

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

## **Victor Koehler**

TCAP retiree, 1977-2007

Interviewed by Peter Myers, August 2017

### QUESTION

When did you start working at the Twin Cities Assembly Plant?

### VICTOR KOEHLER

I started in February of 1977. And then I retired in December of 2007.

### QUESTION

How did you get hired and what was your first job?

### KOEHLER

I was hired as a wire feed. At that time, they were taking applications at the plant. So I had heard from my brother and father-in-law that they were hiring and I was working for Brown Tank in Minneapolis. So then I heard that, and I got laid off there on a Thursday and I went to work on a Friday for Ford so I never missed a paycheck. That worked out really good.

### QUESTION

What does a wire feed do?

### KOEHLER

It's welding, you know, it's a type of welding. So it's they call it may wire. It's funny because I'd just graduated from school and I went and got broken into something that moves, it doesn't stand still. So it was a whole different ballgame.

### QUESTION

Describe some of the different jobs you had at the plant over the years.

### KOEHLER

Well, many. We did the wire feed and I was working on cars. Then I moved over to the body shop and I put in roofs, and then I became Utility. And so I did a lot of jobs. There probably isn't a job I didn't do in the body shop at one point or another. So, in 30 years you kinda move around and there wasn't I think a hoist they never ran either. And those are kinda difficult sometimes.

### QUESTION

What kind of vehicles were being assembled when you first started?

### KOEHLER

Well we had the station wagon, the Country Squire and the LTD's. No rucks; it was cars that I got hired in, that's all I did. And then of course it became the trucks, the F-150's and the cars. So then we moved on to just trucks.

### QUESTION

What kind of training did you get when you started there?

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

KOEHLER

They had a guy that was gonna move on to a different position. He trained me on the job.

QUESTION

What do you remember about the work environment? Was it frantic, was it noisy, what did it feel like to work there in the Body area?

KOEHLER

You know it was hard work at first. I never had a bad attitude. I always thought it was fun. And it was different. As being a kid I was pretty wet around the ears yet and then to know all these people you know that were farmers and they said if you don't wanna work here, there's the door. So that kinda made ya feel like 'Okay....' But, I always tried to be one of the better employees. I always tried to do my job and be one of the better you know employees there.

QUESTION

Were there some points of tension between hourly workers and management?

KOEHLER

Well you know they had a task. Every year. And you had to meet that task. So they'd come and they'd give ya more work. And obviously you know you can only do so much. So that was always a challenge. To show 'em that you can only do this much. Or you're not saying no, you can't do it, but you're not gonna show that you can't really do it, so. You know obviously they have to have this work done so it's gotta be moved on. And that was always a challenge for everybody.

QUESTION

Was there a certain amount of pressure just to keep producing more and faster?

KOEHLER

Yes. I think so.

QUESTION

What opportunities were there for someone like you to get trained and advance to a different position if you wanted to?

KOEHLER

There's always that opportunity but I always felt like I never went to school so I never preceded anything else so to me it was you know good money, good benefits, and if I wanted to move on to something else they'd train you. You would bid on these jobs. So when your time was up you could move on. So that was always a good opportunity there.

QUESTION

Did you end up making some good friends among your co-workers?

KOEHLER

Oh yeah. Made a lot of good friends. After 30 years it becomes your family.

QUESTION

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

Any particular events you remember as being out of the ordinary?

KOEHLER

You know there's a lot. And you can go through a lot of detail. There are some I remember when you know the—we were working back in some of the tool rails came down and nobody got hurt, thank God. But the one that was down there a good friend of ours tucked underneath the table so he you know he was safe and you know that took care of that problem right away. I mean I don't think it stopped production, they just kept going, they fixed in and you know. And at that time I think we were building uh flare sights, so.

QUESTION

What kinds of food did you experience when you were working in the Body department?

KOEHLER

Well I was one of those guys. So and they called it Vic's Corner. It's just something to do, you know. We started out with hot dogs and all of a sudden they wanted something more so we went to hamburgers. They wanted something else so we went to chicken then they wanted something else and we went to like roast beef sandwiches and the other one was hot dagos. So it was Polish sausages. Every day we had something different. Which was kinda interesting. It was kinda fun but it was kind of an honor system and you know people are pretty honest.

QUESTION

Both hourly and salaried workers taking pride in their work....what do you think made people so proud to work at this plant?

KOEHLER

In Minnesota I think we have good working people. And a lot of 'em when I started were a lot of farmers. And I think they passed that on to us. And they had really good attitudes. I don't know too many negative people. They all had a real good attitude. Sometimes you'd see dents or you see something people'd say yeah, let it go or whatever and you know—and people took pride and said no. That's going out to the customer and the majority of people had really good you know positive attitude and then I was that same way too. I didn't like to see anything bad go down the line.

QUESTION

When the plant started back in 1925 and for most of the first half of the century I'm guessing the workforce was almost entirely white guys. By the time you started working there, were there many people of color working in the plant and how was it for someone who was not you know European white male descent to work in the plant?

KOEHLER

I come from a Hispanic family. I got hired and I made that well-known that I was. But a lot of black minorities. Some when I retired were gone already but I thought they were I think in the majority people were treated pretty good. And whoever wasn't they stuck to themselves and you know they fought their way through it. And kept a good job. And they were good workers, all of 'em everybody there was a good worker. I can't think of too many that weren't.

QUESTION

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

For many years there were rumors the plant was going to shut down. When you finally learned they were going to shut it down, how did you feel and what kind of options did they give you at that time?

KOEHLER

I think I had 29 years when it really hit home that, wow, I got 30 years, what am I gonna do now? It was a sad feeling. You know to know that here you work for 30 years and all these people you know what are they gonna do with all these people, where are they gonna go? So it was really kinda heart-wrenching. And you get to know these people, they're your family for 30 years and you're like, I hope they do well. And I know that a lot of 'em were getting up there in age and you're hoping to have some kind of hobby 'cause you hear the rumors that if you don't do something you're gonna go downhill really quick. But it was kinda scary. But I knew that I had my 30 years that I was gonna be okay. But then it was a decision, do I wanna move on or do I wanna quit or whatever. But I thought no, I have six kids and we're all pretty much growing' so you know it's time to go do something else and I figured I'd go do something and I've always wanted to do something different.

QUESTION

And what did you want to do?

KOEHLER

I wanted to be a personal trainer. I became a personal trainer. I wanted to be a bus driver, I haven't done that yet. But I wanted to be in maintenance, work for different companies, do different things and that's what I do now. I wanted to work two years here, two years there, but it ended up working as a janitor for five years. I was only gonna be there two. But it was a nice company to work for. So I stayed there five years. Then I became a personal trainer and then I moved on to maintenance for the apartments.

QUESTION

Anything else you want to say about your 30 years at Ford?

KOEHLER

You know, you miss the people. You really do. Like I said I had six kids I never was really educated so the money and the benefits were great. It was a good living, you know, for everybody. And when I go through Highland Park and I see how quiet it is now it's really sad. But I've always had a positive attitude at Ford and I enjoyed really working there. And I thank Ford for that..

END - VICTOR KOEHLER INTERVIEW

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