

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

Denny Dickhausen

TCAP retiree, 1970-2011

Interviewed by Peter Myers, August 2017

QUESTION

When and how did you first start working at Ford?

DENNY DICKHAUSEN

I used to be a foreign car mechanic down on 42nd and Lake Street. When I got laid off from my mechanics job, my wife found out she was pregnant with our first child. I lived in Circle Point. I used to go out to Minnesota Dragways. A friend happened to hear that I got laid off and he said why don't you go to Ford, the Ford Plant. I said, where's the Ford Plant? He said I think they're hiring. And so I went in filled out a 3 by 5 card, and he said they're not hiring now but within a week or so. So I came back and I did their interview. And so they told about a dozen of us guys to go sit in the room. And this big blonde fellow came in and he said who can start today? Right here. 'Cause I needed a job! I needed a job. I started that same day in my street clothes. Put me on the line, as I'm walking up the car line, I was wondering how can you do your job when these cars are moving so fast?! And there were times when I first started that I didn't know if I was going to make it. Because it's so fast. And so I had a partner on the left side, Jimmy Cobb. Wonderful gentleman. And he had been there many years. He did his job on the left, I did mine on the right. And so I could not understand how he could actually have time to drink a sip of coffee or water and have a puff.

One day he said, Will you ever get this job? I said I don't know. This is terrible! And one day after being on the job for about 2 or 3 weeks, all of a sudden things just kinda fell into place. I could actually stand for a few seconds between cars.

QUESTION

What line were you on and what was your actual job?

DICKHAUSEN

I was on the number four trim. This is when we were making the LTD's, the big ones. And what I had to do was I had to take this steam hose, put it in the trunk of the car and turn on the steam to steam the wrinkles out of the headliner. Then I had to put a few plugs in and pick up the loose screws and bolts. I come from a good German upbringing, good work ethic—but then the foreman, after I was there about a month and a half, came over and he said they need a guy over on the truck line, which was a separate line. He said they wanted to know if I had anybody that could handle the job and he said you're a heck of a worker and then I went on the truck line. And then I worked there for many years.

QUESTION

What other jobs did you have during your 30 years there?

DICKHAUSEN

I was a line worker for many years. Then I got laid off for about three months during the winter. But then they called me back and they put me back on the same job I had as when I left. And so

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then I did that job for many years and then I bid on utility. Which means what you do is you go on any line and any part of the plant and take the place of the person that's gone. So I happened to be kind of a handy person. So I made Utility. After that, I got a repairman's job which was on the line. I had my own station. I would look at the repair ticket as the trucks are moving down the line. And I'd have to repair them. After that, I bid out the pre-delivery, which is when the trucks are getting all finalized to go outside. I did that for a few years. Then I bid on the water test. Repairman. All the vehicles came through a big long booth with high pressure on the sides and underneath. They'd have inspectors with flashlights. And so then they'd write it up on a repair ticket. And then I'd have to pull it apart and fix the leak. And they trained me in for 8 hours. And I was pulling stuff off the truck that didn't need to be pulled off. And I got to be good at it. The funny thing is when I had my 30 years in and they had a little party for me and the foreman and superintendents were there and then they asked superintendents if they wanted to say anything. And the one foreman I happened to know him really well. And he said I remember when Denny Dickhausen got into the water test repair. He says there were times I didn't think he knew what he was doing, but I had that water test job for a long time. And so he said after I got to know Denny and he'd have the foreman call me, I knew there was trouble. And like I said I enjoyed the job, I really did. It was a challenging job.

QUESTION

Describe the atmosphere on the line (sounds, smells, etc.)

DICKHAUSEN

Everyone has a certain amount of space to do your job. One thing you don't wanna do is get in the other person's area. And so after you get to know somebody if you're the new guy you know they look at you like they don't know you. But once you get to be friends and have coffee together, have and you get to be really good friends. Because that's the one thing I miss. I miss my friends. I was there for over 40 years of my life. It's very important to me to keep in touch with the people. Because now that there isn't any more Ford Plant people have kind of scattered to the wind. That's the one thing: I miss is my friends.

QUESTION

Talk about relations between the line workers and foremen.

DICKHAUSEN

Keep in mind I started in 1970. The majority of the foreman that were there had been foremen for many years. It was either their way or the highway. But once you got to know 'em they knew that you did a good job, and again, you get along good. You'd have coffee together. And you got along with everybody. But there were days I didn't want to go to work but I signed on to work.

QUESTION

Were you there for any major labor disputes?

DICKHAUSEN

I went through one strike. In 1976. I think we were off for like a month. And there wasn't any trouble, there weren't any altercations. We picketed in front and did what we had to do. And so I was glad to get back to work.

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QUESTION

How did the UAW work to make work life better for people?

DICKHAUSEN

God bless the UAW. Because if we wouldn't have had the UAW, I would not have the retirement that I have now, and the benefits. There were times when it was rough. Like the union and the company were kinda buttin' heads. But it worked out, and there wasn't any trouble. Like I said I enjoyed my time at Ford Motor Company. But I don't have a bad thing to say.

QUESTION

Any favorite event or incident that you still remember as being unique or strange?

DICKHAUSEN

I do have to say in my years I saw it change between the management and the workers. Before it was okay, this is the way that you're gonna do it. After that, you could see things changing, the atmosphere. If you had something to say to make your job easier, you could talk to them. Before, they didn't want to talk to you. Keep in mind some of the foremen there when I started had been foremen for 20 years. So I could see that change. It was a very good change.

QUESTION

Any last things to mention about your experience there?

06:40:48 DENNY DICKHAUSEN

But I've never been accused of not expressing my opinion. I think it's very important to express your opinion. I don't expect people to agree with me on everything. You know. Everybody has a right to speak their mind. You know. Like I said, I—yeah but I totally enjoyed my 40 plus years at Ford Motor Company. You know.

QUESTION

Living near the plant right now—what goes through your mind when you see that 122 acres of vacant land?

DICKHAUSEN

I remember it was shortly after there was nothing there. I had just come back from Florida. I just live just across the street, so I walked over and I talked to the guards. And I stood on the upper parking lot of the Paint building. Where it used to be. And I could almost see the airport. And then you realize how big of an entity it was. We were there for almost 90 years. Right in the heart of this city. And it's unbelievable. People who have come to visit could not believe they actually had a factory right in the heart of St. Paul. I just hope they don't try and smush everything together in there. Because they're not going to have another opportunity like this. It's right by the river. Beautiful. I just hope they do the right thing.

END - DENNY DICKHAUSEN INTERVIEW