Richard Bielski Interview
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Caribou Coffee Shop
Walton Boulevard
Rochester, Michigan
Transcribed by Daniel Clark

DC: And, I usually start out just asking where you were born.

RB: Detroit.

DC: OK.

RB: Detroit, Michigan.

DC: If you don't mind me asking, when was that?

RB: 1938.

DC: '38, OK. And were your parents from Detroit.

RB: Uh, they lived in Detroit, at the time of my birth, but they were both immigrants.

DC: Oh, OK. From?

RB: Well, my mother came from Poland, and my father came from Russia.

DC: OK. And when did they immigrate?

RB: I think my father came here in about 1909, if I'm not mistaken, or 1905, and my mother came, I believe, about 1910.

DC: OK. Uh, and did they come straight to Detroit?

RB: No.

DC: OK, where did they go?

RB: My mother came by way of Kokomo, Indiana—not Kokomo. I'm trying to think of the steel mills just outside of Chicago.

DC: Gary?

RB: Gary. Gary, Indiana, yeah. And my father came by way of Oswego, New York.

DC: Oswego, OK. Did they have relatives there, or . . .

RB: No.

DC: OK.

RB: No relatives.

DC: So how did they end up in Detroit?

RB: Um, looking for jobs. And my mother's history, she married—and I don' know the background from her first husband, where she met him, the circumstances, or anything else. I just don't know. But my father just came here, it was looking for work. He was a skilled—he was a skilled tradesman.

DC: Where did he learn his skill?

RB: In the orphanages, in Russian

DC: Oh really. He was an apprentice in Russia.

RB: Yes. OK.

DC: Exactly what did he do?

RB: He was a model maker. Woodworker.

DC: So when he—do you have any idea when he moved to Detroit, about what time?

RB: It was prior to—I think it was prior to 1930, if I'm not mistaken, but I don't know the time frame.

DC: And where did he get a job?

RB: Uh, he worked at several shops in town and wound up working for Fisher Body.

DC: Was that Fisher Body out here, or in Detroit?

RB: Fisher Body in Detroit.

DC: Detroit.

RB: Yes.

DC: And did he work as a model maker?

RB: Models and patterns, yes.

DC: Models and patterns, OK. They accepted his apprenticeship, credentials.

RB: Oh yes.

DC: OK. Yeah. Was he doing that when you were born?

RB: Yes.

DC: And then your mother came by way of Gary, you said.

RB: Through Gary, Indiana. That's where my grandfather—when he came here with the family, that's, that's where they landed.

DC: And do you have any idea when that side—when your mother—or did she move with her family to Detroit? Or did she . . . ?

RB: My grandfather brought the family. He was widowed and brought the family to Gary. Began to look for work, and he worked in the steel mills.

DC: OK. And then do you have any idea when your mother made it to Detroit?

RB: No. That I don't.

DC: Do you know when your mother and father were married?

RB: [pause] I think they were married in 1935.

DC: And was that in Detroit?

RB: That was in Detroit.

DC: So you missed the Depression. Did your father tell you at all what his employment status was during the Depression?

RB: Yes.

DC: What was it?

RB: His was excellent. I think my father said the only thing that he ever—it went down to four days a week.

DC: So being a model maker . . .

RB: Well he did that voluntarily also, because he could have worked—he could have worked

five or more. He was a skilled tradesman. He did a lot of special projects for the Fishers, who were still actively managing the company. And there was not a problem with his managers particularly, because of the projects that he did with the brothers. But he was fortunate. He didn't succumb to the pressures inside the shop, all the abuses that were inside the shop before. He always spoke very highly of the Fisher organization, except when they weren't there, they didn't know what went on behind their backs.

DC: What did your father say about what went on behind their backs?

RB: Oh, people bought their jobs. They'd pay for it with, with favors, sexual, money, food—and that's the way they kept working.

DC: Would this be production workers or skilled workers?

RB: Uh, where—he was not in the production area, but it happened, and generally in the shops. That's—people had to buy and pay for their jobs in order to stay working. And that was—you know, the local bosses—he told me about—and the way they conducted themselves. He never had that problem, because like I said, he was, he was too close on special projects to the family, to the Fisher family, and they never dared put him in the position, or even ask, or threaten. They just didn't dare.

DC: Well he must have been quite skilled to be that close to the Fishers.

RB: He had, he had a lot of projects for them. He had many shop patents. He had um—he had—he told me about World's Trade Center, I think was in 1938, where he had made for them a working micrometer out of exotic woods, and other things that I'm not familiar with. But he held various shop patents over the years with them.

DC: It sounds like he truly enjoyed wood. It wasn't just a [?] thing.

RB: Love is the proper word. Because he did it at home, and he looked forward to going to work.

DC: That's really interesting that that would be what he learned in the orphanage, and then it was a real good fit.

RB: He loved it, and that was his life. He just couldn't wait to get home and have supper and get onto some kind of project, always with wood.

DC: Did you work on any of those projects with him?

RB: Yes.

DC: What do you remember about the projects you did as a child?

RB: I didn't have the patience [laughs knowingly] that he had. I didn't have the patience.

And it was never like—it wasn't really pushed on me. It was something that my Dad just let me have my—I had to do the things I wanted to, and whenever I was there and he always encouraged me and would let me do things, OK? And he was a very good teacher. I always marveled at how well he was a teacher, since he had no, really no parenting skills. Nothing learned, because he was in an orphanage. And from what I understand from my oldest brother, who knew a lot of history—and y oldest brother, incidentally, is twenty-two years older than I am. He's eighty-seven. And he and my Dad spoke often, and I understand that my grandfather on my father's side was an alcoholic and abuser.

DC: Is that how your father ended up in an orphanage then?

RB: I think my grandfather died. I think my father was maybe seven or eight years old when that happened. But he had vivid memories of the hard times in Russia. And that's how he wound up in an orphanage. It's—one of the things that, that he was blessed with also, the European education system focused on reading, poetry, music, and languages. So when my father—before he—I used a term earlier that he immigrated. Actually he escaped.

DC: OK.

RB: [laughs] All right? He escaped from the Russian Army. When he came out of the—when he came out of the orphanage, there was only one career in Russia, and that was the military. And it was brutal.

DC: How old was he when he came out of the orphanage and went into the military?

RB: He—he didn't go into the military. That was the thing. I think he was either twelve or fourteen years old when he came out. He already had a master's credentials.

DC: At twelve or fourteen.

RB: Oh yeah. He was—they went to school seven days a week. Seven days a week, around the clock, no stops, no vacations. [laughs] So the teaching and the working and everything else, it gave him quite an education by the time he was fourteen, and I think he knew how tough it was there, and one time he was hanging around the docks, I think in St. Petersburg, and he had heard somebody was looking for a musician—play the guitar or something like that. And he said, "I can play it." Well he had absolutely no idea, but he got on the ship, and from there he went across into the Baltic—across the Baltic and into Finland. So then he had some credentials, he had some passes, and he was going back and forth on the cruise line. And then he got the crazy idea that, gee, they needed a musician going over to the United States. He was it. See? So then, all of a sudden he became a drummer, which he knew nothing about [laughs]. But he became a drummer. And that's how he landed in New York.

DC: So he got a pass to New York?

RB: He got passes to New York—the rest of the status, I don't really know.

DC: But he was a teenager at the time.

RB: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

DC: Gutsy guy.

RB: I had pictures of him and his friends. We have one picture still on his old woodworking chest, which I still have. A woodworking chest, was probably from the 1880s, 1870s, became his took chest. And I still have a picture of him and his buddies skinny-dipping in the East River. I can't tell which one is my Dad, because all you'd see is the cheeks [laughing].

DC: Hmm, well . . .

RB: But somehow, he got work. Interesting story. My brother—my sister encapsulated some of, some of the history—she interviewed my brother, my oldest brother after our parents died. And one of the stories that my brother told her was that there were no jobs when you got to Oswego, but people were hiring. So he got passed over for a job—you know they had their pick—but he found a worker's uniform just hanging up. He put it on, walked into the shop. They didn't know who he was. "Well, they must have hired you, so here, you go over here and you do" this, see? They didn't know. They didn't have his name down or anything else, but here he's got his uniform and everything else, you know, work clothes. That was his first job. First job. Just plain boldness on his part, just out of desperation. He just did it. So he was a good worker, and things went very well for him. It wasn't his vocation, or what he wanted to do, but he had to eat.

DC: Had he learned any English?

RB: Oh yes, my Dad was very fluent in languages already when he came out of Russia.

DC: English was one of them.

RB: English was very easy for him to pick up. As a matter of fact, my father had, had no accent whatsoever, from what I can recall.

DC: Wow.

RB: No accent. There was no accent.

DC: Do you know what that job was in Oswego?

RB: No.

DC: OK, yeah.

RB: Nope.

DC: He just did it.

RB: Nope. It was a shop of some sort, yes. It was a manufacturing job.

DC: It reminds me of a movie I saw recently—Catch Me If You Can.

RB: Yes.

DC: The guy just did anything, you know.

RB: Sure.

DC: Wow.

RB: So he married. He married. And I do know this from my brother. His first wife, it wasn't my mother. His first wife, in Oswego—that's where my oldest brother was born—and that's where I have a, also, this is a half brother, as a correction. I also have a half sister who I never knew, that died in Oswego, in her early life from influenza. And my brother and I talked about making a trip this year or next year, if he's still around, go to Oswego to find out if we can still find the court records. You know, find out where our sister may be buried.

DC: Would that be in that big epidemic at the end of World War I?

RB: Yes, yes, yes. And then, they moved to Detroit. He and his first wife moved to Detroit, and that's when they had my other half-sister. She was born in Detroit. And obviously, in a Polish enclave, because his first wife was Polish also. And then they went through a divorce, and then he met my mother. He always belonged to singing societies. Europeans used to get together, all the various ethnic groups. That was a very, very big part of the culture, was singing. So that's where he met my mother. They were both singers. And my mother trained herself on classical piano. That was something that became the love of her life, and she just had the—she had the ability, so just did it.

DC: She trained herself.

RB: Trained herself. Obviously she had to have some lessons along the way to help her out, but it was not anything that you could afford on a steady basis. But that was the love of her life also, was singing and playing the piano. Always. Until her death five years ago, she still did it.

DC: Is that right?

RB: Yeah. She was in a nursing home for five years prior to her death. She died in '95, and she always told the remaining family, she said, that "When I can no longer play the piano, then I don't want to live." And what she used to do, and she was a feisty old gal—when my wife first met her, she said, "You're still afraid of your mother, aren't you?"—I guess so. She was small but mighty. But at ninety-five, she refused to use a cane. She refused to use a walker. She was in the nursing home for five years, and she walked along the rail, shuffled her feet to get to the all-purpose room. And she was also blind, incidentally. She would to the all-purpose room and feel her way over to the piano, sit down and start playing by memory, remote control you know, and singing. And obviously, her playing skills—she never hit the right keys, but you got the idea what she was playing. I used to visit her every Sunday, and a lot of times at lunch hour I would go from work on my lunch hour and just go over and visit with her. But they were musical. They enjoyed—they enjoyed singing, they enjoyed music. But . . .

DC: Did your mother have any jobs outside the home?

RB: When she came—from what I gather, when she came from Gary to Detroit—and again, I don't know the circumstances—but she was a nanny. That's the only thing I can remember that was told, that she was a nanny, or a nurse. They called them nurses back then, you know. And she worked in Grosse Pointe, and she worked in New Baltimore, and that's what—she took care of children. That's all I know as far as her, her working environment. It's—my mother was dependent on other people to drive, or the buses.

DC: OK. She never learned to drive.

RB: She learned to drive once, and she made a mistake in downtown Detroit, and some cop just chewed her out royal, just scared her so bad she never went behind the wheel after. But my mother knew the bus routes by heart in the city of Detroit. There wasn't any place that she couldn't go. And as the city changed and became tougher—the environments were changing—my mother had been robbed a few times, had her purse stolen. It didn't deter my mother. She just made sure that the—they got the purse back with her Social Security card—at that time she used to carry that with her and some other things—after that she never took the documents with her, but she kept her address in there and she always had a ten-dollar bill pinned into her bra. So she was never vulnerable. She could always catch another bus. And she used the buses quite frequently. When I was a youngster, she used to take me on trips, you know, going down the Seven Mile bus to the streetcar at the State Fairgrounds, and going downtown, and going to J. L. Hudson's and [Crowley's?] and Saunders, of course, and sometimes to the movies with my mother. And my mother knew the routes, all around town.

DC: Where did you live in Detroit?

RB: At first, when my father married my mother—in 1935 they lived in Hamtramck on Joseph Campau.

DC: How about when you were born?

RB: Uh, I was born in Detroit at St. Joe's hospital—but obviously, because that's right on the borderline of Hamtramck, and we moved to Ryan Road in Detroit—Seven Mile and Ryan, kitty-corner from Pershing High School. We moved there 1940 or 1941.

DC: [can't hear question]

RB: I can only say that I—that I can't remember my twos, but I can remember my threes, because I can remember hearing on the radio, Sunday night around the radio with my family, about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I still remember that.

DC: You do.

