Bob Bowen Interview, Part I
August 25, 2000
Local 849 Union Hall
Ypsilanti, Michigan
Transcribed by Daniel Clark

The tape begins with a recording of "Detroit City," by Bobby Bare

DC: . . . I thought we could start by talking a little bit about your home. The song is so powerful in saying he wants to go home. Where was your home? Where are you from?

BB: My original home was in northwest Arkansas. A little place called Hunt.

DC: Called where now?

BB: Hunt.

DC: Hunt, Arkansas, OK. When were you born?

BB: November 1, 1941.

DC: [Mumbles about setting recording levels.] Can you describe your town a little bit?

BB: Well, I really lived in the country. But the closest camp, if you called it that, it was nothing but a wide spot in a dirt road that had two gas pumps and two little country stores, and maybe all total, fifty people. That served the community for groceries, feed for their cattle. And there was a scale there for the coal miners to weigh their trucks in, so they could sell the coal.

DC: So there were coal mines in the area.

BB: Yeah, there's a lot of coal mines. It's a beautiful country, situated in a valley at the foot of the Ozark Mountains. And it's a very fertile land. A lot of hardwoods. There was also some shallow soft coal that was in pretty good demand. So there was a lot of things people could do for a living there.

DC: Were your parents from that part of Arkansas?

BB: My Dad was from the near vicinity, but up on the mountain. That's where he was from. But his family had been coal miners. My Mother's family had moved in there from a little bit further north in Arkansas. But they'd been part of the old southern plantation aristocracy during the Civil War. Of course naturally they fell on bad times after that. But my Grandfather Parker—my Mother's Dad—was, I guess, a good old dirt farmer. And supported a pretty good-size family from the crops he had.

DC: Where was his farm?

BB: It was in the country just south of Hunt, Arkansas, southwest of it. He had about 300 acres, I think. Not a lot of land, but he made a living. Peanuts was his primary crop, then beans, potatoes, oats for his cattle—almost like a self-sustaining set-up. You raise certain things for your family and your livestock, and the peanuts was the money crop, to keep you going the rest of the time.

DC: To get those things you couldn't make yourself.

BB: Mm-hmm.

DC: What did your parents do?

BB: My Dad was a coal miner. He'd lease land, and sink a small shaft, do all of his own engineering and all. Set the elevator in place. He had about half a dozen guys working for him, and they would sell the coal locally. He had a contract with a couple school districts, and different people. So he did pretty good. Now this was after WWII. During WWII he worked for Union Pacific in Wyoming, in their coal mines, because he knew all of the specialized machinery and whatnot. So needless to say he didn't even get drafted. He wasn't even eligible for the draft because of the critical jobs that he knew. It's sort of a strange mix there. My Dad came from—his family originally came from Illinois, and they settled in there after the Civil War, and all being from Union Army families. He and his cousins were all from Union Army—the Bowens and the [Weir's??]. And they all total had a thousand acres on top of the mountain, pretty much like their own little community. They looked after one another, because there was still a lot of bushwhackers around there during the late 19th century and even into the early 20th century, and they did not particularly care for Yanks. But when you go down to the valley, that was pretty much the old Rebel stronghold. It was still—even when my Dad was a little boy, there was a lot of bad feelings. They still called them the "Yankee Boys." He was born in 1913, so that will give you an idea there was still bad feelings. By the time I came along—when I was small I didn't know the difference. I was just a kid, you know. We were all friends—didn't really learn about those things until I moved away, about the hostility, and what the issues were they were fighting for. And then my mother told me what it was like on their side of the family, and how they felt about the issue of slavery and the Civil War and everything.

DC: What did she tell you? Do you remember?

BB: Well, it almost sounds like she was ashamed of the fact that they had had slaves in her family. But she said that her—it would be her grandfather—didn't know how to get rid of the slaves. Said that several times they had the opportunity to leave, he told them they could leave, but they said they got no place to go. And then when the war came over, they had to leave, because he couldn't support them anymore. But it was just a bad situation, because slavery was based in that part of the country. The people needed work—you as a historian you know the problems that came into it—finally her grandfather had to leave. He moved to Arizona and became—I believe he was territorial governor, but he was

poisoned. So I'm not sure he ever took office after he was elected. But if you go out to Tucson—not Tucson, but Phoenix—you'll see some tributes to [ ] Parker. They were a pretty well-to-do family in Arizona after the Civil War. Not everyone went, see. He went, but his brothers mostly stayed in that area of Arkansas. Must have been an attraction to the land—people must be like salmon, that's all I can figure, because the Parkers I knew, after the war, they were just poor. Money didn't mean much. I can see where there could be resentment, because the people like our families had, I guess they were looked at as taking away from them. But I didn't detect too much bitterness there. My Grandfather Parker, I don't think he approved of slavery either. I talk about his Dad and his grandfather, my great-grandfather. He was a big reader of everything that Thomas Jefferson wrote. My Grandfather—even though I'm not sure he ever made it out of grade school, he read everything Jefferson wrote. He believed in scientific farming principles that Jefferson wrote. He was one of the first people in that part of the country to use contour plowing, crop rotations, and getting away from the traditional cotton and things like that. He tried to make it—he did well, but he never had a tractor, always used horses or mules. In the hill country, it was pretty hard to make a living, but he knew what would grow well on that land. And he was really good at stopping soil erosion. A lot of the other people had problems.

DC: Very interesting. How do you suppose he became so different, and so interested in reading and learning?

BB: I don't know. He was just a voracious reader. He never told me why or when he first started. I just think that some people have a tremendous curiosity. But it seemed like they must have valued education, because I know his brothers were the same way. I don't know if it was just something that, if his ancestors had been well read, and valued it, and sort of passed it on, and even though they were poor then, they still valued reading and learning. But considering his age, he was a pretty advanced person for realizing things had to change from what they had been when he was a boy. I wouldn't say that he was liberal in our terms today, but he always believed in racial equality. I think he believed in segregation—sort of like the old separate but equal—but he thought it was shameful the way they treated black people.

DC: So he thought that as long as things were equal, separate was OK?

BB: Well, he thought that should be an individual decision.

DC: OK.

BB: If people wanted to mix, that's fine. But that should be for individuals. He didn't think that society had the right, say, to legislate morality and things like that. And that's the way a lot of the people down there thought at that time. I know my Dad thought that too. Until probably the '60s or '70s, he changed his mind. After the Civil Rights Act passed, and he retired, he told me that was the best thing that ever happened to this country—was the enactment of the Civil Rights Act. And at first I think he was opposed to it, because he felt you had to accept people in your heart. He came to agree, well, if that's the case, then

some people would never accept anyone and they'd continue to use the fact that there was no law to enforce it to abuse others. And that there had to be some legal basis for it. And I thought that was pretty good, especially because I knew the environment he grew up in. I think part of that—his attitude, though, was pretty progressive too, for where he grew up.

DC: What was the racial mix around Hunt, where you were?

BB: I never saw a black person there. The only time—the first black people I saw in Hunt was a traveling baseball team of black men. And they were really good athletes, but they would come around, and I think they'd play really strong for a long time, then—looking back at it I think they sort of took a dive and let the white boys win at the end. So that they probably could get out of town safe, I don't know. That's the first time I ever saw a black man.

DC: So up in the hills there . . .

BB: Then you'd get some of the--There was a town a little ways away from us called Clarksville and Ozark. The county seats, one from Franklin County and one for Johnson. I never saw blacks there, but they lived there. Because my Dad had a contract supplying coal to the "colored school," what it was called then. So I knew there were black people there, even though I didn't see them, but they didn't hang out with everybody else because of segregation. They had their own little—I don't know how they made it, because I never saw them when I went to town—unless you went to the bigger cities. I really don't recall black people until we moved to Wyoming.

DC: Wyoming?

BB: There was a good mix when we moved to Wyoming. We encountered every race you can think of.

DC: Was that in the coal mines?

BB: Yeah, coal mines at Rock Springs. There was Asian people, blacks, Mexicans, people from east Europe. Right after WWII, you had people leaving to escape poverty in Europe from the war, and escape Communism. People moving here from everywhere.

DC: So a lot of these people were recent immigrants.

BB: A lot of recent immigrants. Some maybe second generation. And there had been Chinese there from the building of the Union Pacific Railroad. So there was a pretty sizeable Chinese population there. A pretty good number of Japanese-Americans.

DC: Sounds more like the turn of the century.

BB: It does. When my Dad first moved there, I can remember because he went out there first and then we joined him, they still had wooden sidewalks like they did in the old West.

And there were saloons and gambling, and everything, just like you'd see in the old western movies. But after WWII, about the time I was old enough to understand it, it changed tremendously. But yes, it was like the Wild West in every detail.

DC: So let's sneak up on that again. You mentioned that that's what your Dad did during WWII. Was he also mining coal before you were born?

BB: Yeah. Before he started mining for himself, he worked at a union coal mine in Greenwood, Arkansas, which was the place where I was born. And his family had been coal miners.

DC: In Illinois as well?

BB: I don't know about Illinois, but I know my Grandfather Bowen, he had been a coal miner in a place called Spadra. I said my Dad was from a mountain, but he was actually born in Spadra, which was probably fifteen miles away from where we were at. But they moved back up on the mountain. My Grandfather worked in coal mines for quite awhile, but he got injured in mines, so I never heard him talk too much about it, but I knew he'd worked in the coal mines there. And I'm not sure when my Dad started working, exactly, in the coal mines, because I think it was just a few years before WWII. Because he had been in the Civilian Conservation Corps, when it was established, so he didn't work then. He was in east Arkansas building dikes. And then he went to Idaho and Washington, in reforestation, and building parks and different things. And he really enjoyed it. He said it was a great experience, and he had always thought that that was something that should have continued. He could see great value in it.

DC: So then he came back after the Civilian Conservation Corps and went to work in the coal mines.

BB: Went to work in the coal mines.

DC: So he would have been a union member at that point?

