

Sue Ellen Brown

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IB: This is March 2nd, 1993, Shirley Bradley, Lisa Fine. We're at the R.E. Old's Museum and we're going to be interviewing Sue Ellen Houghtalling Brown about memories of the Reo fire and of her father's work years there. Sue Ellen Brown's address is 7131 Avenue C, P.O. Box 241, Vestaburg, Michigan 48891, phone 517-268-5588.

IA: Just some background information. We usually start with that. Were you born here in Lansing?

Brown: Wayne County, Detroit.

IA: Oh, alright. And did you, did you all move here for your dad's job at the Reo?

Brown: I was adopted.

IA: Oh, okay.

Brown: And my dad worked for a different corporation at that time and then changed jobs and worked for Reo.

IA: And so that's why you came here with him. Okay. Did you grow up primarily in Lansing?

Brown: Yes.

IA: You went to school here. Okay.

Brown: My dad always lived in the Lansing-Charlotte area but I was adopted through Ingham County and the other information they won't allow me to have so...

IA: You were very young though, when you were adopted?

Brown: Um, hum.

IA: Um, what did your father do at Reo?

Brown: He was in the office, in management.

IA: Okay, and when you were growing up when he worked there, where in Lansing did you live?

Brown: We live on, 1210 N. Logan.

IA: Okay, and did you own the house?

Brown: Yes.

IA: You owned the house. Did you have other brothers or sisters?

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Brown: Um, I have three other adopted sisters that are older than me.

IA: Did you mom stay home with you?

Brown: Yes.

IA: She stayed home. Okay, now we get to the good stuff. You said before when we were talking that you have very vivid memories of going to the clubhouse and the parties and all of that. Did they still have movies when you were a child at the clubhouse?

Brown: At the, at the time, it was like a dinner Christmas party and Santa Claus was there and us kids would file down and sit on Santa's lap and get a candy cane and all of us were dressed up in pretty dresses and two of my sisters were gone at the time and JoAnne and I would go to the Christmas parties while dad was working for Reo.

IA: Your parents would come down with you, too? It was like a family thing?

Brown: Well, it was at nighttime so, yeah...

IA: You all went down together.

Brown: My folks had to drive us down there and it was a night party for the adults and their family. It was a family get together for Christmas.

IA: And, the way you're talking about it, it sounds like it was very exciting.

Brown: I had a lot of fun. It was, it looked big inside. It was big. There was a lot of people. Everybody was dressed up and everybody was happy and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. It was an experience that, you know, I can remember from this day on, you know. I was sittin' way back but I can still see Santa Claus. You know, I thought that that was great, you know. Boy, I get to go to one of dad's parties because they used to have dinners or meetings where, my mother was even, would go on trips with my dad and things like that, you know, out to like cocktail parties and things like that with businessmen. I remember them talking about it. I remember my mom's type of clothes that she wore and the jewelry and I remember them gettin' ready for these things and there are a few pictures that I'm hoping I can be able to get. My dad's got a scrapbook and I'm hoping I'm gonna, my mother is going to go through the scrapbook and she's gonna let me have it so there'd be possible, possibility I may be able to come back with a little bit more information...

IA: Great.

Brown: about 'em.

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IA: Did your mom do any of the women's club type stuff 'cause I know some of the, maybe it was just the office staff and not so much the wives that were involved in things.

Brown: Yeah, she never was involved with...

IA: The Reo stuff.

Brown: yeah, she was more involved with her church and us kids growin' up.

IA: So that was primarily her, her other activity was involved with the church.

Brown: Right, with the Nazarene Church, Mifflin, over on Mifflin Street.

IB: Oh, Mifflin.

Brown: Church of Nazarene.

IB: Yes, it's off, runs off East Michigan.

IA: Ah, huh, okay. Besides the Christmas party, anything else down at the clubhouse or anything else, in a way that Reo was a part of your life besides the fact that that's where your dad went to work every day?

Brown: Basically, I think...

IA: That was it.

Brown: that was about it and that we did, we were involved in the Christmas parties and we, you know, that was one thing except for maybe once in a while dropping dad off or picking him off from work. I remember seeing the outside of the building.

IB: You never got to go into his office or...

Brown: No, no. I wished I could. I see pictures of what his office used to look like and...

IB: What was he, you said he was in management.

Brown: Management.

IB: Do you know what department he was in charge of or what his job was?

Brown: Um, I can't think right off, that's why I want to get the scrapbook on him because dad is definitely closed-mouth and my mom thinks that the information should go out.

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IA: Oh, I see, so they have a disagreement about this?

Brown: No, no. No, dad just, he says, I don't have anything to say.

IB: He's not gonna do it.

Brown: He doesn't want to...

IB: It's okay if she wants to do it.

Brown: Right. It's okay for me to gather and what she's gathering up but he's, he just doesn't say anything.

IA: That name does seem familiar to me.

Brown: Donald, Donald Houghtalling.

IB: That's just what I was going to say. I know we've run across it.

IA: Yeah, we've seen it.

IB: In some of our interviews or in some of the literature and things we've looked through.

IA: You know, we may have even seen a picture 'cause we've had other, we've seen other people's collections of photographs, company photographs.

Brown: He was written up in the newspaper. I'm not sure if it was for...

