

BM: And they sell tools?

AM: They do not sell anything there. They give it away when it is requisitioned by a supervisor.

BM: Okay. You have to sign out for it?

AM: Right. However, there was and is a tool allowance for apprentices and this, again, is graduated out over the term of your apprenticeship. At that time, it was—I'm not sure what it was—\$600, \$800. Today, I suspect, it's over \$1,000.

BM: So, after a couple of years, you completed your apprenticeship?

AM: After completion of 8,000 hours, which is comprised of the on the job training and the schooling. At that point, I became a journeyman and remained as such until I retired.

BM: Did you have to then, in turn, start to train some apprentices?

AM: Oh, sure. It's at that point that you want to think back to the days when you were an apprentice and didn't necessarily know everything either. It can be very rewarding. It can be very challenging also.

BM: How widespread is this opportunity? Can everybody on the line actually put their name in to sign up for this? I know you have to take a test. How difficult is that?

AM: I guess what we became involved in was some problems at the Ford Motor Company and a couple of other companies had with Equal Employment Opportunities Commission back in the 1970s. I was the union apprentice coordinator of the Twin City Assembly Plant and so we became involved in a lot of things that were structured to suit the whims of the federal government. Testing was done where, I believe, the requirement was that you had to have at least one year seniority in order to have your name put in place. If a couple of hundred people applied—certainly we had that many on several occasions—they would say, "Those who pass the test will be placed on a waiting list."

BM: In the order in which they ranked on the test? Or is it a sort of pass/fail deal?

AM: We probably don't need to get into that. Some of these tests were scored by an outfit in Pennsylvania that wasn't even Ford. They didn't even call it "passing the test." It was "test qualified." These are things that I neither understand nor can explain to you.

BM: Essentially, these were to meet some of the federal requirements?

AM: Yes, indeed. One of the things that you don't want to do is make the waiting list so long that by so doing . . . For instance, if we had 200 applicants and 100 of them passed the test, how long would it take to eat up those 100? If it took ten years, someone might sue later on and say, "You effectively precluded my being able to take the test by making the list so long that I

couldn't get on it." To offset that, they said, "We'll let you test thirty people." So, we had to have a lottery to select, from among the 200 or 250 people, the thirty persons. It was a bad time.

BM: Is it fair to say that it was primarily ethnic or racial? It was the federal requirements? Or gender? What were some of the issues there?

AM: I'm not the person who has the answers to that. I guess what I was told was that whoever was in charge of this law suit had filed it against, I think, it was General Electric, Ford Motor Company, and one other company on the last day he was in office before he quit. Some of the companies chose to settle or pay a fine. Ford simply said, "This is b.s.," and they fought it, but they still had to comply and jump through all the hoops.

BM: That was at a national level, I'm assuming, this law suit?

AM: Yes, it was national.

BM: It's relatively a small percentage of the total work force that ends up being able to take advantage of the apprenticeship program?

AM: That's true. What their criteria are for selecting those individuals now or what they were then, I'm not really sure.

BM: We spoke about those two options. One is the apprentice and then the upgrader. Then, the third is to just hire?

AM: To hire from the street.

BM: Do they do that, as well?

AM: They certainly do. In fact, they've done a good bit of it in recent years. I've been retired for almost ten years and in the interim, they have hired a lot of electricians from the outside.

BM: Is that because they needed them immediately and they didn't have the pool that was ready to step in and do the apprenticeship?

AM: The perception is that they need the talent now and they need someone who has the necessary skills now and, yes, we can teach our people in-house, but it would take too long. They need them now. You can argue the rationalization of that, but they do have a lot of people they've hired from the outside.

BM: But, the apprenticeship program is still going on?

AM: Oh, yes, and stronger now than when I was there. That has to do with, I think, the current manager of the Maintenance Department and the union coordinator who is there now. They are

both doing a very effective job. I think they have something on the order of about forty apprentices in a half dozen different trades.

BM: You had mentioned that you were the union representative, the apprentice coordinator. Could you explain that position? That's a voluntary position?

AM: Many of the programs that Ford has are participatory with the UAW. They will have a joint board. In this case, the Joint Apprenticeship Committee nationally in Detroit was overseen by five appointed members from the United Auto Workers, all of whom, I believe at that time at least, were ex-tradesmen or current tradesmen so they understand what the program is about and an equal number of company individuals who are appointed by the Ford Motor Company. That follows down then to when you have an outlying area, like St. Paul is 800 miles away from Detroit, so they need someone to administer it for them on the local level. To that end, the union appoints one individual from the union ranks and the company picks one person from the company ranks, and they endeavor to carry out the policies of the Joint Apprenticeship Committee which is in Detroit.

