Chuck Lauinger Interview
January 25, 2002
Mr. Lauinger's Home
Pontiac, Michigan
Transcribed by Marie O'Brien
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DC: . . . Anyways, I usually start out with pretty simple questions, [simple] for you anyway, such as, like, where were you born?

CL: I was born here in Pontiac.

DC: You were, OK.

CL: In 1930, at St. Joe's Hospital.

DC: And were your parents from Pontiac as well?

CL: No, my parents were actually born in North Dakota.

DC: North Dakota.

CL: And they migrated down here—let's see, it would've been probably about in '27—1927 and my Dad moved to Detroit. And there he was working as a plant security guard for—at the Fisher Building while he was taking a course to be a barber. He went to barber school. And then after he got his certificate, or his license, he worked in Detroit for awhile, then he came out to Pontiac here to work.

DC: Do you remember when he moved to Pontiac?

CL: Oh, I would say it would probably be about in '30.

DC: About the time you were born.

CL: That I was born, yeah. Let's see, my sister was born in '29, so he probably came in '29 then, because she was born here also.

DC: What did your parents do in North Dakota?

CL: They were farmers.

DC: Mm hmm. And do you remember hearing about when their family had moved out to [?]

CL: [laughs] Yeah, well my, my grandparents migrated from, uh, Odessa, Russia, to over there,

and they had land grants down there. And that's why they had ended up out there because the government, if you occupied a property for so long, they gave you the property then. So that's really how the Dakotas were populated, by the land grants.

DC: Yeah. Do you know what motivated your parents to move to Detroit?

CL: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah. Well I guess if you've been out on a farm and you hear some of their stories, you know, like—they used to have terrible, terrible wind and snow storms, and they actually had a rope from their house to the barn so they could go out and feed the animals in the wintertime, yeah.

DC: So they could find their way.

CL: Yeah.

DC: Ahh.

CL: You know they really had the big stories about them. And now, just, you know, watching how things are out there now, I can kind of relate to that and I guess back then it was even worse.

DC: Mm hmm, mm hmm. So they sought refuge in Detroit.

CL: Yeah.

DC: From the Dakota plains, anyway. Yeah. You mentioned that you have a sister who is, I guess, a year older than you. Did you have any other siblings?

CL: Yeah, I've got two other brothers and, uh, another sister.

DC: OK, and where are you in the . . .

CL: I'm the second.

DC: OK.

CL: And nothing's worse than having an older sister.

DC: [laughs] Oh, my. I have one, too.

CL: [chuckles] Then you know.

DC: I can relate.

CL: They take advantage of you and they finagle you around, but they get you ready for

marriage. [laughs]

DC: So let's see, your Dad moved, and you said he was a plant security guard and he was studying to become a barber.

CL: Yes.

DC: Then you moved to Pontiac. What did your Dad do here in Pontiac? Did he become a barber?

CL: He was a barber.

DC: He did become a barber.

CL: Yes, he had a barber shop here in town, until he died.

DC: Oh, really, OK. And what did your Mother do?

CL: My Mother, well of course she worked in a factory during the war and so forth and so on, but actually she was a homemaker. She kept all us kids in line all the time.

DC: Now, did she work in the factory during World War II, then?

CL: Uh, yeah. I don't know the name of the factory. It was—it was not one of the big ones. It was one of the smaller ones. [?]

DC: You would've been school-age at that point.

CL: Yeah, I was going to school then, yeah. I graduated in 1948.

DC: OK. So, do you remember anything about your Mother working in a factory during the war?

CL: I know she came home tired and the house wasn't clean enough for her [laughs].

DC: For her.

CL: And those kinds of things. Yeah, for her, yeah.

DC: Was it clean enough for you?

CL: Oh, absolutely [laughs]. Yup, absolutely.

DC: What did she say about her work?

CL: Her work.

DC: In the factory.

CL: I don't really recall too much, you know, and we didn't really care at that time.

DC: Well, I've talked with some women who've worked in factories during World War II, but I haven't yet talked to someone who was a child, and so I was interested in your perspective. Did it have a bearing, any difference, on you getting ready and off to school and all that?

CL: No, I can't remember that as a problem, there.

DC: OK. And your Father was a barber during that time. So, where did you go to school?

CL: I went to St. Michael's here in Pontiac, a parochial school.

DC: Mm hmm. Let's see—were your classmates mostly from your neighborhood, or were they from all around, or . . .

CL: You know, back then, a lot of them lived right close by, but then again a lot of them lived quite a ways away, we thought at that time, but today it's nothing, you know. Because everybody had one car back then, you know—the whole family had to work around a car. And whenever anybody had anything to do, they'd never, you know—out there they never hesitated about getting together, going in one car or anything. But we used to have a pretty good school system, or, I mean, a bus system here in Pontiac, back then, you know. And, the buses were the real means of transportation no matter where you wanted to go. Of course, there's—there is no bus system to speak of now, you know.

DC: Do you remember when the bus system disappeared?

CL: Well [sighs]. It'd be after the war, you know, kind of. I guess probably when people started getting more cars, better cars, two or three car families, you know, and—Pontiac was no longer the central thing where all the doctors and everybody was downtown Pontiac and—you had to go down to the bank and downtown for anything, you know, and we just—you had to go there, all the buses went to downtown, and that's the way it was.

DC: Yeah. So you graduated in 1948. Did you have any jobs while you were in school. Did you have school activities? What all did you do while you were in school?

CL: Well, as far as jobs, yeah, my Mother made sure we had something to do all the time, from a little kid shoveling snow to shining shoes at my Dad's barber shop. And then I worked at a grocery store when I was in high school, after school, in the produce department—and I played football. Of course, that was the only sport we had back then, you know. And that was about the way that that had gone.

DC: OK. So what did you do when you graduated from high school?

CL: When I graduated, I couldn't wait till it got to be my birthday so I could go up to the factory there and get a job because that was big money then, I think we were making like a dollar and a half an hour then, you know. And I had to take my birth certificate to show that I was eighteen. And I worked at a gas station also, at the same time, because I had a lot of time to do it, you know. It was just weekends and at night that I'd work at the gas stations. And then while I was in there—I was in there, oh, probably about six months—and my cousin says, "Hey, let's go join the Navy."

DC: Oh, really.

CL: Where'd you get a stupid idea like that, you know? So he said, "Yeah, we can—we can get out of the house." Because at that time, I had to give my parents my paycheck, you know.

DC: OK, so you're still living at home.

CL: Oh, yeah, yeah. And it was close to the factory, because I could walk back and forth real easy, you know. This is one of the things that had impressed me, because we went by there every day. To go to school we passed the factory, you know, and you could see the guys coming and going and everything and, of course as a young man, you know—I had uncles that were working there then, too. We thought that was, that was pretty darn good, you know. So I thought, well, I'll just work there a little bit until I go to college. But then I went on to the Navy. He convinced me we should join the Navy. So we went down there to join the Navy and we were able to join for one year at that time, and then come out on the reserves. So when I came out of that after my year, things weren't very good, but I had enough seniority to go back into the plant then.

DC: You did, after just six months.

CL: Yeah, because if you were there ninety days you had seniority, and if you went on a military leave, that was counted on there, see.

DC: Right.

CL: So I went back into the factory. I wasn't going to stay there, of course, you know. I mean [?] big world here, but I was going to go on to college then also. So then I had applied to go to GMAC, or D, or—the one in—General Motor Tech, that's what it was, yeah. And then I got seeing how some of the guys were that came out of there and I thought, 'well, that's not really for me.' And in the meantime I had an opportunity to get an apprenticeship. So I decided to take the apprenticeship.

DC: Let's back up a bit. I want to make sure we zero in on that, but what was your first job when you first got into the plant before you went into the Navy? What did you do?

CL: They called them truckers.

DC: OK.

CL: You—the line would go up and down, and when the car would get to the end of the line, you would take it. It just—it was on wheels, and you would take it and you would move it over to the other line to go down the other way.

DC: OK.

CL: Well later on they had made it so the lines went all the way around, but that was my first original job, and then from there I got moved to putting in windshields and back windows.

DC: OK. Do you remember what car you were producing then?

CL: That would have been the 1948 Pontiac.

DC: OK.

CL: Or—yeah, the 1948 Pontiac.

DC: OK, yeah. So then you put in windshields. And how did you like that job?

CL: Well I thought it was pretty darn good and the money was pretty good, you know, because I thought it was kind of easy, but I was a young kid at that time, and of course, they would keep giving you more and more and more, you know, and then the other guys would say, "Don't do that, don't do that." Then you're caught in the middle, you know. So well, hell, this is easy, you know. Some day you'll be old and you can't do that and you're ruining the job for blah blah blah, you know, and this and that.

