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IB: Oh is he really, I didn't know that. Oh, okay.

IA: This is June 9, 1992. This is Shirley Bradley, Lisa Fine. We are interviewing John Bowles and we are at the R. E. Olds Museum and we are going to talk about Reo memories.

Bowles: You want me to start?

IA: No you can ask different questions if you want. To start off with we usually just ask some personal information, just, you know, when you were born and where you were born, where your family is from, like that, so we can get a sense of where you are coming from. So were you born in Lansing?

Bowles: No, I was born in Mishawaka, Indiana.

IA: Is that where you grew up or did your family move here?

Bowles: I grew up in Indiana, yeah.

IA: Indiana, okay.

Bowles: I came to Lansing in 1931.

IA: Okay. And um, did you come up yourself or with your family?

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: You came up on your own to get work?

Bowles: I came myself. Um, I went to work for ah, Louce Manufacturing Company.

IA: What was that?

Bowles: Louce.

IA: Louce, okay.

Bowles: L o u c e .

IB: L o u c e .

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: Manufacturing which made commercial bottoms.

IA: Oh okay.

Bowles: And I worked there for seven years, I guess it was.

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IA: How old were you when you started, right out of school, right out of high school?

Bowles: Yes.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: And um,

IB: What kind of bodies did they make? Like truck bodies?

Bowles: Commercial bodies. Commercial.

IA: Commercial for?

Bowles: Um, National Biscuit Company, Ward Baking Company, Continental Baking Company and the bodies they made.

IA: Oh for the trucks. For the delivery

Bowles: The trucks.

IA: Oh okay. I was just curious, I hadn't heard of, that was interesting.

IB: And that was right here in Lansing, Louce?

Bowles: Pardon me?

IA: Loose was right here in Lansing?

Bowles: Yes. Yes. Ah, it used to be called, it used to be Hu Lines(?) which was an old business factory in Lansing for I don't know how many years. When I went to work for Louce when they started as commercial. And the general manager came from the body shop in Indiana ... and, of course, he brought some of the key help.

IA: I see, so you had a connection, an in. Okay. And what did you do at Louce?

Bowles: Ah I sprayed paint. And for 22 years of that.

IA: In Louce, in the Louce

IB: No he worked there for seven years.

IA: Seven years?

Bowles: Seven years.

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IB: You worked for Louce for seven years? Where did you go from there?

Bowles: Reo.

IA: Oh you went

Bowles: No, I went, I went over to Fisher Body and worked there '69 something like that, but it wasn't me (can't hear) I was working

IA: That's too big, impersonal?

Bowles: Bit.

IA: No.

IB: Even if working conditions weren't real good.

Bowles: they put me washing bodies just before they went in to paint. And ah, ... what they called the utility cab and (can't hear) and the very next day Ah, but that was Fisher Body wasn't for me. And then from then I just oh a couple other little minor jobs I had and I went to work for (loud hum) ah,

IA: Ah huh oh.

Bowles: and I worked for short period of time and then I went to Reo.

IA: And you said when we talked on the phone that you went in in '42 in Reo during the war?

IB: You worked pretty well during the '30's then, you weren't, you stated...

Bowles: Well, I was..... ah, . . . somewhat back in there for a while and ah, hunted around there and come brothers and sisters definitely was there and ah, (can't hear) back there for a couple years and ah, no I was young

IA: During the hard times, yeah.

IB: You didn't have any roots down yet, so you could. What did your father do, was he a farmer or

Bowles: No, no, he was a ah, clerk in a store.

IB: Oh okay.

Bowles: But my father and mother and ah, 10 of us

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IB: Ten children, my goodness.

Bowles: Five boys and five girls.

IA: Oh wow.

IB: My what a wonderful family.

Bowles: And ah, well we got things done, we went to work.

IB: I can imagine, to help out.

Bowles: You better believe it.

IB: Yes. So you came out of high school and kind of went right into a job. You graduated from high school?

Bowles: No, but I didn't graduate from high school.

IB: You had to quit early maybe?

Bowles: ... away from school. My last year of school I went right into a job in Indiana.

IA: In Indiana first.

Bowles: I came up first thing. (can't hear)

IA: Times were pretty bad in 1931. Things were pretty bad in 1931.

Bowles: Yes, very bad. Very bad. I knew fellows who worked in a factory for 5 cents an hour, 6 cents an hour,

IA: Is that right?

Bowles: 10 cents an hour. And ah, ... families

IA: There was no real job security either was there?

Bowles: No job security of any kind and no welfare of any kind, and you know,

IA: No unemployment, like that.

Bowles: No unemployment insurance. Nothing like that. You just kept right on the best way you knew how. Of course, there was four of us boys old enough to work, you know. So, we got by alright.

IA: Ah huh, when you were here in Lansing on your own in the '30's, did you stay in a boardinghouse or

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Bowles: A in a private home.

IA: In a home, I see you got a room with a lodger.

Bowles: Ah huh.

IA: Yeah.

IB: When you went to Reo, was it because they were advertising for help for the war effort?

Bowles: No, I knew ah, I knew the fellow that was ah, the foreman of the paint department. I got acquainted with him.

IA: In some other job or just from social or

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: Social, socially?

Bowles: And ah, he called me and told me that they needed a painter and needed a sprayer for Diamond Reo..... (can't hear) Oh god, three days I guess, something like that. Sitting there waiting for the employment manager to make his mind up.

IA: Oh my goodness. Oh

IB: No.

Bowles: So he finally made his mind up and ah, I took the examination and

IA: Oh you had to take an exam? A written exam?

Bowles: No just a physical exam.

IA: Oh a physical, okay.

Bowles: And ah, they was spraying Army paint. And I worked with, they put me working with an elder man, I say elder, I presume he was 60 years old, something like that. And ah, when he sprayed away and all at once he was spraying what paint they call OD.

IA: Olive drab?

Bowles: Olive drab. (laughter) And ah, it would accumulate down there. All at once that accumulation would smoke and burn.

