

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

Al McGregor

TCAP retiree, 1958-1989

Interviewed by Peter Myers, May 2017

QUESTION

Just for the record, could you state your name and the span of years when you worked at Ford and what your job responsibility was there?

AL MCGREGOR

My name is Al McGregor. I began working at Ford in 1958 on the assembly line. My first job there was actually a pretty menial one. In those days, windshields were put in a rubber grommet all the way around and then they put sealer in them and excess sealer needed to be removed. And it was my job to use a non-metallic tool to try and scrape off sealer and then use a gas rag of sorts to wipe it off, and believe me it's the kind of a job where no matter how clean you think it is, it's not as clean as management wants it to be. And I got several other jobs in production after that. Eventually I became an apprentice pipe fitter and ended up working on that job until I retired in 1989.

QUESTION

Tell me the story about how you got hired.....I understand you got a tip from a friend that Ford was hiring.....how did that work for you?

AL MCGREGOR

Well I had a job working as a shipping and receiving clerk for another company in Minneapolis and it didn't offer any chance of improving my status; and my wife's cousin, her husband worked at the Ford plant and he told me when he found out that I was unhappy with my current job and was looking for other employment, he said well, it ain't for everybody but Ford is hiring. And if you want, show up out there at 6, 6:30 in the morning and maybe you'll get hired. And in point of fact, I did that a couple of days later. I was there at 6:30 in the morning and by 7:30 I had had an interview, a small type of physical and was actually working by 7:30. On that job which I say it wasn't the greatest. But you come to find out that no matter what type of job you're working on, they've got something worse. [chuckles] And I found it.

QUESTION

So between that job and when you moved into the apprenticeship program, did you have a number of other jobs on the line besides cleaning off the excess adhesive sealer?

AL MCGREGOR

I did end up a couple of weeks after I first began there I was put on a job of installing door weather stripping on the passenger side of the vehicles. And it was a job that required some dexterity and some skill and it wasn't an easy job for me to learn. I guess I was probably a slow learner. But eventually you learn how to do it and you become very proficient at it. And after doing that job I would guess for a year or two, I actually got a different job doing inspection and repair on electrical systems on the cars. And did that for some time and I think my classification then was as a utility person. And I did that until I went over as an apprentice.

QUESTION

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You mentioned for a brief time you were re-assigned to the glass department when they were still making glass at the plant. Talk about that experience and how different that was than working in your regular job there.

AL MCGREGOR

You know, the very first job that I had, there were three other people that were working on the same vehicle that I was, doing the same kind of a job, and they had been temporarily assigned to the trim department from the glass plant. The glass plant at that time had been shut down for nearly a year and I can tell you that if you wanna know the difference between most assembly line work and working in a glass plant, every day when a union representative came by, one of those fellows was bound to say, “When are they gonna start the glass?” They would like to be back there. And it did happen at a very, very short period of time one day I was extra help I guess so they said go over to the glass department, they need somebody to help with one of the more menial jobs that they had there. And I thought it was a great experience. A little bit warm next to that hot glass coming out, but while I was there I thought I could learn to like this. But that never happened.

QUESTION

Describe a little bit more the glass process.

AL MCGREGOR

Right. You know at the point that I saw it you know they mined glass from under the facility; they have tunnels underneath there. And they would bring that sand or material up to the main building and heat it in the furnace and eventually produce a flat sheet of glass which as it traveled on a conveyor, it needed to be cut into strips. And the slag glass knocked off the sides. It was strictly flat sheet glass; my understanding is that none of it was laminated. If it was to be laminated, they needed to send it to another facility to have that done.

I think it's a difficult process to do lamination and there were patents on it. And the Ford Motor Company I heard at one time had had tried to do it in a vertical way. Which proved not to be too effective. So they did it at other locations but I think they also had glass manufacturing in Tennessee.

QUESTION

Talk about your decision to apply for the apprentice program. Was that difficult to get into? What did that entail?