DC: How many people were there doing that particular job?

CL: Just me.

DC: Just you, OK.

CL: Yeah, I had to catch every car that came along.

DC: Every car. OK, wow.

CL: But at that time we didn't run maybe fifty, sixty cars an hour, at the most, you know. So you had a minute. As a young kid out of school, in good condition, hell this is a breeze, you know.

DC: OK, all right. But it sounds like there were some people older than you around you on the line.

CL: Oh, yeah, there were guys that were following me. They would come in and put the headlinings in. And they were old guys, and they'd been there for years and years. And this one old man says to me, "Kid," he says, "some day, "he says, "we're going to have a pension here." And he's got his mouth full of tacks, you know, and he's tacking up that headlining, you know. Because that was a special trade—these guys put that in you know, and they were very skilled. And I thought, "well you silly old fool, you just dream on. You'll never have nothing but Social Security," but I ain't concerned because I ain't going to be here anyhow."

DC: You thought you were heading out.

CL: Oh yeah, yeah.

DC: So were they the ones also telling you to take it easy?

CL: Oh yeah, yeah. Because they, you know, they been around a long time, they knew how it was. And they know you don't do anything any faster than you have to, because tomorrow you might not feel as well and you don't want to do all these, and once you've done the job there, it's your job.

DC: You mentioned as well that you had uncles who worked in the plant . . .

CL: Mm hmm.

DC: So, were they in the area before your parents moved to Detroit [?]

CL: No, they came down from the Dakotas after.

DC: Oh, OK, all right.

CL: After my parents were established here they came down.

DC: OK, so yours was the first group—family group—to come on down and check out Detroit, so they came along. So your Dad became a barber, but did all your uncles work at the Pontiac plant?

CL: Yes, three of them did.

DC: Three of them, OK, all right. So did you talk with them much about working there before you got your job?

CL: Well not—not really, because they didn't really stay there. My one uncle had stayed there

and just figured as a job, you know. Now he worked back in the press room, and you had to be twenty-one to work in the press room because of the danger—or they, what they had in there they called "body in white," where they had—the lead and the [?] and all that kind of stuff going on, so—but where I was working was in the—let's see, I think they call that the "finish part," and it wasn't as dangerous so you could work there when you were eighteen.

DC: OK. Did any of your friends or classmates go on with you to the factory after graduation?

CL: Not as a group or anything, but it eventually turned out that one of the fellows that I had gone to school with—was in my class—he had gone to General Motors Tech, and then after he dropped out of that he took an apprenticeship.

DC: OK.

CL: And another fellow had taken an apprenticeship as electrician. But it just happened to be that that's the way it had all worked out in there.

DC: So it sounds like it wasn't as if dozens of people from your school went on straight to the factory. They were doing other things.

CL: Yeah, because really, you know, in our time there was no money for nothing. And most kids couldn't afford to go to school, go to college, at that time. So that they just got jobs where they were, and then I know some of the others had gone over to Pontiac Motors and they had worked at Pontiac Motors. I was working at Fisher Body.

DC: Oh, OK, so some went over to the Pontiac Motor plant, OK. All right. So, did you have any other jobs after the windshield job before you went in the Navy?

CL: No, because they, that's—you got a job, that was your job, yeah.

DC: Do you recall—you would've been, what, eighteen years old...

CL: Yeah.

DC: Do you recall any interaction with the union in that first stint?

CL: Well, I joined the union right away. You didn't have to join the union then. It was—it was an optional thing. But I had joined the union.

DC: Do you remember why you joined?

CL: I just thought that I should, you know—I mean, a lot of people didn't. But I just thought that I should. And it was no big deal. My uncles all belonged to the union, and I guess that's probably why I joined right away, too.

DC: OK. You say a lot of people didn't, did they ever tell you why they didn't?

CL: They were too cheap.

DC: Too cheap.

CL: Yeah. They just didn't want to—it used to be like a quarter I think a month or something like that; it was very reasonable, but [chuckles] they didn't even want to part with a quarter.

DC: When your first little stint there before you went in the Navy, were you aware of the union presence in the plant at all? I mean, did you ever deal with your shop steward or . . .

CL: I personally didn't have to, no.

DC: OK.

CL: But I knew the shop steward guy around and this and that, you know, and what the problems were. I never really got involved in that, so I really don't know.

DC: OK, yeah, it wasn't really . . .

CL: No, you didn't, you know—there was no problem at that time. But when I came back from the Navy, I had the shop steward, yeah.

DC: Well, we'll get there in a second. What about the Navy? Let's see, you went and you signed up, and where'd you go?

CL: I had gone to Great Lakes for boot camp, and then I was assigned at Norfolk to a small carrier, which they don't even have them carriers around anymore.

DC: Yeah, let's see...[?]

CL: In fact, my favorite place was down at Guantanamo Bay.

DC: Oh really . . .

CL: Right down where they got the jail now, the prison, you know? Oh, that was a beautiful spot. I just cannot believe how anyone can find anything faulty with that place—that was beautiful.

DC: Yeah.

CL: [referring to captives from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq] Then they're taking them guys out of caves, they're giving them food and setting them down there—I mean the weather

was always beautiful. If it rained, five minutes after it rained, the flowers were all so beautiful and you'd never know it rained. It was really—it's the far end of the island, you know, really nice.

DC: Were you stationed with the friend who talked you into enlisting, or did you guys get separated along the way?

CL: Well, when we got down there, now my cousin—he was the oldest in the family, and his father had died—and there was ten of them in that family, so the Navy wouldn't pay his allotment for the family, so he didn't go, so I went.

DC: OK. There's an irony. All right, so what did you think about your stint in the Navy?

CL: I had a good time. I enjoyed it, yeah.

DC: Yeah, OK, and how long were you in . . .

CL: I was in for a year at that time.

DC: OK.

CL: Then I—when I came back and I got recalled for the Korean aspect while I was on my apprenticeship, so I went down and I signed up for active duty at Grosse Isle, and I worked at the air station there as a aviation machinist.

DC: OK, during the Korean War. Let's see—a little bit of time would have elapsed . . .

CL: Yeah.

DC: So, we're just trying to trace it through here. When you came back from the Navy, did you ever think about re-enlisting? In the Navy?

CL: No, no, no, no.

DC: No, you just wanted . . .

CL: No, in fact what they had done, they had said—when I went in there, they said you could join for a year and when you came out you could sign up for inactive duty for six years, you know, have your name on the list, or you could go into active duty for four years. Well, that involves going out to meetings once a week, or month—I forget just how that went. But while I'm in there they change the rules. They said if they—if they've got a substation around, you have to go to it. You couldn't go that six-year thing. Well, I—you know, I'm smart, they can't change things on me, ha ha ha ha, you know. So I was probably—I came back and then they sending me letters, and then they finally said if I don't go down there, they're going to reactivate me.

DC: Oh, really?

CL: Yeah. They got pretty nasty, see. So I went down there and the thing was right down here on South Boulevard by Murphy Park. So I went down there. They did everything to make it nice for me, you know. But, you know, a young kid, you got a chip on your shoulder and they got to do this and they got to do that. So anyhow, I went just as much as I had to and no more, you know, and then when the Korean War broke out, this guy called me up and says we have to activate like twenty people right off the bat, you know, and your name's on the top of the list. So that's when I went down and signed up for station keeper duty here, because I didn't want to go back in and do whatever, you know.

DC: Mm hmm.

CL: So that's, that's how that had worked out.

DC: So, was there any risk of you heading back off on a carrier or anything?

CL: Oh yeah. [laughs] Ain't no doubt about it, yeah. Because I'd already had sea duty, you know, and they were activating people, and I didn't have to go through the boot camp again or nothing, so . . .

DC: OK.

CL: That's how that was, and I didn't really care to go back to sea again at that time, you know.

DC: Why was that?

CL: Well, you know, once you're on it, it's fine, but when you get back out and you have to go through all the real strict regimentation that they have for everything, you know, you really don't want to go back into that once you've been out of it again.

DC: OK. Well anyway, before the Korean War started, you came back to the factory, right?

CL: Yes.

DC: And what did you do then?

CL: Windshields.

DC: Windshields—right back to windshields!

CL: Right back to windshields, yup. Right back to windshields. Like they were holding my job for me.

DC: OK. And how was it when you got back?

CL: Well, there again, the job wasn't bad, but I had a supervisor that—didn't get along with very well, so therefore we, I had quite an encounter with, you know, with the union getting this and that, so forth.

DC: I take it this is a different supervisor than the first time around.

CL: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

DC: OK.

CL: This guy was a fresh guy out of General Motor Tech, and he was going to make a name for himself. [laughs]

DC: So what did he do?