IA: Oh my.

Bowles: Well we'd just stumble out like this.

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IA: Oh my goodness. Oh my gosh.

IB: Hot feet.

IA: It couldn't have been too comfortable to stand there and work in front of that. What caused it to catch on

Bowles: It is no wonder it didn't

IA: Isn't that amazing.

IB: It is amazing.

Bowles: ah, so then they eliminated that phase of it. They changed ... they eliminated that phase and they didn't have any use for me there anymore, so I was trying to think after I talked with you, where I went. I went to some other department. I can't, I can't think what the department was.

IA: Do you remember the name of the man who got you into the paint department?

Bowles: Pardon me?

IA: Do you remember the name of the man who got you into the paint department, who was your supervisor? No. Do you remember how much you made when you first started at Reo in 1942? You don't?

Bowles: No, I don't remember.

IB: It probably wasn't very much.

Bowles: No.

IB: Maybe 80 cents and hour maybe or

IA: That's about the range, 65 to 80 that we've been getting.

Bowles: Well, in my lifetime from working, I have always I was making 50 cents an hour and the majority of the other ones was only making about 30, 35. This, you know, back in those days 50 cents an hour was good money.

IA: Good money, sure.

Bowles: So, I don't remember how much, how much they were paying me when I hired in there. But I was trying to think I went someplace, some other department and I worked there for a while and then I went into the Navy division.

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IA: Oh you were in the Navy Department. What did you do there?

Bowles: Well I went in on inspection. And after, I don't know, six months something like that, I went on supervision, but I was on supervision the rest, all the rest of the war. And that's why I ah, was never

IA: Oh, because you were doing this ... provision.

Bowles: Essential they said I was an essential.

IA: I see.

IB: Ah huh.

IA: Part of the war effort.

Bowles: And every time I or something, or they'd tell me don't send in another one. I'll go and take my chances with the rest of them.

IA: Ah huh.

IB: Oh, ah huh.

Bowles: He said that's alright. He said we are going to set them in. He said if we can get a deferment for you, you'll stay here.

IA: If we don't you are in the Army huh?

Bowles: He says if we can't, he said you can just take your rear end and go to their Army.

(laughter)

Bowles: But that's the way.....

IA: When you were on inspection in the beginning there, what were you inspecting the trucks as they came down the final line or

Bowles: Bomb fuses.

IA: Oh that's right, that's what they did in the Navy Department.

IB: The bomb fuses, was that dangerous? Was it a dangerous job?

Bowles: Well it was parts of the bomb fuse, it wasn't the complete bomb fuse.

IA: Okay.

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Bowles: Ah, ... automatics and and this and that and everything was all
..... mention these things.

IA: Each area would do something different on that fuse?

Bowles: Yes, yeah. And, of course, then I was on inspection see and we had
the ah, military ah, parts people. After we inspected the material,
after it came off of the machine floor, then it would go into the ah,
Army ordinance for their inspection.

IB: We've heard some complaints about that from other people.

Bowles: And if they passed it, well and good. If they didn't, you brought it
back and went all over it again and found out

IB: Oh what was wrong.

Bowles: segregated the ah, the bad part from the good part. Some of it was
good and some bad. So, we had sometimes

IA: Right, that's what we've heard from other people.

Bowles: And then again one of the of um, ah, ... two just right, you know,
what I mean. Ah, you got to make them think they were a genius.

IA: Oh, even though sometimes they didn't have as much training, right?

Bowles: That's right.

IA: Yeah.

IB: They didn't always know as much about those parts as you knew,
probably.

Bowles: That's right. And something that we knew that was a little on the
shady side, we and we put that stuff
and it went through. (laughter) You know, you just use the stuff

IA: Use your mind, huh? Use your brain.

Bowles: So ah, all in all, we've had a lot of

IA: Were there very many women working in the Navy Department assembling
those bomb fuses?

Bowles: A lot of women.

IA: Ah huh. Did they have any difficulty that you recall being women in
the shop in a man's place? I've been reading about their problems,

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trying to get equal pay and trying to get recognition and one thing another.

Bowles: Oh that all started after the war.

IA: Oh basically after the war.

Bowles: Yeah.

IB: For the ones that wanted to stay. Yeah.

IA: I see. Okay.

Bowles: And so I had a crew of women working for me on inspections and Navy positions. And of course we was on the swing shift and ... 12 to 8.

IA: Twelve to eight, nighttime.

IB: So your shifts were in four week, four week intervals.

IA: Were these women mostly young?

Bowles: Pardon me?

IA: Were they young women or women .. young women

Bowles: Oh sure. Some of them anyhow. Middle age Very, very conscious, conscientious.

IA: Ah huh.

Bowles: Ah, I'll say this for women during the war, they were, they were good workers. They were ...

IA: Did a good job and

Bowles: No just as good a job as

IA: Absenteeism wasn't

Bowles: No.

IA: a factor?

Bowles: No. No. Absenteeism wasn't I guess from what I could hear from other places, the absenteeism was quite, quite high.

IA: Oh in other areas of the plant?

Bowles: Well other plants.

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IA: Oh other plants.

Bowles: Other plants.

IA: Ah huh. Okay. That is interesting. I remember seeing when I was a child, there used to be the Reo would get the big E flag that would be flying out there on the Baker Street side. Ah, what was that for for doing meeting their production during the war or

Bowles: I don't remember.

IA: Maybe having a big, a good record of turning out good parts maybe.

Bowles: I don't remember.

IA: It seemed to be something they were quite proud of, my mother came home and was quite excited about having that flag up there.

Bowles: But then after the Navy division and after the war, why they kept all those supervisors on for ah, cleaning up all their odds and ends and we got done we were automatically done.

IA: With the war work. Yeah.

Bowles: So I just took about oh let's see, September, I took from the first of the year off.

IA: Did you go back to Indiana again?

Bowles: No.

IA: No. This time you were in Lansing? Stayed in Lansing?