RB: I didn't know what it meant. But I had three half brothers, they were all in the military, all in action, and they all came back safely. That was quite a—I had a brother that was a Master Sergeant in Communications. He was on the—he was in the Pacific, did a lot of duty in the Pacific, and he came back unscathed. Uh, I had a brother that was in the Navy in the Pacific, was in a lot of action. He came back unscathed. And I had another brother that was in the European theater. He was in naval aviation, and he got shot down over Italy. But he landed on the right side of the line, OK? So they all made it back safely. They all made it back safely.

DC: You were very young during all of this.

RB: Sure, yeah. I was three—I was three when the war started, you know, after Pearl Harbor.

DC: What do you remember about your old neighborhood in Detroit?

RB: It was nice and clean. I remember that. Uh, and then when the war was over, there was still a lot of vacant property around there—that's when they started building a lot of homes, a lot of these bungalows, GI homes. That's what they called them—GI homes. They were very nice. And it was funny, but I do remember this: on the south side of Ryan—that would be the southwest corner, predominantly—there were, it was a black enclave. And they were beautiful homes, beautiful neighborhoods, and the people were well-to-do, by the standards of the day. On the southeast corner, southeast side of Seven Mile and Ryan, and down towards Nevada, it was just the opposite. It was—it was a poor, a poor black community. And down below Nevada, south of Nevada towards Six Mile, there was a large housing project also. It was prefab homes that they had over there.

DC: Would this have been in the late '40s?

RB: This would be in the late '40s, yeah. Yep.

DC: And what about your immediate neighborhood?

RB: North of Seven Mile Road, they had, it was basically a white community, and the homes were very well-kept with a lot of ethnic families living in there, in the older homes. And then of course the—when they built the GI homes over there—I don't remember anything about backgrounds, or ethnic backgrounds or anything else. You know, they were just kids you went to school with and they were, they were friends, you know, school chums. My first school was on Outer Drive. It was [Vans Isle?], which was between Mound and Ryan Road. I remember that.

DC: And did the school draw from both the white and black neighborhoods?

RB: [pause] That's an interesting question. I'm trying to recollect. I think primarily it was, it was, it was white. But I think there were several, several black children that were there also. And I do remember the first time—I must have been three or four years old going downtown—was the first time that I saw a black family on the streetcar, you know? So it was predominantly, you know—but people were there. People were, were still striving to do better, you know. And it wasn't just the ethnic community. You know, there were blacks that just wanted better things, and you know, they—there are a few families that moved in there north of Seven Mile Road and west of Ryan. And it was rather a mixed neighborhood. East of Ryan, I don't recall it being mixed, but west it was.

DC: West there was some mixture, OK.

RB: Yes, there was. I remember, I remember food stamps. I remember going to the grocery stores and having food stamps. I remember the rationing—gasoline, food.

DC: I imagine work must have been booming for your father, at least during the war years.

RB: My father—the only problem that my father ever had with work [pause] was after General Motors had acquired and was established for a long time as the, as the owner operator of Fisher Body Division. Uh, my father was a very strong supporter of Walter Reuther. He and my mother were both very, very active in union affairs, and my father wouldn't work overtime. He wouldn't work overtime. I think it was only a couple times in all the years that I can remember him, where he was absolutely forced to. But he believed when you work overtime, you take the job away from somebody else. So he had a—he had a very, very strong social conscience, and we had a lot of—my brother, who was a—my eldest half brother, who is now eighty-seven—he and my father used to argue about the merits of the union all the time. My brother saw enough when he worked at the, at Willow Run, in the aircraft, that he absolutely detested the union.

DC: What specifically did he object to?

RB: The politics of the union, and it was all—how should I say this—it was all self-serving for the people that got elected.

DC: OK, so he thought the leadership . . .

RB: Leadership was crummy, and they didn't represent the people. They were only looking after their interests. My father, on the other hand, because of the abuses that he saw in the shop—never to him personally, but to people around him, people that he knew firsthand—he always used to argue with my brother. He says, "I don't care how bad the union is, it's better than no union at all." I grew up with that mantra in my mind, and yet my career at General Motors, there were times when I thought my father was right, but for the most time, I think my—not for the most time—for the most time I thought that my brother was correct, because he saw unions as stifling productivity. But there were other times where, you had old managers that came from the old, the old school. They needed a union to put a collar on them. They were just—a lot of them were very, very mean-spirited. Those were the days—that was the days of production.

DC: Tell me a bit about your brother's work career. Was he working at Willow Run after he came back from the service? Did he work there before as well?

RB: He worked before. And then he enlisted, during the war.

DC: Were his experiences with the union—they must have been based on after the war?

RB: Yes, he had a lot of different jobs. And if I'm not mistaken, I think it was Kaiser-Fraser was doing the . . .

DC: The airplanes.

RB: . . . was the airplanes there. Yes.

DC: That's right.

RB: Yes.

DC: Yeah, they took it over for a short while.

RB: Right.

DC: After the war. So he worked for them?

RB: Worked for Kaiser-Fraser.

DC: Did he stay on there?

RB: No. When he came back from the military, uh, after his tour of duty was over—and I'm trying to think if he did two tours or not.

DC: He might have, because . . .

RB: He liked the Navy. He liked the Navy.

DC: Because Kaiser didn't really take over until after the war, so that must have been when he worked there.

RB: Yeah. He may have gone back to work for them. But, I think he did two tours of duty, then came back, and he was—he also wrote the shop paper for, for the plant, and for the union. And—because regardless of his feelings, he was still covered by—you know, he was under the auspices of the union. The union had control of his working facilities. He spoke out against them.

DC: What was his job?

RB: He was a machinist. And just went on . . .

DC: So he was in the trades.

RB: . . . and did things. He was in the trades, and then, from a machinist, and that was one of his biggest complaints. He wanted to learn more, and they wouldn't let him. They had him buttonholed. So eventually he just quit, and went to a jobber, and learned his trade as tool and die. Because he was limited as to what he could do in the shop. They wouldn't train him, and there was a lot of politics with changing the classifications and getting in to learn other skills. And he just wasn't buying into that, because he says, it's based, it should be based on qualifications. And he says that's where you saw the—because there were different rates for different jobs. That's where the union was playing games and playing favorites, you know.

DC: So when he went to a jobber, was it a non-union shop?

RB: It was a non-union shop.

DC: Where he could learn more.

RB: That's where he [possessed? Finessed?] the skills and everything else. He went to trade schools also. I think he went to Cass Tech, and he did a host of things there, which he says today, he says, the things I learned over there, he says, kids after four years of college don't know what I know.

DC: I believe that.

RB: Yeah, because he says it was hands on.

DC: Did he do an apprenticeship as well?

RB: No, no. He just went to trade schools, and this is all part of the thing, and then wound up in a jobbing shop, and in the jobbing shop, and in the jobbing shop, they don't care. If you think you can run a job, you know, there was on-the-job training, and there were a lot

of old-timers, old skilled people around that—the jobs, the shop that he went to, he said they had a lot of German craftsmen. And he says, with the exception of some of them were extremely stubborn, he says most of them, they were more than happy to teach you if you wanted to learn and you would ask the questions. They were *more* than happy to teach you.

DC: As much as you wanted to learn.

RB: As much, yes. And then he says, he went on, and he says he remembers—he says after he learned, he just kept looking and looking and learning and learning, and pretty soon in the job shops, he says, you know, it's based on throughput, not on the book of how you do things. So he says you learn—he says these way the job shops make money is by, by pushing their tools to the capacity, beyond what the books tell you you can do—you know the speed, and he materials, he learned the materials, different materials, and learned how to check for hardnesses. And he used to tell me, he used to be able to take steel and just grind it on a wheel and look at the sparks and tell you what the composition was, basically, you know, the carbon content and so on and so forth.

DC: did he like that job?

RB: Pardon?

DC: Did he like that job?

RB: Oh yeah, he liked it. But then there came a point in time where he was, was on vacation in Europe, and doggone if he didn't meet his future wife in Germany. And they married. Then he came back here and stated raising his family. Had a boy and a girl. And the job shop and the hours—because he worked a lot of hours in the job shop—it was sixty, seventy hours a week all the time. He says the money was great, but he says he knew his body couldn't take this in continuous, so he wound up taking a job—applying for and getting a job with the manufacturing and development section of General Motors Corporation, where he went on to do many, many special projects for them.

DC: That was salaried, I take it? Or was that . . .

RB: I don't know. I would assume it was salary. But again, there were benefits, which is what he went for. The working conditions were absolutely clean compared to the shops that he worked in, except the owner—the last shop that he worked with was a German fellow, and he insisted that everything be clean. They cleaned up the shavings, and they couldn't leave there area . . .

DC: In the job shop?

RB: . . . they couldn't leave unless it was clean. He says that was the only job shop he ever saw that was like that.

DC: You said that he worked sixty, seventy hours a week in the job shop . . .

RB: Sure.

DC: . . . and the pay was good. Was the pay good because they were working so many hours?

RB: Yes?

DC: Would it have been good with a forty hour week?

RB: No, it was good . . .

DC: Because of the extra.

RB: . . . because of the extra. And the pay was adequate. You know I have no history—I can't gauge—I don't know what the going rates were at that time. But he wound up working at General Motors, and he worked there for quite a few years.

DC: Did your father stay on at Fisher Body?

RB: My father stayed on at Fisher Body until 1953, when he had a heart attack. My Dad started working at Fisher Body—he had thirty-three years service in—'53, so he started around 1920, at Fisher Body. And he had a major heart attack and couldn't go back to work. And the only thing I remember that were hardships—there were financial hardships, but my father was a saver, as many Europeans were. They saved, and his home was very important. And he knew he had to have health insurance. Nothing was provided, and he had no retirement and no health insurance. But prior to the heart attack, he had bought another piece of property, had a small home on it, which he rented out. And the money that came from the rent is what he paid for his health insurance, and his taxes, and stuff like that there.

DC: How did you live?

RB: I don't remember, other than the fact that my father was a saver. They—many people tried to get him to come back and work for the, even part-time jobs, one thing or another. And he just, he said no. He said no. He just learned to live with what he had. And we had gardens, and trees, fruit trees.

DC: All in the city? You had all this . . .

RB: No, this was out here, after we moved from the city. We moved from Detroit out to Utica in 1946.

DC: '46, OK.

RB: And there he wound up with two half-acre plots, side by side, and that's where he grew,

he grew vegetables. And he had fruit trees.

DC: Do you have any idea why your family decided to move at that point? In '46?

RB: [pause] Yeah, Detroit was already on the verge—and I remember them talking about it, the race riots. I remember them talking about the incident on the Belle Isle Bridge. I remember the problems that were starting to carry over into Pershing High School. And I could—we could look upstairs from the upstairs window, look across kitty-corner to Pershing High School and see a lot of the stuff that was going on.

DC: What did you see?

RB: I seen a lot of fights. And I seen a lot of [pause] intimidation—whites trying to intimidate the blacks, and the blacks, you know, going back. There was no longer any harmony over there. It was starting to go, and my father saw that, and he says, "You know, this is a good time to get away from here." So he had—he—somebody came to him and offered to buy his house at a pretty good price for the time. Well the guy that bought the house, as I understand it, had a small shop. And so, he couldn't pay cash for the property, but he gave my Dad a down payment and was on a land contract. This guy didn't—needed the money—he could have paid cash for it, but he needed the money for the business. So then my father went out to Utica and he bought a piece of property out there, and—a house that was on a half-acre, and which needed a lot of work and stuff like that there, but that's—we moved there in '46. 1946.

DC: You were seven or eight years old then.

RB: I was eight years old, yeah. Just past my eighth birthday.

DC: What was it like moving out to what was the country really back then.

RB: It *was* the country, there's no doubt about it. You know we had one street. It was a private road. They never formally dedicated it, which gave us many problems over the years with maintenance on the road, but all the lots there were half-acre lots. And all around us were farms, big farms. And that's—I have very fond memories of living out there, even though probably the first year was kind of tough on me, like it is on a lot of kids.

DC: Well, did you leave friends behind and all?

RB: Oh yeah, I'm still—right now, I'm just living here in Rochester, and I still have two of my, two of my childhood friends, chums, that become my life-long friends. One of them died; I would have had three. And some of them, they all drifted away and different things, but, you know, I have three from my childhood that are very close. We're very close. We're very close.

DC: So did you then begin working in the garden and the trees on your property and all?

What were . . .

RB: I did what my Dad told me, but to make money out here at the time when I was a kid, the only thing you could do is go out there and pick fruit, and cut grass if you could get the job.

DC: For your neighbors?

RB: Or the farmers. And had a bicycle, and the big truck farms were down, off of Mound Road. Mound and about Nineteen Mile Road. Van Havels had a big farm down there. I still remember the name. Jim Van Havel, one of the sons, became Supervisor for Shelby Township. I worked on his Dad's farm. And there were farms off of Twenty-One and Twenty-Two Mile Road, and we used to go out there in the summertime, ride our bikes, and we used to hoe. That's the only way you could make money. And then they'd try to cheat us.

DC: Really?

RB: They paid us 15 cents a line, the whole big, long line, and then they said we didn't do a good enough job, and they wouldn't want to pay us.

DC: Really.

RB: The farmers, yeah. They were some of them. They were very, very bad people. They just took advantage of kids. I used to say, we got even.

DC: How did you do that?

RB: Oh, I don't want to bring those things up, but we got even.

DC: I'm sure they're long gone now.

