

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

## **Robert “Cubby” Johnson**

TCAP retiree, 1962-1994

Interviewed by Peter Myers, May 2017

### QUESTION

I know everyone who was an hourly worker belonged to UAW, and there were no other unions in the plant. Did that ever cause any conflicts with the local trade unions?

### CUBBY JOHNSON

Ah yes. It had. There were several times where if I was running, say, an afternoon shift there was no production and there were contractors in there. And our people want to do most of the contracting. Because they were really proud of their work. So there were times when we had to step in between the two of them and then say ‘Look. Your outside contractors are in here, we are paying you, but you will live by our rules. Not yours.’ End of conversation.

### QUESTION

How long did you remain in your role as a supervisor?

### JOHNSON

About 16-18 years. I got sick of it. And I wanted to go back to being an electrician again. Except that management had other ideas. So I went back being an hourly electrician but it was said you run the training program. I said, ‘What training program?’ ‘The whole one that you have going now.’ Okay. I said all right, if that’s what you want me to do, okay. But I prefer to work with the tools.

### QUESTION

So at that point did you do any work with tools or did you keep running the training program?

### JOHNSON

No. Just run training.

### QUESTION

Talk about when the first robotics came into the plant and how it all went down.

### JOHNSON

The first robot brought into the plant was a painting robot. It was a robot that opened the car door; now none of this has been painted. This is a completed car. Open the door, stick its paint head in, and go all around. It was programmed. The robot’s manufacturer was a company by the name of Trelva. Out of Molda, Norway. It was a Norwegian robot. We worked with the Norwegian engineers to get the thing going and then all of a sudden, they’re gone. They were fulfilled. The robot broke down. They called me over, ‘Cubby! The robot’s broke down! Talk Norwegian to it!’ I had no idea what a robot was. And I said well I don’t know, I can’t help you. So one of my guys says, well, since you’re a Norwegian, why don’t we just take and slap it in the control panel with a pile of Lutefisk and maybe that’ll cure it!

### QUESTION

Was there any resistance to robotics in the plant, fear that they’d take away someone’s job?

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JOHNSON

No, there wasn't, but the big thing at that time was how many people are they going to replace. And I won't say it was one to one. But if that operator was gone, we had to have an electrician and a pipefitter to service that robot. So really I think it added to the head count. Now, I got another one for you. I was sitting in the office one day, R.W. Johnson calls me in the office. He says, 'Cubby, you're a Norwegian.' I said 'Yeah, so are you, Bob!' He said 'We have a bunch of Norwegian soldiers up in the lobby they're here in the U.S. to train up at Fort Ripley with our American soldiers. And they're here to tour the plant. They'd like to see an American plant. Now, since you're a Norwegian, you taught Norwegian, you go up and greet them in the Norwegian language.' 'Okay, Bob.' So I go out the door and I start to sweat. My Norwegian isn't that good. So I go up there. And I look at this group of about 12 people and I see this lady and she's got gold bars on her shoulder. And I walk up to there and I say 'Gut drag, Gut drag.' So I started Norwegian and she's grinning from ear to ear. And I look around the other people are grinning. And I went on for a couple of minutes and she said in perfect English—'Sir, stop murdering the Norwegian language.' She says 'You couldn't speak Norwegian if there was a sheet in front of you.' She said 'But at least thanks for trying. We appreciate it.'

QUESTION

Did you get input from both Ford and UAW when running the training program in terms of how to do things or were you left on your own to create the program you thought made sense?

JOHNSON

Bob Johnson told me, "You run it the way you want it, just don't violate any of Ford's standing rules." The union president said, "Cubby, just do the job. If you need help or need money, just let me know. You run it." That was it!

QUESTION

When you started at the plant, I'm assuming the workforce was almost entirely white men. Did you see the workforce get more diverse gradually?

