

Toni Conley

TCAP retiree, 1963-1994

Interviewed by Peter Myers, May 2017

QUESTION

Just for the record, state your name, when you started, when you retired and what your final job was.

TONI CONLEY

My name is Toni Conley. I was hired in August 8th, 1963. And I retired July 1st, 1994. 31 years I was there. Great years. I started out as strictly telephone operator. At that time, the old cord switchboard was off of the executive garage. And um I worked there—I worked from 7:30 in the morning until 4:00 supposedly. But then I always had to wait ‘til somebody hung up so I could set the board up for the night for plant security. That was my first job. My second job there was they moved the switchboard to the lobby. And then I became the receptionist and the telephone operator. Besides my accounting jobs, I worked for Accounts Payable, Accounts Receivable, and General Accounting. I did that while I answered the phone. And took care of the lobby. We had at that point in time anywhere from 60 to 75 or 80 salesmen a day coming in. so it was a really busy job and my day went by like ten minutes every day. And when the plant worked overtime, I worked overtime. If they worked until 5:18 or whatever, it was counted in 6-minute increments. I worked the line shutdown. And that was a given every day. They would come by with this schedule and then I would know how late I was gonna work. And that was the most fun job in the whole world. And I was there for 15 years. And in 1978, I took the test to be a supervisor. And I passed the test. And I was the first woman that came from the front office to be a supervisor on the floor.

And I went to material handling which I absolutely loved and I was there for seven and a half years. In seven and a half years, I was the only woman foreman on the floor for five of those seven and a half years. And then I went from there I filled out a DIS form which is a form you fill out if you’re looking at a different job. I had heard that the general stores fellow was gonna be promoted to something else, so I thought, well, why don’t I do that? Because that’s one shift, I didn’t have to switch shifts every four months. So I put my name in for that. Well, on the floor one day my boss came to me and said there’s a phone call coming for you. And the phone rang and I picked it up and it was Jerry Norsby. And he said I’ve got a DIS form here from you for general stores and I said yes you do. He said well, would you consider instead of that being the buyer in purchasing? Honest to—I couldn’t breathe. I said well, I think so. And then he said, could you come up front right away, so I did. And my boss took over my job and I went up front and interviewed for it. And couldn’t believe it. The boss, my material handling manager was in charge of that too because that was considered part of material handling. And he interviewed me, Jeff Smith interviewed me, he was a purchasing agent and I got out and I called Pat right way and I believe he was on my shift then. I called him right away and I said honey, when we get home tonight, don’t answer the phone in case they call and say they made a mistake. And I did that for almost ten years before I retired. 1985 to 1994 and I absolutely loved it.

QUESTION

So purchasing—what types of items were you purchasing?

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CONLEY

In purchasing I bought everything that didn't go on the vehicle. All the automotive, robotic, pneumatic, steel, lumber, all the drugs for medical, all the stationery, all the paper, which was huge. Whatever didn't go on the truck came through my office. And then they took the man out of general stores and put my boss and me down there with new offices. And so I also did that. I supervised general stores plus being the buyer. Had wonderful, wonderful smart guys working for me. Just wonderful.

QUESTION

Back to your first job, the switchboard/receptionist...I'm sure in that position you had a good sense of all that was happening in the plant....

CONLEY

Oh I did. It was the most fun job you could ever have. And I of course, because I was in the front office, the only thing I saw about the plant was if I walked to the cafeteria for lunch. I got to know pretty soon who was on the phone more than they should have been all day. And I had to do place every single long-distance call going out of the plant. And I had to keep time and charges on those. So when the bills came to those department managers, they would line up at my door with their bill in hand hollering at me saying 'There is no way I could have talked this much on the phone all month! I can't pay this!' I'm sorry, why would I fib? You know, it was just a hoot. So it got to the point where of course I always had to win because I was working for the Controller. And it was very interesting. And there were never any hard feelings. Never. Oh it was so exciting. I always said I should write a book and then—but I had to wait 'til some people passed away. Because I kept track of wives, daughters, girlfriends, and mistresses. And that was the biggest hoot of all!

QUESTION

These were the days before private lines and cell phones.....