RB: They're long gone now, but [pause] it—we extracted our price also. I wasn't brought up that way, but it was just some of the kids that I was with. They just believed in vengeance, and we just, we'd go back and do mean-spirited things. Really mean-spirited things. We did damage. But that's the way people were. They just didn't want to pay. They wanted cheap kids. And we worked—it was like this hoeing. You see now, when I see migrants in the field, now I feel sorry for them, because I know what it's like. I remember that. I remember that. I remember the backbreaking work.

DC: Were you hoeing crop fields, or orchards?

RB: Crop fields.

DC: The truck farmers—were they providing produce for Detroit?

RB: Yes, produce and around, yes. And in the fall, that was the big money for the kids, particularly the peaches and the pears. Pears was—close to our house was a very large orchard farm, over there at Dequindre and [?]. And when the pears came on, it was time for season, they had to pick them. So that was big money for us, because I forget what they were paying us—50 cents a bushel. That was *big money*, like oh. But you gotta work fast, you gotta work hard, and you know, then it was great. But that farmer was pretty, was pretty good. But he hired us from the other side of Dequindre, and yet there was a family, there was a family, it was a bunch of ragamuffins, there was about eight boys—this was their turf, see. And they tried to run us off, so they were making money. We used to get in pear fights, and there was a lot of pain inflicted, because they can be pretty hard. The green ones can be pretty hard, exactly. In conclusion to that part of the story, it wasn't until years, many years later, that one of the guys that was from this family of big kids, he wound up working at Fisher Body also, and that's where I met him.

DC: Oh, OK.

RB: But many, many years later.

DC: That's funny.

RB: Yeah.

DC: Paths crossed again.

RB: Paths crossed again, exactly.

DC: Did you ever go back, to your old Detroit neighborhood?

RB: I did as a kid. I went back. I rode my bicycle all the way down Ryan Road. I didn't realize how far it was or anything else.

DC: How far is it? It's quite a ways.

RB: Well, we're talking, I was from Twenty-One Mile down to Seven Mile, so you got fourteen miles one way. And there were no racing bikes or anything else, you know. You know, you didn't have gears. It was just big balloon tires. Schwinn big balloon tires. And I went back there I think two years after I had gone, and it confirmed the saying, "You can never go back." It's not the same.

DC: What had changed?

RB: Everything. Some people weren't there now. You know, this guy's doing this, and this guy's mad at this guy—they're not talking. This guy's not home. His parents have got him doing things. Just on and on. I just couldn't do it. One experience on one of the trips back—this house was like four houses—it was on Dean Street—and the family that lived there, the father came out of World War II and he was a full-blown alcoholic. He

couldn't stop, couldn't stop. He beat his wife, and you know, we could hear the fights in the neighborhood and this and that. He just, he deliberately stepped in front of a bus in downtown Detroit to end his life. And I hadn't ever been exposed to anything like that. That just—that shocked me as a youngster.

DC: Was that before you moved out to . . .

RB: No that was after. It happened about two years—when I made my visit down to Detroit, that's when I heard about it. I still remember the names. I still remember the names.

DC: A big impact.

RB: A big impact. I remember my mother never wanted me—I used to have kids pick on me . . .

End of Tape I, Side A

Begin Tape I, Side B

RB: . . . she never wanted me to fight. Ever, ever, ever. She just was—just preached against it. And my oldest brother, he could see a lot of things that was going on, and one time one of the, one of the bullies who lived next door, as a matter of fact—we had a double lock at Ryan and Seventh, and there was a bully next door. He came over here—and I can still remember this—he pushed me off my tricycle. And my brother told my Dad. He says, "Pop," he says, "you can't let him do that," he says. "He's gotta fight. He's gotta stand up for himself." And I was—I remember I was furious. I'm looking at my Dad, and I'm looking at my brother. I'm crying. I'm determined, and my teeth are set, my fists are clenched. My Dad just goes, suggested for me to go after him. And this kid was about four years older than I [laughs], and I pounded him to pieces. And I never let anybody walk over me again. Ever.

DC: Did your Mom ever say anything at that point?

RB: Well, she was very upset with my father. She was very upset with my father. And my brother said, "Well, you know, she can't fight his battles all his life. He's gotta be able to take care of himself." So my mother was—she was a very—she was overly protective. So I just—that was part of my crucible.

DC: Um, did you have any brothers or sisters in your generation up in Utica, when you were up there?

RB: No.

DC: OK, I wasn't sure.

RB: My half sister was eight years older than I was. And she stayed in Detroit. She taught me to read, because my father had the two—I had a half brother and half sister by his previous marriage, and he would have custody of her on weekends. And she lived off of Davison, and he would pick her up on Friday night with me, and then take her home Sunday night with me. And she taught me to read. He had a room upstairs in the house, that he made for her, and I can still remember getting, getting tucked in and sleeping with my sister, and she would read to me and teach me how to read and everything else. And she started me out on Jack London. Never forgot that.

DC: Oh really.

RB: Never forgot that. To this day. I even talk about it to my grand-nephews and to my nephews and my nieces, about how their Mom—because she was going through her own pain at the time, also, in the divorce. And I was her little brother, and she taught me to read.

DC: Before you went to school?

RB: Oh yeah, yeah. Started before I went to school. And I can remember her taking me, walking, if we didn't have the money to take the bus. She used to take me to the Northtown Theater on Van Dyke and Seven Mile. And she used to take me—in the other direction—she used to take me west to the Cameo Theater on Seven Mile. And I think that was, that was, uh, around John R I think. John R and Seven Mile Road. Yeah, my sister was very good to me. She took care of me. I just have very fond memories of her. Of course she was the closest. Everybody else was so much older than me. They were already gone. They were already gone, gone, gone, gone.

DC: What was school like up in Utica? Where did you go to school?

RB: Um, there was only one school at that time in Utica, and that was right off of Brownell. Uh, and they had that, and they had the high school and junior high—was combined. But there was a three-story old brick building—it was a beautiful building. Big, big field. There was a sports field down in the valley, the Clinton River valley. You used to have to go over a bridge, over the old canals—that was part of the—they were going to hook up originally. They had the canals going through the state. That was one of the areas. And you could go down in the Clinton River Valley. That's where they had their track and their football games and all that other stuff.

DC: Did you participate in any sports?

RB: I did. Football, baseball. That was very brief.

DC: What other sorts of things did you do in school?

RB: I got in a lot of trouble.

DC: Yeah?

RB: [laughs] Got in a lot of trouble.

DC: How so?

RB: How so. I used to sneak off to the pool room all the time. I was big for my age, and I didn't have any trouble getting in the pool room, and they weren't looking really hard. And then, a lot of the jobs, as I got older, I was twelve and thirteen, I always lied about my age and I would get a job. I had—I would set pins at the bowling alley, Cole Morgan's bowling alley in downtown Utica. In the summertime, I would set pins at [Green___?] Park, for all the picnics and stuff. They had alleys down there. And that was a lot of fun. I worked hard for the money. But it was funny because, again, there was—basically, there were a lot of Polish people would come out there, and they would be bowling and drinking and bowling and drinking, and when they were all done, they'd put a five-dollar bill in the thumb hole and roll it down to you.

DC: Is that right?

RB: Five bucks was a lot of money! You know? That's where—that's—they were the heavy tippers. It was the Saturday and Sunday guys getting drinking and having fun and playing, you know, bowling and stuff like that. That's . . .

DC: You were just a twelve, thirteen-year-old kid making that kind of money?

RB: Yeah, yeah. Well, you didn't do it—it wasn't like every weekend where they had a big picnic, but you know—and whenever they needed a substitute I was over there. But I remember that.

DC: So did you graduate from high school?

RB: I graduated by going to night school. I left in the ninth grade. Then I went out and earned the rest of my credits that I needed. I had a [?] shop, for hands-on stuff. That was just . . .

DC: What did you do when you dropped out of school?

RB: I worked landscaping jobs—tree-trimming, removal.

DC: Around Utica, in that area?

RB: We traveled everywhere. And then I got a job at Fisher Body also, as a "go-for."

DC: When was that?

RB: That was in 1955.

DC: OK.

RB: I had just turned 16, had my working papers, and they had an opening, and I interviewed and I got the job. I originally wanted to get on at the ground crews at the, on the Tech Center site—you know, landscaping. And they didn't have any openings. I liked working outside, but I also had a pull for machinery and learning hands-on stuff, so I settled for in-between. I settled for a go-for's job.

DC: What was the go-for's job exactly?

RB: I delivered—I picked up blueprints and delivered them. In the building, put bundles of blueprints into trunks of cars. I carried big bundles, and I escorted people around the building—Fisher Body. People had called—rules were you couldn't walk without an escort. You had to have somebody with you, because there were a lot of sensitive areas, and not only that, there were a lot of people that didn't want old friends just dropping in and interrupting them in the middle of meetings and things of that nature, so they developed a restrictive policy. And that hurt some of the people. They could no longer do business as they had in the past. And this all came about after they moved—they moved in August of 1955, from the General Motors building out to the Fisher Body complex here in Warren. It's at Mound and Van Dyke.

DC: OK. 1955.

RB: Yes, and that was one of the things that—in their blueprints, and what the rules, when they moved out here to their new buildings, that was one of the things they were going to stop, is from people just wandering at random—suppliers and visitors just going at random. They recognized the interference. There were a lot of complaints from a lot of the people. So they made these policies. And when they opened the doors shortly afterwards, they implemented these policies, and that was one of the jobs that I had. That was one of the tasks that I had.

DC: To keep them out?

RB: No, to escort them directly to and from the office that they had registered to sign. And then I would deliver blueprints, and I would do different errands and things of that nature.

DC: Was this just a—what exactly happened at this Fisher Body plant? Were you assigned to a specific department? Was this engineering?

RB: Purchasing.

DC: Purchasing, OK. Was there any manufacturing at that plant, or was that just a design facility?

RB: That was a design, and they had a huge model shop in the back. Huge model shop. And they did some metalwork. A lot of testing. But it had a very large model shop back there.

DC: How did you end up applying for a job there?

RB: I needed—I just needed a job.

DC: OK.

RB: I just needed a job.

DC: How long did you do the go-for work?

RB: About two years, and then I got a promotion.

DC: And what were you promoted to?

RB: There was—there were some clerk functions that had opened up, and I just went into clerking from that point on. I did that for probably [pause] two more years, and then they had—there was an opening, uh, in what they called the follow-up position, which was an expediting position.

DC: Expediting?

RB: Expediting materials. Component materials. Component parts. And at that time, that function of expediting was centrally located at Fisher Body. And the plant material control departments would interface with General Office, but we controlled the distribution and the allocation of materials, because a lot of times they needed, they needed control desperately, because of problems with delivery. And when you got to that particular position, where a supplier was having problems delivering, you had to allocate the material. You had to give each plant enough material to keep them running, but not to load any up in particular. Because they were smart. If they smelled these problems out, the first thing the plants would do was start ordering extra materials: "Plant loss! Plant loss!" That was a mantra. "Plant loss! Plant loss!" "I need a whole bunch of production right now."

DC: Would they really just be trying to stockpile?

RB: That's exactly it. You got it. They always wanted to look good. It was production. The number one rule in production is you don't run out. Doesn't make any difference whether you misuse it or not, you just keep running. So that, that turned into a position, and then after that, the next step was like, they taught you production parts scheduling.

DC: Let's back up just a little bit.

RB: Sure.

DC: You said you clerked for two years. But what exactly was that?

RB: You would sit in the office and you kept track of records for other people.

DC: OK. Filing and stuff?

RB: Filing, making entries, keeping track of inventories, keeping track of shipments. Yes.

DC: It's kind of interesting, with a job that was somewhat associated with the hiring of women at that point in time, doing clerical work in an office and stuff, but they were hiring men for that job?

RB: At that time, they had no women in those capacities. They were—they had a central file, which was staffed by all women, and the rest was stenographic.

DC: OK.

RB: The stenographers supported the buyers. OK? We were all part of the purchasing. Production, material control, production scheduling, and purchasing were all integrated. It was all integrated.

DC: Did you like the clerking?

RB: I enjoyed all the work that I did—except the go-for job. That was kind of tough on me.

DC: Because?

RB: It was just tough. At that time, it was a clothing issue. You know, you had—they had---you had to have a suit. And here they were starting you out at, getting like a minimum-wage job, and they're expecting you to buy a suit. And then with the blueprints and everything else, I was wrecking my clothes, because the dye was coming off, the ink was coming off, and everything else. And finally I had to, I had a real good supervisor, and I just told him, I says, "I just can't afford to work here because I'm ruining my clothes." White shirts, you know.

DC: Sure.

RB: "Well, let me talk to the boss." You know, I had a very good supervisor. So he talked to him. He says, "Well, you can wear a sports coat," you know, and he says, "When you're dragging things around, you don't have to wear a coat. You can just take your shirt off. But no colored shirts! No colored shirts!" You had to wear white.

DC: You needed a big smock or something.

RB: Yeah. Well that wasn't provided. So that was—that helped out.

DC: You'd barely come out even . . .

RB: That was—it was very difficult, yeah. You know, things were tough.

DC: Where were you living at that time?

RB: I was living in Utica.

DC: At home?

RB: Yes. At that time I was at home.

DC: What was home life like? Your father had had the heart attack, probably just a year or two before that.