BB: Yeah, he was a member of the United Mine Workers. So was my Grandfather. The union was very strong in the Arkansas River valley. All the mines there were unionized. Or almost all, except for maybe the small-scale operations. Until probably after the Taft-Hartley Act. Even then the coal mines were fairly strong, but they drifted maybe—the coal veins played out, and they moved to Oklahoma or out west. [noise clanging] Most of the miners were still in the union, but probably what set them back more than the Taft-Hartley Act was the dieselization of the locomotives.

DC: OK, so this coal was going to steam locomotives?

BB: A lot was going to steam locomotives, and shipments for steel mills, and whatnot. The coal miners there—it seemed like it was slowing up a lot in the late '40s—in '49 or '50—because I remember my Dad said, you know, this has been a pretty good living here, but he

had leased [difficult to understand] and his profit margin was getting too close. I don't know if there was a surplus of coal, or what was going on, but he moved and went back to work for Union Pacific in Wyoming.

DC: When was this now?

BB: We left—we went in 1950. Late 1950 we went to Rock Springs again.

DC: Back out to Wyoming. What was your Mom doing during these years?

BB: She was just a housewife. I shouldn't say *just*, because we had a pretty good size garden, and she'd take care of me and my brother, and help keep the garden up.

DC: There were just two children?

BB: Um hmm. Me and my brother Bill. He works over here. He's the [benefits?] rep for the union.

DC: I think he was at that meeting.

BB: Right.

DC: So she worked in the garden?

BB: She worked the garden, and did a lot of work for—to help her parents out. There it was almost like an extended family, even though we had their own home. We were living pretty comfortable by standards of the time. We had a real nice home—a new car, a new truck, my Dad's mine. We were considered pretty affluent by the standards there, but my uncles were not much older than me. My grandparents had a big family on the Parker side. So I spent a lot of time working the farm with them, and so my Mother would spend a lot of time helping her Mother out. Everybody had to work. When I stayed with them, it was up early in the morning. When I was young, I was milking cows, feed the cattle, feed the pigs, hull [check this word] peanuts, and when we got done with those chores, then we could go swimming in the creek. You know we had nice, clean streams then we could swim at. And Saturday we'd get to go to the movies. Go downtown, and it seemed like for a quarter you could get popcorn and a pop, and tickets to the serial. You could see Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, whatever was on. So that was a big treat.

DC: During the summers then?

BB: Yeah. During the winters we'd still go to town on Saturdays, but we had different work to do in the winter.

DC: What work did you do in the winter?

BB: Well, when school started the whole thing changed. We'd get up early, milk the cows, feed the pigs, get ourselves cleaned up. And when I was young, I lived in the little town, I'd walk to school. But when we came back to Wyoming the last time, we'd walk to the bus stop, for the consolidated school, probably a couple of miles. Then you'd come home in the evening, it's more of the chores, and listen to the radio with grandfather, and read. We didn't have electricity. Battery power. Big battery-powered Zenith, I think. And we'd listen to the Lone Ranger, Sergeant Preston, Sky King, whatever, the Shadow. And read all the time. Everybody read. And then you could turn in early, after you did your homework, and be up at it. On the weekends, we'd still go to town. But there was always chores to do. Grind up corn for the cattle feed. Shell corn. You got to get things ready. Grandfather—that's the time of the year he'd take for repairing the fences and the equipment. And where there was some erosion starting, he'd fill it in with stones, and brush, and start trapping the soil, so it wouldn't wash things away. So there was never any spare time, even in the winter time.

DC: So you were helping out with all of those?

BB: Well learning. Because the small children would first start working in the garden. Then they got to where they could work around the barnyard, milking cows and stuff. And then as you got bigger, they'd work with machinery, and gradually learn about farm life: how to hoe the plants, tell the weeds from the plants, and even learn how to plow, which was hard, how to prepare a team to pull a wagon. All those things. By the time a person was a teenager, they would be able to do it all. Of course I left when I was twelve. We moved back here then. We moved here for the first time.

DC: Moved here to Michigan?

BB: Yeah. My Dad got a job here at Ford. The timing element's kind of strange. We were in Arkansas when I was born. That same year my Dad—no it was '42—went to Wyoming. He stayed until after WWII. Then he wanted to go back, so he went to Arkansas, and he stayed there until 1950, late 1950. And time seems so compressed. We stayed in Wyoming until spring of 1954. And then in August, August '54, my Dad got a job here at the Ypsi Ford plant. August 13, I believe.

DC: In '54.

BB: Mmm hmmm.

DC: Now how in the world did he ever set his sights on Ypsilanti at that point?

BB: We had a few relatives that had worked here, for Kaiser-Fraser. Kaiser-Fraser had folded up at that time, but they were able to get jobs, because they were experienced, and they told him he should come and try.

DC: Were they relatives from Arkansas?

BB: Mm hmm. Yep. My mother's side of the family. Her brothers. And it took him a long time, because other than them he had no connections. But he finally befriended one of the security guards, and got him in. It was hard to get in without some connection.

DC: Do you remember when they made their move to Ypsilanti?

BB: Well, Dad came in August. We came in September.

DC: I meant your relatives.

BB: I think they came up around '51 or 2. One of them, Uncle John. And Harley, the Parkers, they came up. Uncle John at first worked for a locksmith in Detroit. He was a locksmith. Then he went to Kaiser. I think Harley worked for Kaiser shortly, but he got drafted. And then when he came back they were folded—in the process of folding up—so he got the job here at Ford.

DC: I just want to back up for a second and make sure I understand your Dad's coal business. So if I understand right, he got a piece of land that had coal on it.

BB: Yeah.

DC: And then just mined it himself, with his few hands, a few employees.

BB: Yeah. He knew the land. He knew where the coal was. So he'd just lease it.

DC: Oh, he'd lease it.

BB: Sure. They'd never disturb the topsoil. They didn't believe in that. They didn't like strip mining.

DC: OK, so then he would just work out contracts around the area.

BB: Yeah, he never had trouble getting good contracts, because he could deliver. The biggest problem he had was getting reliable help.

DC: Did you ever help in the coal mines?

BB: No, no. I was too young. I'd probably have hindered the progress more than anything. My Dad didn't want me or my brother to ever get into a coal mine. He said he wanted us to get an education, or a good job someplace, a trade or something. Never wanted us to enter the mines. Never did.

DC: So what was it like bouncing around between Arkansas and Wyoming?

BB: Well I hated it. Felt like a nomad. And strange, maybe it's me. Maybe it was all in my imagination, but I never felt welcome out west. We were looked down upon pretty bad. It

was almost like reading *Grapes of Wrath*, like the Okies and Arkies, they were looked down on like the lowest form of life. And you would go someplace, and I don't think it was really personal. I think at that time there just wasn't enough jobs to go around. Things were starting to pick up after WWII, but there was a lot of resentment from other people when they saw you come in.

DC: Which people would these be? You said that there were people from all over the world there.

BB: It wouldn't matter. Anyone who was there. Especially if their parents were there and they'd been born there, they'd consider themselves a native. And if you came in new, from Arkansas or Oklahoma or Mexico—so there was really friction between the people that were called the natives and those of us who were coming in. And I think that spun out from the parents to the children, because we were all competing for the same jobs. So we had a lot of problems, I know.

DC: Were you able to make any friends?

BB: Oh yeah. Yeah. I had good friends. Most of my friends were the East Europeans that were coming over, and Mexicans. We got along really well. And there were some others, you know, that were really nice. I remember some Catholic boys that were neighbors. They were fascinated by the food my mother made. She made cornbread, and they called it Indian bread. They had never ate it. So I guess they sort of took a liking to Southern culture. And their Dad owned an office supply store in Rock Springs. We became real fast friends. But for the most part, you really had to be careful. At school, people would be looking at you. There would always be someone who wanted to fight you, so you had to form little alliances with other people, so you could protect each other. Not gangs. But I learned real soon, when I got on the school bus from Rock Springs, to take us back to where we lived, which was just north of that—a mining camp called [ ] , you didn't want to sit in the back or the middle of the bus. You wanted to be up front. You'd get on there first, so that when the door opened, you could run. Because if you got caught, you got whipped. I became a pretty quick runner. I also found out who was in the same boat, because the Mexican kids, if they caught them, they got whipped too. So we all hung together. At that particular time I could speak a little bit of Spanish—I can't now—but we were really good friends. A couple of times we got surrounded, but we was almost like forming the wagons in a circle.

DC: It sounds like you were organized.

BB: We were organized. We did organize, and we looked after each other real well. After we did that, I don't think anyone ever got beat up. But my Dad had to rescue me a couple times, when I was alone, and some of the bigger kids whose parents had been hostile, they wanted to beat me up.

DC: Now would these be parents who were also mining coal?

BB: Yeah, they could be mining coal, or some of them'd be working in town. Most of them were coal miners, which was strange. They all belonged to the same union, but people, I guess, were worried about layoffs, seniority, and this and that, and we're coming along. Strange. I never did quite understand it as a child. But it was a strange phenomenon. But I learned to identify real quick with every ethnic group. It was the first time I met black people. The black people there were treated good. In that respect, they really didn't care what color you were. They discriminated against you primarily because they were worried about you in an economic sense. But this is just my observation—could have been dead wrong. It seemed like the only people that really were treated bad were just the people that came in late. I think even the Chinese were becoming accepted better. It's strange because there had been a big riot there in the early part of the century. And they still probably weren't accepted as much as, say, African Americans, or the Europeans, but more so than others. The Japanese, they really had it bad, because of the war. One of the Japanese men my Dad worked with was killed. Somebody pushed him down a mine shaft. And I'm sure it had absolutely nothing to do with it but race. Because my Dad said he was a great man, and he was every bit as American as they were. That's the way it was. It's a strange thing. Never could quite understand. I guess it made me think, though, because they'd impress me in several ways. One, you based your friendship on helping one another. You didn't care what color someone was, or what their religious views were. You liked them or you didn't. And soon found that economics played a big part in all your relationships. It affected, there was a class structure in a way. You had the business people in town. And you had the working people, who, all of them were insecure, and they created the problem. And then even within the working structure they had laid out, these were the people, the natives, and interlopers, us new folks coming in. Ah. No good. But it wasn't on race. I think it was more a sectional thing, and it was primarily because we were the last ones there. That's all it was. So I don't think racism was bad there. They had had a history, I think, of good things and bad things out there. You know they had, like, the first woman elected territorial governor, or governor of the State, I guess the first one in the country. But they had also had some very shameful things happen, just like they had lately [referring to the Matthew Shepherd case]. That was a strange thing. But as children, me and my brother, I think it really affected the way we think about people, because when we went back to the South, in 1954, we suddenly looked around, "where are the black kids? Where's the Mexicans?" Ain't nothing but just people like us, you know. That's all there was. I even asked the teacher, I said, "I know there's black people around here"—you'd never see them. And she said, "Well they've got their own schools, and there were signs hanging out in different places, that people tell you about, certain towns, they would use the "N" word, but they would say, "Don't let the sun go down on your head." They were really, really, really bitter.