Bowles: stayed there and of course, I was married by then.

IA: Oh I see.

IB: I was just going to ask, you know, had your family maybe started.

Bowles: So,

IA: You didn't meet your wife was one of those war workers, huh? You didn't meet her on the shop floor?

Bowles: No, she worked at, she worked at Fisher Body.

IA: Oh okay.

IB: Oh she did. Oh. So you married a Michigan girl.

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Bowles: Ah huh. So, took the rest of the year off, September to the first of January came back to what I was

IA: Nothing?

Bowles: work. My wife.

IA: Oh at Reo?

IB: So you hired right back in again.

Bowles: To maintain my seniority and everything, you know.

IA: Oh you could keep your seniority even though you had taken off that few months. Oh that's interesting.

Bowles: And ah,

IB: So you started back in '46?

Bowles: Pardon me?

IB: You started back in '46 then, right at the first of the year, '46?

Bowles: Yeah, I guess it was about '46.

IA: Because the war was over in August of '45, so that would be about right.

Bowles: So,

IA: Wasn't that about the time when some of the strikes started occurring, the steel strikes and the or was that a little later, I remember being steel strikes and coal strikes and railroad strikes

Bowles: with ah strike started in ah, in well let's see in the '30's, striking in the '30's. And I think the sitdown strike they had at Reo was in the '30's because they had that while I was working at Louce Manufacturing Company.

IA: Do you remember it?

Bowles: So,

IA: Do you remember that because it was a big event in Lansing, big strike at Reo?

Bowles:

IA: Yeah.

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Bowles: I don't remember how many of them was involved in the sitting down part of it, and ah,

IA: It went on for a whole month too, it was a long time ...

Bowles: Well as I say, I don't ... I wasn't involved in it so

IB: Right.

Bowles: I really wasn't paying too much attention, you know.

IA: I wondered about the Lansing, the labor day.

IB: Oh the labor day.

IA: Did Louce, where you worked at Louce when they had that labor holiday day, did your people go out that day or

Bowles: Well you might well believe they went out. (laughter)

IA: Oh everybody went out. What did you do, or did you

Bowles: We were, we were on the final checkout of commercial bodies and we were over in the north end, that old autobody, where the autobody was,

IA: No, I'm interested in knowing though.

Bowles: Well, you go out Grand River where the ah, where Turner and Grand River,

IA: Yes.

Bowles: well, that used to be one building, Turner Street.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: And that used to be the old Autobody.

IA: It was called the Autobody.

Bowles: And ah, Louce Manufacturing Company rented space there for ah, final checkout and stuff.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: And ah, of course, I was off supervision and well, they called that strike and the telephone ring in the morning and the general manager says get them people out of there and get them out of there right now and keep them out.

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IA: Oh.

IB: My. They were locking them out.

IA: Did you have any idea of why or he said it until you did it?

Bowles: Yeah. So they got out. Well we went across the street and drank beer and ate sardines, I guess.

IA: Sardine sandwiches (laughter) That's cute. We've talked to different people that remember that day and some of them have said that they hung around for a while and that some of them went home and some of them ah,

IB: Most of them went home.

IA: yeah, or went here or there and they said they remembered seeing all, the traffic came to a standstill downtown and there was that group that marched out to the college and then got thrown in the river and

IB: By the students.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: Well the crew I had over there, they wouldn't get involved in no way. They didn't go downtown or anything else they just went until

IA: Until it blew over basically.

Bowles: Until they had enough beer and then they went home. (laughter)

IA: When you went back in January then, um, was that when the model changeover started from war production, from Army trucks to civilian trucks?

Bowles: Yeah they were changed over.

IA: Did that take awhile to affect that changeover?

Bowles: Yeah. Of course, when I mean I was building trucks ah, at Reo and it didn't take them too long to changeover.

IA: Would it have been basically almost the same kind of truck, same body style and whatnot?

IB: Maybe a few more colors than olive drab, right?

Bowles: Yeah. Yeah.

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IA: I don't even know what color Reo trucks were. Did they various colors, I suppose?

Bowles: Various colors, red, white, green, blue,

IA: Whatever anybody ordered or

Bowles: Whatever they wanted.

IA: Is that where you went back to the spray, to the painting department?

Bowles: Un huh. I after I got out of that spray painting, I stayed out.

IA: So you went back on supervision again. Were you basically in the same, what happened to the Navy Department, did it just completely empty that part of the building out and put something else in there or what did they do with it?

Bowles: They ceased all operations there and they put ah, machinery in there and put some of the lawn mower in there.

IA: Oh yeah. Okay.

Bowles: And um, no, they utilized the floor space.

IA: That part of the building was that, would that have been the south end, maybe toward the Washington, Baker corner?

Bowles: It would have been to the west end of the building. Washington Avenue from north and south.

IB: Right.

Bowles: The building that faced Washington Avenue which would be the west end of the building.

IA: I see.

Bowles: That's where the Navy division was in there. It run back down Baker Street. Oh,

IA: Down toward first-aid or something?

Bowles: Ah huh.

IA: Okay, about half way down.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: So then that became the lawn mower division that space afterwards?

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Bowles: Well no, ah, not the whole, now I'm ah, the lawn mower division was in what they called, 700 Building and 600 Building. And then the steel the pressroom, was ah, back end of the lawn mower.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: Or even the back end of the Navy division.

IA: Oh I see.

Bowles: From the pressroom, that's where they formed ah, what have you, heavy presses, so

IA: Being on supervision then I was thinking about the, the unions and that and how that was all working but, of course, being on supervision you wouldn't have been part of the union would you?

IB: And what was the department that you were supervisor and when you went back in '46?

Bowles: Ah, oh you know, I think

IB: Are we confusing you?

Bowles: I didn't go on supervision until I went back.

IB: Okay.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: I went back in inspection

IB: Inspection.

IA: Oh inspection. Oh okay, okay.

IB: ... still on inspection.

Bowles: I misunderstood you.