CL: Well he kept adding more, more and more things to us all the time, or trying to do it all the time, you know. Because he probably had the pressure on him. So he wanted me to put some tape on some hooks, you know, so that the seat wouldn't rattle, and he wanted me to maybe put a screw in here or something like that, while I'm doing the other thing. That comes back to what the old guys used to say, you know—and anyhow, he was very determined that he was going to get me to do that. And by that time I was a little bit smarter and I just wasn't going to add more to the job than I really had to, you know.

DC: Was he doing similar things with other people, under his supervision?

CL: Well, he—I don't know how successful he was, but he—you know, he had quite a few guys here and there and so forth, and I was just really concerned with my own individual thing.

DC: So what did you do then? You said you had some encounter with the union on this.

CL: Well, I'd have to call the committee man and try to do it, you know, try to maintain it, then they'd have a guy come down and work study you—study your every movements, and this and that and so forth, you know.

DC: So tell me about that, you had someone come down and study you?

CL: Yeah, they used to do that quite frequently.

DC: OK.

CL: Uh, in fact, what they used to do, you didn't know they were studying you, they were off somewhere, you know. But then later on, they had to let you know if they were going to

study you.

DC: OK, and so, did the union push for that change, or don't you know?

CL: Oh, I'm sure. Yeah.

DC: Yeah. OK.

CL: I don't think we got very much through the goodness of the big corporations, you know. They got a good philosophy, but there's just too many people along the way that—you know, they want to feather their own nest, or—whenever they're going to do something like that, of course, you know they—like the boss says, "hey, we got to get 10 percent better" or something like that, you know. You're the bottom guy. [laughs]

DC: How long did they study you? Each time.

CL: I—I don't really know, I don't remember, you know. But they had it down pretty, pretty pat. I'd say probably a day or so.

DC: For a day.

CL: Yeah, I would think so.

DC: And, how did you react to being studied? Did you do your job the regular old way? Did you alter your behavior?

CL: Well you made sure you didn't take any special time off, you know. I mean you didn't hurry up and get caught up and run up to the drinking fountain or this or that or nothing like that. You just made it so that your cycle was just complete, just like—just like a machine, you know. When it came back—when the clock came back to twelve you were ready to go around again, and that's the way it—you know—you did when you were job studied.

DC: Yeah. How many people would come to study you?

CL: One.

DC: Just one, OK.

CL: Well, it'd be a guy from the front office, which is—and he's trained to do this. This was his job through the whole plant, and I'm sure that he worked every day. For one reason or another, he was job studying somebody.

DC: Right.

CL: Of course, there was a lot of people working there then, too. And also he conferred with your foreman at all times, too, you know. It was like you against the world when you were there being job studied.

DC: Was there any union representative along when they studied your job?

CL: No, no.

DC: No, OK. All right.

CL: Not to my knowledge at any time, you know.

DC: Yeah. So you put in—or, you talked to the committeeman, they came and studied you. What happened with the study? What came of it?

CL: Well they used it to—whatever they could to substantiate any disciplinary action or anything that they were going to do, you know.

DC: But in this case it sounds like the controversy was whether or not the supervisor was going to add additional work.

CL: Yeah, he's got to prove that you can do that job, you know.

DC: Right. So did they prove it, in this case?

CL: No, no.

DC: No, all right.

CL: [laughs] but that's part of the game that you had to do, no matter how much you had to do, you know, you made sure that you—that your every—because they counted your steps and this and that, I mean they—evidently, there's probably a whole book on how they do this, you know.

DC: Did you get to see the results of the study?

CL: No.

DC: No, OK. So how did you find out how this whole thing turned out?

CL: Just finally nothing left.

DC: Nothing

CL: They'll drop the grievance.

DC: So did you actually file a grievance in this case?

CL: Oh, yeah.

DC: Yeah, OK. All right. And so, it just disappeared? The grievance?

CL: Yeah, when the grievance is withdrawn, yeah.

DC: OK, all right. So in this case the time studier basically supported what you said, it sounds like.

CL: Yeah.

DC: OK. All right.

CL: But there again, if you walked real fast and take big steps and, you know, did all this, then you made sure that you make every [?] move count, you know.

DC: OK. Did you have any other encounters with your supervisor after that? You said this guy tried to put pressure on you.

CL: Well, a kind of a constant thing, one thing or another, yeah.

DC: OK, all right. Did you ever have to file another grievance with that particular supervisor?

CL: Oh, I don't know. Maybe about three.

DC: OK, all right.

CL: Yeah, I just don't really recall any more. You know, after you've been there—like I was there for forty-three years, and you look back and you don't even remember the good things, you know, and the bad things, you just—poof.

DC: Well what were some of the good things about the job at that point?

CL: Well, just life in general, you know, and the guys that you work with and so forth. But after I got out of my apprenticeship there was absolutely no labor problems whatsoever. It was an entirely different field.

DC: Well, we're sneaking up in that direction. Tell me about your stint during the Korean War then. What was that like?

CL: Well, it—it was good station keeper duty, is what they called it. And it was the best duty you could've possibly had. And not only that, it was close by and I could come home on

weekends, like every sixth day we had off, and—really, it was a place to train reserves. Now when I was in the first time on that carrier, that was also training reserves. The weekend reserves, they'd come in, they'd use our carrier for a couple of weeks—we'd take them here and there, you know. And then we'd come back and get new ones. Had a few crashes and so forth, but that's the way it was. But we only had prop planes back then, too.

DC: Did you serve throughout the whole war?

CL: Pardon?

DC: Did you serve as a gatekeeper here throughout the whole war?

CL: Yeah.

DC: OK. Let's see. Were you still living at home at that point?

CL: When I went back in the second time, yes. Yeah. And I got married just before I got out then.

DC: Before you got out of the service the second time?

CL: The second time, yeah.

DC: Where was your wife from?

CL: She's from Pontiac here, also. She had also gone to St. Mike's, but I didn't know her there.

DC: Oh really? How big was the school?

CL: Well, the school had about—probably about six hundred kids in there, for twelve classes. It was—it was first grade up. And she was a couple years younger than me, but you know, you don't—the younger—nothing, yeah.

DC: Right, right.

CL: Each class had around fifty to sixty children in it. The one nun, man she took care of the whole thing.

DC: Wow. So you found out later that you went to the same school, though you didn't know her there. Where did you meet up with her again?

CL: Well, her sister married my best friend, and she was her sister's bridesmaid and I was my best friend's best man, and then—that was the first meeting that we really had of each other, and then about six months later, I guess, we went out a couple times, and about six

months later went a couple more times, and all of a sudden there we were.

DC: What was she doing at the time?

CL: She was working, after she graduated, she was working at the General Motors administration building on Oakland Avenue. Which is really considered now as their white tower up here, as their business administration thing, and she had something to do about the accessories on cars and so forth, you know. It was all paperwork, but she had gone to school to take keypunch, which was—keypunch, that's all I know. I guess today you'd call it computers.

DC: Yeah, a precursor to all that stuff. All right, let's see. So you got married and that was just before you got out of the service the second time. So then you would go back to the factory at that point?

CL: Yeah, I was on my apprenticeship then.

DC: OK, so tell me about how you got into the apprenticeship.

CL: Well, I was working there at the factory and they said to me, "would you like to take a prep test for apprenticeship. We're going to start testing for apprenticeships."

DC: Who offered that possibility to you?

CL: The guy that I used to talk to about going to go to General Motors Tech, some guy in the plant that was the head of that. So I says, "No, I don't think so." He says, "Well it's Saturday, and we'll pay you for time and a half for four hours. Come and take the test." I said, "Yeah, I'll take the test." So I went in and I took the test, and—I seen some guys in there that I had known in school that was pretty smart guys, that I thought, you know. Well, I don't care. All I'm really in here for is that time and a half for the four hours. So I took the test—didn't think no more of it at all. And then I was working on the line there, and this one guy here, he had been in the navy, before—now this is before I went back in the Navy the second time—and he was electrician—and he wanted to be electrician. So he went up there and in order to go up there and interview, or talk to the guy you got to get some relief on the line. So anyhow, he got the relief, he went up there and he came back and man he was really, really upset. I said, "What's the matter?" He says, "They told me I didn't have any aptitude to be electrician." He just put four years in the Navy. So I thought, "Well, what the hell. I think I'll go up there, too." So I got the foreman to give me relief. [??] So I went up there to see the guy. He says, "Oh yeah," he says, "We were just thinking about you." He says, "How would you like to take an apprenticeship?" "What?" I couldn't believe he was saying all this, you know. I says, "What in?" "Well, how about apprenticeship in die making?" I said, "What's a die making?" you know. So then he told me, and I thought, "Well, yeah, anything to get off this job."