CONLEY

Everything went through me. Everything. And I loved it. The telephone company rated me often. I'd say several times a year. And I came out on the top of the heap and I was very proud of that. And that they rated you on how quickly you answered the phone, how quickly the people on the other end answered the phone for me because I did all the ringing. Yes it was very interesting. It was a big growing period for me. I was 23 years old. And I really grew up at the Ford plant, and I'm very proud of them for tolerating me all those years.

QUESTION

So your next job was a real challenge, being the first female supervisor on the floor.

CONLEY

Well...my first job was in trim and upper chassis and everybody that worked for me, not one of them had a wife that worked. And so I had people that resented me. And then people that helped me every which way they could. I had two great stock checkers. One of 'em – his name was Peterson. I nicknamed him "Peaches." He taught me my job. He was absolutely so kind and so thoughtful with me, and so patient. And I didn't know trim from chassis, I'd walk down A Aisle saying 'Okay, chassis on the right, trim on the left.' and it was exciting. And I have always felt

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everyone is equal here. I had no thoughts of salary versus hourly. I never did. And so this was easier for me then. It was a respect thing.

QUESTION

Women friends outside of the plant—did many of your female friends work?

CONLEY

Some of them did but most of them did not and if they did it was part-time—a clerk in a drug store or a gift shop. Nobody did what I did. And the thing was, this was interesting to me, when I first got my job at Ford, one of the reasons I had like 7 jobs lined up that day. Or that whole three-week transition period because the man that I was going to work for at Ford, his wife was very ill, and on her deathbed. So they called—they kept calling every week and saying ‘Don’t give up, don’t give up.’ And the reason I didn’t is because every other place that was gonna hire me was offering me 400 dollars a month. But Ford was offering me 415. And at that point in time in 1963, 15 dollars a month was a lot of money. It was grocery money. And so I waited and I never regretted waiting. However, my in-laws, my sister-in-law and mother-in-law, were both RNs. Four-year-degreed RNs. They were so upset with me because that was more money than they could make in a hospital. And then I made the mistake, only once, when I found out about the cost of living, that check came, my second paycheck there, and I looked at the check and my heart just sank. I’ll have to pay this back, they overpaid me. So I took my check to my boss at the end of the end of my shift at 4:00 and I said ‘I’m sorry but they’ve made a mistake on my paycheck, and it’s more money than I—’And he laughed and he said ‘No, no, no, we incorporate the cost of living in your salary,’ twice a year or whatever it was I can’t remember exactly. Oh my goodness was that cause for celebration. Then I went home and told everybody. That was really—I had the wrath of God. So thank you, Ford Motor Company. They teach you how to keep your mouth closed too.

QUESTION

Describe that big December changeover, which you said was a very hectic period.

CONLEY

During the tear-out. I had all of trim and upper chassis and pre-delivery. When the last truck went by, on the assembly line, we were the last car at that point in time. the last car went by on trim, there was like a 3-car space and the welders came. And took all the metal down, the conveyors, everything. And that was close to midnight. On whatever day that was. I think it was right before Christmas Eve. I was there for 36 hours. But by the next morning you could see wall-to-wall, first time ever since the plant was built. I wore a hard hat, of course, it was the most exciting time in my whole work life to be part of something like that was absolutely mind-boggling for me. It was so exciting.

QUESTION

How long did it take to get all the new conveyors and everything installed?

CONLEY

It went really fast and I’m sorry to say I can’t remember when we went back to work. I was there for the tear-out and then of course Material Handling had to put all the racks up and fill them up.

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QUESTION

And what year was that?

CONLEY

1984. Christmas of '84. Because then I was on the floor until this all happened after that. We went to the Ranger of course, strictly Ranger, and I'm trying to think. March. In March I went over to Purchasing up front, back up front, where I started.

QUESTION

What unusual things can you remember?

CONLEY

Oh, we had a fox! We had a test track in the side yard, this was before the paint building was built. We had a test track and they used it of course. We always had a fox that lived there and brought her kits out there. That was one of the big things every year. I had to go out and see that. I just had to. We always had mallards nesting on the front lawn. On the Mississippi River side of the building. And that was so fun just to see that. That and plus we had a beautiful, beautiful crabapple tree. Right at the front door. That I got to watch all those years in—in bloom. It was like oh thank you Lord. It was just beautiful. We had a really nice environment. Much better than any other plant I've ever been to. And I we were very fortunate.