IB: Okay, so you were still on inspection like you were during the war.

Bowles: Yeah.

IB: Okay. And what was it, what were you inspecting this time?

Bowles: Ah, oh, I went down to the motor plant, they send me down to the motor plant on inspection. I was inspecting fly wheels and cam shafts.

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IB: Okay.

Bowles: And I didn't like that no way.

IA: Oh why was that?

Bowles: It was low ceiling and no ventilation and all that smoke from the machines.

IA: Hard to breath.

Bowles: It was hard to breath and If I'd of had to stayed there, ah, I would have quit. I wouldn't stay there.

IA: It wouldn't have been healthy.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: I see.

Bowles: So I got to shopping around and they needed, they was just starting the lawn mower division at that time. And one of the fellows told me they needed a paint sprayer in the lawn mower. Okay, got the job.

IA: Oh you've had experience.

IB: How long did you stay there doing that?

Bowles: Until they went out of business.

IA: Oh until '76?

Bowles: No

IA: Or '75 or

Bowles: When they sell that to 1955 sometime

IB: Oh the lawn mower division.

IA: Oh so they quit making the lawn mowers then.

IB: Oh I see.

Bowles: They sold it to a.... firm.

IA: Oh. So the Reo lawn mowers weren't made after '55.

Bowles: Not Reo.

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IA: Ah huh..... itself. What did you do then after the oh, did you quit or leave the shop then in '55? No.

Bowles: I went back to ah, I got back... I go up in export. I think I went up in export. I was up in export for a year, I guess. And then they shut that down and then I went in to central stores.

IA: What did you do in central stores? What was that?

Bowles: Tool issue. Tool issue.

IA: Oh like tool crib sort of, oh okay.

Bowles: And ah, from I go (can't hear, loud hum) ... I went back to material control, I went into material control.

IA: And what was that like? What did they do in that department?

Bowles: Well that was like stock, material control. Ah, you might be out on the floor and moving stock and be in the stockroom and

IA: Oh okay.

Bowles: so on and so forth.

IB: Making sure that everybody had what they needed.

Bowles: Yeah. And ah, then what I'd do. I don't know. (laughter) Ah, then I went into the service parts. And I worked in the service parts ah, for quite some time and now I went into military service parts, expediter.

IA: Ah huh. And this is always in the 1960's. ... the 1960's or still the late '50's.

Bowles: the last ten years I was there ... service parts expediter.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: I retired in '71, so '61, '62, something like that.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: Before I ah, the time I got upstairs in the office and so on and so forth and

IA: And so that's for this last job you were up in an office.

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Bowles: Yeah.

IB: What was military expediting?

Bowles: Well, military expediting was they sold military parts to the federal government for all trucks that they built. And then when take a bid on so many, oh so many cam shafts, say 500 cam shafts, and other people were bidding at the same time.

IA: There were other companies?

Bowles: Other companies. And ah, the lowest bidder then got the contract. Well then they would send it to a packaging firm to be packaged to military specifications. rustproofing and this and I don't know

IA: Oh I wondered what you meant.

Bowles: So much in that military packaging, so much

.....

Bowles: And ah, then ah, then we dealt with all the Army bases, practically all the Army bases in the United States. One (can't hear) ... but always parts the government bid them, they was going to a military warehouse and then they would be distributed from there.

IA: Oh okay.

Bowles: See. But, if some military installation had to have free cam shafts right away, well then they would call us.

IA: I see.

Bowles: We'd check and we had them in stock, okay. We'd get them out, ship them, they'd place an order and we'd ship them.

IA: So it is for very special quick needs military... So you had to know a lot about cars and what the parts were and what the military would need specifically.

Bowles: Yeah, it was, it was fun.

IB: It was kind of interesting, was it?

Bowles: Pardon me?

IB: Was it kind of interesting? Or um,

Bowles: Oh sure.

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IA: ... different probably.

Bowles: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I had all the .. parts..... cabs, fenders, hoods

IA: Whatever they needed.

Bowles: The whole ball of works. from wheels and all parts to the truck and ah, it was suppose to be military ah, symbols.

IA: Oh. So you had all that that you had to know.

Bowles: Yeah, we had

IA: Did they change their symbols very often?

Bowles: No.

IA: No. I just got to wondering if you'd learn one whole set then

Bowles:

IA: I could see a new general coming in and saying out with the old, in with the new. I mean you know.

Bowles: No.

IA: I was surprised to learn that Reo trucks are still being built out in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Bowles: That's right.

IA: The Reo Giant.

Bowles: Yeah, but ah, a fellow bought, I don't know, two or three patents.

IA: And he only makes one or two models.

Bowles: Two or three models.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: That's all he makes. See every time they come out with a new one, they got to test them.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: And then when they went bankrupt and sold well, all the new print and everything goes with that patent.

IA: Okay.

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Bowles: So when the man bought the patent

IA: Kind of all right to producing that.

Bowles: .. do is sell machinery and

IA: Ah huh. Were you there at the Reo, when did you retire?

Bowles: I retired in '71.

IA: Oh you were there before, I mean you left before the bad stuff.

Bowles: Oh ... my years.

IA: Did you kind of know that that was going to be happening?

Bowles: It didn't look good to me for one thing.

IA: It didn't look.

Bowles: No. No, it didn't um, the way things looked ah, didn't look good.
But that wasn't the real reason why I retired.

IA: Ah huh.

Bowles: I was 62 years old at the time and I had 28 and 1/2 years service and
I figured that was enough.

IA: That's a long time, isn't it?

Bowles: Yeah. So I just

IA: So when you retired, you got your pension.

Bowles:

IA: That the folks didn't get in '76 when it went bankrupt.

Bowles: They all got a pension alright, but they all got hurt
very bad in there in their pension.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: Especially the ones that went out 30 and out.

IA: Oh yeah.

Bowles: I know some of those \$600, \$700, \$800 a month pension and
.... got through, I don't think they were drawing \$100, \$75.