DC: Were you still on the windshield job at that point?

CL: Yeah. So that's how that went.

DC: OK. So, do you have any idea how many people were accepted into this apprenticeship program at that time?

CL: Well, when one guy would graduate, they'd bring another guy in. So that's how that had worked out.

DC: OK. So tell me about the apprenticeship. What was it like? What did you do?

CL: It was a really good apprenticeship. They—they—it was set up real well between the management and union. Your hours were there—you had so many hours on this or that or the next thing, you know.

DC: Who trained you?

CL: Another journeyman. And you worked for all different journeymen, then. Usually three months at a time.

DC: Was this housed in the same plant, or was it somewhere else?

CL: No, it was all in the plant there. But you had to go to school then, too, you know—at nighttime we would go up to Pontiac Northern to school—or, Pontiac Central for school.

DC: And what would you study there?

CL: Well, you had your different courses like in drafting, mechanical engineering, trig, [?]—they just covered all of them, you know. That was the requirement by the—must have been the union, to get your journeyman's papers, you know, whatever it takes to get your journeyman's papers.

DC: So how many were taking these classes with you?

CL: Well, let's see. I would say there'd probably be about fifteen, twenty kids in every class, you know, because all the kids [?] Truck and Bus and Pontiac Motors and everybody had to go—had to go down there for that class. But in addition there was also a lot of people taking night school at the time.

DC: Now you didn't know what die making was—how long did it take you to find out what you were doing?

CL: [laughs] Forty-three years.

DC: Well, try to describe to someone who knows nothing about die making what die making is.

CL: Die making is—well, they make the dies to press the metal. You got a male and a female, so to speak, you know. There's the—you got trim dies, hem dies, flange dies, draw dies, all kinds of different kinds of dies, depending what the die is meant to do. But, let's say if you got this here—a piece of metal, you know. If you're going to bend it, you got a form die, flange die. If you're going to stretch the metal you'd have a draw die. If you're going to punch holes in it, it'd be a pierce die. If you're cutting around the edge of it, it'd be a trim die. Then you got—are they doors, hoods, roofs, or there's—might take maybe six, eight dies to make one particular panel. Then they got progressive dies where you'd run things through it. It does it all—it goes along at different stages through the one die, you know.

DC: Now are these dies used then in the parts of the plant that produce the doors?

CL: In the press room. [?] in the presses, yeah.

DC: And how would you find out what the specifications are. How would you go about actually making a die? What would you do?

CL: You'd have a—your drawings.

DC: OK, your drawings.

CL: The blueprints.

DC: And who draws those up?

CL: They're drawn up by the die engineers, so forth.

DC: All right. And then they give you the [?], and then what do you do next?

CL: Then you order the steel, and you go ahead and you do what's required, you know, to make it—if it has to be machined, or if it has to go and be profiled, or whatever, you have to know where to put your screw holes, and the [?] holes, and everything. That was then. Now—I was up to an open house here, and I got some of my friends that I had taught as apprentices. They are still working here, and they were showing me how to do them now. It's an entirely different ball game. Do you know you can't get a blueprint anymore. They just go over to the—to the computer. They punch it in, and out comes this section, how long it should be, where the screws should be, and everything, you know. It's really different.

DC: A whole lot different. What material goes into a die?

CL: Well, they're usually made with a hardened steel—for the trim areas. Now, if you're going to, say, make a door, an outside door thing, there'd be a pad to hold it down, and that usually would be a casted steel, if it has to be machined after.

DC: Would you do the machining?

CL: When I first started, everybody had their own machine, [??], whether it's a mill operator, a lathe operator—he went in and he ran that lathe in the mill. That's all that he ever did, that particular one. You know, he kept it clean and oiled and this and that and the boss would give him a job to do and so forth because they knew what should be done next, what can wait, and so forth. And he usually had jobs at a lathe and job on a mill and job on a [??], you know, and that was all part of being able to keep things going, because you knew how you had to do that, you know. Then you had upper shoe, lower shoe, and—just, all the different things that went into them.

DC: Did you have any experience at all with any machines like this before you took this apprenticeship?

CL: No, no. In fact, the superintendent there said that's good because then we don't have to untrain you. Yeah.

DC: Did you enjoy working with tools or building things at all when you were a kid at home?

CL: Yeah, but you know, being my father was a barber, he didn't do anything like that, but, you know, I always had a pair of pliers, because that's how you worked on your bike, with a pair of pliers, because that's all that you had was a pair of pliers. You know, you didn't have any sockets or open end wrenches or nothing like that. And then anyhow, I just always had enjoyed it, I guess, as a kid, not knowing, you know, really what you were doing but that you enjoyed that kind of thing. I really, really enjoyed my profession.

DC: Yeah, that's good. How long was the apprenticeship?

CL: The apprenticeship was four years, equivalent to four years at forty hours. Now if you got overtime in, it cut it down.

DC: So did you do that?

CL: Well, we didn't get much overtime then, you know. But they get a lot of overtime now. But back then we didn't. Of course with my service time and everything, it took me quite a while there, too. But it got there.

DC: Yeah, OK. So, I'm trying to figure out, since I never have gone through anything like this, what was different about your second year of your apprenticeship, what was different about your third year of your apprenticeship—you know, how did things progress?

CL: Well, the way it was set up, you know, you had so many hours on every machine, so much bench time, so much try-out time, and that went like every six months, or every three months—I forget just how it went. And then some of us on days, some of us on nights, and

of course, you had your favorite journeymen you'd like to work with, because some were better than others and some of them couldn't—they spoke a good German. [laughs] Now, those guys, those older fellows, they always were so afraid of the boss. But they came from no union from way back, you know, and if the boss didn't like you, you were gone.

DC: OK, and they still had that fear at this point.

CL: Oh, yeah.

DC: And this is the mid-1950s right now, right, that we're talking about?

CL: Yeah.

DC: And how old were these folks?

CL: Well, a lot of them lied their age. They knocked the ten, fifteen years off of their age, you know, because that made them so to speak more valuable, they thought, in the market.

DC: Right. How old do you think they really were?

CL: Well, I figured, when I graduated from my apprenticeship, everybody always said, "when you graduate, you get the hell out of here to learn something, see." Well, as I was—just about the time I was ready to graduate, the union came through and said that you had to retire at age sixty-five. We lost a lot of guys then. So we had a lot of older people there.

DC: So that many people were over sixty-five?

CL: Yeah, enough had gone in that when I graduated I could stay on days.

DC: Oh really?

CL: Yeah, so. That was another determining factor for me to stay there after I graduated.

DC: So was that right about the time you got out of the apprenticeship that they made that sixty-five year old retirement age?

CL: Yeah, just about the time I graduated.

DC: OK, so then all of a sudden, it sounds like there was a wide open field.

CL: Yeah, a lot of it [?]

DC: Did they take a lot of new apprentices in then?

CL: No, because the apprentices, it was a ratio. The apprentices was always—because they

used to hire a lot of people off the street, journeymen, you know. There—I forget what the ratio was, like one apprentice to every ten or fifteen journeymen, whatever that was. And that was to keep them from getting more apprentices, you know—because actually they always said that an apprentice wasn't supposed to take the place of a journeyman. However, when you were ready to graduate, they let you build one die by yourself. But other than that, you always had to be with a journeyman.

DC: Is that right, the whole time through.

CL: Yeah.

DC: OK, all right. So it sounds like one of the reasons it was a four-year apprenticeship is because you had to have experience on a lot of different kinds of machines.

CL: Yeah. However, when you were on a machine, most of the machines you worked by yourself, so you could make all your mistakes. You know, you were only your own worst enemies. [Laughs]

DC: So your dies weren't going out to the floor, then, it sounds like.

CL: Pardon?

DC: When you were experimenting on your own, it wasn't as if those dies were heading out to be used.

CL: Well, see, like say I would be running a mill—it's because they would be bringing pieces over to be milled, you know, the other journeymen and that. Well, the boss would kind of know what you could do and what you can't do, because here you're—you know—and the main thing was to practice safety.

DC: How dangerous was it to work on these machines?

CL: Well, there's a lot of danger there because you know, you—Let me give you a really good example. It's like when you got on a surface grinder, OK. Now that don't sound like too bad, unless you forget to turn on the magnet, and you come down with the wheel and that portion is not magnetized staying there, well that wheel will just take and throw that sucker all over, you know. And everybody does that. [laughs]

DC: Does anyone get hurt?

CL: Well, nobody's ever gotten hurt that way, where the pieces have thrown.

DC: How far do they fly?