AL MCGREGOR

You know the Ford Motor Company was probably the first of the big three to have apprenticeships. They always had skilled trades people but as far as training them in-house their apprenticeship I believe started in 1941. In about 1965, at the Twin Cities Assembly plant, management in the union had concluded that they would like to upgrade some of their skill levels by having apprenticeships. To that end, they gave a test in the cafeteria, I believe. The first test they gave in 1965 I was not involved in. At that time, my train of thought was well if I take that apprenticeship test and go over to the maintenance department, I'm going to end up on the afternoon shift. Which is a shift that's not very conducive to home life. So I never did go over and take that first test. But one of my good friends that I worked with did go over and take it and he ended up going on as a pipe fitter apprentice. And so I guess it occurred to me that

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maybe I should have paid more attention. And the next time they gave a test which wasn't that many months later, I did take it. And it was a test that did not involve any manual dexterity, it was strictly on paper. And I'm not sure what they garnered out of that but at any rate I took that test and then had to go through an interview process with a representative from the company locally and a union representative. And between the two of them, they came up with a number of things. Your test score I guess, the number of years of seniority that you had with the company, and whatever else. And I ended up being placed in first place on that list. And so you get rather apprehensive and think that you know pretty soon I'm going to be going over to the maintenance department. It never happened. I think it was a year and half later before they finally called me.

And frankly, that same gentleman I mentioned to you, Al Hendricks, who was on the national negotiating committee, he came by the assembly line where I was working and was telling me all the wonderful things we'd gotten in the new contract and I said, well, is the local contract settled yet? And he said no, why do you ask? And I said well, because I've been on this apprenticeship waiting list for almost a year and a half. And he said well, it's not settled until we settle locally. And the next Wednesday of the next week I was in the maintenance department. So it was due to leverage by that individual.

QUESTION

The number of hours both on the job and classroom training to be an apprentice.....

AL MCGREGOR

You know, as background, the apprenticeship program is a coop—cooperative venture between the company and the union. And it's called a joint apprenticeship committee in Detroit, which is comprised of five company members and five union members. Most of whom are all tradesmen or ex-tradesmen. And to the extent that they want to administer it on a local level, they also have a single union representative and a single company representative locally. But apprentice at Ford is based on 8,000 hours of training. That is based on 7,424 hours of on-the-job training and 576 hours of schooling. The schooling that I took and that others took at that time was through what was called St. Paul Technical Vocational Institute. After I retired, they began using other facilities including in-house. Ford had built an educational addition to the building. And they did a lot of that apprentice training in-house after I retired.

QUESTION

What other types of skilled trades might you have learned other than pipefitting? What other trades did they teach in this program?

AL MCGREGOR

When they first instituted it at the twin cities plant they had electrician, pipe fitter, and millwright. And when I went on it was still just those three trades, but later they added tool making and I think they may have added one or two others. Some of 'em after I retired.

QUESTION

Did you choose which one of those three you took or did they assign you?

AL MCGREGOR

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I chose it. However, I will tell you that the good friend of mine who went over there as a pipe fitter apprentice when they did the first test, they came to the number one person on the list and they asked him Dick, which trade would you like? And he said electrician. And they went to the second individual and he said pipe fitter. And the third one was my friend and the only option then was millwright, which he did not want. He said if I turn down this opportunity, can I have the next available pipe fitter opening? And that’s what they allowed him to do.

QUESTION

During the apprenticeship, what were you doing in terms of the actual work?

AL MCGREGOR

You need to understand that as soon as I went over as an apprentice, I never ever did any job on production lines again. I was strictly a pipe fitter, either apprentice or journeyman.

QUESTION

So I presume you worked under the supervision of an experienced pipe fitter for awhile?

AL MCGREGOR

What they do is to assign you to a specific journeyman and in my case, I was working with a fellow mostly to do new construction. As opposed to repair. An awful lot of the work that any of these skilled trades people do has to do with supporting production in some way. And piping, you know, there can be air, gas, oil, steam, vacuum piping. If something breaks, they look at a pipe fitter to fix it. And you know to that extent there are an awful lot of air hoses in the building. All it takes is for one of them to break or you know in the case of the body build section, there’s a lot of circulating water and hoses will break and water sprays all over. And they need someone to fix it. So that’s just some of the things that go on.