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IA: Boy that's rough. Especially when you've worked all your life to get to that point where you could retire and have money to live on.

Bowles: I'm out \$7.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: And I didn't make no issue out of it.

IA: No.

IB: Ah, \$7.

Bowles: Yeah, \$7 isn't going to make me or break me.

IA: No, no, I wouldn't say so. Did you, how many children did you and your wife have?

Bowles: Two.

IA: Two. Boys?

Bowles: One girl and one boy.

IA: Oh one of each kind. Ah, so neither one of them went on into factory work or worked for the

Bowles: No my son he worked over at Fisher Body like this. Well I got him a job there at Reo and he worked about a month and he got a job over at Fisher Body and he worked over there for about a month, and he said this ain't for me.

IA: Factory work wasn't for him.

Bowles: No, he jumps around, ... around and enrolling at Michigan State, come home one night he said I joined the Marines.

IA: Oh.

IB: Oh, oh dear.

IA: You must have been a little surprised. You had no idea. Oh golly.

Bowles: So he done (can't hear) we didn't have

IA: He had a good experience.

Bowles: Yeah. He ah, was selected for officer candidate school

IA: Oh.

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Bowles:

IA: Hum.

Bowles: He was selected for office candidate school but no he wouldn't.... enlist another year and so on and so forth. He just finished his military .. ah, Marine training out there ah, oh, he went through the ranks and he got ah, they sent him down to Pensacola, Florida and they sent him to Memphis, Tennessee and they sent him to Columbia, South Carolina for education..... He went down to ah, ah, to Morraine Training School for officer candidate school.

IA: In South Carolina?

Bowles: No, Virginia.

IA: Oh in Virginia. Okay. Quantico, maybe.

Bowles: Quantico, that's yeah, Quantico. Graduated down there high honors.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: And he went to Lansing Community College a little bit and he went out there a little bit to the college, to Michigan State. He was going right on through and he four, six, eight years college falling by the wayside. And we went down to Quantico for his graduation, it was quite an affair.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: But he ended up a captain so. We tried to talk him into he just, last year (can't hear) was overseas, that was compulsory, so I don't know, when he was overseas he got ... bitter about the Marine Corp and there was two of his buddies. He was in the air wing of the Marine Corp. And two of his buddies ah, they sent to Vietnam and they were both killed over there both of them shot down.

IA: Oh my.

Bowles: Of course, they were in Europe though and he send those two boys over to Vietnam. He got awful bitter. ... he wouldn't listen (can't hear) and everything you know, ah, he would never tell us or anybody else what he actually had done. Ah, he was not classified as a navigator or a pilot and ah, I think he was topography and ah, mapping and stuff So, he is a good boy.

IA: Does he live here in Lansing?

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Bowles: No he lives in California.

IA: Oh so you get out to see him sometimes.

Bowles: Every two or three years.

IA: Um,

Bowles: He has three boys. Three children.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: His wife and our daughter-in-law and three grandsons will be here ah, about the 25th of this month.

IA: Oh you are looking forward to that then?

Bowles: Yeah, for a few days. We go out there occasionally and now and we fly.

IA: Well it is a little less wearing, isn't it.

IB: That is a long way.

Bowles: About four days difference.

IA: Oh sure. Yeah. Did you buy, did you buy your own house here in Lansing? In the beginning did you buy one when you first got your job in Reo or did you save up for awhile?

Bowles: .. Reo and

IA: A lot of people we've talked to that worked at Reo bought or rented houses and lived fairly close to work, so a lot of them walked back and forth to work.

Bowles: No, ... close to

IA: Do you think Reo was a good employer? You thought you were treated fairly and got a good wage there?

Bowles: I did. I did. I know a lot of fellows didn't, so but I always been a person that you have a right to your opinion, I have a right to my opinion, you have a right to express your opinion, I have a right to express my opinion.

IA: And that was the philosophy of the company too wasn't it? The company had that kind of philosophy too with its

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Bowles: always, I've always said I have a right, whether I'm right or wrong or ever right to express my opinion.

IA: And then they can do whatever they want with it.

Bowles: They can take it and say

IA: That pretty much sounds like the American way of thinking. I think, I think we all kind of feel that way.

Bowles: It is really uphold,

IA: Reo had a lot of different kind of programs for the people who worked there.

IB: That's right.

IA: They had a clubhouse and movies and things, did you and your family take advantage of those?

Bowles: Sure the old Reo clubhouse we used to go over there and the movies too. When I worked at Louce Manufacturing Company

IB: Do you still go?

IA: Oh you could go when you worked there?

Bowles: Sure.

IA: Did you have to show any identification, just

Bowles: No.

IA: You weren't one of those people we heard about that sneaked in, were you? We were interviewing somebody and they said when they were children, they used to sneak in

Bowles: Well let's put it this way, I got in.

IA: Got in. They had um, company picnics and things too, didn't they?

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: Did you go to those, you and your wife and your children?

Bowles: No. No. Ah, I wasn't, I wasn't married yet at that time.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: I was still young and foolish.

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IA: Oh okay.

IB: So you socialized.

Bowles: Yes.

IA: Did ah, did you take any kind of training courses or did Reo give you any kind of opportunities to have training courses for your job or when they moved you from job to job, someone would just say this is how you do it and

Bowles: They showed you how to do it and

IA: You'd learn on the job.

Bowles: hire new help, I'd show them how I done it. I'm going to show you how I done it, or how I do it. And if you say that you can do it any differently, and do it as good, and maybe faster, then go ahead and do it. Just because I do it this way doesn't say you have to do it this way. That's what, what I always call..... and question in your mind about anything I know, don't go ahead and assume

IA: And ruin a part or something.

Bowles: make sure.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles:

IA: From what you've seen, did your own experiences, did the supervisors and the men that worked under them, the foremen and the men that worked under them have good interactions with each other? Did they all communicate well and cooperate and everything? Just from what you saw, you know, you can't speak for the whole plant obviously.