CL: Oh [laughs], sometimes you never find the pieces anymore, and then the wheel will break,

too, you know. They had safety guards around the wheels and stuff, you know. Those things just happen. And you know, there was a lot of danger all the time, like, uh, the one fellow, they had a filing machine. And you take it, like say you were—the filing machine was a belt file, coming around all the time, and you would be taking it, you would be filing something off to that there—well, the guy got his finger caught in it, pulled his fingernail off. You know, those things happen so fast, you know. It's like a guy was telling me the other day about his son-in-law, he was using the snow blower, and he come home from work, couldn't get in the driveway. He had a long coat on, so he went up and got the snow blower to blow the snow out so he could pull up in the driveway. And his long coat got caught in that snow blower and pulled him in and chewed a hunk out of his leg.

DC: Is this recent?

CL: Yeah.

DC: Oh, man.

CL: Well he . . .

End of Side A

Begin Side B

CL: . . . turning heavy dies over with cranes and so forth and so on, and there was always a danger of the chain slipping off if it wasn't properly hooked, and you know, they've come up with a lot of new safety features for all that stuff, on the presses and everything now that they didn't used to have.

DC: OK. So when you were done with your apprenticeship, then where did you go? I mean, did you—what did you do then?

CL: Well, like I said, I had enough seniority to stay on days and I went on try-out. Try-out was after you get the die out in the presses, then you'd start working on the dies so that they'd make the part perfect.

DC: OK, so try out would be to test the die to see if it actually worked as is expected?

CL: Right, right.

DC: And tell me how that process went. I mean, you would try it out and . . .

CL: Well, you'd work and correct and do whatever you had to do. You know, you may have to move the trim lines in, or for changes that happen to come along. They used to have an

awful lot of engineering changes. You know, maybe they had to move a hole, or they had to add a hole, or something like that. Those things would have to go in there.

DC: Would these changes be made throughout the model run—throughout the year?

CL: A lot of times, yes.

DC: OK, all right.

CL: And, maybe that the die was too tight, you know, because if you ran a thirty-second metal through the die that had a thirty-second clearance all the way around, too, between the male and the female and so forth, that was—that was just good—good work.

DC: What did you think about the emphasis on quality at the time? Did you try to make sure that everything fit? Was there pressure on you at all to make things work . . .

CL: No, there's no pressure on you to—uh, as far as the quality went because the quality was, you know—you expect it to *be* there when you were done. When you got the die done, so that was—did its part right then the quality was there. However when they were running production, they had the—they used to have quality inspectors inspecting the things and if the panels weren't any good, the guy used to come along and squirt red paint on it so that they couldn't use it, and then they'd have to take it back to the bailer and crunch it up and throw it away. But if he didn't squirt that red paint on there, the line foreman, he would use that because they wanted to know how come he didn't get his amount ran that day, too, you know.

DC: OK, yeah, yeah. Well let's—I need to figure out more about this, because I didn't go through it like you did. Did you have a supervisor then, when you were in this try-out room?

CL: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah. We had a foreman and a general foreman and a superintendent.

DC: OK, and what was your relationship with them when you were in this try-out job?

CL: It was all good. It was a good—good group of people, and they all looked out for each other, and everything was always done right, the union way.

DC: OK. What would happen if one of these dies produced a part that didn't seem to work right on the assembly line? You know, would they ever blame the die people for that, or would they just have to revise it?

CL: No, because you had to take it up to a panel checking area, and they're the ones that OK'd the panel. Because until they OK'd that panel off of that die, you had to keep doing whatever was necessary to fix it.

DC: So who was on the panel?

CL: Uh, they had regular panel checkers, that was their job, and . . .

DC: Were they union people or management people?

CL: Oh yeah, union, yeah. And they always checked—well like, when they're going to run the panels for the day, they had to take the first two or three up there to make sure that it was OK, and then they OK'd it, then they could go on with their run.

DC: OK, all right. So you had clearance from them.

CL: We didn't have—as a die maker, you didn't have any responsibility for the quality.

DC: Oh, really? OK.

CL: Except in—unless, if you were on the troubleshooting for the line. In other words, you might have a line of presses and you're there to take care of anything that happens to go wrong. Well if a punch breaks or something, you're supposed to know that and fix it and so forth, and—but, you know, they didn't want you to stop that line under *any* reason, see. But you wanted to make sure the slugs were coming out, you know, when it pierces. If them slugs don't come out, then it's going to jam up and then break off.

DC: Like a hanging chad, or something. [reference to 2000 Presidential election controversy in Florida]

CL: Yeah, yeah. Hanging chads, right.

DC: OK, all right. So, let's see, you started doing that—let's see, when would you have come out of your apprenticeship? Would it have been like '57 or something?

CL: Oh, let's see [long pause] yeah, I'd say probably around '57.

DC: OK. And then did you stay on that try-out job for long?

CL: Well, as soon as I could go in on new construction, I went in on that.

DC: So what was the new construction job like?

CL: Making new dies. Yeah, I enjoyed that real well. Yeah, they gave you the prints, and the castings came in, and then you just ordered the steel and you made the die, and that was it, because like every one was a challenge, you know, and they were all so different. Now it might take you six months to make the die.

DC: Really? OK, so the blueprints would come from the engineering folks, you said, and would

they be anticipating some kind of change six months down the road? Is that what they would do?

CL: Well, for the new models, we were usually two years ahead of time making the dies.

DC: Yeah, OK, so you're making the dies for model changeovers . . .

CL: Yeah, you get all confused on what year it is because you're, you know, sometimes you're two years ahead making the dies.

DC: Ah, two years ahead, OK.

CL: Year and a half, two years, yeah, because it used to take quite a period of time.

DC: OK, so would you have any responsibilities for the current year's run? Would you be tinkering with those dies as well, with what was going down the line that day? Or would you just always be working on stuff in the future?

CL: Well, usually when you got the die, you're working on the die, that's all that you worked on was that die, you know. And usually the second shift, they were working on a different die or nothing, you know—that was—that was yours and you—if you ruined anything, it was up to you to fix it up. That's what makes a journeyman—you know how you can fix up all your mistakes.

DC: OK. So new construction was where you wanted to be. Can you tell me anything else about what you remember about that job? It sounds like you liked the challenge.

CL: Yeah, every job was a challenge, you know, because they're yours to do.

DC: And so, do you recall at all—was there any impact on your job—for instance, there was a big recession in 1958. I've talked with a number of workers who've said that that was a difficult time for them. It would've been shortly after you got out of your apprenticeship, I guess.

CL: Well, they had laid off quite a few people, and I was laid off also.

DC: You were.

CL: Yeah, for a short period of time—not for very long. And they called us back because we had to, you know, like I said, we're six months ahead of everything, all the time, at least. So they were anticipating the new models, so they brought us in to start working on the new models.

DC: What did you do during your layoff?

CL: [pause] I don't remember.

DC: Must not have been too bad, huh.

CL: I was doing something. I don't remember what it was. I did something for some money, you know. Because, like, uh—I had got appendicitis, and I was off for quite awhile because of a ruptured, you know. And, the sick pay was $18.00 a week.

DC: What was your normal pay, then? Do you remember?

CL: I used to get a dollar five an hour. You used to get—I started out at ninety-five cents an hour. That—we were getting a dollar and a half an hour on the line. And that was quite a decision: did I want to lose fifty cents an hour to take my apprenticeship?

DC: Oh, so you had to really take a hit in pay.

CL: Yeah, yeah. You know, you're losing better than a third of your pay at that time.

DC: Now, did your pay stay at that lower level for the whole four years?

CL: No, every six months when you got your time in you got another nickel or a dime raise. A nickel at first, the first couple years, then you started getting a dime raise.

DC: OK. So where were you at the end of your apprenticeship?

CL: Uh, probably about two and a quarter, maybe.

DC: OK, so you were above, well above your line pay.

CL: Yeah, but in that time, see we were getting a lot more than the production workers. Like they—if they were getting two dollars an hour, we were getting like two and a quarter.

DC: OK, all right. So, anyways, you were laid off for a short while, then called back. Let's see. Something occurred to me and now it seems to have gone out of my head. Did you have any say at all in who got to enter the apprenticeship program after you became a—after you were finished with the program?

CL: No, they did have a—apprentice committee, and they're the ones that assigned who was going to get what and where. Before that time, before I got in there, it used to be your Dad got you in. He was a foreman or somewhere along the line, because that was a pretty common thing there. Everybody said, "Who's your Dad? Who's your Dad?" you know.

DC: OK, so the apprentice committee, then—they were the ones that made the decisions.

CL: Yeah, when I went in, I don't think there was an apprentice committee. I think just that guy

in the front that handled it was over the—he was a guy from management, and he was over the apprentices and the guys from General Motor Tech.