QUESTION

Did the apprentice program change very much during your time at Ford, other than adding a few additional trades to it?

AL MCGREGOR

I think it did pretty much parallel. I’m not sure that much of anything changed—you were still assigned to a journeyman. And you didn’t end up being with one journeyman the entire time, they would spread it around a little bit. I’ve said that some people are good teachers and some are good students, and the opposite is also true.

QUESTION

At any given time, roughly how many pipe fitters would there have been in the plant?

AL MCGREGOR

When they had a single shift of production, pipe fitters they probably had about 20 of ‘em. When you get into the later years in the 80s when they went to two shifts of production, at that time they went to three shifts in maintenance. They scheduled ‘em around the clock. Three 8-hour shifts. And they added a good number more people. You know especially with the advent of robots. It was a need for an awful lot more electricians. And they produced people in-house through apprenticeship and also through a program they called upgrader. and they also hired a good number of people from the outside. When they would hire people from the outside, the

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usual reason was that they’d perceived that there was a skill level availability from the outside that was not available in-house. But if they had time, they would teach anybody anything.

QUESTION

And you said this was a joint effort between the UAW and Ford Motor Company, the apprentice program?

AL MCGREGOR

Right.

QUESTION

Re: the workforce when you started in 1958.....was it pretty much all male except for some front office.....

AL MCGREGOR

When I started there, I’m not sure of the exact number, but the residue of hourly workers that were there during the war—that number had probably diminished to maybe five people. And in the time that I was there, the number of those people probably dropped down to one or two. But I knew a couple of the ladies who were a part of the war effort. But for whatever reason never had the opportunity to discuss what did you do during the war. And obviously there were a lot of females there during the war.

QUESTION

By the time you left and retired, I assume there were more women in the workforce certainly than in 1958?

AL MCGREGOR

There were. I think that when I was doing tours at the plant, I discovered that out of the total workforce, about 14 percent was female.

QUESTION

You left before the plant was shut down but you told me that while you were there, Ford had a policy if they were closing or downsizing the workforce at one plant they would try to offer jobs to those people at another plant. So did the Twin Cities plant end up absorbing some Ford workers from other plants? How did that work out?

AL MCGREGOR

Ford had a policy of doing that but it was based on negotiations with the union. The union had negotiated a policy whereby if you were adding manpower at your plant and before you could hire from your own work area, the local population, if there were individuals at another facility that had been laid off, out of work for X number of weeks, months, or in some cases years, and they chose to come to the Twin Cities plant, and be interviewed and accepted for a position, they must hire them before they could go out in the local community. And to that end, I believe it was when they went from single shift production to two shifts. Building Rangers, they added a second shift, they needed I think 750 people. And they got the great, great majority of them from places like California, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee, Michigan. And I will tell you that some of those were tremendous people. And some of them were—we were happy to see them go if and when they left. For the most part, you or I or anybody else, would not be happy to have

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somebody dictate to you that we need you to go to Alabama or California—or most any place. This is where you live and you really don’t wanna move. And especially if you are a family person who has a wife and children going to school in another location. You need to have a job so you come to Twin Cities but it’s not the happiest situation to be in. And a number of those individuals who if they had worked for Ford for a number of years but not enough years to qualify for retirement, the minute they got enough years in at Ford, they pulled the papers and retired and went back home. And I certainly don’t blame ‘em for that. Especially the people from California. They seemed like they picked up and moved pretty easily. [chuckles]

QUESTION

When the plant went to two shifts.....and absorbed workers from other parts of the country....did that bring more women and minorities into the plant....?

AL MCGREGOR

Yes it did. You know, if I could back up a little bit and tell you that when I started there, there may have been two or three or five blacks working in the building. And that didn’t change a whole lot. But when they went to that second shift and took on an awful lot of people, the population diversified immediately. There were a lot of women, a lot of blacks and Hispanics, and white folks also. But it worked out not too bad.