BM: Is it fair to say that the apprenticeship program is something that was proposed and initiated and pushed by the union? Was it a union initiative more than a company initiative? What's your sense of that?

AM: Do you mean at the Twin City Plant or the national?

BM: Let's say both.

AM: I can't speak for nationally because that happened before I even came to this country.

BM: Where did you come from?

AM: Canada. I was an American citizen.

My recollection is that, at the local level, they perceived that there was some diminution of skills and they wanted to upgrade those skills and they thought, perhaps, one of the better ways of doing it was by establishing an apprenticeship. I certainly concur with that.

BM: On the assembly line, were there any programs, not necessarily a formal upgrade program or an apprenticeship program, for a worker, during your time, to get into other kinds of skills, upgrading to other kinds of skills, perhaps unrelated to their day-to-day work?

AM: As a job within the Ford Plant?

BM: Yes, other programs in addition to the apprenticeship program?

AM: I don't know that you would consider them a program, but there's certainly no shortage of individuals who took it upon themselves to garner a degree.

BM: A high school degree or a college degree?

AM: A college degree. And because of having obtained that degree, I'm certain that it was their entry into a promotional job there. But, I don't know that that's a formal program.

BM: Did the company help with the tuition on that or in signing some flexibility on hours?

AM: The individuals that I can think of, I don't know that there was company participation in it. To my recollection, the company would always pay all or a portion of those educational expenses if it was directed towards the possibility of a promotion within the company. But, if it was something unrelated to anything you could do at Ford, then they didn't pay for it. That has changed nowadays. If you want to learn how to fly airplanes, you can do that.

BM: And the company will help out in some respect?

AM: Yes. This, again, is a UAW negotiated part of the contract as far as education.

BM: Interesting. A recent contract, I'm assuming?

AM: Within the last, let me guess, fifteen to twenty years.

BM: So, you were still there at the time that some of these things started?

AM: Yes.

BM: We were looking at some of the fabulous pictures that you took. Maybe you can describe a little bit about what that's about.

AM: My recollection of this gets sharper as I look at the pictures. I may have to fine tune some of the dates here but I believe that the pictures we're looking at here are in 1985 when they were converting the plant from F-Series truck production and converting a portion of the plant over to building Ranger pickup trucks. To that end, they pretty much gutted out the inside of the building. They left some of the F-Series equipment in the body shop, but everything else was removed, including the conveyors, overhead and ground-based, all of the paint systems, including the drying ovens, the Bonder Ite, which is a cleaning facility they use to clean the metal and prepare it for having paint applied to it. My recollection is that there were a tremendous number of outside employees who were in there methodically using torches and cutting things up, just gutting out the inside of the building.

BM: So, production had completely stopped?

AM: Production stopped.

BM: And just a skeleton crew of maintenance people in?

AM: No, all of the maintenance personnel who worked for Ford would have been on the job and supporting some of these activities. However, a great majority of this work . . . As I recall, when the last vehicles were going down the line, there were outside contractors who were coming behind with torches and cutting down the conveyors. It was like watching a serpent wind through the building and they were destroying the back end of it as the front end went out. I remember a lot of dust, a few fires, none of which got out-of-hand. There were two rail spurs that came up inside the building and they brought in these open railroad gondola cars and they loaded many, many of them. I really don't know the exact number, but there were certainly dozens of them. The impetus seemed to be, clear it out because we've got new stuff coming in. The unusual aspect of it was that, even though this is a facility of approximately thirty acres in size, you could, in effect, stand in the center of the building and turn to the four walls and see each of them, which is not something you could do prior to that and you certainly can't do it now.

BM: How long did that cleaning out process actually last?

AM: I don't have an exact recall on that, but if I were to guess right now, I'd say it didn't take them more than about a week. I mean they had just dozens of people in there and much equipment and they were just ripping things out as quickly as they could.

BM: So, very little, if nothing, could have been saved from the pre-existing assembly line configuration to the new system?

AM: One would expect that they sold everything to a junk dealer and if something could be recovered, it was not recovered by the Ford Company. It was recovered by someone who had knowledge of what was there and would go down and buy it.

BM: Are there any other thoughts that you have on that particular whole process?

AM: Not at the moment.

BM: Was that the most extensive ripping out the whole time you were there?