Bowles: Well, no one truck plant and assembly and stuff like that. Ah, you weren't around it all the time and didn't now anything about it and

IA: I'm remembering a name from well for whom my mother worked there, but also from some of the people we've interviewed, Clare Loudenslager. Did you know Mr. Loudenslager?

Bowles: Very well.

IA: Ah, I'm trying to remember what. I remember ... that he was a good man to work for, but he had his, his ways of doing things.

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Bowles: That's right.

IA: I'd forgotten, what was his, was he a, I've forgotten his position, what it was.

Bowles: Plant manager.

IA: Plant manager. That's right.

IB: And Shirley, I wanted to remember that.

Bowles: and he was drafted and he come back ah, after he was discharged from the Army and But anyhow he kept they put him on supervision and the first thing you knew he was ... and mixing

IA: Kind of went right up the line, huh.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: Was he a good man to work for do you think?

Bowles: Yes, I ah, I think he was. He was like everybody else, he was ah, he tried to be human about everything, you know. And ah, of course, a lot of them but ah, was human nature.

IA: Oh sure.

Bowles: You know.

IA: Not everybody is going to agree. Ah, a lot of the fellows that when you mentioned him going in to the service which made me think about a lot of the fellows that left the Reo to go in the service did they all have their jobs when they came back. A lot of them came back after the war. And then the women left to make room for, some of the women left to make room for the men. Do you recall any problems about the women having to give up their jobs?

Bowles: I didn't have any problem with it.

IA: I was just curious about that.

Bowles: Yeah.

IB: The ones that you had contact with.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: Okay, you were at Reo for 28 years you said.

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Bowles: Ah huh, 28 1/2 years.

IA: Were there a lot of changes in the shop, the way work was done in the shop in those years about you automating it and making it more efficient and things like that?

Bowles: Like everybody else, ah, (can't hear)
.... You know, so oh they'd have to.

IA: It didn't always make the workers' job better though.

Bowles: Somewhat.

IA: Some of it did and some of it didn't. Yeah.

Bowles: No it was a very unfortunate thing that Reo went bankrupt. Ah, I've always said that they wouldn't put up a job operation

IA: Oh you think so.

Bowles: what happens is

IA: Yeah, we've gotten a lot of different stories depending on where the person was when it happened you know.

IB: I think the majority seem to feel that it could have been avoided

Bowles: It could have been.

IA: Yeah, we've talked with a few people that

Bowles: We, what I mean we all know ah, the upper echelon (loud hum) We all know And it seems to me that they sold this White Merck operation sold this Reo to this Cappaert for \$16 1/2 million, all on paper.

IA: Ah huh.

Bowles: But at the same time I haven't found anybody yet that can tell me, they got to sell me something that is worth \$500 for \$1.75.

IA: Yeah.

IB: Ah huh, ah huh.

Bowles: I haven't found that person yet.

IA: But that's what happened.

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Bowles: And that's why I said, when Diamond Reo was corporation ...

IA:

IB: I've heard that those were good trucks.

Bowles: A few years later ... White ... operation to themselves.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: Went bankrupt. And then they would be out of existence a long time ago. But ... truck come along bailed them out.

IB: What truck.

IA: V a l v o.

IB: Oh Valvo. Like Vulvo only Va, okay. I hadn't heard of that one before.

Bowles: That's my opinion.

IB: Sure.

IA: That's what we are here to listen to. Were there also changes in the shop, in the 28 years of the kind of people that worked there, beside the women being in there, were there

Bowles: Well some of the women stayed.

IA: Right. Well that's what I'm saying, the women came in and they stayed after that. Were there other changes that took place and kinds of people that worked in the shops? Starting in the '50's and '60's?

Bowles: No. Not to much.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: Some, but not too much.

IA: Okay, mostly people from Lansing and the area around Lansing.

Bowles: Yeah, yeah.

IA: Okay.

Bowles: You know, and stuff like this. For the

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IA: But the employees, most of the local until they started getting old buyouts and everything, yeah. And people, family people like everyone always said, people with families.

Bowles: Yeah, that is one thing about Reo..... ah, I've heard people talk their dad worked there and the sons worked there and everything and But ah, it wasn't a sweatshop like Fisher Body and

IA: Yeah.

IB: I suppose because it was a little smaller you'd get to know more people.

Bowles: Oh sure.

IA: But it seemed like more relatives hired in

Bowles: Well when I came in in my time here, I when I was on the ... patrol, I imagine I knew just about everybody that worked in the Reo. I was on

IA: So you went all over.

Bowles: And I was all over.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: And um, so some of the fellows want to be there, I'd go up to them and there would be some and ah, I'd ... in the morning I'd take one look at them and I would know whether to say good morning sir or something else.

IA: You could sense how things were going to be.

Bowles: So you know, I see people today I knew em and everything, but I haven't seen them for maybe 10 years. Every once and a while I went to say something to me and I haven't seen them in 15 years. And ah, ... look at em and I can I can realize I should know em, but I couldn't tell you their names see. I'll stand there looking at them and looking around and finally say well you don't know who I am do you and I say hell no. (laughter)

IA: I guess I'd like to go back for just a minute and talk. Lisa mentioned changes over 28 years. I'm wondering safetywise did you see changes in the safety for the worker on the job? When you started out, were things not maybe as safe or as clean for the worker or

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Bowles: Well like I say, ah, spraying that paint, I had stuff burning down there. You know what I mean.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: but

IA: That amazing.

Bowles: Ah, that then that was eliminated, they knew they had to eliminate that. It went rather fast but they were safety factors. I don't think that ah, the Reo had too big of a group of people that was on medical ah, leave or anything like that, but got hurt..... there was no question about that, but it wasn't a whole bushel basket of em. You know.

IA: So the machines weren't as unsafe maybe as

Bowles: No, some of them yes, some of them should probably should have been junked out but nevertheless they was still operating. Ah, sorest of the company trying to get the last piece there all the time, you know.