IB: The Reo newspaper?

Brown: No, in the State Journal.

IB: In the State Journal.

Brown: Yeah. They've got one where they did a caricature picture of my dad but I know that he was at Diamond Reo. I know that he was over at Reo on Mt. Pleasant and he was over at the Motor Wheel over here on Saginaw and so he filtered throughout Diamond Reo and Motor Wheel.

IA: Did he stay through the end? Was he there till '75?

IB: When it closed?

Brown: No, no, he wasn't. Let's see. We moved back from, because at the time he ended up over at Motor Wheel for the Reo lawn mowers and he used to do sales and upper management sales. He used to fly out and I've still got one of the old lawn mowers, one of the original Reo push lawn mowers.

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IB: A push mower.

Brown: Um, hum, without no motor and that's, it's still in its original paint and everything. Do you guys have that for the Museum?

IB: We have several lawn mowers here. I don't know if we have the model you have but we've been fortunate enough, we've got some of the power mowers and some of the push mowers and somebody told us they even had a riding motor and I'm hoping that will come to light.

Brown: Oh, my gosh. My dad might still have one.

IB:

Brown: Yes, I, I drove all the riding lawn mowers that dad would bring in and sometimes they would go to like Comstock Park and do a demonstration at the park even.

IB: Oh, with the Reo lawn mowers.

Brown: Um, hum.

IB: Oh, that's interesting.

Brown: And we've got a lot of pictures on that. It's in color and him standing there with the push mower and...

IB: Is that right?

Brown: Yeah. He flew out a lot to, to a lot of the...

IA: Did business trips?

Brown: Right, a lot of business trips. So, I, my dad wasn't around, really around and all I did was see him on the weekends 'cause...

IB: That was the way...

Brown: Reo and Motor Wheel had him going, flying and where I see my dad, I wave at him good bye at the airport and hello at the airport.

IB: Did he like going out on those trips or did he kind a...

Brown: He, I think my dad really enjoyed working for the company and the corporation and he was discouraged when LaGrange, down in Indiana, when they decided to and that's when my dad, he was offered, because I think at that time, Motor Wheel or for the Reo, for lawn and garden things, the factory down there in LaGrange, Indiana, they offered him, if I'm right, I don't want to, you know, you can check it out, I think Wheelhorse and Goodyear bought out that division and

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they were gonna move him down to Ohio and make him one of the VPs down there because he knew so much about the business and my father said, my roots are in Michigan and so then he went to Lorenz Lawn and Garden place like he was startin' all over and built their business up from a \$50,000 to a \$200,000 within a year and a half.

IB: Goodness.

Brown: Now the business is closed, I understand. After my dad left Lorenz's it just went choom, right down hill.

IB: It takes the right person. He must of been very, a very efficient...

Brown: Very good, very good, very strict, very management minded. He ran his home like he ran his department.

IB: Well, maybe I should of grown up in that household. Maybe I'd be a little more organized. So, that would of happened before the Reo closed, before the factory closed?

Brown: Um, yeah, it did because he was back in Lansing. We moved back into Lansing in 19, oh boy, I hope it's '63, '62, it was, I went into the 9th grade and I graduated in '67 so we can go back from there.

IA: Graduated high school?

Brown: I went to, I went to Otto Junior High School and then I went to Eastern High School. I only spent one part of the 9th grade semester in Otto Junior High School because that's when the shop in LaGrange, Indiana closed down and we moved back into Lansing.

IA: So you were actually in Indiana for awhile?

IB: Oh, I see.

Brown: We lived in Sturgis, Michigan which was only three miles from...

IA: Oh, over, across the border.

IB: Oh, and so your dad commuted back and forth.

Brown: yeah, 'cause it was only, maybe about, you know, a few miles away because we were right on the borderline and LaGrange is kind a like on the borderline, too, so maybe the most he drove was about 10 miles to go back and forth to work.

IB: How long were you down there?

Brown: We were down there in '60 to I think 1963 'cause I went through 7th, 8th and half of 9th grades and then, like I say, moved back up here

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into Michigan, or into Lansing and dad resumed working for a different, small company because he knew he had his time in and things were suppose to be okay and all that I can gather from is I think my dad lost all of his benefits through this.

IB: I was wondering.

Brown: I think he did. It's something really hard for him to talk about.

IB: That's another reason he doesn't feel like he can verbalize.

Brown: Yeah, he had to start all over again.

IB: There are people, even today, that I speak with and they choke up when they talk about it.

Brown: I choke up when, you know, it kind a, I was always attached to building cars and that was my big dream was to, I don't know, other kids wanted to go to college. I wanted to work for General Motors. I wanted to build cars and I was lucky to be able to be a part of General Motors and to work for the company, you know. So here that was my dream and my dad's dream was management and knowing what Reo went through, I can understand what, you know, the devastation of the fire or the closing of the plant. There were people all over Lansing that were just thriving for a job, wanting to work, but at that time, General Motors, I think, shut down part of the line and even General Motors people were out of work so it took from the time of Diamond Reo closing its doors till 1979 and 1980, '81, that these people finally found a job. Some of 'em, you know, probably filtered back in other places but I know that they filtered into the General Motors Corporation because they had factory experience.