DC: That's a pivotal year. You moved back in '54, you noticed the segregation in the schools there, and that's the year of the Brown vs. Board decision.

BB: That was quite a thing, wasn't it?

DC: Were you aware of it at the time?

BB: I wasn't aware of that until I moved back to Michigan, because I think the decision came out probably early fall. But no, I wasn't aware of it too much. I never really recognized the significance of it until I finished college, to tell you the truth. Because when we moved here, they weren't segregated. Even though our community in Willow Run was segregated, even though it wasn't probably a legal thing, but we had—it was segregation in three ways. We moved here, they still had the buildings that they had built during WWII, for the factory workers at the bomber plant and the other places. And they had [two-toped?] houses, where officers lived, or people who had connections could get them. Then the regular workers had these little flat-topped places that were sort of reminiscent of military barracks. And within that there was an area called Clay Hill, where the black people primarily lived. And I don't know if that was by accident, which I doubt, or just people flocking together for protection, or I don't know what. But it was strange—we even had a recreation center called the Teen Canteen, which is now closed, on Clark Rd. where the golf course is. I think the building's torn down. And the black kids had a different night than we did. It was strange here, because I remember I went there one night with one of my friends and got run off. Didn't want a white boy there.

DC: You had a black friend?

BB: Oh yeah, had a lot of black friends. It was strange, my Dad came home one day, and my brother, my Dad's eyes about popped out, but he laughed. It was Ernie Slater, who later became police chief of Ypsi. And I think his brother [Rodney Slater] who's Secretary of Transportation [under President Clinton]. I think that his brother is the secretary—he was too young then. But Ernie's in the living room, he and my brother are playing, and my Dad couldn't believe it, you know. But he grinned, and he said, "Boy that's good." That's the way things changed from what we had. But he was laughing, see. He said, "My friends would never believe that, would they?" Yeah, that was changing. We never cared. We didn't care what color people were. I mean, if we had stayed in the South, we might have, we might have, yeah, we might have picked up, and went different directions. I don't know. But the good thing about moving around, I think it really helped us to see that all of the different races could work together, and that you needed one another. Whereas there, people stayed backwards for so long by wanting us to live in the past. And they kept them in place. They wanted to keep blacks in place, but it also kept them in their place. That's what it did, because I can remember when as a boy, in 1954, there's another thing I remember, it was Orval Faubus running for Governor. And he was very popular. He really was a populist. People loved him. But he really played the race card. I remember him flying into Ozark, which is the county seat in Franklin, in a helicopter. He was using this as a gimmick. Who saw helicopters before then, except for the military? So he went campaigning, and he won. And we liked Orval. And even when what happened in Little Rock—we were living here [Ypsilanti] then—Little Rock, with Eisenhower, it was hard to be totally against Faubus. Even though you knew he was wrong, he was doing what the people wanted, see? And how do you condemn a whole people? And that's I think the reason my Dad was slow to change, and we were too, accepting that the laws had to change. Because, what did the black people have to protect them if the laws didn't change? If you're waiting for those rednecks—I mean, I hate to use the term, but that's the way it was—if you're waiting for those people to accept you in their heart, brother you'd

be waiting till Hell froze over, because it wasn't going to change. So there had to be some protection in the law, and the decision with Brown was, I think, a great decision. But it wasn't complete until the Civil Rights Act passed. Unfortunately, it was the demise of the Democratic Party in the South. Like Lyndon Johnson said when he signed it, "That was it." It still hurts.

DC: A big Republican ascendancy there.

BB: You couldn't elect a Republican for anything down there until then. When I was a boy, I knew one Republican. He ran the store in town, had control of the weight scales, and always tried to cheat everybody that worked for him. So they had a pretty poor reputation. And now, we have a Republican congressman, and they play the race card too. Every election they're more subtle.

DC: So when Faubus came in in the helicopter—you said there weren't that many black people around that area—did you find the white folks there pretty responsive to his segregationist view.

BB: Oh yeah, yeah. But he didn't just play the segregationist view. You probably know his history better than I do. But he was actually pretty close to being a socialist. He had—there was a school [Commonwealth College, 1923-1940, investigated by the FBI] in Mena, Arkansas—I forget the name of the university, but it had been a pretty progressive, workers' college during the '20s and '30s, and he went to school there. I never did quite find the whole connection, but he really identified with the poor old dirt farmers, and the coal miners, and he was really not too big a promoter of the old Southern aristocracy that controlled things. And he pitched the populist position strong, because all of the people were racist in politics there. Even the people we thought were the good guys. I think Faubus went a little overboard on that when he saw it could perpetuate his position, if that was what it took to get in. Kind of like what George Wallace did. Because he came from northwest Arkansas, Faubus, and I've been up in the area where he lived, and I never saw any black people. I mean it was hill country, and black people primarily had lived in the river valley, and where the old plantations had been, with the exception—the only hill country plantation I ever knew of was one that my Mother's family had. Evidently there must have been some good land that I'm not aware of. So it was strange, but the people that we knew identified very strongly with him. And I think that when he got around to places like Little Rock, and Pine Bluff, and say West Memphis, where there were larger black populations, I think he played up the segregationist position even stronger. He didn't have to where we were. You could go all day and not see a black man, driving. But you went to [Rawsonville?], which would probably be an hour's drive, or an hour and a half from where we lived, you might occasionally bump into them, because there they had the signs at the bus station, or the train depot, and different places. I don't know how it would have been growing up black there, because it was almost like they had to hide. I mean they must have had, even when they were swimming in the creek they must have had different swimming holes, because I never saw them. It had to be strange. It would be awful to have to be that careful about what you did and where you went. It would be very bad.

DC: Quite a toll.

BB: It would take a toll on everybody.

DC: So let's talk more about when you moved here. Your Dad, was his job at Willow Run, or was it . . .

BB: Ford Ypsi. Ford Ypsi had expanded in '54. They had started producing heaters for cars here. So he caught on there.

DC: What was his job? Do you remember?

BB: I think he was a spot welder, but he liked working at Ford. He said that was a lot better than working in the coal mines. And they really appreciated the union. They had really good work there in '54-'5-'6 and '7. And then about two-thirds of the people got laid off in 1958. And in '55 they had negotiated the supplemental unemployment agreement, and, well, if it hadn't been for that, we'd have been in bad trouble. But my Mother was working when she came up here.

DC: What did she do?

BB: She worked for [King Sealy?], which later was bought up by Chrysler, and she had also worked for Argus Camera. So she worked, and then in '57 she started working for Ford in Rawsonville.

Dc: What was her job there?

BB: She was a small motor winder. She was really good at it. She liked that work. She worked that, I think, until she quit in the early '70s.

DC: Did she get laid off in '58 as well.

BB: Yeah.

DC: She did, OK.

BB: She got laid off. Yeah, they were both out of work. I remember that was a tough time. Almost everyone around here, it seemed like they were out of work. And I don't know what kind of seniority it took to work, but I mean it had to be bad. Because I remember my Dad thought, "Uh-oh, here we go again." Because he thought for sure we'd have to leave, because we couldn't afford to live here.

DC: So he would have been hired in right on the heels of the '54 recession, when that was letting up.

BB: Yeah.

DC: Then about three good years, four good years.

BB: It was the second Eisenhower recession, see. '54 was war-related. '58 was I guess just the business cycle, but my Dad always tended to blame it on whoever was in the White House. So it was Eisenhower's fault.

DC: Were you going to school then during those years?

BB: Yeah. I went to school at Edmonson Junior High and then Willow Run High School, which I graduated from in 1959.

DC: So I guess you would have been a teenager, was your brother older or younger?

BB: He was two years younger.

DC: But you still would have both been in your teens. I was wondering how your parents arranged their shifts, or what you did . . .

BB: My Dad worked the day shift, and my Mother worked afternoons, for the biggest part of the time. There was a period of time, when she worked for Argus, that they both worked days. We'd get ourselves off to school. By the time you're a teenager you're big enough to do that. We lived a block from school, and it wasn't any big deal. When she worked afternoons, it was a little more difficult, but we'd still get up, and we were pretty responsible. Come home and do our usual household chores, and we were asleep by the time she came in. That wasn't too good for them, though. They wound up getting divorced.

DC: Did they. When did they divorce?

BB: In the early '60s.

DC: Really. OK.

BB: I attribute a lot . . .

End of Tape I, Side A

BeginTape I, Side B

(chatter about the tape recorder)

DC: Did you have any jobs besides your household chores, then, when you were a teenager here?

BB: No. My Mother and Dad were really not too big on us working. They said if we got a job we liked, fine, maybe mowing somebody's grass, but they thought—they both remembered working when they were teenagers. My Mother had to quit school in the ninth grade to help the family, and she never forgot that. And my Dad never made it out of grade school, because my Grandfather had been injured, and he had to support the family—he had a big family. So my Dad had done different things, and they both thought we should enjoy our years before we graduated.

DC: You mentioned before that they wanted you to be educated as well.

BB: They wanted us to be educated, and they wanted us to enjoy our life as kids. They said that it goes fast enough; the few bucks you make's not worth it. So I thought it was a good attitude. When we went to school, they made sure we made it through.

DC: How did things go at school? I'm thinking about your experience—you had to organize yourself for protection out in Wyoming. Did you find anything similar here at Willow Run?