RB: That's right. It was OK. The only thing my Dad—you know, they told my Dad, the only thing you have to be aware of is don't lift your arms. He had hardening of the arteries, and he took his nitroglycerin whenever he felt a tightness in the chest. And they told him that whenever you feel tired, you have to rest. And my mother was very supportive of him, because a lot of times my Dad would just get tired. Driving a car, he'd pull over to the side of the road and just lean back and just rest, you know, ten or fifteen minutes, and get charged up again, and go about his business. It would just come over him. And he never had another heart attack since then. It was ten years—about ten years, without a reoccurrence. Then when he died in an automobile accident.

DC: Oh is that right.

RB: They were just getting to the point where they were starting to do heart surgeries and opening up the arteries and this and that, one thing, but he paid attention, and he just took it easy and didn't press himself. He didn't make himself—he didn't become a cardiac invalid, but he paid attention. He felt himself getting tired, you know, and he did learn to keep his hands from going up above his shoulders. I guess that really puts a strain on the heart for a cardiac arrest, that's all. He paid attention. He paid attention.

DC: So moving up to the next jobs that you did—you did the expediting, and you got into production parts scheduling and all that . . .

RB: Scheduling, yeah.

DC: Yeah, yeah. Where in the hierarchy were you at that point in time in those departments?

RB: That took me to a sixth-level job.

DC: You had started out where?

RB: About three or four.

DC: OK, so you were moving up a little bit.

RB: Uh hum. I enjoyed working, and I would—I loved detail, getting involved in detail, for my own education. Always looking for an answer as to why things happen, why things go wrong, OK? I would interrogate the specifications to find out why they were misusing materials, and that was—sometimes that was a contentious issue, because I knew more, I knew more about the use of the material than the people in the specifications department.

DC: Was that simply because you were curious? You asked the questions?

RB: Absolutely. I got curious. I just got in there. I learned to the engineering releases, and the intent of applications. And I could translate that into physical usages on the job, and that was—everything was done manually at that point. The specifications department would give you a month, a month's usage of various parts that were under your control.

DC: I'm not sure what that means.

RB: Well, they would develop a specification that would say, you know, like in the month of August they were going to build "X " number of jobs, "X" number of units on this Buick or that Pontiac, and this uses a common part, and at five per car, or six per car, this is what the month is going to be. And then they'd shuffle down a number to you. Then you had to figure out the schedule, and how you would set it up. And at that time, a lot of the usages—in the fasteners, they had multiple suppliers. And we had a lot of guys out there that were terrible suppliers. They had their own agendas. They—we saw a lot of things that they did that—they were taking advantage of the corporation. And I would learn to sniff these things out. And a lot of times I made presentations as to what, you know, let the numbers speak for themselves.

DC: Would it be a matter of quality, or price, or . . .

RB: Dishonesty.

DC: Dishonesty? Not delivering what they said they were going to?

RB: That's right.

DC: In what ways? Give me some for-instances?

RB: In fasteners, they would short the boxes.

DC: OK.

RB: On weight. And they abused that. And they were being paid—on fasteners, they were

paid, they were being paid on a piece/price basis. Well one of the things that we found out, is that was like, that was like a golden calf for these guys that were dishonest. Because what would happen is, as the tools wear, thread [??] they would wear, you're putting more metal in the box than you are parts. So along way back when, they initiated—they bought some special scales—100:1 scales that would weigh out a hundred parts, and say, "Well gee, look at that. This is what the weight should be." It was more metal. We're paying for pieces, not, not, not steel. So the guys—and then of course, a lot of these problems would come to light because they wouldn't have the fit. They were having trouble driving home bolts and things of that nature, see? So the reason they're having trouble driving home the bolts is because they're oversized.

DC: OK. They're not meeting specifications.

RB: Sure. Or sometimes in the shop, they would just—they would turn around, they'd just turn up the torque on the guns and drive it in anyway. And sometimes they'd strip. And you know, there were all kinds of problems. I gotta *know*. I developed a nose for that. So in addition to my other job, as you know in scheduling and expediting—sometimes we did both. I was fortunate enough, I did both. And I also all of a sudden became recognized for my ability to sniff things out. And I became a troubleshooter in addition to my other tasks. So when there was a problem in somebody's plant, and we weren't getting delivery, they'd send me out on the road.

DC: So someone recognized your skill.

RB: Yes.

DC: A supervisor of some sort?

RB: Yes. I had very good, supportive people. Very good, supportive people. Every time there was problem, there were other people that went on the road—they usually called them back and sent me out, because I just had, I had a keen desire to know and learn. And I enjoyed my job so much—I enjoyed the people I was always dealing with—even in these substandard suppliers. Because I found out there's a lot of people working on the lines that are really smart. They know what they're talking about. And a lot of times I found out that the supervisors, they didn't know half of what the guys on the lines actually knew.

DC: You'd go out and visit the lines then?

RB: I'd go out there all the time. I'd go to the bars at night with the guys that were on the lines, rather than go with the supervisors, many times. I just wanted to find out what was going on. I wanted the real story. I wanted the real story.

DC: What kind of stories would you get?

RB: Oh, the managers that I was dealing with, and the supervisors, were *lying*. They were

lying. They would do things. They would do things that they said they weren't going to do again, and they weren't doing the things that they said they were going to do.

DC: In terms of the numbers of parts?

RB: Oh parts, quality, and all that other stuff. But I learned how to get around that, and that was by applying myself and not just listening. To me, when I went on a troubleshooting job, it was not an eight-to-five, because most of these places were running three shifts. I made sure I stuck around for three shifts. I could tell by the numbers that they were lying. Something happened that, you know, and then they'd make some weak excuse, or the next night I might stay over for the second shift. I might stay to the third shift. Or I'd come in late at night, after everybody went home except the guys on the production line. I'd find them changing tools, running somebody else's job, and leaving our job alone. And then in the morning they'd say, "Well, we had a breakdown." That was the excuse. Well you didn't have a breakdown. You [chuckling] you oversold your capacity.

DC: OK.

RB: And you're taking advantage of us.

DC: So you would have a delay in the supply of parts that you needed.

RB: Oh yes. And there was always a story coming out of the second and third shifts. So I just decided, well, the way to find out what's going on [?], so I'd stay up twenty-four hours. I'd watch that thing from morning to night. And all of a sudden, the numbers made sense. So I knew when, when they took it out of one shift, or a half a shift, or whatever. And I would come back with the results—and a lot of times I stayed there until the supply, the supply was filled to what we needed to maintain our production on our lines.

DC: So they were over-scheduling their capacity and then just playing one job off against another.

RB: Exactly.

DC: OK.

RB: The last one was on—when they were building the Cadillac Sevilles out at the—was it the Seville?—were building a Cadillac out at Linden, at the Linden assembly plants, in New Jersey. We had an outfit in western Michigan that was supplying die castings for it. And, boy, it was pillar to post—chartering aircraft, sending heavy die-cast parts over to the assembly plants and this and that, you know, just all kind of excuses and everything else. Well, they had, they sold, they delivered to General Motors—they delivered stuff for Fisher Body. They made manufactured die castings for Cadillac. They were manufacturing die castings for Pontiac and Chevrolet. And I would have—there were counterparts that came in there from those divisions. Now the big thing was, OK, it's six o'clock, let's go out for dinner. I wouldn't join them. I'd stay and make sure that my

parts ran. The next morning they'd come in, they'd have their separate meeting with the guys from Cadillac: "Oh, the tool broke down last night." It was the same took that my job ran in, and I wouldn't let them take mine out, see? So now they're lying to the guy from Cadillac. But that's the kind of things I did. I just stuck, I just got right into it.

DC: Would you have open access to these plants?

RB: Yes. If there was any restrictions, then they'd be calling my managers, you know. My director of purchasing would have been on the phone saying, "We're sending this guy in and just make sure that he gets all the cooperation that he needs."

DC: Sounds like a contractual relationship.

RB: Well it's not a contractual relationship. No.

DC: Just job by job?

RB: No, it's *power*. I'm the customer; you're the supplier. OK? It's leverage. They were just leveraging their—you know, if you want another contract out of us, you let our guy in. We want to see what's going on.

DC: Were there shifts in who had the leverage over time?

RB: [pauses] I can say that there were times when the supplier [pauses] might try to use persuasion, like subtle blackmail, that unless they got this, that, or the other thing, they weren't going to ship or manufacture any more parts. They tried that. They tried that. And sometimes, and sometimes we had to bite the bullet—and sometimes we were very, very wrong in not acknowledging legitimate business requests.

DC: such as?

RB: When—in General Motors, when Lopez came on stream [pauses], it became—in their quest for cost savings—and I recognize the times. General Motors was in dire straits financially.

DC: What times are we talking about right now?

RB: Talking about in the '80s. Late '80s. We were in bad shape. But all they did was just push for dollar savings from the supplier, irregardless of what his situation was. They ignored it. And that was some of it—I, I, I felt very strongly that a lot of things that General Motors did at that point were, were unethical, and they really bothered me, that they would do—that they would treat people that—there were very many good suppliers out there, that gave them a lot of, gave them a lot of assistance over the years. And they way that assistance came about, there were times when we went through recessions, where they wouldn't allow—Fisher Body wouldn't allow any capital expenditures. And in many instances, tools had been worn out. They were beyond their useful life, and they

were starting to put out real bad stuff. And you know, when somebody can't get their, in the shop, can't get their—can't maximize their production, you'll wind up losing money. You put money [?]. So they would come through with, with very legitimate reasons for a price increase for additional tools. We had some very, very good and knowledgeable buyers that—and they stayed on the job for a long time, which made—there was a lot of good things happen with longevity on the job. Today they just rotate everybody like it's, you know, here today, gone tomorrow. But in that scenario of no capital investments, sometimes they would make deals with the suppliers for them to go ahead and build a tool, and they would find out piece, piece price, cost, amortization over a year, or two years, or whatever. And they kept a book on that, and they would grant a small price increase, but it would take two to three years to recover, and they used to keep track of—that's one of the things they used to keep track of, some of the buyers. How much material have they shipped? And at this cutoff point, the guy had to come in and reduce his price. Because now he had his money, but it took a long time to get it. So that was one of the things that we did. Then we had situations on some products where we had—once case that I know was a particularly good supplier. He did specialty cold heading.

DC: Specialty what?

RB: Cold heading.

DC: Cold heading. The steam went off there just as I [referring to background noise] . . .

RB: Cold-heading products—bolts, screws, nuts—they had divisions that did nuts alone. And a lot of times engineering would come through with a problem that had to be fixed with a new product. And they would say, they would say to this guy, "Look. I can't pay that kind of money. This is all I can do." The guy says, "I can't do it for that money." He says, "Look. You got a lot of business with us. You gotta take the bitter with the sweet." So the guy gives in. The guy would turn upside down, he'd give us our product, everything would be going good. Now maybe some low volume—he's taking a hit on every part that he's making. And because he's making it up on some of the big ones. And a lot of times—volume increases from job to job. It starts out you're using a part for a particular car line, and another car line wants to use it, so now you're making more, OK? And that amortization was no longer in play. It was just a question that he was making up [behind?] for all this junk. Now Lopez came in—he demanded, incorrectly, a price reduction for every stinking part this guy had. And he may have thirty or forty parts. That don't fly. So now, they're squeezing him. He says, "I can't do that to you." 'Here's a part here I can give you some relief on. Here's what I can't give you. I'm already putting money in the box.' He didn't want to listen to me. So now—and then they started threatening: If you don't produce—if you don't give us a price reduction, we're taking business away from you. You don't have to be a brain surgeon to say, "Take it!" So now they go out and they try to quote the jobs and get it from somebody else, and they find out that they've been underpaying for the product right along, because everybody else is already asking for twenty percent more than what this guy's been selling it to you. Now you've blackmailing him the other way. There were a couple companies that said, 'We've supplied General Motors. We've got—we've had so many

bad jobs out there, and we've never had, we've never asked for a price increase.' That game's changed. Take the jobs. And if you threaten me with taking the rest of them, take them all. I'll find a better way, but I'm not buying into this stuff, because you're not going to close my doors because you want something. The guys that got out of the business first, or told GM that they weren't going to participate, came out to be big winners.

DC: Really.