IA: Right, but some of them were too old.

Brown: Right. A lot of 'em were too old.

IB: That's another sad thing. Some of them were so close to retirement.

Brown: Yes, and they, well, my, that's why I'm sure because all my dad gets is a Social Security check.

IA: Oh.

Brown: So I'm sure that he lost all of his benefits and all the years that he put in there.

IB: That's tough.

Brown: That's why it's tough for my father to talk about it.

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IB: Yeah, I can understand that.

IA: When you all came back from Sturgis, you didn't move back to the same house, 1210, you went to a different house?

Brown: No. We lived over on High Street, 1415 N. High Street, I think, or if it's 1514. No, they moved the house. It sat right beside the gravel pit. Now it's over, if you look across from the gravel pit, you can see the house. They moved it way around into a subdivision but you can still, I can still see the house and they rented that for, I think it was two years and bought the house on 732 Cleo and then I bought the house and then I sold it.

IA: Oh, that was when you were waiting in the apartment...

Brown: That's when I was waiting in the apartment for my folks to, because they were ready to retire and I told dad I would like to buy that house because I have this feeling and dream that I want to go to work at General Motors and, at the body plant and the house being only two blocks away and having a baby and that, I would be able to support my child and be able to go to work without having to even worry about transportation and everything would be convenient for me. So my folks sold me the house and I didn't ask for no deals either and didn't get one. I paid the price and I stayed there up until about, since '88 and then I moved up to Vestaburg, Michigan.

IA: Anything else, Shirley, or we can go on to the fire?

IB: We can go on to the fire.

IA: Yeah.

IB: I'm anxious to get into that.

IA: Which is actually where we are now 'cause you're at Cleo, right? You were in the apartment waiting for the Cleo house. So you already told us some of this but if you could just maybe start from the beginning. You were home...

Brown: I was home watching T.V. and my baby always goes in my lap and I breast fed and was watching T.V. and I decided to get up because a car had pulled out of the parking lot and I could see, you know, how cars will park in front of the windows at the apartment, okay, and I just oh, wow, wow, wow. I can see the sky and I kind a looked out there, you know, the car moved and I went and looked out the door or the window and all of a sudden I see this, I reminded me of Germany before they had changed the lights here in Michigan, they had these yellow lights over in Europe when I lived in Germany and I go, my gosh, that reminds me of Germany and then I thought again and I says, no, my gosh, that's a big fire. I thought actually it was the

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chassis plant, Oldsmobile burning but it wasn't. The more I drove towards the downtown area, the closer I got to the fire and my gosh, Diamond Reo is on fire.

IA: So you actually got in your car?

Brown: I got, well, I had to, I had to...

IA: Arrange all the stuff together ready.

Brown: I had to change my baby's diaper in case it was wet so she would have a dry diaper. I had to dress my daughter into warm clothes. I had to put her in her snowsuit. I laid two blankets, or a sheet first and two blankets on the floor. Laid the baby on the floor, wrapped Jamie up and tied her up real snug and had her little hat, bonnet on and her, I put a sky mask on her because I didn't know who blistery the wind would be. I had to get her diaper bag just in case, you know, 'cause I had to keep on checking on my daughter and I had to load my camera up with film. I took two extra rolls with me and make sure that the lenses, the correct lens was on there which I'm not sure if it was. I was in quite a hurry. I lived on the corner of Lenawee and Butler in the Lenawee Apartments there. I had a 1970 Chevelle, green station wagon. In fact, it came from Gary Glen, from Glen Signs. He used to put it in a car show and it was a snazzy station wagon and we, I drove towards the light. I kept on going in and out of streets, trying to get towards the light because I wasn't sure what was on fire. I thought the downtown area was on fire. I thought General Motors was on fire. Everything was going through my head and then I pulled up and it wasn't on Baker Street but the street before Baker, or the first street and you turn left just before Diamond Reo there's two streets on each side. I turned left and then pass the store and I pulled my car down one block and walked up to the fire. No policemen, no fire department. I then decided, how am I going to get around this heat because the closer I got, even when I was in the street, it was warm.

IB: Now, you're walking up Washington Avenue?

Brown: No, on a side street off from Washington Avenue that runs East and West.

IB: Elm or something.

Brown: It's the, if you were coming from the north heading south, it would be the first street.

IB: I think that's Elm.

Brown: Okay, and I'm not sure of that.

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IB: I'm not either.

Brown: See, I'm not even sure if the other street is Baker Street.

IB: There are two...

Brown: I just, you know, kind of read Baker Street's in trouble you know, or something, you know, it got kind a bad there, neighbor, got bad I guess, but ah, I parked my car and then I tied another sheet on my back to harness Jamie around my back because I knew I couldn't have her in the front of me because of the reason that it was warm, common sense brought in, my daughter would be behind me.

IB: And you needed to have your camera in front of you.

Brown: Right, I needed to have my camera equipment and my film in front of me so what I did was, I found the closest building to the fire which was like a train station area. It looked like the old train station to me. I've never been in, you know, really been on a train like that, only in Germany, but I ducked inside of the, I think it was a fire exit door or a service door type thing, steel door. There was at least a good two feet, you know, to where I was protected from the fire and I would pop my head out and take a picture and then pop back in and then I'd pop back out and take a picture and pop back in. And then I heard an explosion on one side and this would be, this picture right here. When I heard, see, you can tell that I had to come out from the building to get the explosion that I heard over here.