BB: At Willow Run, I really enjoyed Willow Run. It was a—my best friend was a guy named William Howard. He was a black man. And his Dad was a barber. And it was again, most all—I guess everybody went to him to get his hair cut was black. He was my best friend when I first came up here. And my brother's best friend was Ernie Slater, who was black. And we gradually had white friends too, the kids we played baseball and football with. But they were probably our best friends for at least the first few years until we bought our own home and moved. And then we made friends there in our neighborhood.

DC: Where was the new neighborhood?

BB: The new neighborhood was about, [?] Avenue; it was a block east of Willow Run High School. Then it seemed like a beautiful home, and it was. But now I look at it and I say, "Man that baby is so small. But man, that's a nice place." And it was. You had two bedrooms, and a one-car garage, but Mom and Dad liked it, and we did too.

DC: So your friendships changed a bit because you moved out of that old neighborhood?

BB: Yeah, Yeah. We made friends with the kids on our block. Because we played baseball almost every day we could. We had enough kids around that we could just pick up a game and have fun. The problems you had there at Willow Run, there was some racial tension—but I think that came up later—I never noticed any racial tension when I came up here in '54. Maybe it was me, I don't know. I had trouble with some black kids, but that wasn't because of their race. They were just jerks. And one kid drew a knife on me. I took it away from him and gave it back to him. And we never got in any more trouble. Just usual kid stuff. There was white kids that beat on black kids. White kids would call black kids names; black kids would call white kids names. I thought it mostly just kids growing up, typical kid stuff. It wasn't nothing like it was in Wyoming [again, referring to Matthew

Shepherd case]. You didn't have to—there, you got whaled on, you got whaled on. They're going to beat you to a pulp. There'd be fights and stuff, but I never saw anything bad here. I was surprised that in the '60s, when things cut loose, but I guess all that hostility had been pent up over the years, and it finally came through. Willow Run was a good experience. We hung together, you know, nothing like gangs, you just pick guys you like that you play ball with, or guys that like the same cars, or hang with the same people. That was it. Just like kids do now. I always thought Willow Run got a bum rap. It was a—we had some really good teachers. When I came up from the South, I thought I had a fairly good education, but I realized that I hadn't. I think the first few years in Arkansas, I had a lot of benefit with the one-room schoolhouse. And we went to Wyoming, I didn't learn anything for four years. But the schools there weren't bad. If I had been in that one-room schoolhouse, I would have picked up everything from first grade through sixth grade. That's the way it was taught. So if you just sat there and listened, you learned. But when I moved here, I realized how weak my language skills were. We had a great teacher, a fellow who graduated from the University of Michigan—had a PhD in international law, of all things—named William Wong [sp?]. And I couldn't understand, and I still can't, why he wasn't teaching at some college or university around here. He was in his 40s when he started. He had been a war correspondent. And he had been the adopted son of the American Ambassador to the Philippines. This fellow could speak several dialects of Chinese. He could speak Spanish, Italian, French, Russian. He spoke English with an accent, but he would make us write essays every week. And a lot of people were terrified of it, but I loved writing. Little Doc Wong, he would make you think. And I thought that was a great challenge. We had another number of teachers like that. We had—people who wanted to do well could. I wasn't particularly a great scholar, except in English composition and history, and auto shop, probably, and get into math, man, I'd probably just skim by. Just didn't like it. But the school was good, and the teachers were good. And the kids, just like any group. We were all, black and whites thrown together here because of the economics of the war. People were coming here to build bombers and bombs, and then after building cars. We were all basically the same social class. I don't care what color we were, we were all—we were a mix of southern whites who had come up for jobs, just like that song by Bobby Bare. And blacks had come up for better opportunity. Who wanted to stay in the South picking cotton as a black sharecropper or just barely getting by when you could come up here and work in the auto plants. It would be stupid, no-brainer. But the only connection there was your family and the scenery, down South. And I know that's a powerful pull [brief mumble]. The strange thing about it, the people that I knew from the South—not so much the blacks, but the whites, who lived in the South—they all wanted to go back. All of the kids I knew as teenagers, if they had been anywhere in the South, it was their dream to finish high school or college and go back home. They didn't call this home.

DC: Did many of them go home?

BB: Oh yeah. Most of them I knew went home and then come back, because they found the same things their parents did: there was no opportunity. The working people who went down South said, Well, you can't make it. There's no unions down there. There's not many things—so you go down there as a worker, you've got no protection. And you may

get a lucky job, but how long is that going to last? Said, no, forget it. And as a black man, there's no way that I would have moved back. But it was hard. And the only people I knew who could make it down there were professionals, and I didn't know any professionals, but guys that I went to school with became professionals and stayed here—you know, lawyers and things, like Ron Egner [spelling?]. He did well. And then a fellow named John Coburn [spelling?] who went to school with us, who—I don't know if his people were from the South. I think he was from Kentucky—he's a General in the Army now. But I don't know if he would want to go home. He liked his life. Just everyone I knew wanted to go home.

DC: So what did you do when you graduated?

BB: Well, when I graduated I was seventeen, so one month after I was eighteen I got a job at Ford here. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I worked here for a few years, and I said, "This is not for me."

DC: What was your first job?

BB: My first job I had was working on an assembly line that was temporarily filling in for a broken automated machine. We were assembling shock absorber rods and piston assemblies. And that seemed so fast to me. I mean I could not believe it. I came in and that line was going so fast, when I'd go home at night I would dream about those parts going by me. And I would have never made it except for a good guy working across from me.

DC: What did he do?

BB: He was so good on the job, that he'd get ahead and he'd help me out. So it took me about three or four days to get the hang of it.

DC: Did you know him before you went to work?

BB: No. I never knew him before. He was older than me. He was always so nice, a nice man. I would have gotten fired if it hadn't for him, while learning the job. My Dad had told me, anything they ask you to do until you get your three months in, you do it. In that time, the foreman would take advantage of you.

DC: What did the foreman do to you?

BB: Well, anytime everybody else was on a break, he'd give me a polishing cloth and say, why don't you go over and clean that machine, clean and polish it.

DC: Was this during your three-month probation?

BB: Yeah. I was busy. I mean, I'd get my break, but nothing like the other people. He didn't hesitate to call me back before my break time was up. He'd put me cleaning it, or if

something broke down, he would give me something to do where he didn't mess with the other people. And I just took my Dad's advice. I did that for a short while, and I was a good worker, and they needed a job on a molding press. One of my uncles had worked there, and they took me.

DC: A different department then?

BB: Different department.

DC: And how did you go about applying for the job, bidding for the job? How did that work?

BB: You know I can't remember if I even bid on the job. Because I think I got in there before—now I might retrace—I think I got in there before I finished my probationary period. And I think there were some loopholes in the contract, where if it's probationary, they can pretty much assign you where they liked. And they had an opening. That job saved me, because a few months later there were some layoffs. But that job was considered a semi-skilled job, and it would take some time before the seniority, the senior people, could bump you off. And by that time the layoffs were over.

DC: Were unskilled jobs most vulnerable then?

BB: Oh yeah. And I wouldn't really call it a skilled job, but you had to learn some things that would take awhile, like making sure the temperature of your molds was right. How to take care of your molds so the parts wouldn't stick. Make sure that the powder that was going in was equally distributed. It may take a person a few weeks to really get good at it.

DC: Who taught you how to do the job?

BB: One of the other operators showed me how, and it really wasn't a hard job, just hated it.

DC: Why did you hate it?

BB: The heat. I never did like heat. But I would stick with it, because you had to have a job. And my Dad had told me, you got to work. Either you go to school or you work. And I'd bought me a car, shortly after I got that job where I got my three months in, I bought me a car, a used car. And Dad says now, "You shouldn't have done that. You don't get SUB pay until you get a year. I said, "Don't worry, Dad, if I get laid off I'll join the Army." He said, "Oh yeah," he says, "How much is your car payment?" And I told him, and he said, "Well, you don't make that much in the Army. How are you going to pay for it?" So I said, "Well, I guess I better stick with this job." So I did. I stayed with that job, that molding, and the hardest part I hated. In that job we molded distributor caps, ignition coil towers, and water pumps [and ???]. And some jobs you could get done; some you couldn't. I got stuck on midnight shift, and I know most of the guys liked midnights. I didn't like it.

DC: Why would they like midnights?

BB: Ten percent higher pay, plus less supervision. So if you did your job well, and you would get efficient at it, you'd have time for yourself. The other shifts, especially the day shift, you were pretty well watched. The afternoons wasn't as bad. Afternoons was the best of all, because—I liked that because I could get out of work, go running with my buddies, set my clock so I could wake up in time to go to work the next evening. Had time to read, play with my cars, go out with the girls, whatever. But midnights was a killer, because I couldn't get any sleep. Never got adjusted to it. Never could like the fumes either. Never could get used to those fumes. And then I got moved from that molding job to another molding job where we were making heater housings. That was an unbearable job.

DC: What was unbearable about that?

BB: Couldn't make production. Because the machines had to run perfect. The mix—we had a mix of asbestos, clay filler, and some resin, and sisal fibers, that was mixed, and they had to be weighed, and they had to be just the right consistency. If they're too wet, they wouldn't form well; if they were too dry, they wouldn't press out and fill the mold. You had to keep the molds waxed, but not too waxed. And if anything went wrong, you couldn't make it—the job was timed too tight. And the supervisor I had—me being a kid, I think I was eighteen when I started working for him—he wouldn't pick on the old guys so much, but me and the other handful of young guys, he'd expect a little more out of. And I wasn't making production. I mean I was just as efficient as anybody.

DC: So others were having difficulty as well?

BB: Sure, they were having trouble. But those guys learned something. The boss wanted production; he got it. They had electric counters. Well, one of the fellows there listened—there was a sequence of selanoids operating hydraulic valves and stuff. We had dies that come in from the side called core [???]. They'd come in, after the press would come down. And he'd listen to the sequence of that. He figured out manually how to make that electric counter work on its own. We could cheat it, counter-jack it. They didn't think we could do it, see? So those guys said, 'Well if you're going to be threatening people with disciplinary action, we'll make it.' He felt sorry for me, he said, I'm going to tell you, Bobby, he says—the guy already told me he was going to fire me if I didn't get production. He says you're going to be I-94. You know what that meant. I didn't know he couldn't. You know I could have called the union, but I was just learning—and so I says, told the guy I didn't want to do it, didn't want to cheat. But when push come shove, brother, I had a choice: I could cheat and keep my job, or I could work hard and actually make more parts for the guy, but never get production, and get fired. So I started cheating just like the rest of them.