AM: It's the most extensive thing that I saw. Certainly, when you gut out eighty-five or ninety percent of the building and there's nothing left, it looks like some of the pictures you may have seen when the building was built. All there is are bay columns and empty space.

BM: How long after it was cleaned out until the new stuff was up and running, would you guess?

AM: I would think no longer than three months total.

BM: It would have taken that long for the construction of the new stuff?

AM: There, again, my memory . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

BM: You were saying that it probably took about three months to get the new stuff up and running.

AM: That's just a guesstimate. I would say that it was not more than three months.

BM: Who did the new installations? Was that your existing maintenance crew or did people come in for that?

AM: In the Maintenance Department at the Twin City Ford Plant, they have a tendency to do things in-house to the extent that they have the manpower available or the expertise. Now, what we're talking about here is something that's beyond the scope of the people who are there to do in terms of availability of manpower and, in some cases, expertise. Some of this is very large equipment so they hire a variety of outside firms to come in and set equipment, to run electrical lines, to run circulating water lines, and lots of other things. I would guess that most of it was done by outside contractors.

BM: On an unrelated topic, which is from a little conversation we had, I had asked you if you had any knowledge of any injuries on the job and, maybe, you could describe again the one unpleasant experience.

AM: This is something that is hearsay on my part because I was not an employee, at the time. But, what we were talking about was the death of a . . .

BM: Wasn't there another incident where you were describing the [unclear]? Am I confusing myself?

AM: Right, this one I did see. We had mentioned there was a death of an outside tradesman in the building prior to my coming there and what I related to you after that was that in the same area, which is an electrical substation underneath the cafeteria—I don't remember the year—there was an employee there named Rube Jensen, who was doing some electrical work in the substation down there. Evidently, he used a reach rod, a pole, to open the door on a 13,000-volt cabinet. He made a sad mistake because it was a loaded line. The essence of what happened is that, when he opened that cabinet door, he broke contact with the switches inside and a fire ensued. Even though he wasn't within more than three or four feet of the door, he still got pretty

severely burned. It caused the electricity in the building to shut off completely. Even though this was in the daytime and there are some skylights in there, the whole plant, essentially, went dark. Communication was lost because none of the telephones were working. Two-way radios did not work because that requires some electricity to run a repeater that they have in the building. At one point, one of the maintenance supervisors had said, "Gentlemen, I know what we need to do here. Take a portable DC welder and fill it with gasoline, take it over to the area where the repeater is, run wires up to the repeater, and put the machine on, and switch it over to generating 115-volt AC power, and then the radios will work." He was quite right. It was kind of amazing to see things begin to happen without people shouting at each other because prior to that, that was their only means of communication.

I did see the individual who was injured come by on the back of an electrical cart. He was in a seated position, looking fairly well-shaken. His coveralls that he was wearing were kind of shredded on his left arm and also the left leg, I believe. He was taken to the Medical Department inside the plant. They had called an ambulance. They removed him by ambulance to the hospital in St. Paul and having treated him minimally there, they wanted to keep him at least overnight. He adamantly refused and, in fact, walked out of the hospital and went home, which was probably not a smart thing to do. However, he survived that and his burns healed. He is no longer with us. He died from an unrelated heart attack some years later.

BM: He was fortunate to have survived that incident.

AM: When you tangle with that much electricity, you don't always get to talk about it.

BM: Right. Al, I understand that you still give the tours? In fact, I think I had the pleasure of one of your tours a couple years ago . . .

AM: That's correct.

BM: . . . long before I knew I was going to be doing some work on this story. One of the things I'm learning from talking to some of the other retired people, like Bob Hansen and Del Peterson, is how things have changed so dramatically and radically at the plant. They were manufacturing engineers and process engineers and designed the plant and the equipment in there. They can't even understand how things are working today. You are there quite a lot today giving these tours. Could you describe your impression of how things have changed over the probably forty years now that you've been involved in this plant?

AM: I think automation is an evolutionary process, which is necessary. It's the kind of thing in a competitive business where you either stay ahead of the curve or if you get too far behind, your competitors are going to beat you to death. Perhaps, one of the biggest things that they have used a lot of is robots. Robots are used sometimes in areas where the work is repetitive or tedious or dangerous. But, I think, in most cases, when robots are installed, it's on a cost comparative basis where when they write a proposal to put in a robot, usually the defining reason is because it will save X number of dollars based on manpower needs and so on. At the present

time, although no one can give me an exact number, I think the last I heard, they have something on the order of 143 robots in the building.

BM: Those are replacing the equivalent of 143 persons, jobs? Or would it have been more or less?