IB: That would have been over here some place?

Brown: Right and so I jumped out, out of that doorway and then continued to take pictures and that was as far as the intensity I could get, of the fire, on the right hand side. There was three major flames...

IB: Major sources...

IA: Sources.

Brown: Three different sources of flames. There was one on the east side of the building. There was one on the west side of the building and then in the center.

IB: But they hadn't come together yet, if you were looking...

Brown: I think what, I think what happened is, the way I looked at it is that there's a possibility that it, the fire had started in the first place in the middle.

IB: I see.

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Brown: And then I think because of the grease and the chemicals that have been on the floor through the years, I dare say the fire trailed to something else that was on each side of the building because...

IA: Traveling along the floor.

Brown: It traveled, yeah, you could tell how it traveled because all of a sudden an explosion went off over there and then another explosion went off over there. Then that's when the police department came and...

IA: Did you smell anything? What did it smell like?

Brown: I couldn't smell anything because I tried to direct, instead of going on the other side because of the wind coming from the north...

IB: So the wind was blowing from behind you toward the fire?

Brown: Right, right, and so it was, it was, I was basically trying to avoid the heat and trying to find the best situation and the safest situation to be able to take pictures of the fire and since this building was right there, I thought that would be a good source of protection because of the brick that was on there and so I used that side, I used the south side of the building to take the pictures.

IB: So you were facing where the clubhouse is...

Brown: Well, I mean, I was on the north side...

IB: and all those buildings?

Brown: Yeah, I was on the north side of the building and taking pictures to the south.

IB: Um, hum, straight south, right. Across the tracks factory How long do you think you stood there between the time you arrived and started taking photographs till the time you heard any emergency vehicles or anything or anyone came and talked to you?

Brown: Um, there was 36 exposures, three rolls of film, the time it took for me to drive there and everything, the police didn't come. I unloaded my cameras because I had run out of film and I had started to back up and that's when the police officer had drove up and...

IA: You were already on the way, you were already on...

Brown: I was on my way to backing out because I had no more film. What I was gonna do is go back to the car and continue watching the fire from there.

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IB: So you were sitting in your car?

Brown: No, I hadn't reached my car yet.

IB: And he came up to you...

Brown: The police officer came up to me and he didn't give me a badge number or anything like that. He just told me that I had to leave and I said I was leaving and he says if you don't leave now, I will put you under arrest for obstruction.

IB: And you were the only one in the parking lot?

Brown: I was the only one. The police department and the fire department had not come yet and I said, I asked him why and he told me it was none of my business, that if I didn't leave then he was gonna arrest me because I started asking questions.

IB: What kind of questions did you ask?

Brown: I asked why the fire went on this long without any protection with the homes that were in the vicinity of the area because of the intensity of the fire and there was no fire trucks on the south side and there was no fire trucks on the north side and by the time the police officer was there, I don't know if he might of called in because there was a witness there they would have to call in and then that's when, after he went to his car, then I heard the sirens from the, from the number one fire department right down here, was the first ones, I think, to show up.

IB: Oh, right down here on Grand?

Brown: Um, hum, I think it was number one fire, fire one, I think it was the number one fire trucks that came out.

IB: And so he told you to leave.

Brown: Yes. I was told to leave or else I'd be arrested.

IB: Did he ask for your name or anything like that?

Brown: No, he took down my license plate number. He said, he told me he did. That's why he would be able to arrest me. We can come and get you right now, I'm telling you to leave.

IB: But he didn't do that until after you started asking him questions?

Brown: He did not, he did not tell me to, he didn't tell me that he would arrest me until I started asking questions why the fire department

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wasn't there and why the police weren't there and why are these houses out in the open which they could of caught on fire.

IB: Did he ask you why you were there?

Brown: Yeah, he did and I told him I was a hobby photographer and it was very interesting for me to take pictures and he wondered if I was affiliated with any body and I says, no.

IA: He had that, are you with a newspaper or something?

Brown: Yeah, he asked me if I was affiliated with anybody. He asked me who sent me here. Who, how did I, how did I know the fire was going on. I didn't, I looked up in the sky and I seen it.

IB: Isn't that interesting.

IA: I can't believe there weren't more neighbor, people from the neighborhood around there.

Brown: No.

IB: You were the only one. How eerie.

Brown: It was. It was very eerie. It was very eerie because that's what I couldn't understand. All the people that are next door or, if they had, maybe they had called the fire department which I don't know. I never got in contact with the neighbors at that time. I was more afraid because I had a few month old baby. I don't even thing, Jamie was born in July and it was that following fall it happened and she was born July 19th, '79 and she was only a few months old and I was bundling her up to, you know...

IB: What happened after, you returned home. You got the pictures. You sent them to be developed. Did you, what happened? Did you...

Brown: I received some telephone calls because when I had turned in the pictures to be developed, I had put my name and address on, on the pictures and I had received telephone calls and they wanted, they said, we are, they told me that they had, like investigator type, wanting to know how I got the pictures. Where the pictures are at and they were demanding the pictures.