RB: Sure, because they didn't have to do all this giveback, you know, and running red ink all the time, and wound up going out and getting—now they started getting Ford and Chrysler business. They went elsewhere. But those people, they had, they had loyalty to the General Motors, and some of these guys, you know, seventy percent of their sales were General Motors. And they soon found the error of their ways. You know, the policy changed, and we heard that now, we aren't going to take any more than 30 percent of General Motors business. We've got to fill in with other people. And we're going to get our price and we're not going to play the game. The bid was legitimate. If they don't know our track record, if they don't know what we do, so be it. We had some products—in one instance we had a product—it was quite an expensive sub-assembly that was going for seventeen or eighteen bucks. And they did all kinds of things to try to improve their own throughput and their process to knock cost out of the product. This one guy was selling this one part for six or seven years and never, never asked for a price increase. GM came in and denied him—says write me a letter—this was the standard, standard answer: write me a letter and we'll take it under advisement. Two or three months go by—no response from General Motors. Write another letter. No response from General Motors. Now they go to the director. Director blows them off for another two or three months—finally agrees to a meeting. So now we're, we're talking six, seven months. Now the guy comes in and says, "You haven't responded. We need the money. We're going to stop shipping. You can't do this. We have a contract. You'll but us out of business, one way or another. If we don't get the money for the product, or you sue us, you're going to put us out of business." And they were savvy enough suppliers, and they were big enough to know—let's say that General Motors doesn't like bad publicity. So they said, 'From this period of time, we're taking a snapshot, where you start screwing us around. [banging the table for emphasis] We want monies, retro-paid, to here. We want the money. If we don't have a certified check in our hands, you're not getting any more parts. Now they didn't ship. Now the guys are everybody's concern. Now it goes from the division, it's all the way to the Fourteenth Floor. And now it's time for this company to start playing games with General Motors. They won't return the guy's calls. There's nothing to discuss. The check is either in here, or we don't ship. "Well, we own the tools." 'You can have the tools." The guy says, "You can have the tools." "We paid for them." The guys says, "You paid for the primary tool. You didn't pay for all the ancillary devices, and timers, and everything else. That was our cost. You paid for the steel. You didn't pay for everything else in the process. You didn't buy the machine." In some instances—in this case, the machine was purchased special to run this job. So now—General Motors still can't—there's nobody at the lower levels can understand what's going on, and certainly not—they're not going to run the news to the top. That's

something you never did. All they started doing is, uh, demeaning the supplier. 'He's no good. Take him off the quote list.' Threats, threats, threats, threats, threats. They don't want to listen to the guy. And first of all, there's nobody up there that's got any expertise on tooling or anything else. They won't get their engineers out. Their egos are too big. 'We're going to do this just by numbers.' So in this—I think in this particular instance, they said, "All right. Well here is what we want you to do." They agreed that they would pay the guy his price, but they wanted to build up a bank of material in addition to maintain production. Well the guy said, "Now we're talking time and a half, and double time. You know I gotta pay, and that's the only job I have running. You're gonna pay for my . . ." General Motors says. 'All right. But we want the bank built.' And the guys says, "Well, it's going to take you six months to build that bank." 'OK, go ahead and do it. Then we're going to pull the tools.' In the meantime they had people in and out, engineers looking at these tools, and they gave the—the supplier gave access to the guy. So at six months the inventory's all built up. The guy's got his money. They come in and then they pull the tools. I happen to know that they just threw money at it—General Motors just through money at it to get it going. They bit off their nose to spite their face. And the price they wound up paying for the parts was twenty-seven bucks apiece. The most foolhardy move, stupidity, on the part of the managers that were in the purchasing department. I seen enough of that, and as I came to the end of the line, I was, I was happy that it was time to get away from people that had that mindset.

DC: It sounds like things had changed over the course of your career.

RB: The mindset, yeah. The mindset. Before it was cooperation. They'd have engineers in there. And they'd have people coming in. You know, they'd get the experts in there looking at things, and looking for different ways, whatever. That wasn't the case. They were strictly after money, and with all the damage that they did, I think they damaged their own reputation, you know. And then it was . . .

DC: I was thinking. Can we go back . . .

RB: Sure.

DC: . . . to when you started doing all this work—in the late '50s, early '60s, it sounds like.

RB: That was in the '60s when I got into the troubleshooting job. In addition to the—in addition to the production scheduling.

DC: Yeah. It sounds like there you were uncovering . . .

RB: Uncovering, and then I became—I eventually wound up being a buyer. That's why I got into the other end of it. That was like the next step.

DC: Did you ever tour—not necessarily the parts plants, but the production plants where the parts were going?

RB: Yes, oh yes. Oh yeah! I knew the, I knew the applications. I knew where they were going.

DC: Because you mentioned that sometimes they were ordering far more parts than . . .

RB: Yes, and those people were salaried. And I got to know the people very well. We communicated on the phone all the time. And then after awhile, there were people that you developed respect for. And the story was, you don't bullshit me, I'll help you out, whatever your problem is. The first time I fine that you're messing around with me, that's the end of the cooperation.

DC: Um, when exactly did you begin the troubleshooting?

RB: I started doing that in the '60s. That was my first, that was my first production . . .

DC: Early '60s? Late '60s?

RB: Early '60s.

DC: Early '60s, OK.

RB: '60, '61.

DC: Right in there, OK. Um, do you remember anything at all about the big recession that hit in '58?

RB: Yeah.

DC: Because you would have just been getting started . . .

RB: Sure.

DC: . . . at that point.

RB: Yeah, no problem.

DC: How did that affect Fisher Body?

RB: I can't tell you about Fisher Body, but I can tell you about the Purchasing Department.

DC: OK.

RB: I can have—and this is firsthand—my director absolutely refused, when it came time for budgets, absolutely refused to have extra money in his budget. He wouldn't buy into that, because he knew if times were bad, he was experienced enough, that they would have to pare back his budget, and he would lose people that had been trained. So what

are you going to do if you don't have this budget, you don't employ all these extra people now, what are you going to do when we're from the recession and things start getting going.. He says, 'we're going to pay overtime.' That was it. You'd have to pay overtime. 'We have the people here. We don't want to lose the people. They're trained. They know their stuff. We can't afford to let them go.' The other thing that the, the powers to be at that time, all of them had a similar career path. They started out clerking, follow-up, scheduling, into buying. Some of them went on into management. And a couple of them became directors of purchasing. But that background was all there. Everyone of them knew . . .

DC: Worked their way up?

RB: . . . but they knew what the job demanded, and the nuances of production and material control, where a lot of people today, they just don't understand. They don't. So that was easy for them to understand the problem, and when you called up—they'd send you on a troubleshooting assignment—you don't have to worry about talking to a general director and him not knowing what you're talking about. He's been there, done that. So, you know, you were his eyes, and his ears. So the experience was there. There was a depth of experience in the department that we didn't have anyplace else.

DC: When you first started out with your troubleshooting and all, were most of the parts suppliers union shops or non-union shops?

RB: A blend. A blend. Now my first opportunity—my first opportunity in troubleshooting was when the government, they had mandated what they called an interlock safety belt system. Then they found out all the problems that it was causing, and they had to pull out, effective January One, they had to get rid of all the Interlock and start having all the seatbelts going the standard way without the electric device in there. And I spent—some of the seatbelt companies were right here in the, in Bad Axe, and that was—Bad Axe, Michigan—and I spent weeks and weeks and weeks on that job, coordinating it and making sure the right belts were being built, the right colors, the right combinations. Because they went on many different options. There were so many variables in the same color. So that was a major coordinating job for me. That was the first time I did that, and I really burned myself out, the hours, but I really enjoyed that. That really got me piqued.

DC: That was one of your first jobs then.

RB: One of my first jobs, and then part of what was glorious about that, sometimes when you're working at General Motors, you don't have a lot to do. You get peaks and valleys. And my director was a very strong director, but we had other people cruising through our department, because it was on the way to medical and on the way to the [pauses] our personnel department. These guys would come through here, you know, directors from other departments, and they'd see you laughing around, your feet on your desk. They're bragging to our general director, "You guys don't have enough to do," and everything else . . . .

End of Tape I, Side B

Begin Tape II, Side A

RB: . . . he's making these comments where—our director was strong enough not to take any of this B.S. from him: "We'll take care of our own. You take care of your own." But the guys that were doing all the carping also were from old school. And they just had—they had some, they had some habits that came out of management in the Depression. They never let go of it. They never let go.

DC: So you were supposed to look busy at all times.

RB: Look busy at all times, and this, you know.

DC: You say "peaks and valleys." How long would the peaks be? How long would the valleys be?

RB: All depended on the recession. But the interesting thing about the recession—my numbers, and I went by the numbers—I kept statistics of everything that happened—the interesting story that came out of the numbers was, even though the economy may be turning around and going full force, we had more problems obtaining material at that time than we did at any other time. Yes. Because all the manufacturing, all the component parts for manufacturing, they had already laid off everybody, and it was all new people. You had to get the supply line filled again. Raw material had to come in, this and that. And that was a critical—it was like a critical mass, you know. And . . .

DC: So getting started up again was hard.

RB: Always the most difficult, the most difficult. And it was a recession. That wasn't model change. It was a recession. Because everything dried up, and then you, you just couldn't get up to speed fast enough. And everybody was always under the impression, "Why are your air freight bills so high?" "Why all this extraordinary traffic movement, flying material all over the country?" I knew the answer, and I was already—when things started turning around, since I did my own schedule, I was already anticipating a lot of the stuff that happened. And I was always quite successful as being the one with the least amount of problems in any of the [?] that I handled. And then they would ask me to help out, since I was doing so good. They would always ask me to help out on other [vecs?], on other materials.

DC: "How did you do this?"

RB: "How did you do this?"

DC: So you figured out quickly that there were going to be these delays . . .

RB: Plus I learned my product. That was something else that nobody was asking me to do. A lot of guys just sit around, you know, they want to go play baseball after work, or they want to go hit a golf ball. And that was lower on my priority list, and I just, I wanted to learn. So I spent a lot of time on my own, analyzing numbers, seeing who's who. But I made a point of visiting people personally. We had one example of a specialty company working out of New York. They didn't sell directly to General Motors. They sold to a distributor. And things would go wrong. It wasn't a product that I handled. But at one time I did. And so the distributor didn't have any parts. He couldn't get any from the manufacturer. This, that, and the other thing. Now the director—the associate—the assistant director would make phone calls. He wouldn't get anywhere, so he would report out to the director. The director would call the president of the company. He didn't get anywhere, everything else. So one time my supervisor came to me, he says, "You worked with this outfit a long time ago, didn't you?" I says, "Yeah." He says, "Did you have any trouble with them?" I says, "No," I says, "the only thing is, we don't deal directly with them. We deal . . ."—you know, we bought from the distributor. He says, "Do you know anybody up there?" I says, "Yeah." That's fine. "Do you think you can help us out?" It was his idea, not the assistant director or the director. Because he knew how I operated. I says, "Yeah, I got—I know a lot of people in a lot of places." So, not at the high end, you know, but the grunts. So I says, "Well, you know," I says, "We're supposed to be touring. We're going up to Connecticut to tour a fastener house up there." I says, "We're leaving Thursday, and we're not coming back until Sunday morning." So I says, "Well, I'll see what I can do while I'm out in the east." So we go visit the plant, and they saw the tour and everything else, and they take us into, into the city, into New York City for a dinner at a famous restaurant—Mama Leoni's. I'll never forget that. Here's the first time I saw New York. Here's people were all around the building waiting to get served, and we just pull up in the limo, open the door, and the seats are read, OK?

DC: Well done.

RB: So, that night, these guys were going to go to some night spots, and we were going to meet up at the Rainbow Room later on. There was two of us. And one guy says, "You know," he says, "I really want to see Barbra Streisand." She was just playing there at the Winter Garden in the '60s. "And I want to go see if I can get some tickets." I won't tell you the whole story on it, but everybody else was getting blown off and the two ladies in the box office *gave* us the tickets at five minutes after eight. And we had fifth row orchestra seats. They could have sold them for a million bucks. They gave them to us, because we were nice boys, and everybody else was pushy. We remember sitting there with the limos, and Jacob Javits [mispronounced Javowitz] pulled up with his entourage, Congressmen, and his group, and these ladies *gave* us these tickets. So then after this, we've got to meet up with these guys at the Rainbow Room, sometime. I had this guy's—this company that was having the problem—we had just conversations. It's like relief—sometimes you stop and you just start talking. I knew this guy liked bourbon. I had the address. We stopped, and we got two bottles of bourbon. I said, "Bob, you can catch up with the guys at the Rainbow Room," I says, "I'm just going to go take a cab,

with my own money—I'll pay for it—I just want the cab to take to this guy's house." So I don't know if he's there or not. So he takes me. I don't even know where the hell we went. But the light's on. It's like a brownstone. So I go knock on the door. "Yeah! Who are you?" "Dick Bielski." "Jesus Christ!," you know, "Come on in!" You know, I'm bringing in two bottles.

DC: Yeah.

RB: We sat down, we had a nice conversation. I says, "I can't stay long," you know, "Call me another cab," you know, "I gotta get back." But we had drinks, we talked, everything else. And I says, "You know," you know, two things I says, "I got a—we have a problem." I says, "I don't deal with you guys anymore," and this and that, one thing and another. "We have a short supply. We've got major stoppage. We're going to shut the lines down." He says, "What do you need?" I says, "Well you know the part that we always buy." So, "Oh yeah, yeah." He recites the part numbers, but there's—everybody recites. They know everything. They either have a description, or they memorize the part number. "I'll take care of you." He says, "And you cover me with an order for shipping direct." I says, "Yeah, I can get that out of them," because that's all I had to do, was go to my managers and they could pull it out. They never questioned what I did, and if I needed support, they gave me support. So the next day, the guys from the plant, the plant manager, called in the director, "Where the hell did these parts come from? We didn't think you could get any." "We can't." "They just arrived at our dock." "We got this." Then another guy called, 'We got this. We got that.' "How the hell did this happen?" [chuckling] Sharing some conversation and a couple bottles of bourbon.

DC: A couple bottles of bourbon.