QUESTION

You had mentioned that your children worked there briefly.

CONLEY

My daughter worked there when she was in college in the summer. She would come home she worked there as what they call a TPT or Temporary Part-Time, and she'd come home on Friday night and work Saturday. And she got paid ten dollars an hour. Here's what she said: 'Oh Mom, I could do anything for ten dollars an hour.' Okay, we'll see. So after about two months they put her on full-time in the summer for vacation replacements and so forth. And she would be upstairs in her bedroom crying at night. 'Honey what's wrong?' 'Oh Mom,' she said, 'You don't know what it's like. It never quits. It never quits. They just keep coming and coming and coming.' She worked on the IP line. I said 'No, I wouldn't know anything about that, would I, with the telephone?' I couldn't even go to the bathroom, are you kidding me?

CONLEY

So then my son worked there out of high school—he was a trainer chef for Perkins. They sent him all over to train their chefs. So when he turned 18, he came to Ford. Before college. And he worked there for several months. And he worked for Pat. And I had just started dating Pat. And he said to me, 'Mother, if you don't marry Pat Conley, I'll probably never talk to you again.' I said, 'What are you talking about? I've only been out with 'em a couple times, he doesn't even talk!' He's Norwegian you know. So anyway, if my son didn't come home at night from work, 'cause he worked nights, he'd been at Pat's house staying overnight. So that's how that was. Both my children worked there. It was good for them because it made them know what they didn't wanna do for the rest of their life. It spurred them on to finish college. And that's a good thing.

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QUESTION

As a supervisor on the line, did you have to supervise any summer student workers?

CONLEY

No, not ever in Material Handling. We didn't have that. But I wasn't on the floor very long, just days, when I learned there were certain people to not cut across the conveyor by, because they would take their power tool and throw it at my back. It was hooked up of course. With air. But they would, you know. And they resented me being on the floor. But that was okay too because they got over it.

But it was a whole different era. And I had salaried people that were afraid of me. Because I was a woman, and what were they going to do? Promote a woman before a man? Oh, are they crazy? I had hourly people that told me that: “How dare you take man's job”? I'd say the same thing to them over and over: “See that line up in back of me? Oh, nobody there, right? Nobody wanted this job. I got it.”

QUESTION

Good for you.

CONLEY

Yes. It was fun. And those are the same people that were so afraid of me when I first went on the floor. That when I went back up to purchasing, a whole group of them from Material Handling came to see me to give me hugs and tell me how happy they were for me. So, it was so worth it. It really was. Yes, I was, brought a tear to my eye.

QUESTION

Did you do much in Highland Park before or after work? How would you describe Highland Park, especially the Ford Parkway/Cleveland area in the 60s and 70s?

CONLEY

Where Moeller Jeweler is now on Cleveland and Ford Parkway, on the would be the northwest corner, there was a drug store. And her husband was the pharmacist and she had a lunch counter. It couldn't have had maybe six, seven stools in it. And she made the best sandwiches. You couldn't believe it. And a lot of the little ladies from Highland Park, we'd go there for lunch a couple times. A couple of the girls. And because we only had a half hour so it had to be closer. And the little ladies in Highland Park would double park on Ford Parkway and go in and have lunch and then go out and get in their car; is that a hoot? Those were the days! Those were the sixties! You could do that. And then I belonged to what they called the twilight bowling league. It started at 4:00. So we'd get off at 4, go right over to Hodges where they had a bowling alley. And we'd bowl. There would be gals and guys. Some managers. And we had a ball. And of course, bowling and me, I've never been coordinated. So I did gutter ball heaven. And we had so much fun laughing. And we just laughed, we didn't care. So it was a lot of fun. Lot of fun, good camaraderie. Good camaraderie. And nobody ever was less than or more than.

QUESTION

Describe lunch room.