IB: They actually demanded them. I want your pictures.

Brown: They, they, yeah, they called me up and were demanding the pictures and I don't know who it was. They never left a name...

IB: They didn't identify themselves?

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Brown: They just identified 'em as an investigative, you know, to investigate what had happened and that they needed the pictures and the negatives and it scared me because if anybody would of contacted me, it should have been the police department and so, being a witness and they did not identify themselves as a witness and so I hid all my film that I had taken after I had 'em developed and everything, I hid everything.

IA: Did you just have them developed at a local photography?

Brown: Meijers, I think it was Meijers.

IA: It was Meijers, okay.

IB: That's interesting. I guess, I'm wondering how they got, somebody must of known that you had those developed there or something.

Brown: Somebody must of looked through the photographs in the store.

IA: Either that or they got your name through the police who had your license plate number.

IB: Through your license number, that's what I'm thinking.

IA: Yeah, that's probably it.

Brown: See, I'm not sure how that happened.

IB: But at any rate, all of a sudden, did you get more than one phone call?

Brown: I received a couple of phone calls and then, and that was it.

IB: Sounded like the same person?

Brown: No, it was a different person.

IB: It was?

Brown: Different voice.

IA: What did you tell him?

Brown: I told him I had nothing.

IA: You didn't have any pictures.

Brown: Told him I had nothing.

IB: Did they believe you, do you think?

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Brown: I think that they thought I might not have the pictures and then I hid 'em. I think that they might have believed me because the telephone calls stopped and that was in the, the last part was right when I was moving out of the apartment, was the last telephone call I received and I think that was, oh my gosh, I think that was spring because I moved out just before the lease was up but I already paid in advance on my rent and everything so I was all square and legal with the apartment building and moved.

IB: So it was a matter of a few months. How long a period of time do you think it was from the time you got your pictures developed till you got your first phone call?

Brown: It was about three weeks, I'd say, a month to three, three weeks to a month. It was very, it seemed like the pictures had come in my house, I was putting 'em in these and I started receiving telephone calls and I hid those pictures and then there was a place in the back of my truck where I hid, I thought I had put all of the negatives and all the rest of the pictures in there and then I had those hidden because actually those were, I think, the best quality pictures that I could get out of it because of the type film. I wasn't, I couldn't go to the store. I had to grab the film I had...

IB: What you had.

Brown: Right.

IB: Did you, do I remember that you were taking a photography course?

Brown: Yeah, Norris Singles, I wasn't, I was in, not, not at that time but Norris Singles back in 1970, I had a '71 Volkswagen and a 1973 Chevelle station wagon and so in between that time, I was a volunteer worker for the Northside Action Center and Norris Singles headed up the photography department and he taught me how to do photography and through that we would gather kids up off the street and give 'em something to do and teach 'em a trade. We taught 'em trades from anywhere from arts and crafts to running a restaurant down in the basement of the Northside Action Center and the photography and the photography classes were at nighttime, always at 7 o'clock, right on the dot.

IB: So that's how you happened to have your camera and you knew about the lenses and you had your film because you were taking part in this class. Did Norris see your pictures? Did you show them to him?

Brown: Norris never got to see my pictures. Norris introduced me to my first fire when the furniture place burned up by the Action Center, by Northside Action Center, for a class, it happened to be during a class we were taking so we all stepped out with all of our cameras and whatever. He could, 'cause a lot of the kids couldn't afford

cameras so there was a couple extra cameras and we took pictures of that fire and that's, I think, how I recognized, you know, going at first it reminded me of Germany. Then I went, no, this is a fire. I flashed back to the warehouse, the furniture building fire and we took pictures of that, too, but Norris Singles got them 'cause he took pictures himself.

IB: Did he, but he knew you took these pictures?

Brown: I don't think Norris Single knew I took those pictures at all because that was past the time that the Northside Action Center apparently, possibly had closed down because I think the Northside Action Center was renting out the building for a dollar a year and things like that, you know, just to help kids and Norris Singles donated his free time. That was all volunteer work.

IB: Was he working for the State Journal at that time?

Brown: He's working...

IB: I know he does now. He was then, too?

Brown: Yes. At that time, I think he was in transportation...

IB: Oh, is that right?

Brown: department, yes.

IB: Oh, now he's

Brown: Oh.

IB: He's a nice man.

Brown: He's gonna criticize me.

IB: No, we won't show 'em to him.

Brown: Oh, show it to him but...

IB: He comes down here very often, off and on and does, help for us

Brown: Well, he knows that if I've got film I'll just grab it and use it, you know. No matter what it is, I'll adjust the camera to where it needs to be taken 'cause I think I had 400 ASA. I loved 400 ASA. Norris taught me with black and white. I had color film because my daughter being born so I wanted color pictures of my daughter so I went into the black and white plus the color and did black and white photos of my daughter at that time and color photos and I just

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happened to have, 'cause I would have anything from 64 ASA, I think, all the way up to 400 and I only had three rolls so it could of been any sort of ASA film speed in there, you know, that I grabbed and I don't even know if my camera was actually, really adjusted right because I was...

IB: You were afraid.

Brown: I was nervous.

IB: I would have been, too.

Brown: I was scared. I was.

