

“Made in St. Paul: Stories from the Ford plant”

Brenda Dickhausen

TCAP retiree, 1983-2011

Interviewed by Peter Myers, August 2017

QUESTION

When you were first hired to work at the Ford Rouge Plant in Michigan, were there many women working in the plant?

BRENDA DICKHAUSEN

At the time that I got hired here they were hiring all women. Because they had to have a percentage, you know. And I started in the Rouge complex which is a humongous complex. I started in the stamping plant. But we kept getting laid out. You'd get laid off, you go back, you get laid off, and that happened for a couple of years. And then I got laid off the last time and I didn't think I'd ever go back to Ford because it was really a bad slump. Um and it was kind of a freak that I was able to sign this paper saying I'd be willing to transfer. And they called me and said are you still willing. And I said sure. I didn't even know where Minnesota was. I had to look it up. And but my uncle who had helped me get into the job he said go for it. This is gonna be a very productive plant. And so I did. And I've been here ever since. Thirty-some years I've been here.

QUESTION

Was it hard to make the move to the Twin Cities?

DICKHAUSEN

I did leave my daughter back because she was only 9. And I didn't know anybody. I knew nobody. So it was like I can't just leave her in an apartment. I knew I'd be working long hours. And so she stayed with my mom. And I came here and a bunch of us got together and actually one of the guys, I think his uncle had an apartment that he'd given him. So we all crammed in there. There was a whole lot of us in one little efficiency apartment. It worked for the time being because we didn't have anything else. And it was right down the street from the Ford plant. And so and we'd walk to work every day.

QUESTION

What do you remember about those first days at the plant here?

DICKHAUSEN

Well, first of all, just seeing the outside of it and seeing that it was placed in such a beautiful neighborhood was amazing. Because I was from the Rouge plant in the middle of Detroit. Not so pretty. And then to come in it was hard. A lot of people were a little upset with us because there were a lot of families here. And they were thinking we were taking jobs away from their kids and their cousins and their you know. So it made it hard but you know I had five years' seniority and I was gonna use it. They got over it.

QUESTION

What was your first job in the plant?

DICKHAUSEN

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I worked in Body Build. And they were trying to put us in places they thought we'd be familiar. Which was smart. And since I came from a stamping plant, they thought Body Build would be the best fit for me and what I did is I put studs around the windshield. So when they put the windshield in it, I had a stud machine that I'd go all the way around. But they didn't want me in Body Build because I was a girl. And all the guys are in Body Build. I remember my boss coming up and saying, you sure you don't wanna go to Trim? I'm like no, I don't, I like my job, I'm fine. And I did stay in Body Build for quite some time. With different jobs. Welding jobs and stuff like that.

QUESTION

You were part of a group transferring from other plants, and these transferees were sometimes called 'preferentials.'

DICKHAUSEN

The first group of preferentials that came in we were kind of the cream of the crop. They were picking and choosing who they wanted. People that never had any problems. Once the union got a hold of it they weren't too happy so then they had to bring it to everybody. Which was only fair, you know. But there were quite a few of us. Quite a few.

When I got there, I started in Body Build at night, the night shift, and I think there might have been one other woman in that whole department. I don't know now there might have been a lot in Trim, because those had the smaller parts. And so that's where they wanted to put the women was in Trim.

QUESTION

How did this plant compare to the Rouge plant?

DICKHAUSEN

A lot cleaner here. It was a lot cleaner. I felt safer. I didn't feel so safe a lot of times in the stamping plant, you know. It was kind of a scary place. So here it was kind of refreshing.

QUESTION

Talk about the camaraderie you had with your co-workers here.

DICKHAUSEN

Oh my gosh, there's so many awesome people. They were family. Because we were there sometimes 60, 70 hours a week practically. So, I mean, you were with them more than you were with your own family. And you'd go home and you'd crash out 'cause you're exhausted. But there was so many good people. I couldn't even pick and choose. Yeah you had a few of the rotten eggs, but other than that I mean, that's everywhere. Most people we all worked hard and just did what we had to do. And you know I like this plant because they really took pride in the quality. It was a real big thing for this plant. I liked that.

QUESTION

Did it take a while for the men to accept the new women in the plant?

DICKHAUSEN

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It got better I think. Because they got more used to having women and realizing that we weren't all wimps, you know, that we were willing to work just as hard as the guys. So, once you set that and like the guys that you worked with, they'd have more respect for you. Once they realized you weren't like 'Oh I can't do that,' you know. I'd get down there and dirty just like the rest of 'em. And they liked that.

QUESTION

Did you get involved in the UAW?

DICKHAUSEN

I was head of the election committee for about 15 years. I loved it. Because I'm not real political. This way I had to stay common ground but yet I knew what was going on. You know. So I liked it. I enjoyed doing a lot of things with my union. I worked in pre-delivery for a few years. And that was an awesome experience when it comes to solidarity.

QUESTION

Do you miss working at the plant?

DICKHAUSEN

I miss it. I miss the people. There's some people I'll probably never see again and that's sad. Especially the way we all just left so quick. You know and I mean most retirees it's a little bit here and a little bit there, and then they can come back to the plant and say hello. We don't have any of that. And that's sad.

QUESTION

When did you retire from the plant?

DICKHAUSEN

I left two years before it actually closed. I took a buyout. They paid my last year and then I was gone. So. I was one of the lucky ones, let's put it that way. I didn't have to go anywhere else.

QUESTION

What do you think about the future plans for the site?

DICKHAUSEN

I hope they do the right thing, you know? I'm really worried about putting in a giant box store. It's concerning, you know. For a while there they were talking about changing the name of the street 'cause it's Ford Parkway. And I was like, wait a minute. Ford did a lot for this community. When they had their Highland Fest, they donated a lot of money. We did a lot of volunteer work and different things like that.

END - BRENDA DICKHAUSEN INTERVIEW