

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

## **Debbie Francis**

TCAP retiree, 1978-2009

Interviewed by Peter Myers, August 2017

### QUESTION

When did you start at Ford and what was your very first job there?

### DEBBIE FRANCIS

Okay. I started in 1978. My first job in the plant was on the motor line which was building alternators and putting them onto the motors.

### QUESTION

The motors weren't built at this plant, correct?

### FRANCIS

Correct. They were shipped in um at that time from Lima, Ohio and at the end they were from Germany. Cologne, Germany in the US and then one was from Mexico.

### QUESTION

What kind of training did you get before going on the motor line?

### FRANCIS

Well, they tell you when you start there that you have 3 days of training. Well, back in 1978, women were not real accepted into the mix there. And I remember that they would train—the guy that has that job 'cause what it was in 1978 they were splitting shifts. There was gonna be two shifts and I would be going to the night shift, but I had to learn that job on the day shift. So he taught me the job but—there's ins and outs to the jobs and I wasn't trained properly and I remember him leaving early on the second day and the supervisor said, do you have it? And I said no and he said you will. So, so you'd kinda chase the line for a while but you know.

### QUESTION

About how many women were working there when you started?

### FRANCIS

At that time, before I came in there was probably only a handful. There wasn't tons of women. When I started in 1978 they were starting to bring in more women. So I would probably say in the whole plant maybe 30, 40 in '78. Yeah. Out of 2,000 and some people.

### QUESTION

What did it feel like being one of the very few and first women there at the plant? Was it stressful?

### FRANCIS

Very stressful, very intimidating. But once they got along and you could do the jobs, then there was a little bit more respect. But not in the beginning, no. Catcalls and fresh meat and all that kinda nice stuff was said to you.

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QUESTION

Did the few women there kind of bond together?

FRANCIS

Well, when you first started you didn't know where the bathrooms were, they didn't have a lot of women's bathrooms back then. So my sister-in-law, who's here too, we kinda got to where we'd sit at lunch together and kind of talk about all of our aches and pains. And not crying in front of people. So yeah. It was rough in the beginning.

QUESTION

Talk about how it got a little better as time went on.....

FRANCIS

Once the gentlemen at Ford decided that you could do these jobs then it changed. And once they decided that you were not gonna run to the supervisor or the foreman and be saying 'you know 'he said this, he said that,' you know. Then you had you know respect.

QUESTION

What jobs did you have at the plant?

FRANCIS

I was Utility on the motor line and then I was the relief person which I relieved seven people in the morning and then seven people in the afternoon. And then I could go home. And then, after 22 years on the motor line—that was my safe spot. I didn't wanna move. But I moved up to Paint and I became a Paint repairperson. So, what basically my job was to anything that came back through you had to inspect the roof and the hood and then if I see any imperfections then I could sand 'em and buff 'em out. Otherwise we'd have to send it back to the farm and then they would do the bigger repair. So I stayed there probably about 4 or 5 years. And then at the end, I had a chance to be the union safety rep for the plant. So that's when I retired when we knew the plant was closing.

QUESTION

Talk about safety as a huge concern. How did the UAW impact how safety procedures were written up?

FRANCIS

I will say that when I started in 1978 I don't know if there were any safety procedures in place. But when I became the safety rep, it was a big thing. It used to be profit first, then safety. And at the end they really pushed safety. There were a lot of procedures in place for safety.

QUESTION

With the UAW, who did you work most closely with?

FRANCIS

I worked with the management side. He was the safety thing for the management, I was the safety for the union. So he and I worked a lot together. You know, back in the day you wouldn't have done that but at the end that's what we wanted to do is both work together, both get ideas on how we could improve safety, how we could you know get the jobs to be better. They

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brought in ergonomics, which they never had in the beginning either. Fit the job to the people—no, they didn’t have that.

QUESTION

What kind of changes to the plant did you see during your decades working there?

FRANCIS

Like I said, it was so kind of bad in the beginning, I can’t say bad but I mean it was stressful and hurtful and all that stuff and then it got better as long as you could prove that you could do the work you were okay. And towards the end I enjoyed my time at Ford, I really did. In fact I wish I would have stayed ‘til the plant closed in 2011. But I decided to take a risk and leave at 31 years.

QUESTION

Did you go onto some other job at that point?

FRANCIS

Oh yeah, I went to Target to work part time. And I found out that I started at \$6 something in 1978 at Ford and I was gonna start at 2009 at \$7.50 an hour at Target, you know. And then now I just work for seasonal for my son-in-law’s landscaping business. So I just answer phones and do emails and stuff like that in the summer.

QUESTION

Do you have any favorite incidents or memories, funny stories?

FRANCIS

Funny stories? Yeah, I can tell you one. I was loaned out at that time if you were Utility, you would be loaned out to different areas. And I was loaned out to the Frame line. And I remember this gentleman told me to go down and get a set of shocks. And when I got down to the person he said now remember, this is your left shock, your right shock, don’t mix ‘em up, bring ‘em up to the gentleman—the repair man. So I’m going’ left right, left right, left right all the way up there. And here’s this old repair man and he’s got this cigarette hanging out of his mouth and I said, ‘Here’s the left shock and here’s the right shock.’ Where did they get you from? And then the whole line is laughing you know how dumb you are. You know. And one thing I didn’t do they used to do to new hires is go sign up for your Thanksgiving turkey. I never did that.

QUESTION

I’ve heard people mention that. Explain what that was all about....

FRANCIS

Well they would say that you would have to run up to HR and sign up in order to get your holiday turkey. And the people in HR would just [rolls eyes] ‘Not another one.’ [laughs] One guy told me if he would’ve been smart he would’ve run up to the grocery store, got a frozen turkey, and brought it back with him. And said, ‘Look what I got!’

QUESTION

It sounds like some of the jobs were really monotonous but people made up for that....things they came up with.

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FRANCIS

Oh yeah. One of my best friend’s nickname was Haystack. And I don’t know four or five years later they said Robert Miller and I go ‘Who’s that?’ You know. ‘Cause I didn’t know him by Robert Miller. I knew him by Haystack or um Red Eye or— I mean they had so many nicknames. You couldn’t keep up with ‘em.

QUESTION

Any things you did yourself to help pass the time if you had a monotonous job.....

FRANCIS

Oh yeah! Start rumors. That we were gonna go home early or you know. Just that it was always a given if a truck fell into the dip tank up in Paint, that was an automatic; they’d have to shut everything down, cut it out, you’d go home. So, you know, every once in a while we’d start rumors that the truck went into the dip tank and we’d be going’ home early. You know. Just to pass the time. I worked 58 hours a week when I first started. So I spent more time with them at Ford then I did with my family, basically. I had two young kids when I started there and that’s like I said, we went through marriages, divorces, grandparents, deaths. They’d always have a strong bond with the people from Ford.

QUESTION

Anything else you’ve thought of?

FRANCIS

Oh yeah, metric screwdrivers. They told me to go and get a metric screwdriver from general stores. And I was a twenty-some-year-old gal that never—I didn’t know. So I go there with the slip and they wrote it down and everything. And I remember the guy in the general stores just looked at me like ‘Are you kidding me?’ You know. So then after that I started to—when they told me about winter air and summer air in the tires I didn’t fall for it! So yeah, we had such get-togethers. Like at Christmas every line would have their own dinners, everybody would bring food. I mean, birthdays. Everything was celebrated there. Yeah. It was fun. It was hard. It was hard work. But it was fun.

END - DEBBIE FRANCIS INTERVIEW