IB: When you first got out there, did you, you had a sense of the fire being in the center and not having spread as yet.

Brown: No, it had already had spread.

IB: Oh, okay.

Brown: Then I heard the explo, the two explosions on each side and they didn't go off at the same time. It was different. It was boom...

IB: I see, then the fire really ballooned up.

Brown: Yeah. The second explosion is when the police officer arrived and I don't know if he heard it or if there was a call in on it or what. I don't know. I don't have a police radio or anything.

IB: It would seem like people would, in the neighborhood would see that, see what you saw.

Brown: Well, yeah, I saw it from a basement of a apartment building.

IB: Several blocks away.

Brown: Yeah, and here there were people right across the street and I was wondering...

IB: Where is everybody.

Brown: Where, yeah, where is the fire department. If it was me and being at that time of night which was not late, really late at night...

IB: What was it, early evening or something? Oh, no, it had to be dark, it's dark out.

Brown: It was dark but I don't think....

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IA: Well, with the winter so ...

IB: Oh, that's right. Winter, it would be dark...

IA: So it could of been around 6:30, 7 even.

IB: Yeah, it gets dark out...

Brown: Well, I think it was more close around like 9 or 10 o'clock at night.

IB: Nine or 10 o'clock. I wonder, over on the Baker-South Cedar corner, in that area, if that was engulfed yet or whether that spread to that or whether there might have been fire trucks over on that side.

Brown: No, there was no fire trucks on either side...

IB: Nothing, just quiet.

Brown: because I drove, I drove down to the one side and that's why I decided that that would be, the south side would be a bad area to take pictures...

IB: 'Cause the wind was coming...

Brown: because the flames were comin' towards me and where I was taking pictures at, the flames were going up and then going to the south.

IB: I understand.

Brown: And I, so I stayed on the north side to...

IB: So really, you had been all the way around that...

Brown: I went all the way around the block before I started taking pictures.

IB: You went down Cedar, down Baker and back up Washington and over by the depot so you went around that whole area.

Brown: Yeah, I went down, well, I come down Washington and went down Baker and went up on Cedar and then I illegally made a left hand turn over there by...

IB: We'll expunge that from the record.

Brown: That's alright. They can't get me now. That's a long time ago.

IB: Statute's run out.

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Brown: Yeah, the statute of limitations kind a freed me from that but I made an illegal turn to get back on to that area and come around and there was no fire trucks.

IB: So you really had been all around that complex.

Brown: I went all around it first before I...

IB: That is so strange.

Brown: took pictures and that's when, that's when all this started. Then the spreading had already, it was already spreading because I could see the fire in, on the sides here...

IB: Like

IA: Oh, oh, I see.

Brown: on the sides, I could see it running on the sides. See, here's where it was before, actually before the explosions.

IB: Oh, this is before and this is after, okay.

Brown: And then, and then this is right when the explosion happened. This started building up really big and then this explosion happened. I waited for the explosion because I had to go back inside. Then I went out and took a picture and that was my first shot of the, this would be actually, this would be the south side or the west side...

IB: The west side, yeah.

Brown: of the building and then I don't have the, the rest of the pictures were on the east side and I did not get them but it just kept on building but you can see by the pictures how long I was there with those pictures because some pictures were taken out. I had, only had these because I felt that these were the best pictures representing, you know, the fire in progress.

IB: Right, right.

IA: had a few in between but these were the

Brown: Right, there is a lot of pictures in between that...

IB: You must of been there, I'm thinking at least a half hour before anybody showed up.

Brown: I was there, well, it took me, it had to taken me at least five or ten minutes to get my baby and me prepared to get into the car to go and then the driving time to find it and hitting your one way

streets, you got to go this way, then you're turning left and then I'm turning right and then I'm turning left and then I, I wanted to go and survey the whole surrounding of the building and the only way I could do that was to bring myself back up onto Cedar and come back around.

IB: Right, right, exactly.

Brown: And so I had to even go out of my way and then come, filter my way back in on the road to be able to do it, you know, to be able to take the pictures and decide which would be the best, how I could get these pictures with the lens that I had grabbed...

IB: I think you did a good job.

Brown: Which one, you know, how am I going to take these pictures and I wanted to be able to see, I wanted to be able to get the pictures to where it would show, I think this is an illegal fire. I had the feeling when I was there, the fire was intentionally set and I don't care now whoever comes and asks me about it because I didn't, you know, I wasn't around when it started but I was there and nobody else was because if, if so, these pictures would be able to tell you if there was a fire truck in this vicinity and there wasn't because I was back from the tracks.

IB: It's incredible, isn't it.

IA: Well, you're not the only one that's suggested that possibility. Other people we've talked to sort of roll their eyes and go, you know.

IB: I think it's a very real possibility.

Brown: I, I kind a have, I don't know why but I kind a half have it in my mind if General Motors didn't have something to do with it because of the word going around that they wanted to use the property for proving grounds.

IA: Wow. This is a quick way to clear it out.

Brown: Right.

IB: It's like burning down an old house. It's cheaper than having to, or maybe even safer because it was an old, old facility, maybe even safer than having someone in there trying to take the bricks down and...

Brown: It would cost, it could cost 'em too much money to have the building torn down...

