

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

Pat Conley

TCAP retiree, 1965-1995

Interviewed by Peter Myers, May 2017

QUESTION

What years were you at TCAP, and what was your position when you left?

PAT CONLEY

I started in June of 1965. And I retired July 1st, 1995. I wanted to have my full 30 years of service in. When I retired I was a maintenance foreman in Central Maintenance.

QUESTION

How did you initially get hired at the Ford Plant?

CONLEY

I initially got hired out of college. I graduated from Stout University in Wisconsin. And Ford came and interviewed on campus. And recruited employees. I chose them over Weyerhaeuser and Alice Chalmers and a couple of other companies because I was interested in the business to begin with. And they assigned me to the Twin Cities assembly plant, lo and behold, right across the river from my hometown of Hudson.

QUESTION

What was your first job and what kind of training did you have, if any, to do that job?

CONLEY

The training was quite typically Ford Motor Company training at that time. And it carried out through a long period of time. I went to the floor in the body shop as a foreman. And I was introduced to the people on the line that would work for me. I was shown where the zone that I would supervise, where it started and where that zone ended. And I was shown the timesheet with the people's names on it. And I never saw that person that showed me anything ever again. I learned everything that I knew and learned from those people. Some good, some bad.

QUESTION

That must have been a little stressful at first.

CONLEY

It was very stressful at first. You knew no one, a very unusual environment. Noisy, dirty, nothing you'd been accustomed to or exposed to ever.

QUESTION

Briefly describe what the workers in the Body Build department did.

CONLEY

At that time almost all of it was either put a part on such as the roof panel or the door hinges in the zone that I had. And the rest of them were all spot welders. They all spot welded the roof down, the door pillars in, those kinds of activities. All spot-welding.

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QUESTION

So all the body parts were shipped from another location, right? They weren't actually stamped here?

CONLEY

No. Twin Cities Assembly was exactly that. It only assembled the vehicle. They didn't manufacture anything.

QUESTION

What kind of skills did people in the body build department need to know? Obviously welding, but what other kind of skills did they have to do?

CONLEY

Most of the hourly people that worked on the line were just spot welders or put a part on that would be spot-welded and clamped it in place. That was the primary job of almost all the employees back there where I was supervising. And then you had maintenance people, skilled trades, you know the fitters, electricians, millwrights and toolmakers and then in that zone, they had some automation, archaic as it may be, which a toolmaker by the name of Winkle built onsite himself. It welded the rocker panel to the floor pan and he had a row welder that welded the roof to the drip rail so as far as the skill trades were concerned, he was our primary person of the trades in that zone because his automation was primarily in that zone.

QUESTION

What kind of changes to the body build process did you experience over your 30 years? Was robotics coming in toward the end of your 30-year period? How did technology change how the body build department worked?

CONLEY

I was only there to observe that because I was removed from that department after a couple years and went to the paint department. So I watched it from the sidelines but it gradually developed through this man named Bob Winkle. Into other automation that was built on division and sent in. It was automatically clamped shut, you put the parts in and clamped it shut and then welded it. Today it has developed into the unitized body where a human hand hardly touches anything. And that's how it's developed from totally being manhandled to almost no physical labor at all involved in the process. And that developed just periodically through the years.

QUESTION

So talk about your transition over to the paint department. And at that time, they were still spray-painting largely by hand, is that right?

CONLEY

Almost everything was spray painted by hand. The body. The only thing that was not was the small parts paint and a priming system that was automated. It was called Bell—a Bell System. It was circular bells through the paint at the product. Electronic—electrically charged. That was the beginning of automation in the paint departments. And some of the other things were developed by people within the plant, and it was two makers, fitters, electricians, and they were

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basically hand-mounted spray guns on an articulating arm that was built in-house. They'd operate up and down but it was all for priming. There was nothing that was painted color originally. It was automated. So the color was all spray painters. Yes.