IA: Keep the expenditures down maybe for buying new machinery. I've heard too that the building itself in some places wasn't too safe, the floors maybe quite old.

Bowles: Yeah. yeah. Yeah. old buildings

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IA: And of course people were in positions that could help you, but you feel you did that in your 28 years that you worked your way through, given the opportunity to do that. You can't do that a lot of different places.

Bowles: That's right.

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: You can do it, but it is pretty hard to

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: Ah so,

IA: That makes a big difference in the attitudes that you have to the company (loud hum)

Bowles: Oh I young people working for them and see one of them not for the best and you know, if you can talk to them a little bit and ... get us back on square again and ah, and some of them listen to you, some of them (can't hear)

IA: The old-timers can like that when you started?

Bowles: No I knew all about (laughter)

IB: So they knew they couldn't fool yeah, huh.

IA: We talked to one gentleman who started when he was a young kid right out of 8th grade or 9th grade and he said the old guys that worked there were, wouldn't show him how to do anything. They kind of were maybe afraid for their own jobs, here comes this young kid you know, and he said I had to learn everything myself.

IB: The hard way.

IA: Yeah.

IB: Nobody would show him how to do anything.

Bowles: Some of those old-timers was that way.

IB: Kind of natural I can see why they'd feel threatened.

Bowles: Yeah. I knew a fellow that worked in export and it got down to where they was going to quit packing, shipping, exporting and .. exports to Turkey and foreign countries.... Turkey. And this one fellow .. that's all right, let them shut it down. He says I don't care. He said I got all this stuff in my notebook and he said when I leave, he said it is leaving with me.

IB: Oh no.

Bowles: So..... (loud hum) That was a very, very poor attitude for anybody to have. Because they paid him to get that knowledge.

IB: Right.

Bowles: He write it down in his book.

IB: Right.

Bowles: Why should he feel that way. But

IB: It is very selfish.

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Bowles: I never went for that stuff. like I said before, ah, any time I was breaking a new person in better, quicker,

IB: You gave him the basics and

Bowles: That's right. And you know, or both of you should know there is no two people that does the same thing alike. Maybe I shouldn't say there is no, but I probably should say there is very few people.

IB: Well because we are all individuals and we all have our own way of whatever experience we bring to that.

Bowles: Right.

IB: Um, obviously not when you were working in the office, but before then, were you you weren't a member of the union or anything? Oh you were a member of the union.

Bowles:.....

IB: You went up to yeah. Um, and it was pretty quiet they didn't have any strikes during the '50's or anything like that.

Bowles: No.

IB: Okay, so there wasn't real much, I mean, besides paying your dues and maybe going to a meeting or something, there wasn't much going on ...

Bowles: No. I belong to the union for a few years the only thing that I ever accomplished by belonging to the union was ah, I made all the insurance companies

IB: Because of all the funds that they had that you paid in to.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: ... \$10,000 insurance policy sothe day I retired, that \$10,000 insurance policy went down to \$750.

IA: Oh really. Oh. Hum.

Bowles: I ... my head off about it. Well if you want to keep it up, you can keep it up.

IA: But you have to keep paying it in.

Bowles: I'd have to pay the premium myself. Well here I am 62 years old and a \$10,000 policy, I'd have to take money..... from the pension I got in order to pay the cottin pickin insurance.

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IA: My gosh, \$10,000 to \$750.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: It just staggers my mind. Oh, dear.

IB: I think there is just a couple of more things that I have. Um, when I was mentioning before about the clubhouse and the activities, they also had sports things like teams, the Reo team with the baseball team and things like that.

Bowles: Oh yeah.

IB: Did you do any of those things or did you watch them.

Bowles: No.

IB: You didn't participate in that. And so that some did.

Bowles: Oh they had bowling teams and

IB: Bowling right.

Bowles: softball teams and um, all this and that.

IB: Right, but you didn't participate too much.

Bowles: No.

IB: Was it mostly for the younger guys, was it mostly for the younger guys?

Bowles: Yeah. and the young ones and ah, play softball and baseball and golf

IB: You were too busy doing other things.

Bowles: I was too busy doing other things.

IB: Right.

IA: And then later on you had a family to go home to so, um, did your wife continue to work at Fisher Body after you were married or did she stop working there.

Bowles: She continued working

IA: She did?

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Bowles: first child why she Oh, let's see about six months I guess it was, something like that and she went back to work.

IA: At Fisher? I thought she didn't come to Reo.

Bowles:

IA: She had seniority right. And she stayed there?

Bowles: She stayed there until ah, I think '66.

IA: Oh my.

IB: Oh she worked there a long time.

IA: She worked there a long time.

Bowles: Twenty some years.

IA: She just left a few years before you left.

Bowles: Yeah, so well she took sick leave for a I think it was '66 and she officially retired in '67. And the sick leave for a year.

IA: Oh I see.

Bowles: My wife was

IA: Oh. Brought on by her job do you think? Did she have to do something very physical.

Bowles: No, I don't know, her knees, she has had both knees replaced.

IA: Oh my.

Bowles: And ah, not

IA: Just takes over.

Bowles: That's right. If you ask me how she is, I says well, as long as I leave her alone she'd be alright, you know. But we get along pretty good.

IA: What did she do at Fisher Body? What did she work out there? Did she have a lot of different jobs or

Bowles: Well she worked in the cushioning room.

IA: Cushion room.

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IB: Oh stitching the cushions or stuffing them or something?

Bowles: I don't know.

IA: talk about. Does she, she took care of the house and the kids and everything and did that job too.

Bowles: Well we had

IA: Oh you had somebody help you at home. Anything else, Shirley?

IB: No, I can't think of anything else.

IA: See you didn't forget anything to say, but we managed to talk for a while. Thank you very much for

IB: Yeah.

Bowles: and .. washing bodies and I guess I'm working about an hour and I..... soaking wet from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet. And they had a big old that had been on that job for quite a while. And right down the center of that thing, it just looked like somebody took a pen or a pencil and draw a center line down. He worked one side and I was on the other side and he didn't wash that far over that

IA: Oh is that right over the where your line started.