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IB: Oh, I'm sure...

Brown: as if to collect insurance on a burnt building.

IB: I wish I had a couple, some of the bricks from it. We do have 'em here in the Museum.

Brown: Do ya?

IB: Yeah, in fact, the front walk that you came up and the facade on the building, that's all Reo brick and we've got several cart loads of 'em out in back but at the time they said, anybody that, I think it was in the paper, anybody that wants bricks from the, you know, the factory up to a certain time can go and get 'em...

Brown: I remember that.

IB: And then they found out that the people here in were trying to create a museum and so they said, you can have all those bricks you want if they'll be of any use to you so, and this was in May, Mother's Day, Sue Miller who was later on to become a director, she and her husband and their children went out there and picked up bricks and loaded 'em all day long.

Brown: I've heard about that but I didn't go and collect any bricks.

IB: Well, if you want a brick, I'll get you one.

Brown: Oh, I'd love to have one.

IB: I'll get you one before you go.

Brown: I would love to have one.

IA: I have one question actually that's not related to the fire but I was noticing when you were trying to figure out when things happened, you did by what car you had and you also said earlier about how you always wanted to build cars. So, I'm just really curious, you know, where this love of cars came from 'cause normally you think about it and I know that sounds really sexist but normally you think about it for men. You know, that men are into cars and they're into trucks. You don't usually think about, I mean, women like nice cars, you know, fancy cars...

Brown: Well, I got a truck out there. I drive a truck.

IA: think about or wanting to get their hands dirty with cars or, it just seems different. So I'm just curious where it came from with you, if you think it came from your dad working in car, well, it was really a truck...

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Brown: It was basically factory. At one point, I was just a, you know, I'm a tomboy for one thing and I started a savings account and, to buy my first new car and...

IB: You were in high school then?

Brown: No, I was 10 years old when I started saving for a car.

IB: Oh, I think that's wonderful. I've never heard that from anybody.

IA: I didn't have my first car till I was 30 so it's really different for me

IB: I had to get married and divorced and then get a car.

Brown: Mike Denman from, up there at, up north, he has M & M Wrecker and Mike Denman is, which we love to death, is like a brother, he gave me my first thrill ride on Vickeryville Road, on a gravel road, real fast and I loved it and...

IA: This was when you were real young?

Brown: Yeah, and I says, I'm gonna be a race car driver. I'm gonna build my car from the ground up.

IB: Oh, isn't that interesting.

Brown: And then I went into drag racing.

IB: You did!?

Brown: Yes, yeah...

IB: You've done drag racing?

Brown: I was, yeah, I was with Al Moon Independence Racing Team.

IB: Oh, no kidding.

Brown: And Al Moon, Dick Griffin, Griffith, he used to own the Go Shop, I don't know what they do now. Since I moved out of Lansing, I've kind a lost track. I used to be affiliated type buyer for Johnson's Speed Shop, Roy Johnson.

IB: Oh, did you?

Brown: The guy with the cigar in his mouth and that guy can talk, he can eat with a cigar in his mouth. He's great. He's great. I love listening to his Las Vegas trips, too, and I, my first marriage, Doug

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Hammelink, I ended up racing cars with him and getting in the racing team.

IB: There's a Pete Hammelink, isn't there?

Brown: I'm not sure. I know that...

IA: that name, too.

IB: We have.

Brown: I know that there's a George Keenan that worked over here at the Diamond Reo and I'm not sure if he's dead or if he's alive but he used to work over there and he married my ex-mother-in-law and...

IB: So you've been around vehicles and it's been part of your life since you were very little.

Brown: It's been a, only my life. I, the day, I walked into General Motors at the Fisher Body plant, I thought I was in heaven.

IB: Is that right?

Brown: I thought I was in pure heaven. I built cars. I never, I would work my butt off. If a foreman came out to me and said, Sue, we're out of glass. We need door glass built up, I worked that night shift plus all night long, I walked out when the day shift was walkin' in.

IB: Made sure they had their stock.

Brown: And made sure they had their stock. Foremens could pull me off the line and work me anywhere. I could, I just was so, the cars came so easy to me and it was, it's my first love and I think...

IA: Did you start working there after high school? No? It took a while to get into the shop.

IB: When did you hire in?

Brown: 1981, over on, that was...

IB: So your little girls was two or something.

Brown: A year, about a year and a half old.

IB: And you got into the, where did you start over there?

Brown: I started as miscellaneous with Gordon Shepard and I was putting in screws, inside the car before the interior was inside the car and I went from trim, I've worked most of the wire

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department, glass department. In fact, my last job was NVSS job which is a government safety job and I used to put in the safety pads and the clip that held the windshield...

IB: Around the windshield...

Brown: in there and I've painted cars and...

IB: You've painted cars?

Brown: Yes.

IB: That's what my dad did.

Brown: I worked in the paint department.

IB: My dad did there at the Fisher Body all of his life. He loved to talk to you.

Brown: Oh....

IB: I think you had a much better paint situation than he had.

Brown: That's when they, yeah, he did not, we, I don't think we had the lead content in there but they made sure that when I did go up into the paint department over at General Motors that they says, are you able to have babies and I said, no, not any more and...

IB: Oh, they did?