QUESTION

Then you were also there when they built the new paint shop, right?

CONLEY

We were all there when we built the new paint shop. And took it out of the main building and built it into that separate facility and that was to totally change and automate the painting system. And also it improved the cleanliness, it isolated the paint from any other outside contaminants and environment that was detrimental to painting inside the building. I used to use the phrase sometimes when I worked in that paint building—it was like painting a car in a barn. The roof leaked sometimes and it was a rather archaic principle. Henry Ford first started with mopping it on with pans, and had black paint only. And it was still a rather archaic system until it was developed into an automated system which had to be done in a separate building.

QUESTION

When that automated system was built I understand they hardly needed any of the manual labor to do painting. So a lot of those folks got transferred to other jobs in the plant, is that right?

CONLEY

That's correct. Most of them did. A lot of them became part of the skilled trades people that oversaw the bond-right operation and watched the automations so that if something went haywire, skilled trades could repair it.

QUESTION

How would you describe the relationship between supervisors and the hourly workers or between you and the folks in the line that you supervised?

CONLEY

Well personally, I went there as a supervisor intending to supervise, so I enjoyed it from the get-go and I always did. So, did I have a good rapport with most hourly people? Yes I did.

QUESTION

What kind of interaction did you have with your boss, your management? Who did you report to when you were supervisor of the paint department?

CONLEY

The structure was General Foreman and then Superintendent. The Superintendent ran the department. And at that time he had two general foremen that operated parts of the paint department. And then there were the supervisors such as myself.

QUESTION

Back in the sixties and seventies, the annual model change was a bigger deal than it is today. Model changes were more dramatic then. Was there a lot of extra work involved when you'd change over from the '67 to the '68 models and that sort of thing?

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CONLEY

Well, in the paint department, not as much. It was primarily just changes in colors. And a few of the smaller parts that went on. Except that the front-end assembly, the fenders, radiator support, that wouldn't change. Every year, new fenders, new tail light assemblies, of course the body shop had a huge change every year into the sheet metal parts would change and. It was busy and hectic. Usually when you started out with new parts right after the model change you would have a two-week or a three-week shutdown. You'd start up and of course things never quite fit just right. Holes were not pierced; holes were not the right size. And there were a lot of reworks that went on for a period of weeks, sometimes months, 'til these things were corrected. In primarily in the stamping plants. And that carried on into trim and chassis. They couldn't do their things without these reworks having been done. So it was a busy time for these continuous changeovers and that's why they got smart and eliminated all this constant change year to year. Unfortunately, I think the Japanese taught them that, not themselves.

QUESTION

So now to switch subjects: how did you and Toni meet at the plant?

CONLEY

I can tell you her side of the story because it's also my side of the story. She was in the front office as the operator and greeter and accounting activities. And I was on the floor and never went up front. Even as general foreman and utility foreman, you rarely went up front for any reason. A meeting once in awhile. So, when they went onto shifts, then these people from within the plant that chose to become part of supervision such as Toni had to go to a training seminars. Which some of us were part of, including me. And at those training sessions, she thought I was Don Jergensen and Don Jergensen was Pat Conley. So we really didn't even know each other. Until that time. But then, here we are, together ever since.

QUESTION

I've heard of quite a few cases where people had family members working there. Do you know quite a few people who had a family connection within the plant somehow?

CONLEY

Nepotism was a big part of Ford Motor Company. It was promoted. So could I tell you some of them? Because I'll miss dozens and dozens. I knew the Andersons; they were three generations that worked there. There were brothers, the most I knew that worked there were four brothers together. And I knew them well. Lots of twins that both worked there. And there were many many brothers and fathers and sons. Many many.

QUESTION

Talk about any social activities on weekends or after work. Did people socialize outside of the plant?