RB: You know, you don't put stuff on—he was a nice guy. I liked dealing with him. I had never had any problem with him. And I tried to get to know everybody that I, you know, the grunts at my level. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed that—the conversations, many times. And see, that conversation, those kind of things happened for me, were those times where things are just so hectic, you have to take a breather, and you don't care who sees you taking a breather, or things are so slow that you're on a perpetual breather. I used that—I availed myself to those moments. But all of a sudden, now—you know, all of a sudden then found out that I was behind it. He says, "Well, how did it happen?" And my supervisor, who said, "Whatever you want, and I'll pay you for whatever it is." I said, "You don't have to pay me." So when the directors asked the supervisor—which they were also very close. They were good friends. The supervisor and the director were very good friends—he said, "How'd you get it done, Ed?" He said, "You don't want to know!" [laughs] That was the end of that. He says, "Don't ask."

DC: Don't ask. Did you have to coordinate all these shipping methods too?

RB: Yeah, I did that. I did a lot of that too. That's all the shipments.

DC: That sounds pretty complex.

RB: It was. Yeah, it was, sure.

DC: Did you use mostly trucks? Or did you use trains?

RB: Never trains. It was either truck—overnight express delivery, or aircraft, a lot of charter aircraft. We even used helicopters many times.

DC: These are for the emergencies?

RB: For the emergencies.

DC: What about for standard deliveries?

RB: No, those routings were already handled by—they called them the Traffic Department. Now GM calls it Logistics.

DC: OK, so yours was only the troubleshooting when times got tight.

RB: Well, I was responsible for everything. You know, my materials went by truck. They had regular schedules, they had regular shipping days, and things of that nature. That was already set up. That was not set up by me. That was set up by, at that time it was called the Traffic Department.

DC: But when you had to work out these emergency solutions . . .

RB: Oh yeah, well I knew the people to call. I had their home phones. Guys back at Fisher Body, if I had a, you know, I knew my Traffic—you know sometimes, again, you're a grunt, but you wind up—like I had a Traffic manager that was, we clicked. We were friends. We could communicate. We could talk. So I never asked for anything that wasn't important. And a lot of guys were always crying wolf, and he read them fast. And when I came to him, he knew I had a valid reason, that I had researched it to the point where I had to ask for his assistance.

DC: It sounds like you got a lot of access by being a straight shooter.

RB: Yeah. Yeah.

DC: OK, so you didn't have to . . .

RB: I didn't have any problems. The only problem I had with being a straight shooter was, I wouldn't play the game. I never had any desire to go into management as such. And I was denied an eighth level. By that time GM was changing their policies, and I couldn't get an eighth level because I didn't have a college education. That was one of the, one of the criterias [sic]. And . . .

DC: Given all that you could do, I don't know what good a college education . . .

RB: With my seventh level, I *had* my college education.

DC: You did at that point? Where did you get that?

RB: On the job. My experience.

DC: Yeah, well that's what I meant.

RB: My experience, yeah, yeah. And my pay range was above the high point of the seventh level. I was already at the low-level eighth-level range pay scales. They took care of me financially, but they wouldn't give me an eighth. They took care of me financially. And I had to fight for one of my codes, because I had a . . .

DC: For one of your what, I'm sorry?

RB: For one of my code levels—my seventh level, I had to fight for it, because I had a, I had an absolutely terrible administrator to work for. And I called him on his stuff, and he didn't like it, and he caved in. That's because I knew I was right. Plus I had a lot of documentations—I had two beautiful letters that were composed on my behalf, of this company—I spent two months every year up in Canandaigua, New York, living in this plant, getting changes on Cadillac products. And the president of the company wrote two beautiful letters thanking me for my cooperation and everything else, and I came to know him personally quite well. He's now the Vice President at Chrysler Corporation, and he's in charge of their China operation. Very, very nice man. Very nice man. A Christian man, who loved people. He loved to work. He was a, he was a unique manager. He was the kind of guy who could wear a thousand dollar suit, but if there was a problem with a press, he'd take off his jacket and climb right into the press. He was a hands-on guy, and that's where I really, really clicked. He also set up a, for Chrysler, the Bramalea, Ontario plant for them up there. He set up all the manufacturing, production, you know, production lines and everything else. That was his forte, he's good. Now it became Chrysler International, and now he's over in China. And they wanted—he wanted to retire, and they said, 'How about one more shot?' And he says, 'On my terms. I answer to nobody except back here.' So he did that. He says, 'I won't play second fiddle to anybody anymore.' Again, one of those friends that I made along the way.

DC: You mentioned awhile back that, you know, throughout much of your career you sympathized more with your half brother's perspective on unions than your father's.

RB: Yeah.

DC: Tell me a little bit more about that.

RB: Well, the problem—a lot of the problems that we had were right—involved, by people, the union workers right on the line themselves.

DC: At the jobs . . .

RB: No, at our own plants. They caused many of our problems. They would not allow solutions to happen without a lot of b.s., and there were always complaints being filed, grievances and everything else. I started to believe my brother that these guys can't see the tree for the woods. They just can't see it. They just can't comprehend how good they have it. And all it takes is cooperation. But instead, if you got to bend the rules a little bit one way or another, you wind up filing a grievance. And yet they were necessary. They never saw that.

DC: Can you give me a specific example?

RB: [long pause] It had to do more with, like, doing repairs in the plant, where we would go in, we would have a crew—in the last operation I did, this was after I retired from General Motors. I was working, consulting and doing contracting, and I was working at the Detroit Hamtramck plant. And they were changing suppliers on major components. They were doing radiators. They were doing front and rear suspensions. And they were being sub-assembled by a company down in the Enterprise Zone. And that company was a total failure. And they had quality problems with the sub-assemblies that they were sending in to, um, Detroit Hamtramck plant. They had problems with deliveries, and they were causing the lines to go down, frequently. And so, it was decided that they had to have a change. So the company that they picked—and I don't know how this happened, but they—I knew of the company before, and had heard of them, and had seen some of the things they did. I thought very highly of them, and for once, GM Purchasing seemed to have gotten a hold of one of the best people to do this kind of work. And they did that. But the transition had to happen. They had to be up and running January First. They shut down for the Christmas holiday and they had to be running January First—no January Second, they had to be up and running. With a new company. Same products, but now they were doing the assembly. So all the cooperation that was necessary, and the coordination of product—take an old product, move it from here, here, keeping the inventories, building new lines—this other guy, the new company had a different idea of how to run the lines. They had old tools. The tools were failing. He had to program backup—it was all manual. And it was also was a hell of an engineering effort. We had our process engineers over there. They couldn't believe the strides that were being made. But, it came down to the fact that there was a lot of inventory, not a lot of inventory, but there was inventory at the Detroit Hamtramck plant. And part of the things that they were having problems with was, uh, the bolts weren't tightened down, or they were missing bolts, whatever. And the new company sent in people, you know, and I was one of them. I'd physically be wrenching, on the, you know, putting them in, and taking track of it, plus the new stuff that was coming in. Since they were training people, we had to hundred percent inspect everything that was there—one hundred percent. Every unit that was in there had to be hundred-percent inspected. And we would hang our own stuff on there. The stuff that was already in the line, that was there before us, hanging on the racks, waiting to be used, on the releasing sequence—if we saw something that had to be repaired, and we took a wrench to it, we had a grievance. [pause] And they could

have shut the plant down. They could have walked out. Because it happened quite frequently. And we had some, at that point—I found, again like you will every place, there were some guys there that did these jobs that were just mellow as all hell. If I needed a hand, they'd come out of their position to come over to help. And if the committeeman showed up and was raising hell, "Says I can't help you now. You know who's coming." "Fine." You know, and then, later on we'd go, "Well, you know, he's an elected official. I think he's full of shit. Don't like working with him. He's militant." And he says, "But he's the boss," you know, "so we've got to go along. Because it's solidarity." I says, "Well." "Yeah," he says, "yeah, and that only goes so far." He says, "They talk about all the solidarity," [laughing] he says, "when I ever needed help," he says, "I wouldn't see too many people scrambling to help me." So he says, "That's, that's the way of the world." So, but I had a couple good guys that helped me, and knew these lines, worked on these products. And the bitter part of it was that these jobs were originally performed by UAW workers. But then they farmed it out because of cost.

DC: When was that big transition?

RB: That transition—I don't know when they farmed it out. I'm trying to think. They probably farmed it out, maybe, maybe around last contract time. Back then it was, see, '98, '97, '96. Last contract in that time frame. I think that's when they outsourced the work. The product was still the same. They outsourced the work—the assembly, the sub-assembly.

DC: Did you have the same kind of interference, opposition, from union officials back in the '60s, when you first started doing that, at work?

RB: At that time, I wasn't directly involved with the UAW on the line. I could only be there as an observer. And I could try to understand the problems and see if there was some input that I could make to overcome objections. That was—I tried to be, I tried to be the cool head on otherwise volatile issues, when I could. And if I felt my collar getting hot, I'd walk away. That was also part of the, part of getting along with everybody, and trying to get things going in the right way. And I did little things, which I do all the time anyway. I had one Hi-Lo driver that—he was a tough cookie, a militant. You could just, you could see it. He wouldn't go one ounce out of his way to help you do anything else like that. And I'm just watching this guy, because I was on his assignment for almost three months. I'm watching this guy, see. He smoked cigars. I smoked cigars. He doesn't have my palette. I can tell by the kind of cigars he's smoking. So one day I just said I'm going to—I asked him if he had an extra smoke. He had these little cigars. And he just—growled at me a couple of times, wrah, wrah, wrah. "Come on," I said, "One cigar smoker to another." That broke him. That broke the ice. He gave me a cigar. So I went outside, I smoked the 'gar. The next day I came in here—I used to—this Caribou [Coffee Shop]—I used to hang around at the other Caribou in [pause] down at the other side of Adams Road, near Livernois there, and next to it was a Churchill's Cigar Shop. That's where I, I used to hang around on my off hours—one thing or another. I'm retired. It was like an old guys pool room. It was a lot of retirees, people used to just hang around there, used to have a good time. So I stopped, and I got—I went through

there, and I knew the, pretty much, the cigars, and I got a couple of nice, fresh cigars. About five bucks apiece. Next day in the plant, the guys' coming by, he's giving me an evil eye. I motioned him over. I didn't, I didn't, you know, give him a lot of eye contact or anything else. I says, "From one cigar lover to another," I gave him the stick and says—he just kind of looked at me. The next day, I'm driving by there, he seeks *me* out. "Man was that good!" "Here, have another one."

DC: Introduced him to the finer . . .

RB: I introduced him, and from that point on, a lot of the militants—you know, I'd be standing around looking—sometimes, you know, you make the appearance of your looking like your stymied. He'd slide by, he said, "You need help?" I says, "Yeah, I need those two baskets loaded up on top of there." "No problem." It was just cooperation, but you had to get to know the people. The guy who was the worst in that whole scenario, and he retired—that same year—he retired in the same year that this project occurred. It was the UAW committeeman, who was the worst of anybody in the plant.

DC: That specific one?

RB: That specific committeeman was just one nasty human being. The experiences were great. My other contracting experience, after I retired . . .

DC: When did you retire?

RB: I retired—Delphi became, was a division of General Motors before they spun off—the last area I was in, I was in the seat business. And everybody pretty much knew that if you were in the seat business, you've already been—you're already on the list that they're going to get rid of you, one way or another.

DC: Why is that?

RB: It was a labor-intensive product, OK, and we went through all this stuff—you know, green, yellow, red—they would fake the books on, you know, lie to you about the progress and how much money you had to save, and this and that. It's labor.

DC: Would there be people on the way up, and people on the way down? Or just people on the way down?

RB: It was a mix. They had to keep some, they had to keep some managers in there. And unfortunately, some of those managers wound up right at the very end, after they sold the business, the seat business, some of those managers slid into the corporation. They were already slotted. They were exempt. A lot of them went with the business, to Leer, and were hired back in by General Motors after Leer, magically, let them go. It was staged. The whole thing was staged. It was a—I got to say it was a pretty damn slick maneuver. But, but they lost a lot of their service when they went back to General Motors, a lot of

those people. At the time they offered me that package from Leer, and I took it. But at that point, I didn't want to go back to General Motors. I just—I had enough of the fun and games over the years, and a lot of dishonesty. And it bothered me. And I said, "No, I'm just going to apply for my retirement. Then I'll go on and do consulting and stuff like that." Which I did for two years. And that was probably—those were also highlights of my life. Because I worked . . .

DC: the consulting?

RB: Yeah, I worked as troubleshooting and consulting on some of these things, and I really enjoyed working in the Empowerment Zone. And one of the nicest . . .

DC: Where is the Empowerment Zone?

RB: That's down in Detroit, down in the real low-income communities.

DC: Right.

RB: And one of the, one of the companies that I worked for, which I had—I really enjoyed it more than anything I've ever done for General Motors, because I was working with people who really needed their jobs. It was non-union. I worked with Vinnie Johnson [famous Detroit Piston basketball star]. Piston Automotive.

DC: Piston Automotive?