DC: So they would be the ones who would accept people into the apprenticeship program?

CL: Yeah, those were, at that time, yeah.

DC: So there wasn't any union person?

CL: Not at that time there was any union at all involved in on that, because we couldn't belong to the union even, when we were apprentices, if I remember right. Let's see [pause] you know, I just don't quite remember, quite how that went. I think that—well I just don't really remember that right now. I know—I think I remember, looking back, you can't belong to the union when you were an apprentice. I think that's what it was.

DC: Really? OK. Could you when you were a journeyman?

CL: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. In fact then, I think that it was mandatory. You know they had the work rule, everybody had to belong to—at that time, that change came around.

DC: Let's see. What was your wife doing at that point in time?

CL: Having babies.

DC: Oh yeah?

CL: Yeah.

DC: How many children did you have?

CL: We have four children.

DC: OK. Yeah. So they were born, then, in the mid-50s, it sounds like?

CL: Yeah.

DC: All right, so some of them are about my age.

CL: Yeah. '53 was my oldest son. And then '54 was my daughter. '55 was my next son, and then '57 for the last one.

DC: OK. I was born in '58, so right around in that age range. OK. All right, so how did that work out? Having four young children, you're just out of your apprenticeship and all.

CL: We didn't have any extra money, I'll tell you that.

DC: Mm hmm. Where were you living then?

CL: We were living on Whittemore Street, down in the south end of Pontiac.

DC: OK, so what was it like trying to make ends meet then?

CL: Well, she did a good job. You know, like I said, we only worked like, about forty hours. I'd bring home like thirty-six dollars a week. And it—you bought one gallon of milk, and you were pretty careful how you spent your money then. I think our rent was ten dollars a week. We were sharing it with another older lady. She just wanted somebody in her house then.

DC: So, it sounds pretty tight.

CL: Oh yeah, it was tight.

DC: What about for other—other of your co-workers? How were they faring in this time period?

CL: I imagine we were all pretty much in the same boat, you know.

DC: I'm just curious because there's this memory of the '50s being a period of affluence, you know, people making lots of money, but, it sounds like . . .

CL: It wasn't much then, you know. I mean, I don't know who was making all the money. They're making the money now.

DC: Did you have a car, then?

CL: Yeah, we had one car.

DC: OK, what kind of car was it?

CL: Well, when we got married, we had gotten a '52 Pontiac. Brand new, because she was working at the Ad[ministration] building and got a discount on all that stuff.

DC: Did your wife stop working there when she had the kids?

CL: After she had the first child, yes.

DC: OK, did she ever go back to work there?

CL: No.

DC: Did you still belong to the same parish?

CL: Yup, we still do.

DC: You still do, OK. Was that a big part of your life, then?

CL: Well, it's—we'd go there all the time. We don't [??] socializing with, you know, a lot of parishioners and so forth.

DC: Were you involved in any union activities back in your journeyman days, or when you got out of your apprenticeship, at all?

CL: No, I never was real active, and the committeeman's not for me. That takes a different kind of an animal.

DC: Did you ever have any grievances as a die maker then, once you got out of your apprenticeship?

CL: Mostly group grievances, you know, not individual, where we thought something should be done and they didn't want to do it and blah, blah, and blah, blah. So you'd sign group grievances.

DC: Can you remember any specific examples? I know it must be hard after all these years.

CL: No, I don't.

DC: Yeah, yeah.

CL: Those things you just put aside, you know.

DC: Sure, yeah. So anyways, it sounds like things were tight but you had a pretty solid job by the late '50s here.

CL: Yeah.

DC: Can you tell me more about the people you worked with? How would you describe the people you worked with? Were they younger like you? Or mostly older?

CL: Well, it was really all—you had older ones and younger ones and all of a sudden the old ones were retired and the young guys are no longer young guys anymore. They're up there and they got more young guys and you know it just kind of blends in, all of a sudden, you don't really realize how things change. But we had a good group of people and we would have picnics together, and we'd have Christmas parties together, amongst ourselves we would get them going, you know. It was just pretty good.

DC: That would be the group of die makers getting together like that?

CL: Yeah.

DC: That's pretty neat. Did you keep in touch with people who went through different apprenticeship programs? Or were you pretty much staying together as a group?

CL: Well, it was really kind of a clannish thing. You didn't really have time to do much associating—my one good friend, he was taking a tool-making apprenticeship and I was taking a die-making apprenticeship and we were seeing each other quite a bit. But as far as the toolmakers, they did their things together and we did our things together.

DC: Let's see. I keep getting these questions and then they go out of my mind. Did you ever get your job time-studied again, or job-studied, after you became a journeyman?

CL: No.

DC: No, that was out of the question.

CL: No, however, they—your job—when they gave you a job, you had so many hours to build it.

DC: Is that how they rated your performance then?

CL: They would rate your performance, but how they would do it, who the hell knows, you know, because you never really cared. You know, some guys took more pride in their job than other people did. Some people didn't care at all, you know. And I just always went in to do a good day's work when I could. Some days you got more done than other days. Some days—it's like anything else, you don't get anything done. You work your ass off, you know.

DC: What would make a day go especially well on that job?

CL: Well, you know, the good—what do they say?—camaraderie, amongst the guys and the fellows you work with and so forth, and the jokes, and the winning the football pool, or you know. Just everyday things. Nothing special. You'd either have a good day or you don't.

DC: Did you help each other out?

CL: Yeah, if you needed help, yeah sure, absolutely. Yeah. You know.

DC: Then you said like at every job some days you just couldn't get anything done even when you worked really hard. What would happen on those days?

CL: Yeah, yeah, some days. Well, the next day you just had to do the same thing over again.

Yeah, you might have scrapped a piece or something like that.

DC: Oh, so you might have made a technical mistake or something?

CL: Yeah, possibly.

DC: OK. Was there any other thing that could make a day go bad?

CL: Well, not really, I can't think of anything. You know, I mean, just sometimes things go better than others, that's all.

DC: That's true. So was there ever a point in your career as a journeyman that you became involved in the union again. I mean, you're going to union meetings now. I'm just wondering if there was ever a point where the union was of any further importance or interest to you when you were working.

CL: Well, can't really think of any real particular thing, you know, other than that when we'd go on strike, you know we had strike duty to do and so forth and so on, to get the agreements.

DC: Do you remember any strikes?

CL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we had—I was still on the strike—but I was fortunate because when I started in '48, the big strikes had already been on where they had been off for a hundred and some days for a nickel, you know, and things like that. So even though I'm 71 now, I came in a little on the late side for that, you know, and the strikes that we had then, I don't think any of them went over thirty days.

DC: OK. Do you remember any of them in particular?

CL: Well, I remember going and doing the strike duty, you know, picketing.

DC: OK, what was that like? Do you remember when you did the strike duty?

CL: The years?

DC: Yeah.

CL: No, I don't. I'm bad on years.

DC: That's fair enough. Well, tell me what it was like to be on strike duty.

CL: Well, you'd go down there and they'd have soup and sometimes they'd have some guys playing a guitar and, you know, it was just—you'd go down and see the guys that you know and you'd sign up for strike duty with a bunch of other guys that you knew, you know, at the same time, because you could sign up for when you wanted to go. And you

had to do the strike duty in order to get your strike pay.

DC: OK, all right. Do you remember supporting the issues over which you were striking?

CL: Oh, yeah. You know, you had to support whether you thought they were good or not, you know. There was a lot of things that we as skilled tradespeople at the time, we thought, well hell, we don't want that because that's only going to benefit the non-skilled guys and then the non-skilled guys, they'd get upset because we were getting what they thought was better and so forth and so on. And the one thing that you'd go up there to the union hall—of course, you know, there was more non-skilled than skilled—so they'd ask you, "Are you a skilled worker?" You'd always say, "No." Because you got better picketing duty. [laughs]

DC: Well tell me, then, what was the relationship like between the skilled and the unskilled?

CL: Well, actually, it was good. You know, I mean—it's—you know, there's always people that's envious. And if you're making a nickel more than anybody else, they're envious, you know. And, being that I was an unskilled, I knew what they had to go through. I know if the guy had to go pee, he'd better control it because he ain't going to go until this guy gives him a relief, because you don't leave your job, you know. So you knew what he had to go through.

DC: As a journeyman, could you go pee whenever you wanted to?

CL: Oh, absolutely, yeah. No, but you know, you just went and did it, and they never said anything about taking too long or nothing like that. But, by the same token, you were expected to do your job, and if you didn't abuse your, you know, your job or so forth, or create a problem for your foreman, there's no problem.

DC: Did many of the skilled workers think they were better than the non-skilled?