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CONLEY

Well, there again it was almost a sad thing. There was a big division between hourly and salaried. And that's okay, that's the way it is. But the food was good and plentiful. And inexpensive. But I didn't eat there all the time, but I could get a bowl of soup for like ten cents. So it was great for me especially. But I enjoyed it. There were different salaried people that I only talked to on the phone. We had our lunch bunch. Another gal and I – she was the secretary in purchasing – she and I would walk to the cafeteria and sit with our lunch bunch and they were all the maintenance guys. All the supervisors in maintenance. And we just had just a ball with those guys. They were so fun. And told us all this inside stuff going on, so it was fun to be part of it.

QUESTION

Any other favorite memories or events you can think of?

CONLEY

One of the things that was kinda fun was when the Mustang came out, my switchboard then was off the executive garage. So they pulled the Mustang into the executive garage and before all of the big executives came out to look at it together, one of the engineers puts some horse things under the back end of it. And then left. So they came out there—there was this beautiful red Mustang convertible with the little horse things, little horse bunnies, under the car. And that was a hoot. They were always pulling stuff. It was really fun.

QUESTION

In your last few years there, I assume there were more women, more diversity. What was that like?

CONLEY

Oh my goodness. There were 13 women in 1963. That included two women on the IP line left over from the Second World War. And I don't know if anybody has told you how they got rid of all the women during the war—after the war. After the war, they put the women on creepers, an automotive creeper that goes under the car. They put 'em there, on their back, under the railroad cars, with whiskbrooms. And there were huge bugs and rats and mice and it was just awful. And they did get rid of a lot of them. But some of these women like the guys—the gals stuffed on the IP line they had to work. They didn't have husbands. Whether they were killed or divorced it doesn't matter. But I was one of 13 and counting the women in the Controller's office had more women. There were a couple women secretaries but mostly at that point in time in 1963, the men were secretaries. So it was interesting. And then when I left, I had friends on the assembly line. Women friends that were hourly people. They'd come over –at that point in time Pat and I lived just five blocks north on Mount Curve Boulevard. They would come over after work or in the evening, we'd sit and have a drink and reminisce and did you know this and did you hear about that? It was fun. But the women I always thought were so special. Because I know that their thing was a little bit harder for them than it was for the men. And some of them were treated unfairly by the supervisors which I could not get involved in. But I knew. And they didn't complain. Because they all were so grateful to have that good a job.

QUESTION

When top brass from Dearborn would come to the plant, what did you do to prepare?

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CONLEY

Oh, big huge cleanups. If the plant looked like that every day, it would've been a miracle. It was huge, huge cleanups. And I was very fortunate. I was the one that they chose when I was in purchasing as a buyer, they chose me to be the tour guide for Governor Perpich, one of the Ford boys, Peterson. So it was very exciting and they were nice guys. You know, regular people. And I treated them that way and I think that was the key to it. Although I was threatened by the plant manager saying, “Don't you dare tell them any of your jokes, Toni.” I said okay, I promise.

On the days that we were expecting the executives from the Ford Motor Company and Dearborn come to visit we always had a heads-up. Give us a week anyway. We slaved during that week. We had unlimited overtime. The floors shined like they were freshly painted. There wasn't one piece of wrapping hanging from any palate on any of the racks. Everything looked so good by the time they got there, it was a pleasure to be there. It wasn't humming like it normally does. And it was a really good discipline thing for all of us. And it was fun to see them. And one of the Ford people that told the gal at the Chicago assembly plant who had my job, one of the Ford boys came and sat in the lobby and visited with her. And she said aren't you gonna go on the tour? He said nah. Seen one, you've seen 'em all.

QUESTION

Were you there when they still had a showroom?

CONLEY

No. that stopped in the fifties. They built executive offices there. And my switchboard ended there of course. But they had terrazzo floors under all that carpeting and they were just beautiful. I still have a solid brass table that was in the lobby then in the fifties. And it was on the scrap heap and one of the managers said to me I hear you're redecorating your apartment and that was when I was divorced and my children were grade school kids. I said yes I am. He said well, I think I have a present for you. Give me your apartment key and I'll have I'll have Blackstone deliver it. And here was this table. I still have it. Can't part with it.

END - TONI CONLEY INTERVIEW