Bowles: He wouldn't no way.

IA: So you weren't working together.

Bowles: That's right.

IA: He was just doing his job and that was all.

Bowles: I was working my fanny off and as I said, I would like to and ah, got rid of him just before any more and I'd have been chasing them My boss come out and said well, you got to get back down the line. He says skip a couple. He said I'll skip a couple. Pretty soon he come back up again and he said you got to get them cleaner he said you didn't get them clean enough. I said well..... He says So, the next day they put me on something else. And, of course,

IA: Yeah.

Bowles: So and I think I worked 85 days, something like that.

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IA: Oh they laid you off.

Bowles: Sure...

IB: So you couldn't accumulate and then if you hired back, you started again, you'd have to start from the bottom and work back up to 90 days again.

IA: Oh my. This was at the Fisher Body.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: But you said you thought that Reo was a better place to work? Were you, you weren't treated in that same way at Reo?

Bowles: Well yes. No, you weren't ah, weren't treated the way I was treated there Somebody seen that you were trying and you were behind, you were having problems, they'd send ... to help you.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: see, and I presume that Fisher Body there was a lot of people doing the same thing.

IA: Only you didn't.

Bowles: Only I just didn't get one that did.

IA: I don't know, we've heard that same thing from a lot of other men that worked there that there was some cooperation and

IB: At the Reo.

IA: yes, at the Reo.

Bowles: Yeah.

IA: And the feel like you said before, it is a family, you know, and we are in this thing together.

Bowles: Yeah, it was if I had to make a choice, I would have taken Reo before I would have Fisher Body.

IB: Some of the people also felt proud about the product too. They thought the Reo stuff, the stuff coming out of Reo was better and much more attention was paid to it.

Bowles: Well you know, the truck drivers in the country would tell you that the Reo truck was the king of the road.

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IB: Hum.

Bowles: In other words, it was the best truck along the road.

IB: So you felt like you were contributing to something worthwhile.

Bowles: I think the majority of the people ah, made it that way, ah, was proud of it that they, you know, that they had a part of it,

IB: Right.

Bowles: of something like that see. So,

IA: It is going to reflect in your job too if you are feeling good about what you are helping to produce. You are going to maybe do a good job.

IB: Somebody told us that work in the office that when Reo went down, Reo went bankrupt that there was still a lot of standing orders for those trucks. That people still wanted those trucks. So that bares out what you are saying.

Bowles: I guess there was, ah, so

IB: And there were a few trucks left on the line and everybody that wanted them was kind of scrambling to get them.

Bowles: We sold those models, some of them, some of them ah, ah, some people had individual orders ah, like um, oh some of the movie actors and stuff came in from Hollywood or California and bought trucks.

IB: Ah huh.

Bowles:

IA: See the plant.

Bowles: See the plant and see ah, assemble them and so on and so forth to see them. Quite a few of them done that. So, they were all well satisfied. Just too bad that's all

IA: And plus it was a Lansing business, you know, it was at least until the end.

Bowles: Well, when we was talking about this thing ah, going bankrupt, I had always thought that the business people was that business people wouldn't get behind it financially the higher echelon plant and

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IA: The Lansing business people you are saying wouldn't get behind it and help save it.

Bowles: Because they was, there was too many people taking too much stuff out of the backdoor. But I think that they if they would have took a bunch of them and pick out the ones they wanted and set them down on a table and just have a good old conversation about this thing, it would have never went bankrupt. And to a group of people that were going to operate the plant and expect from them and so on and so forth. Ah, I have always thought that

IA: Yeah, that is a shame that that didn't happen, it would still be part of the Lansing scene.

Bowles: It would have saved about 2500 jobs.

IA: And who knows, maybe by now it would have even be enlarged and there would be more people working, you know, if those trucks continued to be the quality that they were. There would certainly be lots of orders for them.

Bowles: At one time they were talking about doing a new plant.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: And ah, there was a lot of rumor but there was going to build a plant out west of town. Ah, you know where Don's Truck Stop is out there.

IA: Yes, yes I do. Out on 69.

Bowles: In that vicinity out there.

IA: I see.

Bowles: But that all fell through, so ah,

IA: Did you know any of the men that went from the Reo and started the Spartan Motors in Charlotte?

Bowles: Yes..... and stuff.

IA: Oh.

Bowles: Yeah.

IB: We went out and visited there.

Bowles: Pardon me.

IB: We went out to visit Spartan Motors.

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Bowles: No, I never, you know, it funny ah, I knew those fellows and I've seen them and they've invited me to come over there and

IB: We both went.

Bowles: Did you?

IA: Oh you should go if you get a chance, it is very impressive.

Bowles: And ah, I just ah, just never, you know, ah,

IB: Never went.

Bowles: maybe I'll go right thru Charlotte, see. But ah, here not too long ago I was talking with one of the fellows that ah, that worked at Reo that went over there and he told me that one of them that went over there and just sold his stock.

IA: Yes.

IB: And made a lot of money. Okay.

Bowles: \$160,000.

IB: Ah huh. What was it, what did they say the stock was \$1.25 a share in the beginning and now I said, oh my gosh. We just got this thing from Business Week a friend sent me ah that listed Spartan Motors, this is from Business Week Magazine that Spartan Motors is one of the 10, 40 best small companies in America.

Bowles: Yeah.

IB: Isn't that amazing? There it is right there. Listed with all these others. See this is the name of the article. Best small companies.

Bowles: Yeah, yeah. I know they are ranging right up there high.

IA: Yeah, very high.

IB: They are building, they are getting ready to build another addition on and they've already got what, four buildings, four or five buildings?

Bowles: But this fellow I was talking to a little while, he was telling me well he said he got \$160,000 profit. I said well Zeek why don't you sell yours. Oh he said damn-it, he says I did but I sold it too quick.

IA: Oh.

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IB: Oh doesn't that make you sick.