

## My Employment at General Motors

My employment at GM, as with other employees, was not without its challenges, some of them manufactured by me and some by the manufacturer. Tuesday, November 8, 1949, was the fateful date of my employment at Fisher Body Division of General Motors Corp. I was so overjoyed to be employed since I had been unemployed for about two months. However, I had been trying to get employment, off and on, at Fisher Body for two years. I was hired on in the Booth Cleaners group as a pit cleaner. My job was to clean out the refuge at the end of the line. There were pits at the end of each line that had dirt, screws, nuts, bolts, cigarettes, butts, cigar butts- you name it. It was there.

The first week I was there an employee came and introduced himself; saying he was a representative of Local 602 of the UAW. He was Homer Frazier. Initially, I was somewhat suspicious of Homer Frazier: he was white, and he had a southern accent. He told me, after ninety days, I was welcome to join the union. From time to time Homer went out of his way to talk to me about joining the union and all of the benefits I would receive. My mistrust waned overtime about Homer. He was from Arkansas and so was I. Of course, I had moved to Lansing from St. Louis, Missouri and had been a union member at the shoe factory, where I worked. However, I was not aware of the multiple benefits the UAW had, through negotiations, strikes and other efforts, gotten for its workers, and I don't believe that was the case in St. Louis. The day after my ninety days of employment, I joined Local 602. Unlike the situation in the shoe factory, I didn't have a representative of management in opposition. What stands out in my memory of the situation in St. Louis was the superintendent saying: "Cal! You really don't have to join the union."

It became abundantly clear to me after awhile that the employment of blacks was stingy in FBC. The job I had afforded me the opportunity to wander through the plant from one end to the other. I saw white employees both sexes and Mexican workers and very few black men and no black females. A lot of the jobs blacks had were in the categories of sloppy and uncomfortable like the "Wet Deck" jobs washing the car bodies with towels and rags, or undesirable job like spraying that heavy black material with the employees being all taped up in coveralls and a hood as if they were out of space to the janitor, sweeping to the job of booth cleaning as I had which were low paying jobs, but my job really wasn't hard work. So when I began asking questions and challenging the answers I got back from the foreman higher ups, I am afraid I got on management's list. The questions: Why aren't any blacks on the lines other than the "Wet Deck" and spraying that black sticky mess? Why aren't any blacks in the trades? And why aren't there any black foremen and female employees?

All of the queries, and from time to time, the word prejudice escaping from my lips, made me a 'troublemaker' that was what I was known as, and I'm sure they had other names they used in my absence. Probably it went like this "That boy is out of his



place. He needs to be put in his place. He's got a job! Why can't he be contented?" I have a feeling there was another name they used, also. But the troubling thing to me was the acquiesce response I got from the "Brothers" those men were satisfied with the status quo. I really don't believe they were. I think some of them, at least, were just afraid to let their ambitions be known. So I concluded you can lead a horse to the water, but you can't make him drink. I'm going to do battle for myself. And when I made the statement "when I get a few years in," I would be making my move. That was a no-no, and management had their guns loaded for me.

My mind was occupied with thoughts of man's inhumanity to man. We had not-so-long-ago come out of a war defeating Nazism and Fascism and other kinds of isms and nothing was done about racism. So in 1953, I put in for a transfer to the "Material Control" department. Why that Department? It had one black employee in its rank. How he got hired in that department had to be a minor miracle. But that's not either here or there. I knew the man very well; he was a deacon at the church we attended. George Jones was a fatherly figure and I just love him. He and I talked all the time and he had encouraged me to transfer to that department so he could have some company of color, of course. The only drawback I had with "Deacon" as I so kindly referred to him was that he was a diehard Republican.

But that didn't hinder our friendship. There is an element of truth in that old saying "That some of my best friends are Republicans." But back to the transfer. I was shot down. My foreman, Bob Remus, got to the foreman in that department and told him I was this and I was that and a lot in between. A few times I saw them talking and I just knew Bob was spilling some venom about me. Plus the fact I had a couple of discipline cases going against me. I had been found sleep or in a position to go to sleep. My application as denied. Remus had a snide smile on his face when he told me I wouldn't be going to material control because they decided they didn't need anymore help. I wanted to tell him he was a snake in the grass but thought better of it. At that point, I began to cultivate a deep dislike for Bob Remus. I called the committeeman but the results were nil.

Throughout the years I tried to get promoted to other departments, but the results were the same when they learned who I was, and probably what I was, they didn't need anybody. In 1963, I made another bold move. I wrote an application for a gas tester. That was a job of testing the gas meters in the booths for safety. I never saw the posting on the board. Foreman Remus and his supervisor had conspired to keep this information out of sight, so some of Remus' card-playing buddies could get first shot at it. Seniority was suppose to be the guiding factor to be eligible for promotion, but if management didn't want to promote whites it didn't like or blacks or Mexicans, it would circumvent the rules. And someone who they liked with less seniority than somebody else would get the job, and once he is on the job, it is very difficult to get that employee removed. So a white co-worker pulled me off to the side and informed me of underhandedness that was in process and suggested I go put in for the job. I did just that. I had the seniority.



Rather than give all the boring details of my battles with management in Fisher Body, which would be long and drawn-out as well as self-serving, I'll just say things got a bit testy and I was the target of sneers, coolness and the silent treatment from some people including most of my black co-workers. In any event, I wrote a letter to Walter Reuther informing him of the prejudice and racism that dwelled in the plant. I recall telling him "it was so thick you could cut it with a knife." Reuther responded saying he would forward my letter to regional agent in Flint. That all happened. There was an investigation. I got the news from a person who barley knew me. To bring this to a conclusion, remember this was in 1963. A month after the fire died down, Fisher hired it's first black foreman. I'd like to think my actions had a lot to do with it.

Slowly but painfully management began promoting more people of different races and sexes to higher positions. By 1968, it had blacks in all of the skill trades. Of course, the Feds were looking over their shoulders and management was uncomfortable. Finally, in 1964, I got promoted but not without a fight. I was promoted to a semi-skilled job and in 1970, to a skill job. The ride was difficult but it paid dividends in the end.

Calvin E. Sturdivant