DC: While you were cheating, were you still doing the job as best you could?

BB: Oh yeah. But I still couldn't get it. So I'd get done just in time to clean up, because you didn't want to leave your press inoperable for the next shift. You wanted to leave it in good shape—clean it up, wax the dies, clean it out good, get the excess off, be ready for

the next shift. And that was good, that part. They did stress doing a good quality job, I thought. They wanted things in good shape for the next shift.

DC: But it sounds like you couldn't have done a good quality job if you had met their production goal.

BB: Not with that supervisor, no way. There was ways to do it. Guys had to start cutting corners. When you're in molding operations there was two things that made those housings right. One was pressure, and the other was temperature over a period of time. So—I don't know what time it took to cure, but there was one trick to, you could turn the temperature up and cut the curing time, and manually raise the press too soon. But you know what happens to things when you force temperature and pressure too high too soon. You tend to—chemically, it gets too active. So you might get bubbles, and forms may, things may warp, and it didn't turn out good. But some guys would do that. I didn't like to do that.

DC: So who set the production standards?

BB: We had manufacturing engineers, or time-study men, and most of them were pretty fair, but I think there, when they timed it, usually, they're supposed to time just the typical person, not the fastest guy, but the standard was too tight on that job. Other jobs I've had them were too loose, you know, to be fair to the company. But that one was too tight.

DC: How often did they study that molding job?

BB: They studied it almost constantly, especially after we found out how to manipulate those counters. They did an inventory and we came up 50,000 housings short. And they sent a detective out to find out what was going on. They never did find out what was going on, but they rewired it. But the guy figured out about in one day the sequence. I think they had to go back and re-time them.

DC: But what could you do, though, if you felt in your heart that you couldn't make that production? Did you have any recourse besides . . .

BB: Well, I had recourse, but at the time I didn't know. I should have called a committee person and just say what this guy was threatening to do. And I think he could have said, Look this is set for ideal conditions. This guy has to be working off standard. But I didn't know that, and maybe even some of the other guys didn't know either.

DC: So were they mostly young guys there?

BB: No, they weren't all young. Some of the guys were up in their 30s and 40s, you know, and here I'm eighteen, they should have known better.

DC: So they had worked there for a while, then?

BB: Yeah, most of them had been on layoff and just come back, see? So maybe that had something to do with it too. The union was good even then, but I think a lot of the guys, they always, after a layoff experience, they wonder "How far can I push it?" Because even today, you know, production standards, that's the one thing that the company's looking for: the payoff point. Are you getting the numbers? And from us, if we can't make it, then we have to be able to show a good reason why we can't. Most of the guys could show it. But there were always a few duds who didn't want to do a good job, and they'd screw it up for everybody else too.

DC: Sure.

BB: Because they'd made it, by taking the shortcuts I was telling you about. By jacking the counter even. But their products were crap.

DC: Were there any grievances, or any interactions with the committee man, then, when you had that job?

BB: Oh yeah. The first time I called a committee person . . .

DC: How long had you been working when you did that?

BB: Less than a year. I called a committee person up. I think it was related to something shortly after that supervisor finally just got too much on me about that. I called a committee person, and he showed up, and when he first comes up I says, "Oh man, I'm in trouble." Because he went up to the supervisor, and I could see him laughing and joking, and I didn't know that by contract, the committee person was supposed to go and see the supervisor first. And you know he was just setting the mood. Soon he come up to talk to me, and after he talked to me he went back and talked to the supervisor. The guy got off my back. Jerry Woodruff was the committee man. Good man.

DC: Now had you met him before?

BB: Never had. First experience I had with Jerry. Jerry's just a friendly guy. And he knew the guy before he'd been a supervisor. In all fairness to the supervisor, he just had tremendous pressure on him too.

DC: To get production out?

BB: Yeah. I'm not sure he would have fired me, but I didn't know. He was probably just bluffing me. But he had tremendous pressure, to get the count up.

DC: So how did you even know to call a committee man then, if you hadn't even met him?

BB: My Dad had been a strong union man. I talked with him. Yeah, he said, "You've got over three months. Stand up for your rights." And one of my uncles worked on that shift too. He told me, "Call him."

DC: So they knew who to call.

BB: Sure.

DC: There were some people out there who knew, but it sounds like there were an awful lot of people working in there who didn't really have either the knowledge of what to do or the courage to do it.

BB: Or the courage. A lot of fear. There are still people like that. The union could help them, but a lot of them—I guess maybe fear's a powerful thing. A very powerful, strong force. The second time I called, I got the committee man again. We had—the molding job we had didn't make a super-precision part. It had what was called "flash" on it. They had to be sanded off on these belt sanders in the back. And the guys had these reamers [?] and belt sanders. They would be getting it in condition to send it down the assembly line to be drilled and riveted, and whatnot. And there was a large vacuum collection system—it must have been twenty-five foot tall. Big bags.

DC: To collect all the sand and dust and all.

BB: Yeah. And occasionally it would break. And when it'd break, it was like the desert in a sandstorm. You'd get all that dust flying, and they'd want to give you a respirator to breathe [sneezes]. (There was a little town called Coal Hill down there you'd have been interested in. I never met this lady; I think she's a retired teacher at one of the universities there in Arkansas, and she did a history of unions there in the Arkansas River Valley. Maude Gallagher I believe was her name. That's what they called her.) Anyway, back to what I was saying, that bag would break, those bags would break, and they'd give you those respirators, and they'd remind me of the sandstorms we had in Wyoming. But I'd just say, "Look, I'm going home. I can't breathe through this respirator." And I'm glad I didn't stay, because there was asbestos in it. So the guy said, Go home, but I'm going to write you up. So I called a committee man, and he said, No, no. You can send him home, but it's going to be an authorized pass. [Inopportune noises clutter the tape.] . . . showed me how to do things right.

DC: So were you doing the actual sanding, or was your room just affected if the thing broke down.

BB: Well, it was strange. I had a big, big press. It was a large press. It had a conveyor belt that went from my press—after it went through this cooling vat, it would pop them off and send it to those guys who worked by the machine. But the collectors ran from behind us, in the hideaway, and they collected the dust for what must have been about eight or ten molding presses. And each one of our presses, I recall, would make four heater housings at a time. So it collected for all of those, and when it broke, I mean, it was a lot of dust. So I feel sorry for some of the guys. They stayed.

DC: They stayed.

BB: They'd stay. Maybe it was just me, but I could never breathe through—it was a regular mask. It wasn't a nuisance mask. But I'm not sure if it would have been safe for that. But a lot of those guys I knew, now they have problems with the asbestos. Asbestosis, or whatever you call it. I got a little compensation from it myself, but I tried to get out of there as soon as I could. It was by accident I got out, though. There was a cutback, and I got shipped to another job.

DC: So you were ready to keep your job but you had to move to a different department?

BB: Had to move to a different department. Then I finally got laid off there for about three months, which was—about that time I think, I was nineteen. It was like taking a vacation, you know? Because of that SUB pay, I knew it wouldn't last long, thank goodness. I needed that department—to me it showed—that started getting me thinking really strong about the union. Because I thought, wouldn't it be awful working in a position where you—where the company didn't have the decency to protect its workers, and say just go home. Or where you threaten them to go home like that and say don't come back. That's like being Upton Sinclair in the jungle. I think even though our working conditions weren't as bad at that time, why would any stay through that. I bet a lot of them wish they hadn't.

DC: So how long did you stay in that molding job?

BB: I stayed there about a year I think, or a year and a half, total.

DC: And you had a short layoff in that time—about three months.

BB: Mm hmm.

DC: Did you collect SUB pay during that time?

BB: Yeah. That gave me time to think about a lot of things. I started thinking then about going to college, even though I didn't start until 1963. I had time with some of my friends, time to read, and just relax. I knew I was going to get called back; it was just a matter of when.

DC: Was it identified as a short-term layoff?

BB: It wasn't identified as that, but one could see the pattern, the way it developed. Car sales weren't near what we have now. I can remember, I think 7 million was a typical production year. Traditionally, just before the spring rush you'd get a layoff, because they could produce much more than they could sell. In spring, when things would pop up, and that's what would happen. And when they'd start [difficult to hear] back to work. That fooled us later, though, because, "Oh it's temporary." No it wasn't!

DC: So you started thinking about college. Did you have anything in particular that you were thinking about?

BB: I thought it would have been great to be a lawyer, but I wasn't really sure if I had the academic skill and talent for that. I took an exam, when I was at Eastern. My grades had been so bad at school, I had to take an exam to see if I was "material." So I studied like mad. I studied, you know, my weak spot, math. I bought books on mathematics and studied them. And I took the test, I said, "Oh man, this was rough." But they called me up two days later to say, "you made it." I said, "Wow. You mean it?" So I was going to study pre-law, and I did—I just took general studies for awhile and decided . . .

DC: But you didn't start right away?

BB: No. Well, I think it was '62 before I thought it over and got that test. And I was able to get registered then before the spring semester, or winter semester '63. A week after I got married, I think.

DC: We'll sneak up on that here again, because you had that three-month layoff, and then what happened?

BB: I get called back there and I worked about—I worked a few months in what's called the "Old Building."

DC: And what did you do there?

BB: I was working on the generator job.

DC: And what was that like?

BB: I liked it. There's a wire brush [faint] armature [faint] solder [faint]. And it was fast, but I got good at it. I'm always a slow learner, but I always excel once I've done it. I could read a book and do that at the same time. I mean it was amazing. And not tear any parts up.

DC: So who taught you how to do that?