CL: Oh, yeah, a lot of them. A lot of them did, yeah.

DC: How would they show that?

CL: [laughs] Just by vocal, you know, what they would say, and so forth.

DC: To each other, or to the non-skilled people?

CL: Oh, to each other, yeah. "Look at that goddamn guy out there. Boy, I wouldn't have his job for nothing," and so forth. It's because those are the guys, their Dad got them in and they never had to go, you know—they didn't have to do the line work before.

DC: Oh, so they went straight into the apprenticeships. So they'd never done that. Let me get a sense for this. You know, during the '60's there was a lot of stuff going on, they had the

Vietnam War getting going, and the Civil Rights Movement and all—what was it like working in the plant during the '60's with all these different things going on in the society?

CL: Well, you know, with Civil Rights, it wasn't a problem. They had brought in a black man from Detroit as a foreman. And that really seemed strange. But there again, you know, you kind of—anytime somebody comes in as a symbol of something, you know because we all worked our way up and did this and did that and you proved yourself for this or that, and then all of a sudden they bring somebody in from another plant when most of our promotions were all in-plant. I mean, and that's probably why we got along so good with the salary personnel.

DC: So the foremen mainly came from the ranks, then?

CL: Oh, yeah. You know, I went up there like three times to be interviewed for a salary. And as you're going up, you don't know what the hell you're going to say, you know. And then you decide, well, 'No, I really don't want to get on salary.' But at that time, salary was a good job. Now, people on salary want to get back to hourly, because of the benefits.

DC: So you aspired to become salary. Did it ever work out for you?

CL: I never decided I wanted it. But after I had retired I had gone as a contract worker to New York. I'd fly out on Monday and come home on Friday. For fourteen months. And there, I was over people, and boy I'm sure glad that I never took that job.

DC: A taste of supervising.

CL: Yeah, didn't want that.

DC: Well, were there many black workers in the plant?

CL: There weren't many at Fisher Bodies. They were mostly all over here at Pontiac Motors, and I think then they used to put most of them in the foundry. I think that that's the way that was.

DC: At Pontiac Motor, you mean.

CL: Mm hmm.

DC: OK. But not many black workers at Fisher Body?

CL: Not—there weren't too many of them, no.

DC: Were there any black skilled workers?

CL: Well, just that foreman that they brought from Detroit, and then they had a couple of black

apprentices.

DC: A couple of black apprentices, OK. And do you remember when they joined the apprenticeship program?

CL: I don't really know. Then they had one black girl. And the thing had disbanded, or they had shut the place down before she had graduated. Then they put her back out at the Orion plant, and she went to Orion plant on an apprenticeship of some kind.

DC: Do you remember when that was?

CL: When the plant closed?

DC: Yeah.

CL: I think I got out in '89. We were the last ones to leave.

DC: OK, all right. I'll have to look that up.

CL: That was on the Fiero then.

DC: Oh, mm hmm. Did any of your fellow workers serve in the Vietnam War?

CL: [pause] I don't really know, because really, that got to be quite an age difference there, and I don't recall any of the apprentices and going to the Vietnam War. You know, just don't really remember.

DC: Yeah, yeah. You would have been much older than the people serving then. Did you pay any attention at all to what your international union leaders were doing at that point in time?

CL: Not really much, no. We figured, whatever they're going to do, there ain't nothing we're going to do to change it anyhow. You know, they'd have the delegates go up to the conventions and so forth, but I understand, those that went that were against them, they just pulled the microphone off. They didn't—they were having a party while the guy was talking and when he got done talking he'd plug the microphone back in again, and get on with their meeting, you know.

DC: So what do you think about that?

CL: How they handled dissenters?

DC: Yeah.

CL: I don't think much of it, but that's the way they ran the show, you know. I'd never been there. I'm only telling you what I've heard how they did it.

DC: So you talked to some people who actually went to these conventions?

CL: Oh, yeah. Well we'd vote for people to go to the convention, you know. A lot of them really liked to go.

DC: You say they would like to go?

CL: Yeah, they'd like to go to that, yeah. Well, it was a trip, all that kind of stuff.

DC: Sure, yeah. Do you remember any of these people having something that they thought was really important to say when they had the microphone unplugged?

CL: [laughs] No, no. Those were the usual people that went—I shouldn't say to stir up trouble, I don't mean it that way, but these were the people that were opposed to certain things. Because you know, it gets to be kind of a nasty inside fighting in there. In fact, I was just reading in the *Newsweek* how all the back-stabbing's going on in Washington but things are going good real now. Really good now. Bush's group doesn't do that, he said. [laughs]

DC: They say. So were there ways that your job changed? You mentioned that die making is completely different now than it was when you started. How about during the time when you worked? Were there changes in your job from the time you started, through the time you were working?

CL: Well, I'd say no. You know, but things happen so gradual, as it's happening you don't even think nothing about it. You know, that's like being on vacation for two weeks and you come back and everything looks so different.

DC: Mm hmm. But you wouldn't notice it if you were there those two weeks. OK. But do you remember any new technologies you had to learn?

CL: Oh yeah, I went in—into model making. Wood model making.

DC: Oh, OK. Tell me about that.

CL: Well, that was—I was able to go into that because of my seniority. And as somebody would die out of that, then there would be another opening. They had like six people in the lab.

DC: What do you do with wood model making?

CL: Well, it used to be that every part was an exact replica in wood. And they made all the [checking?] fixtures and everything off of it and so forth. And most of them were made in Detroit at the model making places, but then when they would come out here, if there had to be changes we'd make the changes. But we would pour our [?] and stuff off of that.

And that was usually plastic, or plaster. And then we were making some rubber molds for awhile there.

DC: So when did you change to this job?

CL: Oh, I'd say I probably had about ten years in that.

DC: OK. Before you retired?

CL: Yeah.

DC: OK. Did they have wood model-making when you started?

CL: Yes.

DC: They did, OK, so it was something that existed.

CL: [???] and that paid more money.

DC: It did, OK. Is that why you moved to it?

CL: Well yeah, and plus the fact is, it was different. It was, you know, the next step up and so forth.

DC: OK. So a change of pace. One of the things you said you liked about die making is that every challenge was different and you had a little control over what you did. How did you find the wood model-making, then? How did you figure out what you were supposed to do, and how did you like that job?

CL: Well, I really liked it because there you had to do a lot of construction for—see, like if this wood panel, or the wood model would come in and you had to make your [aids?] for your different dies. Maybe you had to flare this thing all out in different situations, so that you'd have big hunks of mahogany that you had to change and so forth. It was good.

DC: Would they be scale size?

CL: Oh yeah, everything had to be right to size.

DC: Is that right? Wow.

CL: Because that's what they made the dies off of.

DC: Wow, OK. Were you making dies off of wood models like that when you were making them?

CL: Yeah.

DC: Oh, OK. I didn't realize that.

CL: Well, see, they would be poured into plasters. You know you couldn't really use the wood models for anything other than pouring the [aids?] off of them. Because that went on—that was the Bible. That was it.

DC: OK. You know, people like me, who have never been involved in this process, we see scenes of the assembly line but we're not aware of all that goes on before that finished car rolls off and these are all really interesting parts of it to me. Do you like working with wood?

CL: Yes.

DC: Do you work with wood now?

CL: Well, not so much anymore. I got a saw and a router and a few things in here, and I built the house, you know.

DC: You did? Wow. I'm impressed. When did you move in here?

CL: Yeah, when we moved in here, yeah.

DC: You built this house, but you moved at some point because you lived somewhere else earlier, so when did you move in this house?

CL: Let's see. About '57.

DC: Oh, OK. So you've been here a long time. Do you remember the union, your local union, ever being involved in any local political activity?

CL: [pause] Not really, no.

DC: Not really. Don't know if they ever supported a candidate for mayor or sheriff?

CL: Oh yeah, they'd have their—I don't think that they really much went to the city politics or nothing, but the state reps and so forth and so on, yeah. And of course we got the CAP [PAC?], that's big in our union.

DC: OK. Do you remember ever getting involved in any of those sorts of campaigns?

CL: No.

DC: OK, yeah.

CL: No, I don't really get into the political thing, I just go vote and that's it.

DC: OK. Would the union try to ensure that you would get out to vote?

CL: No, but they'd just tell you who they'd—they would like you to support, because they'd say that this person has got your interest at heart, and so forth.

DC: OK. Did that have any influence on you when they would make those recommendations?

CL: Not really, you know, maybe sometimes if you didn't know the person or something like that, you know. But as a rule, you kind of make up your own mind if you want to vote Republican or Democrat or this or that or anything else.