QUESTION

The plant underwent a major conversion for the Ford Ranger. What do you remember about it and how disruptive was it? How did it affect your job?

AL MCGREGOR

Well, you know they pretty much gutted out the inside of the building. I mean you could stand in the middle of the building and see all four directions to the walls. Which is a bit unusual. Probably hadn’t been that way since they built the place. But they cut down all the overhead conveyors, I mean there were torches all over the place. No serious fires thank goodness. But I would say they pretty much emptied that place out. And when I say they, it was outside contractors that were brought in to pretty much destroy everything that was in the building. And they did it in a week, two weeks. They had rail spurs inside the building, two rail lines inside the building. And they simply backed a bunch of gondola cars up in there and they had bobcats bringing steel over and just dumping, dumping, dumping. You know I would have to tell ya I don’t think it was allowed, but I brought a camera into the place. And when I tell ya it’s not allowed, before I even started working for Ford, I went through the Ford assembly area in Dearborn, Michigan. And the first thing they have you do is check your camera. They would not allow anybody in there with a camera. Now if you transpose that to today with everybody carrying a smart phone that’s obviously a camera, I mean there are hundreds of cameras in there now. At any rate, I had taken a bunch of pictures from an elevation over the railroad tracks where you could see some of that stuff and kind of interesting pictures of the destruction that went on. They needed to clean it out in a big hurry because there’s new stuff coming in behind it. And that changeover probably took upwards of three months. So that they would be ready for the new lines.

QUESTION

Does that mean the plant and production line was idle for that long a time?

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AL MCGREGOR

That’s correct. Yeah. Most people were laid off. But that did not apply to the maintenance department. They needed everybody.

QUESTION

Hard to imagine seeing from one end of the building to the other, must have been a strange feeling in there. Aside from that particular changeover, what were some of the biggest changes to the whole production process that you saw while there?

AL MCGREGOR

You know I think automation is a progressive thing. It just goes on and on probably since they closed the plant, you’d be surprised at how much things have changed just in the last six years. But I guess robots are probably the one item that really comes to mind. In point of fact, the first robots that they put in the facility were in the prime paint booth. I think there were only four of them that they put in. I’m not sure the exact dates, maybe back in the late seventies. But they were not very good. The one robot was assigned to just open the door on the vehicle as it went by and the second one was painting inside there. They required a good bit of maintenance and they weren’t good. But, like anything else, things improve as they go along. They have robots now that are really terrific.

QUESTION

A lot of people feared that robotics would eliminate their jobs, but other people argued that robotics in some ways would alleviate some of the most physically demanding jobs and make the remaining jobs a little more satisfying. Did you see any evidence of that?

AL MCGREGOR

You know it’s hard to look into the minds of the people that made those decisions, but my good guess is that mostly those decisions to add a robot were based on cost. And you know one of the things that you need to remember with a robot versus a human is that that robot works the day shift, doesn’t get a break, and then the afternoon shift starts and it goes right back at it. And they reduce manpower in a hurry that way.

QUESTION

How would you characterize the state of labor/management relations during your time there? In general, the relationship between the hourly workers and management?

AL MCGREGOR

You know it’s obviously an adversarial relationship but I think for the most part, it went pretty well. There are always problem people and problems on the job but I think that between the company and the union they managed it very well.

QUESTION

In the maintenance department you were union but pretty separate from the production line people. Was there much social interaction between maintenance and production folks?

AL MCGREGOR

Oh yes. You know, you came from production so you know a lot of those people. And they know you. And you try to help them when you can and it’s a good way to do it.

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QUESTION

After you retired you started giving plant tours, what kind of questions did people ask, what were visitors most surprised by?