BB: Well, when you first went there the supervisor would show you, and the operator, and there was a number of guys that could do it. Guys ran a solder pot straight across from me, Roland Tooson, he would always help me out, show me things. We talked together a lot. We played baseball together and stuff, a real nice guy. Roland's a preacher in the community now. I think he had played for the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the Negro teams, really a top-notch athlete. Super man, really a super guy. I always liked Roland, and working right across from him, it was great. But the people there on that line were fun. And it was afternoon shift, less pressure, supervisor didn't threaten you. When I first started I was on a particular job, and I was nervous, and I screwed it up. And he said, "Just relax man." I liked a guy like that.

DC: So it was a very different environment from the molding room.

BB: Oh yeah. This "old building," they called it over by the river, supervision was a lot more relaxed.

DC: Was that the key to the different climate?

BB: Yeah, I think so. That old building was the first building there, built in '33 I believe, or '32. It seemed like the people there, most of them liked it. It was close, really close-knit. Most of the supervisors had come from the ranks too. And basically afternoons, it was just easy-going. I don't know how the "days" was.

DC: Had the supervisors come from the ranks in the other room where you worked, the molding room?

BB: Yeah. But this guy, this one particular guy, he was just—I think the job must have been a critical job, because he couldn't get the count. Instead of trying to do like they do today, and get to the root causes of what the problems are, they just always assumed it was poor workers.

DC: Are you talking about the molding room?

BB: Yeah, that molding room. I guess he assumed they was right too. He said—I don't know what the problem is, but I have an idea the superintendent or the general foreman was putting a lot of heat on him, so he just wasn't the kind of guy who could hold up to it, and say "Hey, that's not the problem."

DC: With this armature job, then, did you have engineers setting the rate for that job?

BB: Yeah, but that job had been around for years, see, even though the designs had changed. People knew the jobs well, the machinery did improve, and ran good, and people were slick.

DC: Which people?

BB: The people on the jobs! There's always some exceptions, I think, like that molding job, but most jobs, when the time-study man comes, he's not going to work hard, because if you work hard, that's what you're going to work at all the time. You're supposed to do it at a normal rate. Most of the people I saw did it at slower than normal rate when they was timed.

DC: How about you?

BB: I tried to do it at a comfortable pace. I knew some guys that could take a five-minute job and turn it into an all-day one when they guy came. But most of the time-study guys were fair-minded guys. I've known some of them would tell a guy, say "Look. Hey. You can't work like that all day, can you?" He said, "No." "So you better slow down."

DC: Oh really?

BB: Yeah. We had some guys who were decent. I remember some of them, they would side with the union. Sure. They'd say, "This job's timed too tight." It was amazing. This was in the '60s, and they're siding with the union. That's true.

DC: Did you know any of these time-study engineers?

BB: I didn't know them personally. My brother got really active in it when he got in, but I knew some of the old committee people had told me, and I got to know them later. Yeah, Ed Burton [sp?], who's retired [faint], got to know him. He was that kind of guy. He was fair to the company, but he also knew that you're not going to be fair to anyone if you set the standard too tight, and cause all this friction. You get junk. When you set production standards [???], then you can't deliver. But some people did abuse it, you know. They would finagle around it and get the standard set so low, that you could get done in half a day. That could cause bad working conditions, for safety and whatnot. But generally the standards, at this plant, I don't think were too tight. Often times they were pretty reasonable, but there were exceptions, especially if you get a new lineman. And he had people in there that—I guess if you had piecework you'd call them rate busters. But people are afraid, so they go too fast. I don't know what the psychology is. There's always someone likes to demonstrate their superior skills. And they set them too high. But I haven't seen too many like that here.

DC: Were there any like that in the armature job?

BB: In the armature job, I mean there were no tight ones. They were reasonable. They knew the machines so well, that—since the job had been there since the '30s—they knew how long it took to change them. They knew approximately how much down time you were going to have for breaks and whatnot. If machines ran well, and they usually did, they could get done early on afternoons. I don't know about days.

DC: How much early?

BB: Well, the guys who did what they call connecting the armatures, before they came to us, I doubt if some of them worked half a day.

DC: Really. What did they do the rest of the time?

BB: Well, they'd take breaks. Maybe in the morning, in the first four hours of the shift, half of them would be working, and the other half, I don't know what they're doing—playing cards, drink coffee, or whatever. And after lunch, the other half would come in.

DC: Would they have to be on the lookout for the supervisor?

BB: Nah. He knew what was going on. Oh, they might all be working there at the start of the shift, until the big shots went home. But the supervisors—

DC: This is the afternoon shift?

BB: Yeah, afternoon shift is entirely different. Day shift was a little different.

DC: So the bigwigs would leave at 5:00-5:30, something like that?

BB: Mm hmm. Then everything changes. You'd no longer—just like, I guess removing the military guards. That's what it was like. And people did their job good too. But they were quick, and they'd say, "Hey, if you take a break, I'll take a break."

DC: Did you ever use your committee men at all when you were on that job?

BB: No. I didn't take the breaks like they did, because I was the only wire brush operator. But they'd come in ebbs and flows, and I knew I was low seniority, so I'd say, hey, the day would come when I could get a job like that. If I stayed there. So I wasn't worried about it. I'd read, do whatever I wanted to do.

DC: So you could read and do your job at the same time?

BB: Yeah.

DC: Did you have a shop steward or anything like that?

BB: We had committeemen.

DC: Committeemen? Were they responsible for a number of rooms?

BB: They would have a number of departments that they had, and I don't remember what the count was in those days. Might have been one for 250 or 300 people, and it gradually got reduced. So there was a committeeman on every shift, and we knew who they were. The good ones would walk by at least once a day, waving "Hi" at people, talk to a few people, and be friendly. If they were good politicians.

DC: They had to get elected, right?

BB: Mm hmm. So they would get elected plantwide here, not just by departments. And I think every six weeks they rotated. And so they'd go to different areas.

DC: So they'd get to know a different department.

BB: For the most part, they did a good job. There were a few of them I thought were duds, but that would happen in anything because of politics and people—most people never call a committee person. So they say, "oh this guy's a friendly man. Hey, I'll vote for him." He

might be bad, but they don't know that. Maybe only 5 percent ever call him, or 10 percent. And even if he's a bad committee man, he's going to win some of them. If he deals with decent supervision, most of them will recognize when they've made a mistake, and they'll correct it right there, without even writing a grievance down. We had a good relationship here, considering the stormy relationship, or how long it took getting set at Ford—not until '41. This place was amazing. The union and management really seemed like they tried to work together. Even, like I said, when I was a kid, a lot of people were afraid, but I never could understand why they were, because these people could resolve most grievances.

DC: Well, I imagine a number of these people had worked in the years before the union.

BB: A lot of them had when I first started, yeah. But most of those people really were appreciative of the union, more so than anyone. When I first started in that old building, that had been there from the old days, it was a strange thing—the restrooms, the way they were set up, they were set up the way Harry Bennett's gang wanted them, in the old days.

DC: Which was how?

BB: For one thing, they had a row of toilets over here, or commodes, there was no doors. I mean, because it was set up under the assumption, the old guys would tell me, that if you went to the bathroom, hey there better be something in that water before you flush. Because some guy might ask to see it. Make sure you weren't—

DC: Weren't wasting time.

BB: Yeah, weren't wasting time. And it stayed that way until the late '60s, early '70s.

DC: Is that when they put doors on?

BB: Yeah. The way it changed, I think, we said in negotiations, "This has got to change, guys." Isn't that something?

DC: Wow. Interesting.

BB: Yeah, it was very interesting.

DC: But when you started, there were still no doors on the toilets.

BB: Uh uh. At least not the old building. The new one was, when it was built in '54. But the old one wasn't. It was strange. It was still set up like it was in Bennett's days. That was a strange phenomenon.

DC: So how long did you work on that armature job?

BB: I didn't work there even a year.

DC: Then what happened.

BB: I went to the truck heater job.

DC: The truck heater job. OK.

BB: That was only a day-shift job. And I forget, but I think I put in for that job because I said, if I'm going to go to school, let's get me some stability on my shift. And I got in on that.

DC: It was all the day shift, so you know you're only going to work . . .

BB: Yeah, that's all they had at the time, was day shift on that. [Both speak at once] I started that before my first semester. And then I had a chance later even for a better job I put in for. I did that for about a year, and then I put in for calibrating distributors.

DC: Let's slow down, because you've had interesting things to say about each of these jobs.

BB: Yeah, OK.

DC: Let's go with the truck heater job. What was that like?

BB: It wasn't a hard job, but it caused me some problems. I got carpal tunnel from it. Had to put in, it seemed like fifteen or eighteen screws in every third heater.

DC: By hand?

BB: No, I had an air gun. Sometimes the parts didn't fit good, so you had to give them a push. Sometimes the clutch would grab, and it'd twist. But it was a lot of repetition. But unless the things were running bad, you really didn't notice it. But using that air gun day after day, day after day—and I didn't do it very long, maybe a year. I can't imagine people doing that year in and year out, what it would have done to them.

DC: So what did it do to you?

BB: Well, I got a little knot here, it's from the repetitive action of that, plus the next job as well. I attribute part of that to that, and the other one, for the job later, I'd use a hand screwdriver.

DC: Was it loud, this . . .

BB: Nah, it wasn't loud. It was a pretty quiet little gun. You use a lot of air guns on that, and we didn't get done early on that job.

DC: OK, you had to work the whole time.

BB: And it wasn't fast. It was three guys putting these covers on, and we did—we could keep up easy. If the parts were running good, two guys could do it. But it wasn't that often the parts fit right.

DC: So you had to reconfigure then?

BB: Yeah, you had to twist them, force them. But that was not a bad department. It was clean, well-lit. The only fault I had in that, I got hit in the head. They had a conveyor overhead that had plastic heater housings on it.

DC: How high up was it?

BB: Oh, about twenty feet.

DC: And how did you get hit?

BB: The conveyor would rock every now and then. So I told my supervisor, I said, "you've got to—these shields on the side up there are not high enough." "Ahh, they're all right." The next day one of those babies got tossed off on a line jerk, hit me on my head, drove me to my knees. Man, it about knocked me unconscious.

DC: How fast was it moving?