RB: Piston Automotive was the name of his outfit. He and Bill Laimbeer [another former Piston star] were partners at one time, then Laimbeer got out. But anyway, Vinnie was having a lot of problems, and Leer was looking at picking up, buying this business. There was an intent there. Because I got in there, and I knew the lay of the land. And I worked through a contract house that had a very good reputation—it was R. C. [Watt?] out of Warren. And they approached me on this because I was recommended for this job because of my background. He says, "Well," you know, 'why don't I do this? Why don't I do that?' I says, "Yeah, I don't mind doing that," and I says, "I don't care about the drive. I don't care about the neighborhood, because I'm a native Detroiter. I lived in—in year's past I lived in some of the toughest parts of the city." So, I said, "I understand people. I don't mind the drive. I don't mind anything." "But," I said, "I don' t want anybody to mess with my paycheck. I know Vinnie's in trouble financially. I don't trust Leer. RCO will pay me?" He says, "Well, we'll have to get back to you on that." So they came back, and they agreed, so I got my paycheck from RCO. I found later on, that it was a year and a half before RCO got the money from Leer for my . . .

DC: So you were right to be worried.

RB: I was right to be worried.

DC: Where were you living throughout all these years?

RB: Utica and Rochester Hills. Utica and Rochester Hills all the time.

DC: And did you ever do anything outside of work? It sounds like you got pretty, pretty involved in your work.

RB: I had a lot of stuff, but when I had time—in my early years I worked two jobs, because there wasn't enough money to be made. And I married young.

DC: What was the other job?

RB: Well I worked for a painting contractor, which I had done on and off since I was nine years old. I grew up with those boys and have been friends to this very day. My lifelong companions. And he used to give the kids jobs to do on the weekends, where we could make some extra bucks. And he did various things. And then I had—I stayed with the landscaping and tree removal specialties, and I had—I was running my own work on the weekend, and working at Fisher Body. And then, back in 1976, I bought an asparagus farm in western Michigan, and I had twenty acres of asparagus. So by that time I had five weeks' vacation. So the first two years I did crop-sharing, and I, and I could see that I was being taken advantage of. If you're not there, you can't see. So the third year I did everything myself, and I found out how bad I was being taken advantage of the first two years. But I would take my vacation time—I would set things up, and some of my counterparts would sort of laugh at the things—we had the buildup going on. I planned the model change as far as the products that I carried. That's the time that I scheduled and expedited. And there were a lot of nuances there, and I understood them better than anybody else, and I taught a lot of my suppliers how to stock parts, how to keep inventory, what to keep on inventory, and why.

DC: Was that so you could go on vacation? Or was that just . . .

RB: That was just part of it, because the more they knew—because everything I took over was a problematic group.

DC: Why asparagus farming?

RB: I visited western Michigan—my nephew moved up there. He married a gal up there, and he had a—he graduated from Wayne State. He wanted to teach up there. He also bought a farm, and it had asparagus on it. It had twenty acres of asparagus on it. I went to visit him, and I loved it so much that I decided, "I'm going to do something that I want to do rather than being transferred somewhere." You know, I was reaching out for the brass ring. I was going to it, rather than—I was chasing a dream. And another reason that I went that way, is when I grew up here in the Utica area, here in Macomb County, this was purely agricultural. I had the fondest memories. It was so nice, you know. I could walk in the fields at the end of my street and hunt pheasants, you know, things like that, as a kid. And when I went up to Oceana County, it was like I rediscovered old ways, and things like that. So I really loved it. And my wife really enjoyed that also. So we just

packed up. Kept our house down here. We leased it, and we just packed up like gypsies and had a deal going. I stayed up there. But I planned everything.

DC: How long did you stay?

RB: I was up there seven years.

DC: In Oceana County?

RB: Yeah. And I commuted. I had a daughter that lived in Rochester. She had a home in Rochester. She rented down on Water Street, so I would commute on the weekends. We could do flex hours at the point. GM allowed Flex hours. And if there was any overtime that was ever going to be worked, I was going to do it Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. I don't care how many hours it was mandatory for me to be there, you're just not going to catch me there Friday.

DC: You'd go back to Oceana County.

RB: So I used to leave at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. And sometimes on Monday, depending on how much work there was, I could start at 10 o'clock in the morning. So I would drive back—it was over a five-hour drive—I'd drive back. I did that.

DC: When did you get married?

RB: Pardon? [vehicle noise]

DC: When did you get married?

RB: I got married in '57.

DC: You were pretty young. And where did you meet your wife?

RB: Um, I believe it was out at a carnival. [chuckles] You know, guys and gals, guys looking for gals, and gals looking for guys. I met her at a carnival.

DC: Where was the carnival?

RB: It was in Utica.

DC: In Utica. And what was she doing at the carnival at the time?

RB: Looking for guys. [laughs]

DC: Looking for guys. Well, I meant, were there . . .

RB: No, that was it. We got married young, and we started having babies, and that was the

name of that game.

DC: How many kids did you have?

RB: Four. Four. Four daughters.

DC: And it sounds like they started arriving very shortly after you were married. Is that right?

RB: Yes.

DC: Did your wife work outside the home? Did she stay home with the kids? What did she do?

RB: At some point of time, once the kids got, got out of the house and were in school full-time, then she worked for just part-time work, working in shops, or something like that.

DC: What kind of shops?

RB: Small manufacturing concerns. That's all, whatever. You know, just production work.

DC: Yeah. What kinds of things did you do as a family when the kids were little?

RB: Well, I like the outdoors a lot, and it was hunting, fishing, and of course this was all country. There used to be a lot of streams out here. Used to go out there, and it was just like you had your own private swimming hole. We'd do the things with the kids. And I'd take them up to Lakeville. There's a lot of little ponds up there. There was some State Recreation Areas, and we used to do that thing. My wife couldn't participate in too much, because as we found out—the first time we had a clue of it was when we took a vacation—we went up to the Upper Peninsula, on the Pictured Rocks—and the kids and I are jumping around doing stuff. She can't do any of it. She thinks we're crazy. We didn't know until the fourth child that she had a heart condition. Because she wound up developing a blood clot that went to the eye—she fell down the steps and had a blood clot, and that's when we found out that she had a lot of heart damage. She had a rheumatic heart as a child, but we never knew that she couldn't catch her breath. So it was only when the fourth one was on the way that we knew that she had a, she had a problem. That's the way it is.

DC: So you liked the outdoors, liked the hunting and fishing.

RB: Yeah, I gave up even on the hunting. I gave up on the hunting. I like the fishing. I'm still very active.

DC: Fishing?

RB: Uh yeah. Salmon. I fish a lot of salmon [?]. Just came back from one in Ludington last weekend.

DC: Any luck?

RB: Four guys, twenty-one fish, in three days. That's not bad. [chuckles]

DC: Did you stock your freezer?

RB: No, we split it all up. I just take a few here and there. I'm not really too wild about it. You can just get carried away with that stuff. I take a couple hunks for myself, enough for maybe three or four meals—and there's only one other fellow that I know that enjoys fish like I do, so I invite him over. I gave him a couple pieces, and sometimes he smokes some for me. I let the other guys fight it out for the remaining. I just want a few pieces.

DC: Sure.

RB: My wife doesn't eat fish, so . . . Yes, troubleshooting, that was the spice in my life.

DC: That was the big time, huh?

RB: That was the spice in my life. That's the stuff that really turned me on. Getting in that plant and just rolling up my sleeves, and sweating with the grunts, watching the wheels go around. Got my time, got my little timer, got my clock, got my notebook. You know. I had one interesting assignment out at Grand Rapids. Funny things happen, but I think it was Oldsmobile that came out with, it was a '66 model . . .

DC: [obscured by car noise]

RB: 1966, they came out with their hot cars. They came out—they introduced the sports mirror on the car, built-in mirrors right on—color to the body. And we were having trouble, and like—it seemed like there was ample capacity to produce the parts and ship, and all of a sudden these plant losses, and these mislabeling problems, and this and that—we were to the point where we were shutting some of the plants down that were using the product. So they send me up to Grand Rapids to find out what's going on. Oh man! We got the nicest group of workers. God, they were just so helpful, and you know, they're productive, and no one's wasting time. Nobody standing on a shovel, you know, and yet these problems were persisting. So I says, well, I got to find out what's happening. So back there again, on the second shift. Jesus! I'm back there, just taking my time, and I poke around, poke around, poke around. I'd go back to where they're packaging this stuff, and I got this fellow out there, he's packaging it and everything else. I got a list out at that point. He had, you know, sixty different variations, sixty part numbers. I got my list. I got my part numbers. And I'm watching this guy, tack. I got my lists—this is yellow, this is the part number. He just put a green mirror into the yellow box. And I kept watching him. And I says, "Everything you pack," I says, "just segregate it, right now. We want to check some of them out." So he—we're checking it out. And now I had two or three skids of material, and I called for some managers to come in at night. I says, "Now, I'm sitting here watching him. I've been sitting here for four hours. Here is

what he's packed. I want you to go through the box. Here's the list." Oh my God! So then I said—I went over the guy, says, "Are you color blind?" Yes, he was. But he was ashamed to say anything about it. So I really didn't know what to say to him. He was doing the best he could, and nobody ever asked him, OK? Nobody ever asked him, and he didn't volunteered.

DC: So that's where the breakdown was.

RB: That was the breakdown, right there.

DC: So the other people really were being efficient . . .

RB: Everybody was doing their stuff, and so they gave him another job in there, and the problems disappeared.

DC: Oh my goodness.

RB: Just sit there and watch. "Where is this going wrong?" I can't say anything. I gotta watch it. I have to watch it repeat itself. So it was repeating. Every—you know, the chances of him hitting the right box [laughing] was about one in a thousand! So I had—by the time the managers came in there, there was like four or five pallets of material that they had to go through them every one of them a hundred percent inspection. And they're saying, "Oh my God. Oh my God. How did this happen?"

DC: How many shifts were they running at that point?

RB: They were running three.

DC: In other words, every third shift . . .

RB: Every third shift. But that was causing the problems.

DC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

RB: Because now, when the shortages would appear at the plant, where there shouldn't be shortages, now you got a call back, because it's hour to hour—now you have to interrupt production. And the paint lines were the one thing that you didn't want to interrupt, because they were the hardest to change. You could do assembly, but you couldn't do paint. You put them on the racks, and going through the ovens, and they'd have the shells, and they'd have the bases, and everything had to match, and you know . . .

DC: So it's harder to do spot work.

RB: You can't do little spot stuff. You can't come in and say, "I need five." You know. I need to run a hundred. Well if I run a hundred, I back everything that I'm supposed to be building. So we started doing offline. We got some offline booths, and that came about

from my visit up there. They had to be able to do offline painting.

DC: So they could do some . . .

RB: So they could do that, rather than interrupt the full production. The stories—I could just go on and on and on—there are so many of them. But a lot of times I saw so many things that GM was doing wrong, it just, it really bothered me. And I had managers that didn't understand. All they did, they could pound the table, but they never got any respect because that's all they knew how to do.

DC: It sounds like the common feature here is that you would actually go and look . . .

RB: If you want to get anything done today, you still have to do the same thing. Well, we liked working with the Mexicans also, receiving stuff. I was down there on troubleshooting stuff. I was down there to find out what was going on in our own trim plant. This was Delphi's trim plant, in Mexico—it was one of the maquilas. We worked in Juarez. And I went down there and I spotted so many things, I , I got the numbers back, and I sent in my reports, and got a lot of people upset, and they even got rid of a plant manager. He was lying. He was lying.

DC: About what?

RB: Well, leather was a very expensive commodity, you know, it was priceless to the Mexicans, who aren't making any money. So they'd be, they'd be building up seats, they needed certain patterns to match—the leather was disappearing at night. So they built a cage, parts were still disappearing, because now they were throwing the stuff over the top.

DC: Oh geez.

RB: So now you had to weld up the cage all the way to the top, and you wind up running a crib on the leather. You came in with a requisition, the guy would go get it. So now we had responsibility. So now the guy would go get the patterns that you needed, and give you a bundle, or give you your tray, you signed for it, and it went on the line. The other thing was, mis-scheduling, misusing, and we went there, and I took an inventory—I wasn't supposed to be—I didn't do this—I just did this casually. I'd go through this area for a week or so, and every time I would stop and look at certain racks and certain bays, and I would write down what I found. The numbers added up to a substantial misuse of materials that were still on—it was in the high six figures. So I made the report back to the guy that got me on there, and somehow, that plant manager got wind that our general manager was going down to see for himself. That night he had some of his Mexicans, that were beholden to him—came in with about eight big, tandem trucks, and took the stuff out to the dumps, and they were going to just bury it. They cleaned the racks, so when the general manager came down there, he saw that all these bays were cleared, and he knew that somebody had blown the whistle on him. But it just so happens that one of the guys who was uncomfortable, was not in the clique with this plant manager, and they

started asking the questions, and he said, "No senor, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know." This one guy says—he almost started to cry—he wasn't part of that group, and he said, "I drive truck," you know, we do this, we take this, and we take this, and we take it over and dump it. So then they went over—they had an investigation and went over there, and they actually paid to start digging up the material, and they found all this material, all this cloth, all this vinyl, and all the stuff had salvage value. We could have sold it. We could have retained something. But it also showed how bad material control was in that plant, that they were stuck with all that stuff. They were asking for stuff they didn't need, you know. So it was at that point, or shortly thereafter, that he was removed. They gave him a choice—that's the way General Motors always did. Either take the retirement or your fired, one or the other.

DC: Did you see a transition from more local suppliers to suppliers in Mexico and other parts of the country?

RB: They were just starting to get into this globalization stuff, and, you know, outsourcing . . .