AL MCGREGOR

You know, there's a lot of 'Oh wow' about it, but you know I think the thing that interested a lot of the visitors that came through was the way things come together. You know. How come the seats come at exactly the right time. The tires come at exactly the right time. And I guess my explanation to them for the most part was that if you can imagine all of these conveyor lines are empty, the first sheet of paper that comes along that tells you what to build is what you build and you put it on the line whether it's a seat or whether it's tires and when you do the next one and the next one and the next one, what I'm telling you is that when the line fills up, they all come together at exactly the right spot. Number one fits with number one, number two with number two. And that's kind of an oversimplification but really that's the kind of the way it works. And you know I think of while I was doing tours, none of the tours or very very few of them were ever done in the paint facility. They were done in the main building. But of the things in the plant that interested people the most I would list the tire line and the body decking operations. When you think about it, on that tire line, they had one person that put rims on the line. And a second individual put tires just lay 'em on top of the rim. And from that point on, the conveyor moves forward and it is automatically mounted onto the rim. And filled with air to the exact pressure and then there's a third individual working there who looks at a monitor and discovers exactly which wheel weight needs to be put on where. He hammers them on. And that's it. Just three people to do all of those things.

And also the body decking operation from the time I started there until they really got into automation and things like that they employed a number of people to deck those bodies onto the frame and motor assembly. And when they decided to automate it, they put in a gantry robot and it didn't always work well. Believe me. For a time some of the maintenance called it the can crusher. Because when it was bringing a body over to deck it down, sometimes it didn't stop. It just kept on pushing. But they eventually got it working very well and I was told that those two gantry robots that were working in there eliminated nine production jobs.

QUESTION

Ford allowed retirees to take some classes after you retired. Did you ever take advantage of that?

AL MCGREGOR

I did take one in particular which was to build my own computer, a desktop computer. It was kind of an interesting thing to do. They had allowed at that time up to a thousand dollars I think it was for taking a program like that. I don't know if that program exists anymore especially for a closed location like this.

QUESTION

Speaking of training, once you became a pipe fitter did you do periodic training to upgrade your skills or how did you get additional training as the years went by?

AL MCGREGOR

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I did not take any outside training on occasion went to seminars that might take two or three days on specific things. But never back at college and sometimes if new products or new processes came in they would send in somebody from the vendor that made them to educate us in the plant.

QUESTION

Yes I heard about that....

AL MCGREGOR

There was a company that came in there one time and they had a group of us in a semi-circle and they were asking, So you're an electrician and you're a pipe fitter and you're a millwright and you're a toolmaker, and you have to understand that—that a lot of these tradesmen are very proud of their individual trade. But for whatever reason, this guy looked at me and he said what's the difference between a millwright and a toolmaker? I said there isn't any. Immediately made enemies of both. [laughs]

QUESTION

Talk about the workforce.....dedicated workers taking pride in their work.....was there anything you think about this particular plant and group of people that inspired such dedication to their jobs?

AL MCGREGOR

Off the top of my head I can't think of anything other than just personal integrity. I spent about nine years working on the assembly line and there is some satisfaction in doing a job, any job, and doing it right. But I would have to say that when I went on as a pipe fitter, that's a whole new world. I mean there are things that you can do using your brain and your hands and your mind. It's a great job.

QUESTION

I imagine there was a fair amount of competition for those apprenticeships with all the line workers and I'm sure quite a few of them wanted to do what you did.

AL MCGREGOR

You know I eventually was appointed to be the union representative for apprentices in the plant. And it became difficult when they wanted to add more people to the list of potential apprentices. They needed a method by which they didn't make a list so long. That it effectively precluded somebody from ever getting a job. I mean if you agree to test a couple hundred people and you place 'em all on the list, how long would it take you to use 'em all up? And so, to offset that, they would say we'll let you test thirty people. You might have 200 people apply, but you need to do a lottery of some kind to select those thirty names. And you know so it's a selective process and at the point that those thirty people are tested, then they need to decide who's placed on the list and who isn't.

QUESTION

Most memorable event at the plant.....the flood of 1965what people had to do to save the operation and protect the assets.....