BB: I don't think the line was going that fast, but it just happened to fall straight down on me. Jumping, tossing over the barrier. It hit me right on the head. Next day they had it fixed. That supervisor was a real dud.

DC: What made the supervisor a dud?

BB: Didn't have any heart. He was all business. I remember, that's the only time I ever got sent home in my life.

DC: Why?

BB: I had an old '50 Mercury at the time. I'd drive to work; I lived a few miles away back over by Ford, the end of Ford Lake, and I got up in the morning and it wouldn't start. So I walked to work. I walked to work, got in, he says, "Your job's covered."

DC: While you were late?

BB: Yeah. Go home. And I know there's always people that need help. Well he wouldn't give me nothing, so he just sent me home. So I had to walk back home.

DC: Just that once.

BB: That once. That's the only time it ever happened to me all the time I worked for Ford. I think I probably only was AWOL one day in 35 years. And then that one tardy there.

DC: So what was that AWOL about?

BB: [Hesitates] I hate to say it, but I partied to much one night. And I [??]out at the drag strip on Sundays, and me and some of my friends went out drinking too much, came home about midnight or later, and the next morning I had a hangover. I mean, that's all it was. One time in my life. But I called in and told 'em I wouldn't be there, but to me I was AWOL. I mean they covered it for me, but that was it.

DC: I doubt you were the only one who ever did that?

BB: Well, no, but I felt bad about it. It taught me a lesson, to control my drinks.

DC: When was that?

BB: It had to be in the '70s.

DC: The '70s. So that was a long time in the future. So did that supervisor you didn't like, on the heater job, did he rise from the ranks?

BB: Yeah, he had been a hydraulic man. Skilled tradesman, but he just didn't know people. He was a machine man, that's all. I didn't think that was right, and he was also the same guy who wouldn't have the shielding put up until I got injured. Yeah, he was the kind, "I know machines. I know this and that. I'm smarter than you guys." That was his attitude. He thought he was a real intelligent guy. And the people who knew how to run their jobs would do things well, but he thought he knew better. So that'd get him in trouble quite a bit with some of the people.

DC: So what did they do? How did that play out?

BB: The way it would play out would be if we had defective parts and we'd tell him, "Hey, these things aren't fitting right," he'd say, "Well, they're within the proper specs." "It still don't fit." So he'd say, "Run them." "OK" We'd run them; they'd get rejected.

DC: Did that reflect poorly on him then?

BB: Yeah! You couldn't get the count. See, if the guy will work with you, you could get things fixed right

End of Tape I, Side B

BeginTape II, Side A

DC: So anyways, it sounds like you weren't going to go out of your way to make life easy for him, then.

BB: No! No one would.

DC: How many were in there?

BB: I don't think there were more than twenty-five of us on that line. I doubt more than one person on the line would've gone out of their way for him. And that was a guy that had an easy job, like a machine setter, who got a lot of free time. But I don't think he'd even have gone very far out of the way for him. Just enough to protect his job. But no one would do anything special for him.

DC: Did you ever have to involve the committeeman with that job?

BB: I don't think so. I knew pretty much what I could do on my own then, by listening to other people and really never got in trouble.

DC: What happened with your carpal tunnel? What did you do about that?

BB: When I put in for this job calibrating distributors, I'll leave it from there. It took it some years to develop. You don't notice it right off, but when I first started calibrating distributors, we also had to set what was called a dwelling [?] of a points, for an electronic ignition. So I had to run like 500 a day, plus calibrate the advance curve [?]. So you take years of doing that—I did that for about nine years, with twists. You had do this twist with the hand—with a hand screwdriver, I think just the repetitive action of that plus the air gun, it strained—I don't know if that's a ligament or a tendon that goes through that sheath in the carpal tunnel. I don't have it as bad as some people. My fingers don't get numbed from it, but if I hadn't been blessed to get off of that job, I probably would have had some big trouble from it. But I got off of it before it really manifested itself in a bad way.

DC: So what did you do then?

BB: Well, I ran for political office, here in the union. And I got elected Recording Secretary.

DC: You were still quite young, weren't you?

BB: No, no. I was in my 30s.

DC: Wait a minute.

BB: I skipped a lot of years. Because I worked as a calibrator, and distributors and repairman. I had been a distributor from late 1964 until about 1975, right around there.

DC: That's a long time on that job. What was that job like?

BB: Well, once I learned to do it, that was probably the best job I ever had.

DC: Was it hard to learn?

BB: Yeah. It took a—I thought it was a harder job to learn than most, because it required a lot of physical skill and a good touch. Because you had to set spring tension, and a few things that you really had to get good dexterity with. Once a person picked that up after a few weeks, I got really good at it. I could get done—if things were running really good, I could get done in a little over an hour.

DC: The whole job?

BB: Yeah. Of course it didn't often run that good. But that was taking shortcuts that everybody took, which is another story.

DC: What is that story?

BB: The story is that we wanted to do a good job, or at least most of the guys I saw wanted to do a good job. When I first started that job, the guy said, "You got to do 500 a day." I don't think I did a hundred pieces the first day. And the boss started putting the pressure on me again—different boss, this time—to get it, and I said, "There's no way you can do this job the way you're supposed to do it and get 500." So he said, "Well you get it," and he kept insinuating. So I talked to the other guys, and watched them, and would say—see, the machines was set up in two rows, and a conveyor, or I should say a line going between them, where you could take the parts off the hooks, and then you had to do your work on them, elevate them [noise obscures words]. Guys that were good at it all had the front machines. So the guys that was new was in the back. I wouldn't get a steady flow, so there's no way I could get production. And if the parts were running good, I found then the guys would only set the points; they didn't even check the spring tensions. They had to use an oscilloscope, see if it was advancing so many degrees at a certain rpm. And if they were running good, you could bet with some mathematical precision they would be good, on the run, because they were pre[?] by machine. So if you ran the first ten and they were good, odds are, I'd say, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred, that it'd be good. So the guys quit checking them. Set the points and let them go. I know I didn't do that until push come to shove, and the boss says, "We got to have these parts." OK. And then he would even insist when they were running bad, you got to have these parts.

DC: What were you supposed to do if the parts proved bad?

BB: Well, he'd take a walk so he couldn't see what we was doing. We'd just set the points and he wouldn't look so he could get his count. Quality was bad.

DC: And those would go into the cars.

BB: They'd go in cars. But if you didn't get them, he was really upset then. So guys would say, 'If it's going to benefit him, it's going to benefit us.' So if you got to have them—he'd say "Get 'em boys," and then he'd take off. We'd know what he meant.

DC: In a better world, if the parts had been defective, what would you have done? Just throw them out?

BB: Well, we'd have corrected them.

DC: Oh, you can correct them.

BB: Sure, that's what our job was, to correct them, and we could. But it required everyone to cooperate, because if a few people didn't do the job thoroughly, then you never had the parts in the back, so you'd have to do that in order to get your count. So over a period of time you could lose your work ethic. You could come in and say, "I want to do a good job," and you'd work hard, and you'd never get done. Whether they were running good or bad, the boss would basically say, "I want you to take the shortcut, so I can get these out." So what would happen over a period of time, you'd say, "if it's good for the goose, it's good for the gander." So I want to take a break, what's wrong with *me* taking the same shortcut for *me* instead of just for him. So gradually we run like crap. It was the heyday of poor quality in the auto industry. Count's all that mattered. And we knew it.

DC: How many worked in that room?

BB: In that department, let's see, well we had two shifts plus a repair crew on nights. Ah geez, we must have had about fifty people or more.

DC: What kinds of vehicles were your parts going in to?

BB: Everything that Ford made. And I'd say that most of them [supervisors] would be good. But occasionally we'd get some real duds, and with that attitude, after a while most of us—I might sound like a Marxist—but we were *alienated*! I mean, after a while you got to where, hey, I don't care. Say hey, just getting paid. They don't care if you do a good job or a bad job. All they want is the number. So you get to where it didn't even bother your conscience. And that bothered me, for a long time. But finally I got like the other guys. It's what the company wanted—it's what they get. Even the guys in quality control—they knew what was going on. Even—not just the hourly guys, the salary guys, some of them with a lot of authority, they knew what was going on, but they were powerless to stop it. Quality was not #1. It was the Count #1. Because they could sell everything they made.

DC: Sales were good.

BB: Sales were great. Mustang years, high performance engines, you name it. And I found later too, if you had a real conscience about you, and you did an exceptionally good job on that, they would give you more hard jobs. But guys with the duds always got the easy

jobs. The people that were skillful and would do a conscientious job, they just kept them over and would give you a more difficult . . .

DC: Would they also fall behind and not get the count and be disciplined for that?

BB: They were getting pretty sophisticated. They'd rarely discipline us. But they would put us in a position where we knew we weren't getting it done. Originally when I first started, I think they would have disciplined me, but after I had a little experience, no. But if anything, we should have been disciplined for poor-quality workmanship.

DC: Who should have gotten that discipline, do you think?

BB: [Laughs] Probably at one time or another all of us. But the supervisors and the superintendent—it started at the top. Those are the ones who should have been disciplined, because they knew what the requirements were for a good product, but they didn't care. But if anyone was disciplined, it'd be us. And I had a good friend who got disciplined for it—Dick [Tabor?].

DC: What happened?

BB: Well, he took the shortcuts one night, and he had about five or six rejects—and the supervisor didn't like him anyway. He had worked for him before—and he wrote him up: poor workmanship. So Dick called the committee person. So Dick says, "Well, look, I'm not trying to get anybody else in trouble, but I'm not the only guy who got rejects that night, you know." The committeeman says, "Is that right?" So he starts checking all the facts, and all the guys got rejects like that that night, including myself, and one of the other guys. We were running some special models for NASCAR cars and different things, and we got fed up because they were always giving us the crap. So we said, we'll do like the other guys, maybe then they'll even this out where we all get our turn on this—they can do it too—they just choose not to. So we had rejects—boss didn't want to discipline us, so he had to tear that one up on Tabor. [creaking noise disrupts]

DC: What would have been the risk of getting written up? What would have been the consequence there?