CONLEY

Not a lot because we worked so many hours that you primarily went home and rested and you didn't get even when we were younger, didn't get involved in too many other activities. So probably stopping at the saloon occasionally. And once in awhile a weekend thing where a few

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of us would have the whole weekend off and we’d get together for something. But it was primarily family-oriented.

QUESTION

What was a typical work week like for you in terms of the number of hours, number of days?

CONLEY

It depended on the economic conditions but I can go back to a little statement or trite cliché. Chrysler hired enough people to do the job. General Motors hired twice as many as they needed to do the job. And Ford hired half as many as they do to do the job and then put ‘em all on overtime. So, basically, we spent most of our time on overtime unless the economic conditions were really deplorable. So most of the time, it was 6 days a week and 10 hours a day. That would be pretty much the average throughout the company for everyone that worked there.

QUESTION

Toni told me a story about a time right before Christmas when you worked three days without ever going home. Talk about all the extra work that had to be done when they built and then transferred everything over to the new paint building.

CONLEY

First, they had to build the paint building. Which they did do. And then they had to have the tunnel and conveyance system to get the body from the main building up to the paint building and then back down again. And once that facility was basically tried out and up and running, then at Christmas time in ‘84, they tore out the old system within the plant and that became the trim department. Trim operated around the perimeter of this interior paint building. And the spray booths were all taken out of the building, then that whole area became five trim lines right in a row.

QUESTION

So what was the working situation like during that December time? Was it all hands on deck kind of thing where everybody was working massive hours?

CONLEY

No, most people were off except for the trades people and the contractors and the people related to the maintenance facility. The production workers had a very nice Christmas holiday.

QUESTION

The people working at the plant seemed to have a lot of pride in the work they did and I imagine it’s not like that at every manufacturing facility. Was there something about this plant that was different from other Ford plants or other big assembly plants that led to this strong degree of commitment?

CONLEY

I guess you’d have to go back to the thing that everyone says. The Midwestern work ethic. And there were very few in that plant that didn’t have it. Everyone did a really good job.

QUESTION

Any favorite memories or stories that you can tell that might be interesting?

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CONLEY

I have to think about that one because there's thousands and thousands of interesting little things. One that comes to mind is in the summertime when it was hot. Plant security had chemical extinguishers and water-charged compressed air charged water extinguishers on almost every bay post within the building. And they were not supposed to be monkeyed with. But after any 85- or 90-degree day outside, which made it that much warm or warmer inside, they had to be filled every night. Squirt fights ad infinitum. No matter who said what, everybody had a lot of fun with the water. If they'd have had a fire, they'd have had to use the chemicals 'cause there wouldn't have been any water.

I think another one – and it was always pulled on rookie hourly people – there were a lot of conniving ways of doing it but they'd convince them that there were free turkeys in the cafeteria at Christmas time. That was quite prevalent. And we just spent some time with a friend of mine that worked on the rivet line and I didn't know this, even though they worked for me at that time I was their superintendent, they went up to Lunds and bought a turkey so they could really put on the dog. And then whoever was on relief would come back with their turkey. Which was “the” turkey. And [inaudible] Clary said, ‘By noon Pat, the turkey was so grubby and beat up from going back and forth to the cafeteria to get these young guys to go up and get their turkey.’ So that was quite a fun one. And that was an annual event, to pull on the young ones that would be naïve to the free turkey deal.

QUESTION

Anything else you can think of?

CONLEY

I guess probably back in the old paint department, I was the foreman in the prime booth. And in that prime booth, there were a number of gentlemen that hunted. And another thing you weren't supposed to do was cook in the ovens. Which in the paint department everybody was an expert at. The thing you weren't supposed to do you did cook in the ovens. And we had some feeds that would uh put some of these chefs around town to shame. Turtle, venison, elk, duck, goose, pheasant, all these things would be cooked in the oven to a “t.” Had beautiful, beautiful banquets. Not supposed to do it, but we did. We had a lovely time doing it. That was a fun thing too.

END - PAT CONLEY INTERVIEW