AM: Perhaps, more than that. There certainly is a savings to them. I've been told that the cost of some of the cheapest robots is about \$70,000. If you can presume that that robot takes the place of one person . . . it also does the same thing on the second shift, so it's actually two people.

BM: That pays for itself in a year.

AM: And they don't get six minutes of relief an hour as do the humans and they don't pay any benefits. But, every time you put in a robot, you must remember that you have to add back some of the subtracted personnel. In this case, robots require some attention. We may have an electrician, a tool maker, a pipe fitter, and so on who is involved with periodic work on those machines, so it's not as though it's a total subtraction.

I think at the other extreme of the robots that they've installed out there is that, up until about a year ago, the body decking operation was done with human beings like us controlling machinery, which is to say, these are heavy things and they had saddles they'd lift them with. There were nine people, I was told, that were involved in that total operation. Now, they have installed at a cost of \$1.3 million or \$1.8 million—pick a number—two gantry robots and the necessary equipment to complement them and those nine people are gone.

BM: Did they start with the robotics when you were there?

AM: Yes, they did.

BM: What was that like?

AM: My suspicion would be that the first robots were put in in the prime paint booth, the body paint booth, in the 1970s. I don't recall the exact year. I think there were four of them and one of them was used to open the door on the vehicle. Then, the second one would paint inside. I think they were looked at with a lot of suspicion by most of us who worked around them and on them. They didn't necessarily do a very good job. If you will, they were kind of the forerunners of some of the things they have today that are much, much, much better. It may be interesting to note that, eventually, they threw those things away and began doing it by hand again.

BM: Really? After how long a period?

AM: Several years, seven or eight years.

BM: That's interesting. So the experiment was deemed a failure.

AM: But, now, they have brought robots back into the paint building, since I retired, and I'm told do that precise same thing and I suspect do it very well now.

BM: Was there a celebration among the workers when those robots were carried out?

AM: I don't think so.

BM: The workers are resigned to it? It's not a very sensitive, volatile issue?

AM: I suspect that a lot of us make snide comments about robots, but it's the wave. You either get with the program or get run over.

BM: Where is it going to end up? Project fifty years ahead. Is it all robots? Where are we going with this?

[laughter]

AM: I can't see that far into the future.

BM: But, at this point, it's not a really volatile labor/management issue anymore?

AM: I don't think so. I'm not close enough to it to know. It's safe to say that if you were to get a graph out and see when the first robots came into Twin City Assembly and how many there are today, that the line does not drop; it goes up. So, is it going to continue? I would think so.

BM: But, it's probably also correct to say that because of the union keeping a watch on this situation that nobody directly lost their job because of the robots, that they were probably transferred somewhere else? There may have been an attritional loss over a period of time, or am I wrong on that?

AM: I don't know a good answer to that. It's kind of a nebulous thing. If you see, there went my job, then they'd find you something else to do and what you may not know or realize is that maybe somebody else got laid off that day that was on the low end of the seniority list, even if the individuals involved did not suffer.

BM: It's for sure the number of jobs will be reduced, whether or not it's the individuals or maybe it's over an attritional situation?

AM: If we were to try and put it into perspective, let's assume that we take all those robots out of the building. Would they have to add some people? You're darned right.

BM: So, it's fair to say that in your forty years experience, this is a vastly changed work environment?

AM: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

BM: No robots when you started?

AM: That's right.

BM: How many today, did you say?

AM: One hundred and forty-three.

BM: In what other respects has the plant changed, would you say?

AM: I think the footprint of the building has changed tremendously. I was told that when they first built that building—we're talking 1925 when they first began building vehicles in it—that one half of the building comprised the assembly operations and, then, in the other half of the building, the only thing going on was glass operations, which means that we've got a lot of empty building. The thought then was, why did they build this thing so big when they're not even using it?

BM: Do you mean after the glass shut down?

AM: No, prior to that. The glass operations did not take up that half of the building. It was just one little pocket. It was primarily empty space. The evolutionary thing that has happened is that not only do they now use all of that space, but they have added to the footprint of the building in various ways: the inclusion of a warehouse out there, the vertical storage building they've built in between them, the addition. My memory is not precise but they added to the west side of the building, in 1961 perhaps, sixty feet wide and 1400 feet long. That is a huge amount of space. Since then, they have added on various other parts; including in 1998, they built a small addition to the back of the building to house in-coming seats that were manufactured for Ford by Johnson Controls in Hudson, Wisconsin. So, they have this automated warehouse. I guess what I'm saying is that the evolution is going on as the place just keeps expanding like a balloon.