JOHNSON

Very gradually. Many of the men would not accept women into the skilled trades. That took a lot of going over. Matter of fact, I shouldn't really say this. One of our skilled tradesmen got after a skilled trades trainee lady. He used language unbecoming to a gentleman. He found himself laying flat on his back on the floor. She said "I am learning to be a skilled tradesperson and the first thing I'm learning how to do is how to deck a loudmouth."

QUESTION

Good for her. Did you have any electricians who were women during that time?

JOHNSON

Oh yes. Yes.

QUESTION

How much did people like you working at the plant actually know about Henry Ford and his original vision and philosophy about manufacturing?

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JOHNSON

Very little. Nobody made any big effort to know anything about Ford. We all knew the story about if he’s a farm kid, hire him. But otherwise, no.

QUESTION

Did you ever meet some of the Ford executives that came to town?

JOHNSON

Several of them I met. And to tell you the truth, I wasn’t impressed. Those that I met in Detroit were entirely different. They were more down to earth. We would hold training sessions in the Ford Dearborn Assembly. And Plant Manager Engineers would come down, just ordinary people.

QUESTION

Any other good stories or memories from your time there? Fires? Other disasters?

JOHNSON

One of the thing that sticks in my mind. It was just shortly after midnight one night. We were winding up our shift. One of our millwrights called on the radio and says ‘Cubby, come out to the tri level.’ Now tri level is where the stand-in cars made from other plants that we would have to unload and go out to distributors. And I said ‘What’s the matter?!’ I’m mad. ‘Shut up, you dumb Swede, get out here!’ So I go out there and here’s this young girl. She’s half-dressed, the blood’s running down the side of her face. One eye is closed. This eye is wide open. I says, ‘Lady, what happened?’ So I said to the millwright, ‘What’d she tell you?’ She was picked up in downtown Detroit. Taken out to the Ford plant. Raped several times and thrown into a car on the railroad that was headed for the Twin Cities, and when she woke up she was in the Twin Cities. Well, of course then we had to call the police and all that sort of stuff. I thought to myself, oh man.

QUESTION

Did you socialize much with your co-workers, any social events people from the plant would go to?

JOHNSON

I had learned that if you’re good at being supervisor don’t get too friendly with the guys you’re supervising. Because they’ll come back at you and ask you. No, I never really socialized. I don’t drink, never have. So, I couldn’t stop off after work and have a beer. I guess maybe I was kind of a loner.

QUESTION

I’ve heard there were times when a worker had a problem with alcohol and would the company and the union give them a few chances to straighten out?

JOHNSON

Well, this particular guy, when he returned, one of the best solid workers that I had on that shift. He completely changed.

QUESTION

Anything else you’d like to say? How did you feel when you learned the plant was going to shut down?

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JOHNSON

Well, I thought why? The plant is old but it's still running. And you got the best darn workforce in the whole system of Ford Motor Company. But, we don't we don't count. And well one thing that bothers me today and I must admit whether I hurt my union brothers or not. Out of the thousands of people, peace time, women worked in there took the place of the men, there's not one stick over there to remember any of us who spent most of our working lives in there. Ford won't put up anything. The union won't put up anything. Sad.

QUESTION

I've heard some people talk about once the site is redeveloped, that there needs to be some kind of tribute to all the people who worked there for all those years. I don't think it's a dead issue yet.

JOHNSON

Well, I would hope not.

QUESTION

They can't do it until they have some development and that will take quite a few years. But I'll keep my ear to the ground on that.

JOHNSON

The thing that really hurt most of us that retired from there, they closed that plant down and they were going to build one in Mexico. Why? Fortunately that failed too.

QUESTION

Any more stories to tell?

JOHNSON

I tell you, if you ever got a bunch of Ford people together to tell stories, and if the stories were ever to be printed, it'd have to be printed on fireproof paper because oh, boy! And it's a shame that somebody hasn't sat down and got a bunch of Ford people to say what is your story—like what you're doing.

END - CUBBY JOHNSON INTERVIEW