BB: The first time you just get a warning. And it may go on your record. It depended on the supervisor. Then the second time you would usually maybe get the balance of the shift off. The next time you might go three days. You'd get progressive up until you got discharged. I never knew of anyone getting discharged or getting much time off. But the supervisors—the supervisor was probably in the same bind we were in. They needed—they had to get the numbers or they were in the doghouse with the general foreman, who was in trouble with the superintendent, who was in trouble with the area manager. It's like a military system—get the numbers. So it was bad.

DC: So you started college somewhere . . .

BB: I started in 1963. I had to go part-time because, for one, I had taken too much time off, so I had to get back in the groove and get my skill levels up. So I took two classes.

DC: Was this at Eastern [Michigan University]?

BB: Mm hmm. Then sometimes I'd sign up for a semester and I'd get my shift changed, so I'd have to drop. So it took me eleven years to get my Bachelors.

DC: We have students like that at Oakland right now. Same situation.

BB: Same stuff. And it makes it hard too, in some respects, because it really makes it hard to get the discipline you need for study, and writing. When you get your shift changed and you drop a semester, you sort of slide back for a while. It makes it tough. But the good thing about it, like that calibrator job, I started taking three and four classes a semester, because I could get done so quick, and I'd study. I'd study on that job. I never got better grades. I think after I got that job I only got one C—all As and Bs. Before that I had nothing but Cs, but I never had time to study. In those other jobs I'd come home—on the other job I was so tired, I couldn't read a book, so I had to get by just on what I retained from the lecture, or from what I picked up from my notes. And that's hard to do, even in an easy class like Sociology. All I got was a C, because I had never had time to read the book.

DC: So were you taking night classes then?

BB: Yeah. You'd get out of work, and it's time to go. Go get a shower, it's time to go to class, you come back, man, you couldn't stay awake to study—too tired. Then you get up early in the morning, you got to go to work. And there was no time to read on the job, whereas the other one I could. So after that we'd sort of—the boss had something going for him, and I wouldn't say nothing. It was benefiting me. And they didn't mess with us too much.

DC: And you got married in there somewhere too?

BB: I married the week after I started college. Or the week before, one or the other.

DC: Oh, wow. A lot going on. '63?

BB: And that was the best thing I ever did. My wife helped me a lot. Without her I could never have made it through school. When times were tough, she'd work, as a waitress or something, help me out. She read, I think, every book that I ever read. She had probably as good or better education than I do. So she did well. She helped me a lot.

DC: So was she working regularly, or just helping out when need be?

BB: Later she pretty much worked full time. But at first, it was just here or there. In 1967, in particular, we were on strike for sixty-something days, so she worked full-time at Big Boy restaurant then.

DC: Did you have any kids then?

BB: We had two girls at that time. We had a third one born in ’69. Yeah, we had the kids, took care of the kids, and went to school, and she worked. She did well, and I got top-notch grades. I was happy. In fact I probably got the best grade in my economics class—one of those big old lecture halls. First time in my life. [that same darn noise] I don’t know how much remains in my head now, but yeah, it was good. It was the first time I could study good. Then, you know, the strike, in a way, was really enjoyable.

DC: Tell me about the strike. What were the issues in ’67?

BB: ‘67? You know it’s been so far back I can’t remember it all. I think we were starting, arguing about “Thirty and Out.”

DC: Was it just this plant on strike?

BB: No, it was all of Ford, the whole Ford system. The main thing I remember is how close you became with all of the people that you were on strike with. You know, serving on picket duty, and different things. When we weren’t on picket duty, a number of us would get some of the guys here together, and our other friends, we’d have baseball games and stuff—have good times.

DC: So it was warm weather anyway.

BB: Oh yeah.

DC: What time of year was it?

BB: Fall. September—October. We went back before it really got cold. You know it’s strange the time flew. It’s a shame that being a former officer I can’t remember all of the issues, even.

DC: Well, most of those I can look up, but we can try to explore more about what you did. Let’s see. Do you remember paying much attention to national union issues at that point in time?

BB: At that particular time I think I was more interested in national political issues, because I started changing my political philosophy a lot. I’d been fairly conservative, and even though my family was all Democrats, I guess I fell in—when I first started school I fell in with this Englishman that was about my age or a little older, and we became—I’d read all this political conservative stuff, and I became a real conservative Republican for awhile, because I believed that stuff, and then the more I studied in college, the more I started saying, “Hey, that’s a bunch of hogwash!” And I became very liberal. Plus I saw the issues that were going on in Vietnam, and I started changing my view on the war, and becoming more socially conscious about what was going on in the world. And it made me

a much better union member. Before that, you know, I'd call them for my own needs, but I really never understood completely how important the union had been to the whole society, not just for the workers.

DC: But that came through paying attention to national events, not necessarily starting the union itself.

BB: Right.

DC: What were your views on the Vietnam War, and how did they change?

BB: Well when it first started, I was probably like a Barry Goldwater type. I voted for Barry Goldwater. And I thought, hey, untie the military's hand, let them go over there and do what they have to do and come home. I'd say short of an atom bomb, probably, and I wouldn't even rule that out, because I bought all that about the domino theory and the red peril. I bought all that stuff.

DC: Did you talk about that at all with the people you worked with?

BB: Oh yeah. We talked about it constantly.

DC: And did these people pretty much share that opinion?

BB: I don't think many of them would want to use nuclear bombs, but almost to a person they supported the war effort, at least in the beginning. And even 'til the end, I don't think many of them were against the war effort. A few of us started changing our views.

DC: Did many of your friends get drafted?

BB: Oh yeah, some of my friends got drafted, and that had changed my mind, because when they came back they were different people. And they'd talk about their experiences. And some of them said that they didn't know if they'd go again. One of my best friends was in West Germany, and he volunteered for Vietnam duty. And when he came back, he turned into a hippie.

DC: Why the change? What did they say? . . . that transformed them?

BB: What transformed them was that they saw the corruption of the South Vietnamese government, and the ARVN. They said that they couldn't see where one side was better than the other. And I guess just the whole war effort. Some of them didn't like it because they thought that they weren't being allowed to win. Others just thought, "Well, what's the goal over here?" What are you fighting for? There's no purpose. We're just shooting people, and they're shooting at us. But some of them really thought they couldn't see any difference, from one to the other. That we were just as evil as they were.

DC: Do you remember people getting drafted out of the plant?

BB: Oh yeah. Yeah I do.

DC: What was it like when that happened?

BB: Well we didn't—most of the guys, we thought they were heroes. Guys going off fighting for their country, and defending freedom and all that. They were treated good. I can remember Milt Davis, a good friend of mine, he remember he went off and came back—he was a changed man too. You know, just the horrors of war.

DC: Did some of these people come back and work in the plant then?

BB: Yeah. Yeah. Some of them are very deeply affected even to this day. Seeing people killed, and the things they had to do themselves. A guy that later became my best friend was working here when he got drafted, but I didn't know him. Right after he came back I got to know him well. And he'd never talk much about it, but he was a veteran. We didn't know anything until one day he asked the supervisor if he could have a day off the following week. And the boss said, "No way. I can't afford to let you go." And the next thing you know the supervisor of labor relations come up to him, "He's got to have the day off." And they gave him a new Lincoln to drive. He was going to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, getting a Silver Star. But this guy, he looked like Audie Murphy. And after we found the truth out, and they did all this stuff, he had about thirteen or fourteen medals. Four Purple Hearts, a Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, I mean he just had them all. He had got shot down at Khe Sanh, and been down—was missing in action for twenty-something days. He and all the guys in his crew. They had been—he said their helicopter went down the only place where there was no Viet Cong. One of the officers was injured, so they had to take care of him. They had to live off the land, eating snakes or anything they could until they got back behind, back home. And they had reported to his parents that he was killed. It was a mistake. It was a sad time. So when he finally got in, as soon as they could, they had him fly home, to let them know that he was alive.

DC: That would be an amazing piece of news.

BB: It was. And he helped change my mind too. I think he supported the effort. But I guess anything you do like that, you're in, you can't hardly go totally against what you've been doing, but he saw a lot of atrocities. He saw Viet Cong prisoners getting pushed out of helicopters until one would talk, and a lot of needless killing. I think the one thing that touched me the most in him, was that he always took his little 35 millimeter [camera] with him, and he'd take pictures, and he was flying. The best picture he had—I wish he still had it but it got washed away in a flood—you could see the elevation. He must have been just leaving. They must have been leaving their camp, and there was this little Vietnamese boy carrying a little toy rifle over his shoulder. A little kid about this high. He said, "Man, what an impact this war is making on these kids." That touched him. But I'm glad he made it back. He played ball with us and all. He was a real good football player, but he had two plastic kneecaps then.

DC: From the war?

BB: Yeah, and he had a scar across the top of his head, where a bullet went through his helmet. He's just lucky to be alive.

DC: Is he still alive?

BB: Yeah, down in River Rouge. I haven't seen him in a few years, but every now and then we bump into each another. He moves around a lot. He always wanted to go back—he quit here and went South, and came back. A real good guy. But the guy who volunteered, I think what changed his mind, he was driving a truck in Vietnam, and he came into a village where bodies were just stacked up like cordwood. All young boys, say twelve to fourteen. The South Vietnamese Army killed them, because they thought they *might* be Viet Congs, or Viet Cong sympathizers. They weren't sure, but they killed them just for good measure. So things like that come back and change your mind.

DC: Did you have any debates with fellow workers in the plant at that time?

BB: Oh yeah. Gradually changed. Toward the end I said I didn't think I'd go. If I'd have got drafted, I probably would have, because—I tried to join at one time.

DC: When was that?

BB: When I was about twenty-five, I think, or twenty-six.

DC: And what happened?

BB: I walked up to the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps officer at the college and said "I'm getting tired of this part-time stuff, how about just joining up?" He said, "You're a year too old for this program."

DC: OK, you were a little too old.

BB: Yeah. That was it for me, but I would have gone. At the end, I'm not sure, because I was 1-A all the way, but I never got called. My brother got called, but flunked his physical. Excuse me for a second. [Break]

End of Interview, Part I