BM: As big as it is, certainly, to people who are not familiar with this type of manufacturing plant, it's still pretty small compared to some of the newer state-of-the-art . . . ?

AM: My understanding of it is that it's certainly not a big building in comparison to some other assembly plants.

BM: I guess a last question here is, as a retired person now, the company, as part of a partnership, is constructing a training building, which will be utilized by the workers, by the

company and the University of Minnesota is a partner, the state of Minnesota is a partner and you're going to be taking some courses there. Could you describe that a little bit and how that whole program works?

AM: The particular course that I'm going to be taking happens to be constructing a computer, but this whole thing is set up by negotiations between the UAW and the Ford Motor Company and retirees, as myself, are entitled to up to \$1,000 per year in approved courses on site, which is to say on Ford property, as opposed to regular hourly workers who can choose to go to various outside places. This is a very nice, very new, not yet open building, which I think is going to be a pleasant surprise for a lot of the employees out there. Hopefully, participation in it will justify the cost, which is considerable.

BM: Is there a facility now for retirees to take on-site classes?

AM: Yes, the same things could happen right now in the building; however, they've kind of shut that down because of some storm damage.

BM: As a practical matter, it's just not a . . .

AM: It's sort of on hold awaiting the construction of the new building. I think the feeling was, why should we invest monies into fixing up something when, by the time we get done with that, the new facility will be up and running and, then, we'll have to scrap everything we just put in.

BM: Now, have you taken courses previously as a retiree?

AM: No.

BM: How do you go about determining which courses are going to be offered? Who organizes that?

AM: There is a coordinator by the name of Chuck Lines who is an hourly employee who is the coordinator for this thing.

BM: Is that both the retirees and current workers?

AM: Yes. He has an office at the Ford Plant and will have an office in this new facility. They publish a directory of upcoming classes that are available for everyone.

BM: If a group of people wanted to get together and propose an idea for a class, that could have been included in the program?

AM: I would agree with that.

BM: On any topic? It doesn't even have to be related to Ford or automobiles?

AM: You might want to talk to Chuck Lines about that. I think, perhaps, that's true.

BM: Okay. I appreciate very much you taking the time, Al.

AM: Happy to do it.

BM: This is very, very informative.

[break in the interview]

BM: We're back. Al and I were just chatting about his recollections. When he started in 1958, there were still a number of women who were there. They were brought into the plant, I guess, during the war. Maybe, Al, you can describe a little of that?

AM: The women who were there, as I remember, worked on the instrument panel line, which was probably a little lighter duty work than you might find in other parts of the building. I believe there were five of them. That number diminished to, perhaps, two through attrition, to a point in the mid-1970s, I would guess, at which point the company began hiring persons without respect to age, color, sex, and so on. At the present time, the last numbers I heard, out of an hourly work force of 1,815, 247 are female. To further expand on it, I don't really know what the population of minorities is there. However, again, when I started working there, there may have been a handful of blacks who worked there. Their hiring practices changed somewhat over the years. However, in 1978, when they added a second shift, they added a second production shift, and to get those employees, I'm sure they would have been happy to hire from the local work population that was available. However, by contract with the UAW, there was a provision that said, "If there are unit employees who are laid off from another Ford facility around the country for X number of months or years and they have a desire to transfer to the Twin Cities and accept a position there, you must take them before you hire local. To that end, we began accepting people at the Twin City Plant from various Ford locations: California, Tennessee, Michigan, Ohio. We got some very good people. We got some horror stories—we need not go into all of that. A lot of the diversity of the population that they have out there, both male and female and colored and white, came to us then.

BM: Interesting.

AM: I suspect that if you or I were transferred to California or Nashville or someplace like that, you don't really want to go there. That's where the work is, but you're not happy there. This was true of a lot of the folks that came here. Certainly, some of them stayed and became happy, dedicated employees. Others could not wait until the day when they had enough credits in to retire and go back home and I understand that.

BM: Right. Morale suffered as a result?

AM: Yes, I think that's true. I certainly understand it. I would say that we lost some good people when they were given a window of opportunity to return to their old location, again, through contract negotiations.

BM: You say there were five or so women that were still there from the World War II era. Did you ever have a chance to chat with them about some of their experiences? What was your sense of that?

AM: No, while I was on a first name basis with two or three of them, I never talked about those things.

BM: Are any of these women still around, do you know?

AM: I'm not aware of any that are still around.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[End of the Interview]

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