End of Tape II, Side A

Begin Tape II, Side B

RB: . . . we started the maquilas—OK, again, I'm speaking for Fisher Body at that time—now they started the maquilas for some of the assembly, for shipping and making the seat covers and everything else—there were a lot of other products at that point that we [?]. For example, our [?] Division also had maquilas down there, where they were making [?] harnesses and shipping them back [?], for trade credits.

DC: When did that start, using . . .

RB: It was back in the '80s.

DC: '80s, OK.

RB: Well, Mexican nationals.

DC: Yeah.

RB: The Mexican suppliers came on later on, and at that point I wasn't sourcing anything. I didn't—I wasn't aware of what was going on, but I knew that many of the products that were being sourced for the purchasing department were being built by our suppliers that had plants—you know, they were also maquilas. So in what that was about, they were looking for trade credits.

DC: For what purpose?

RB: To weigh against tariffs.

DC: Oh, OK. When you first started out, were most suppliers local, or were they all over?

RB: They were all over.

DC: They were all over, OK.

RB: The cold-heading industry was predominantly Rockford, Illinois.

DC: What was that? [lots of background noise] Rockford, Illinois?

RB: Yeah. We had cold-headers in the area also that were specialty houses. The big volume stuff was done in the Rockford area. And we had spring suppliers—we had really about four spring suppliers. Three of them were in Michigan. Three of them were in Michigan. And we had four slide tools, for clips, for body molding clips.

DC: Were any of those suppliers in Michigan?

RB: Well Rockwell—Rockwell had a big one in Chelsea. We had one in Roseville. We had a small one in Illinois.

DC: It sounds like a lot of these plants were in smaller communities.

RB: Yeah.

DC: I guess the one in Bad Axe way back when . . .

RB: Way back when. But that was a Jim [Legann?], a Jim L____ venture. He got [noise] way, way back then, he started out. And I can tell you the story about Jim L____ and General Motors, but I won't [laughs]. He was a wonderful person. He was a wonderful person. But the connections—there's a connection that goes back to the Fisher brothers. There's a connection that goes back there to Bud Goodman, who was a Fisher Body vice president, general manager of the Fisher Body division. A lot of these relationships, and a lot of these things came from working close together many, many years ago. And they kept up—there was mutual assistance going there at that point. It wasn't as complicated as it is today. It was very simple. And it was also in the days where these relations were—where General Motors had 52 percent of the business, and all they had to do was—if the price increases came up too much, they just upped the asking price of the car. That was the way of recovering it. It wasn't necessarily efficiencies that were promoted—not at that time. Not at that time. The Japanese . . .

DC: When did that happen?

RB: The Japanese showed us how. The Japanese showed us how.

DC: So the competition . . .

RB: Yeah, well—I'm trying to think of the guy that went to Japan, the doctor that went to Japan and showed them how to do that.

DC: The name slips my mind as well.

RB: But he went over there and he showed them statistical controls—statistical processing. That brought them back. Because the Japanese used to have a very poor reputation for quality. Very poor. In all aspects—in textiles, in clothing. Anything that came out of Japan, you just didn't want to touch.

DC: I remember that when I was a kid.

RB: Yeah, yeah. But he went over there and he showed them what statistical processing and control can do for you. And with that, it's, you know, all they did is take the techniques that we used and apply statistical processing, and pretty soon they're biting our tails. And now everybody knows how to do that. Deming—Dr. Deming. Remember that, Dr. Deming?

DC: Yeah, that's right. That sounds right.

RB: And then the concepts "lean manufacturing," this, that, one thing and another. It's a lot of good stuff. A lot of good stuff. Lots of common-sense stuff.

DC: Well I think I'm going to have to get back over to campus here pretty soon, but I appreciate your time. If I want to catch up on more stories, I hope I can give you a call.

RB: Stories I can fill you in on—you know, I've got a couple of other brothers we haven't talked about that were in the business also.

DC: Well, you know, I can do about the ten-minute version if you want to tell me a little bit more . . .

RB: Nah, let's not. Let's let you digest this and if you want to, if you want to get back—and also, there's other stories. The other gentleman—I don't know if you got the other gentleman's name.

DC: Uh, I have his name, but I haven't had a chance to call him yet. Mr. McKenzie?

RB: Yes, you bet.

DC: OK. Yeah, I hope to talk to him real soon.

RB: Yeah, he was, he was in—his area came in—he wound up with General Motors after they

broke up Fisher Body. He wound up at GM, in their Purchasing Department, and there's a lot of beautiful stories, a lot of things that he can support, and the things that I talked about. And a lot of the techniques, and the missteps, and the missteps—one of them was that they were always talking about, the managers were always talking about "driving" the process down. Well hell, that is the furthest thing from the truth. They wound up making decisions that were not in the best interest of General Motors. They had their own agendas, their own buddies.

DC: When they said "driving the process down," what specifically did they mean?

RB: Oh, that means that you would make the decisions about sourcing. See, and they wound up saying, "Well, this is a consensus," so everybody, everybody signs off on the decision, but you're coerced into signing off on the decision, and it's somebody at the upper level that had an agenda that they wanted to bring somebody in as a supplier. Oh yeah. So it was very—it was bittersweet. It was bittersweet. And Jack Smith, you know, it was mighty fine after, you know, he had all that stuff with [Inocki?]. And my wife was very familiar with personnel issues, because she had worked, and she hired and fired for many years—she worked in New York. My wife worked for [Chaubman?] She worked for ADP.

DC: In New York, you say?

RB: Yeah. And Jersey. And she came back here. She's originally from Grosse Pointe. And when Jack Smith was pursuing [Inocki?], she just shook her head. And she says, "I can't believe he's doing that." And I said, "Why?" And she says, "It's been our experience, right along, everywhere I've gone, when somebody has a mindset that says they're going to leave, you can lure them back with everything else, but they're never going to enjoy themselves, because it's psychological. You either want to work for a company, or you don't. And she says, "To have somebody—to pull somebody back, that already has made up his mind that he doesn't want to be there," she says, "that's going to come back and bite you." And that was Jack's—unfortunately, for all of the wonderful things that he did, him chasing Lopez—it was tough for a lot of people to see him doing that. Because everybody in the supplier community was glad to see the son of a bitch go [chuckles].

DC: Well it's very interesting to get your perspective on this, because I haven't yet talked to someone who was in that niche in the industry, and you have amazing insights not only into the union, but also into different levels of management.

RB: Fisher Body was unique from this standpoint: when all our systems were built to service Fisher Body, we had manufacturing, we had assembly, we had trim, we had hardware, we had stampings. So when the systems were built, in trim especially, when all the systems were built—the computer systems were built—they were designed to handle all of this stuff. The people that merely assembled and sold the product, the only thing they cared about was assembly. We were on the same page. But when the corporation came through and mandated that we come up with common systems—they called that "Sysco"

[sp?]—that was back in the ‘70s—Corporate Information Standards, et cetera, et cetera. What happened, we only had one vote on that committee. And of course no one else could understand what we were talking about. So they stumbled for quite a few years.

DC: The biggest problem, from your perspective, was?

RB: They didn’t give enough credit to what we did and the fact that we managed all these various businesses within the division. They only had one—all they did was assemble. Sales and assemble. And they could care less. But when the vote came down, for standards, we only had one vote on that table. All the other car divisions . . .

DC: And what effect did that have on you?

RB: We, at that point, I was in charge of also—in spite of all the other stuff—I spent two years on designing a system that would handle all, all the things we couldn’t do with the present systems, all the nuances, all the things that I knew about our operations. Incidentally, I was also—I had a half a dozen suggestions for Fisher Body. I never max-ed, but I had a couple [?], so I knew what I was doing. I knew the system, and the term that I always like to hang on it: “I was a white-collar operative.” I could weave my way through the cloth of our division. I knew the people and I knew how it worked. I knew the flow. And we came up with a beautiful, beautiful system, and then in the final, final analysis, we got called in one day, and they say, “Well, thank you very much. We appreciate all the effort. We’re pulling the plug on the system. General Motors just announced that Fisher Body’s going to be no more.” So at that point, there was a lot of stumbling—but you know, GM is one of those companies that can make rivers move upstream. They just throw money at it. They’ve always been able to accomplish about anything they want. They just throw money at it. Sometimes foolishly.

DC: It sounds like you think this one was foolish.

RB: I don’t think they gave enough credit for what was being done, and all the planning to go into a new—managing the business in a different way. I don’t think anybody believed what Fisher Body did. In some regards, we were arrogant, because it was cost plus for us. We had our margins. We knew the stuff. We knew tooling times. We knew implementation times, and this and that. And the customer, being the divisions, would always come to us and they would want something, and we’d say you can’t have it for six months. Well they thought that was pretty arrogant of us to be straightforward and honest with them, but it was probably—we didn’t have any salesmen on that group. There was nobody schmoozing. We just said it. We just said what had to be said, and they didn’t like it. So I think it was very conspicuous that the car divisions were out to get Fisher Body. But in the final analysis, when they started handling their own changes, and everything else, all of a sudden, I think it was a hard lesson learned that we *knew* what we were doing. OK.

DC: Somebody thought that the parts just magically . . .

RB: It was just "magic," right. You want an engineering change, fine. And then Fisher Body did a lot of engineering changes for the customer that never, they never asked for money. They never asked for money for an engineering change, this and that. Sometimes . . .

DC: They would take care of all that behind the scenes?

RB: They would just do the stuff. It was, you know, we were a captive supplier. And then now, when General Motors gets into the real world, the guy says, "You want a change? Give me the money." Some of them are smart enough to say, "I want the money up front" for this, that, or the other thing—a lot of them, because then GM wasn't paying. They were playing games with Accounts Payable, which I can give you a story about their games with Accounts Payable. How do I know it? Because I was trouble-shooting that too at one time.

DC: They weren't getting paid, huh?

RB: They weren't getting paid.

DC: That's one way to cut costs!

RB: And they didn't, they didn't know how to manage it. They didn't know how to manage it. I could accomplish the same thing with some basic rules, but I'm not an accountant. I don't know anything. Because I was getting invoices paid when nobody else was getting them paid. Again, I found out what was happening and *why* it was happening, and I dug into it. And then I made my suggestions, and certain things did get accomplished, but not from an accounting standpoint. We just made some proposals. We found where the problems were—the people who were in charge of the payables area went—now they had contracted the stuff out. So they had leverage to their contractors. So they said, "Here's what we're finding." "What's the issue." "Fine." So now we find out that the rules that the contract established on payables was the cause of the problem. These guys, the people working in there, they had to process so many a day. If it was complicated, they shoved it in the bottom of the drawer.

DC: OK.

RB: And the stuff would start stacking up, and they would do the easy ones, and then all of a sudden, now you're going in, you're opening up, you're opening up a can of worms in something that hasn't been paid for eight, nine, ten months! Why? It's in the bottom of the drawer. I had to go over there at night and look in the drawers, with the supervisors. Open up the drawers and look back in there. And say, "Here's what you got. Here's what you got. Here's what you got. Here's . . . ." Everything that I said came to pass, and then all of a sudden, some of the people lost their jobs working for the contractors, and there were some supervisors for the contractors also lost their jobs, because they weren't paying attention.

DC: But it sounds like it was ultimately related to this ridiculous . . .

RB: While we're still on time here, one of the things that I found that was just the dumbest thing that I ever saw, is that they never applied the 80-20 rule.

DC: Which was?

RB: 20 percent of the items are going to give you 80 percent of your problems. So the way I always handle a job, if you're going to deal with a company that you owe millions of dollars to, that's one problem. If I've got a hundred companies that I owe less then ten thousand for, I want to get rid of those one hundred companies first. So if I had a priority, I'd take care of all the little invoices first. I'd get them out of there as fast as I could clear that thing out. First of all, you [?] a lot of people when you did that. Shoo. You just blow them out, because now you got a couple experts that are dealing, familiar with the account, the more they had people that were responsible and knowledgeable, and knew what was happening. 80-20 rule. They never applied the 80-20 rule. Simple. 80-20 is everything. I taught my people scheduling. In the plastics industry, I taught them 80-20. I always talked to them—my lesson to them was always stock the real low runners. Stock them up. But run your other ones week to week, because it's a major change on plastic, on power, pellets, whatever you're using. I said, then if somebody comes in, slides in from the corner, says all of a sudden they're going to have some kind of a promotion, and they want this hideous color of yellow, you can always pick it off the shelf. You don't have to interrupt your production: 80-20 again. And I always had them scheduled. Do your light colors first. Save your dark colors for last, because you can clean out the screws and you can get more throughput. Something that I learned.

DC: Just by being awake, and alert.

RB: Yeah. Why, why does it take you three hours to get up to speed when you change from blue to beige? "Well, we gotta make sure all that beige streaks out of there." "Oh man, it wouldn't cover it, would it?" "No." So now, I'm running beige. But the blue overpowers that. Now you're making the change in an hour and a half. You clean the screws out in an hour. This was the stuff that I loved. This was my, this was my force. This is why I looked forward to going in to work. Just like my father used to. It wasn't a trade. It became a specialty. Enjoyed it. Oh, did I enjoy it. I wish I could have continued, but it wasn't to be. It wasn't to be. Oh, my last call—I won't even bring this up. The 1986 start-up. We almost shut the corporation down because of lack of cloth. To be continued . . .

End of Interview