AL MCGREGOR

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You know, that particular flood was I think the worst one they ever had. And that was two years before I went on as an apprentice. But in talking to other tradesmen that were working there at the time, a couple things happened with all that high water down in the Mississippi. I think they had to completely shut down the hydro plant because the turbines wouldn't turn, there was no falling water. And at the steam plant, which is located in the same area down by the river, they eventually had to shut off the boilers. Water got so high that it compromised a lot of those things and they didn't wanna stop production. So what they did was to shut off virtually everything in the steam plant and they brought in a number of what is called package boilers. And the local workforce connected all of those boilers at the south end of the building to piping and brought steam in so that they could continue to run. They had one oven in particular that was all steam piping for heat. They had to have steam. And one day, I was working as a utility person in production and was extra help that day and they needed help down at the river so they sent me down there and I have to tell you that I don't know if I was afraid, but hydraulic pressure is really something. I remember going into the steam plant and descending one floor and you could see the sandbags all around the building, but you could see in this one area that water—the walls down there are 17 inches thick. And water was coming right through the wall and just kind of bubbling out about a half inch and falling down. Right through solid concrete. It is most impressive.

They had another area where they had by the steam plant, they had two oil storage tanks that they used to fire the boilers and they had to protect them so they built a dike around them. And I recall looking out there and there was on the ground, low down, there was a hole about four inches across and you could look down and see about three inches down there was water just kind of undulating in there. And then it caved in a little bit. And a little more and a little more. It was a scary time.

QUESTION

Didn't they eventually deliberately flood the inside of the steam plants to equalize the pressure?

AL MCGREGOR

They did. They had to do that.

QUESTION

How many days went by before the water level subsided to a more normal level? A few days or a week....?

AL MCGREGOR

It was probably a couple of weeks. You know. That was a lot of water.

QUESTION

Any other particular memories, good or bad, about all your time there that especially stay in your mind?

AL MCGREGOR

Well you know I guess going up to the new paint building and working up there was all brand new equipment and great bunch of guys to work with. I do recall one time that they had had a fire when production was down in the paint kitchen. They had operators in there who would flush out circulating paint lines. These paint lines were made to service the paint department

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when it was in the main building. And how much fluid would it take to fill one paint line? About five barrels. Because it's so much distance and it's like inch and a quarter, inch and a half pipe. And at any rate, one of the operators out there in the building they had flushed the paint line out with up some kind of a Naphtha and to blow all of that out of the system they the guy took a five-gallon pail which had a metal handle with a plastic bale on it, and he hung it on a on the bottom of a filter. And opened the line on it. He didn't put a static line on it. And it immediately started an immense fire. And there was that building at that time had a deluge system in it where the horn goes off and you've got like twenty seconds to get out of there or you're gonna be out of air. And at any rate, they called the city fire department of course and there was a lot of those folks there and I was not in the building, I was outside it. And the fire captain came over and he said you know there's a number of hoses that got burned off of air lines in there and there's air flashing around and he said we need somebody to go in there that knows what they're looking at to turn some things off. And I said well I can do that for you. So he told one of his firemen, he said, give him your air pack and hood. And this black fireman, when he got me all hooked up, the last thing he said when he slapped me on the shoulder was 'Don't throw up in the mask.' [chuckles] but, at any rate I went in there and to my surprise, once I got inside that room, there must have been fifteen people in there but you couldn't see from outside 'cause it was so much smoke in there. It ended up not being a big problem but it could've burned the place down.

QUESTION

When you think of 86 years of production there and many times something disastrous could have happened with huge damage...

AL MCGREGOR

They they had fires in the place. And a lot of times, outsiders would tell ya if a fire starts in a paint booth, it's gonna burn down. But it never, ever happened.

QUESTION

Wow, this has been great! Anything else that crossed your mind that you want to talk about?

AL MCGREGOR

Well, you know as time goes on I can tell ya a lot of stories but some of 'em should not be told. [chuckles]

QUESTION

Understood. So tell me what kind of gatherings still go on for the retirees aside from the monthly meeting like I went to a few months ago? What other types of interaction do you have with fellow retirees now?

AL MCGREGOR

Well some of us former pipe fitters on occasion get together with our wives and have a dinner and a lot of conversation but other than that our retirees chapter of the union has an annual picnic and an annual Christmas dinner. And we get to see a lot of folks then.

END - AL MCGREGOR INTERVIEW