DC: Again, kind of looking at the sweep of your career, I know that times were tight economically when you got out of your apprenticeship. Did your economic situation ever ease up? Did you feel like you were on top of things more at different points in your career?

CL: Well, we always thought we were on top of it, you know. Didn't have no bank account or nothing but you didn't owe nobody nothing, you know. And like I tell my kids, when I built the house here, a two-by-four was a quarter. But look at what the pay is now, you know, to compare to what it was then. So you know, really a two-by-four was pretty expensive.

DC: So, if I hear you right, you're saying that you always felt like you were going to be OK.

CL: Yeah.

DC: Now, the auto industry went through some difficult times, certainly in the 70s on through the '80s. Did you retire in '90, is that what it was?

CL: I retired in '89.

DC: '89, OK. I was close in there. Were there any different pressures on you at all in those times, you know with the downturn in the economy in the '70s and all that?

CL: Do you mean financial?

DC: Yeah—or, I mean, the overall car making but also how it impacted you.

CL: No, we worked pretty good there. We had times, you know, when the plant would be down for a year or so a couple times there, we worked right through it, because we really didn't have anything to do with building a car.

DC: It sounds like there would always have to be some car in production, whether production was high or low, you had to have the car parts there so therefore you would have work.

CL: Well see, we were making the dies and also the press room was stamping out things for a lot of other models, too, you know, for Buick and everything—not just for the Pontiac.

DC: Oh really? OK. So you would get orders for dies from all over.

CL: Yeah, so our dies—sometimes we were making Chevy dies. Might be making Buick dies.

DC: Oh really? Did those other plants not have their own die room then?

CL: Well, I don't know how they gave their, those dies out, you know, if it—a lot of times, what presses you had that you could use to try the die out after you built it, and sometimes we didn't try out the dies that we built.

DC: OK.

CL: They'd go to another plant, that maybe they needed the hours or something.

DC: OK. That sounds interesting. You'd just send them off and would you ever see those again? Would they send them back if they didn't work?

CL: No, because if we tried them out, we had to make like, say, a hundred panels that went through a real close inspection, and once they bought off on those panels, they bought off on the die. That's the way that went. Then, from then on any repairs or any changes, they had to do that.

DC: What did you and your family do for fun, for recreation?

CL: Well, we'd go to the parks, go play cards, different places—took the kids to the zoo, took the kids to the Belle Isle, took them to Boblo [Island amusement park]. You know, you're raising your family and you get them a bicycle and help them ride their first bike and so forth, take them up to the park, ride down the slides and . . .

DC: Did you have the time to help teach your kids how to ride a bike and stuff like that?

CL: Oh yeah.

DC: So were you mostly on a forty-hour week?

CL: Yeah, I'd say a lot. But then a lot of times we'd be on eight hours a day but we'd work a Saturday then. I mean so, you know you still had time. When the kids had paper routes you helped them when it was raining. And you did this and you did that. You took them here and you took them there.

DC: If you had an eight hour day, what would be your shift? What hours were you working?

CL: We always worked from 7:00 to 3:30.

DC: Oh really? OK. That's nice.

CL: That was another thing—they'd try to change our hours. Everybody said, "We ain't coming in till 7:00 no matter what," you know.

DC: Oh, they wanted you to come in earlier?

CL: Oh, they might say, "Come in at 6:00," you know. Nope, we're all going to work at 7:00. And we were small enough, I guess, you know, to—able to get away with that. We had our own little side of the plant and that was the way—because we weren't tied to production at all.

DC: So did you guys bargain separately then for this sort of thing?

CL: Yeah.

DC: Oh, OK. Because when did the regular first shift begin?

CL: Well, they tried to tie us in with the production part. See, and if the production changed, they wanted us to change, too, and so forth.

DC: Would you just say no?

CL: Yeah. Well see, that's where everybody stuck together for everything. Nobody came in at 6:00, no matter what they said.

DC: Did the company ever try to find a different way to get die makers? Did they ever try to break up the apprenticeship program so they could get you to do what they wanted?

CL: No. But like I said, see, everybody including our superintendent all came through apprenticeships there, you know, so you just knew everybody for every—you got to be family, like.

DC: Yeah, sounds interesting. So you mentioned that you got laid off briefly in 1958. Were there any other times in your career there where you actually got laid off?

CL: I think I was probably laid off maybe three times altogether.

DC: Do you remember when the other two times were?

CL: I don't really remember the dates or nothing. But the one time that I was laid off, they made me come over to Pontiac Motors and work.

DC: Oh, so . . .

CL: Yeah, but I was only there for two weeks and then I got called back.

DC: OK, so it's pretty small in the larger scheme of things here.

CL: Yeah, but at that time if there was a job available at one of the other plants, you had to go there to work.

DC: All right. Is that because of your . . .

CL: They didn't want to pay the unemployment and that, you know.

DC: OK, so they could move you if they had the opening.

CL: Yeah.

DC: OK. Well let's see. This is one thing that other workers have talked about but I'm not sure it would affect you. One of the themes that comes up in my conversations is automation, because production workers were always worried about automation, losing their jobs. Was there ever any impact of automation on your jobs?

CL: No, but we worked—out in try-out they had an area for working on the automation to feed the parts into the dies and so forth and so on, and that was a nice group. I was in that for awhile. And I liked that really well, because there you looked at how you going to do this here—then we really came up—I worked with some pretty neat guys and they had some pretty good ideas, you know, how to make a rack to put the panels in there when the dies opened up and they're going in there . . .

DC: So it's trying to automatically feed the dies?

CL: Yeah.

DC: OK. And who would normally have done that work?

CL: They had about—there was one foreman and three of us guys there. And part of that was under your apprenticeship, too. And those guys were pretty clever guys. They had some pretty good ideas and it worked, what they had done—just to make, you know, to come up with something that was electrical and air and so forth, air cylinders.

DC: Usually, from what the others have told me, automation was designed to try to eliminate certain jobs—you know, to try to streamline production. If your automated system for putting the stuff into the dies had worked, would anyone have lost their jobs?

CL: Well, anytime that they could make it, you know, to eliminate a job, that's fine, but the biggest thing was the safety, and also the speed of it, you know. One of the things they had was when this one die would open up, it would lift the little panel and another sheet of metal would slide in, you know. A guy used to have to wait till the die opened up, then he would put that metal in, you know—it eliminated people, yes. But look at what the robots are doing, you know. These plants, they run with hardly nothing now, you know. And the design of the dies, of the different parts, like the headlines now, they just snap in. One guy comes and bang, bang that's it, you know. And the door panels and everything—when I first went in there around every window they had a window frame and the guy used to have to come and drill the hole and put the screws in on all of them. Now you just go in there and hit it with a hammer and it's all snapped in because of the clips on it.

DC: Was there more use of plastic near the end of your career than there was earlier on?

CL: You mean plastic on the car?

DC: Yeah.

CL: I don't really know because we didn't really get into that too much other than when you buy a car and you look at it, you know.

DC: Yeah, OK. I wasn't sure if it made any difference at all in what you did.

CL: No, not in what we did, no.

DC: Well this is interesting. This is the first time I've talked to someone who went through an apprenticeship and all that, so it's a really interesting angle on this process. Can you think of things that I'm not asking that were important to you while you were at work over these years?

CL: No, I can't really think of nothing.

DC: Not really, OK. Chances are I'll think of things that I forgot to ask, but it sounds like it was fairly smooth sailing, then.

CL: Yeah, I enjoyed my job every day, yeah. There was days you didn't want to go to work, but it wasn't because of your job, you know.

DC: Everyone has those. Yeah, sure. Well, what have your kids ended up doing?

CL: Well, my oldest son, he had taken apprenticeship up here at Pontiac Motors as a machine repair machinist. Well he had gone to OU for one year, and he dove out over there in the swim program. And then he fell in love. And then I urged him to take an apprenticeship test, so he did and he got in there. Mainly he got in because of the fact that he not only had just come out of high school but he also had a year of college, so he scored pretty high on

his tests. So after he finished that, then he decided he'd really like to go south where it's warmer. So he went down, and he ended up, finally ended up in Atlanta, and now he runs a—he's got a plant there, he makes outdoor furniture out of cedar, he gets the cedar here from Michigan. And he makes chairs, swings, beds, railings for log cabins and so forth and so on, and he's got five people working for him. And he's happy as can be. And my daughter, she had worked up here at Pontiac Motors for awhile, and she worked at Fiero for awhile. And then at the big cutoff thing, she took a buyout, and her and her husband moved to North Carolina, and she's a mountain girl.

DC: Your kids are all heading south!

CL: Then my next son, he had graduated from OU as an engineer. And he was swimming—he was an All-American up there.

DC: Really. Wow.

End of Interview