Brown: Yeah.

IB: Because of the lead in the paint?

Brown: I'm not sure why. I'm not sure why.

IA: That's illegal now to ask.

Brown: Yeah, but, well, I just don't know why.

IA: No, I know, but it's illegal now. They can't ask that. I mean, now the thing is if a woman can't go in there who's gonna have children, nobody should be allowed to go in there.

Brown: Right.

IB: That's right.

IA: It's not good for anybody.

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Brown: And so I was a woman that would not be able to have children anymore so...

IB: They felt it was safe...

Brown: For me to go in...

IB: you wouldn't be having any medical claims.

Brown: Oh, well, we've had explosions over there.

IA: Oh, gosh.

Brown: Yeah. I got blown right out of the paint booth.

IB: In the paint department?

Brown: Yeah. I got blown right out of the paint booth. The ventilation system stopped and they, instead of having the paint department kind of open, now it's kind a closed in and tunneled now. You should go through there.

IB: Is it?

Brown: Yeah, and we were inside of booths and what I was doing was, I was spraying around the door jambs and I was spraying the floor and I was spraying the sides and I was putting the heat treatment, painting over the top of a heat treatment that was in there and I would clean my gun every second car instead of waiting for the guy come around once an hour because if you didn't, I felt if you didn't have your gun cleaned that you would have spurts comin' out and it wouldn't be a smooth paint job.

IB: Makes sense to me.

Brown: And you have to have a rhythm and you have to be smooth with that or else you will have runs.

IA: Did you have to wear like a space suit when you were working?

Brown: Um, no, no safety equipment, had at all. We made our own safety equipment. I would wear a bandanna around my head and I'd put a bandanna, because we had a hard time over at Fisher Body getting safety equipment.

IB: You did?

Brown: Oh, yeah. My foreman died because of a dip tank and I refused the job. We had a three day change over and they asked me if I wanted to work the change over. I'd get extra money and I always worked the

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change overs and I says, well, sure. What are we gonna do, you know. Be a short change over, well, why not work it, you know, and get the extra bucks.

IB: Sure, time and a half.

Brown: Well, you got to go down into a, like a tank and clean it out and I says, well, where's my safety harnesses and everything else and he says, none and three men died that weekend.

IB: Were there fumes in there like methane fumes...

Brown: That killed them. It killed 'em. Yes, Mr. Ward was, he was a black foreman 'cause there's a bunch of Wards in there and but ah, William Ward was his name and he died trying to save his two workers he sent down there.

IB: Oh, my.

Brown: And one went to the hospital and I think he lived maybe a day. His body absorbed the poison. I think pretty much, I don't know who the two guys were. I just knew that, my gosh, my foreman died and then they shut down the line for one minute of silence and then we were back to work.

IB: I guess I'm wondering, when your father heard about the fire and saw your pictures, what, did he make any comments about the Reo being gone or...

Brown: No. He...

IB: Of course, it had been closed anyway for say eight years.

Brown: Right. He goes, oh, my gosh and, you know, oh, you know. And then that was it. Dad's not very well with, you know, talking about, you know, like the words and all but I think, I think there was some thought into it. If you'd look at his eyes, you could see some thought went into it but a reaction off from management is really hard to.....

IB: Is that right?

Brown: Yes. Management is real hard to figure out. Not really, but they are. They're kind a real cold.

IB: A little separate from, separated....

Brown: They're separated, they have to, yeah, it's their job, you know, to separate themselves actually from the employees in the union and to

get their paperwork done and so they kind of separate themselves from....

IA: Did your sisters, you had sisters, right?

Brown: Um, hum.

IA: Did they have the same kind of interest in cars that you had?

Brown: No, no.

IA: They did different things?

Brown: Yeah. They're, yeah, I have one sister that lives out in California. We're all adopted so we're not blood related. I'd never seen Sibyl. I never seen the first girl that was adopted into the family. She moved out when, she found her real brother out in California when she was about 16 years old and then Ruth Thomas, my folks brought her into the home because she was from an abused family and she kept on being over at mom and dad's house so the woman came over and said, you can have her and so Ruth was in our family. I never got to meet Ruth. The two girls had left before Jo or I were adopted and I'm not sure where Jo was adopted. I think she was adopted out of Ypsilanti or else born in Ypsilanti area and I was born in Wayne County, Detroit.

IA: And she's the one that's in California?

Brown: JoAnne, I don't know where she's at. I'm not sure where she's at.

IB: So you're kind of the last...

Brown: I'm the last of...

IB: Are you the one that's closer to your parents, it sounds like.

Brown: Yeah, I see them, I'm only about 20 minutes from them now since I moved up north, I'm only about 20 minutes, I'm 20 minutes north of them and I swore, I wanted always move 20 minutes closer to Phoenix, Arizona and ended up the other way, some how, because the price of the house sounded real good.

IB: And you may get to do that some day, you never know.

Brown: Oh, I plan on it. I hope that I can get my husband into the senior golf, PGA or whatever they call it.

IA: Oh, he's a golfer.

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Brown: Well, he likes to golf and that's always been his dream so I figured when he retired, we'd get a bigger, heavier duty truck and get a fifth wheel and grab his golf clubs and let him go to town.

IA: Do you still work down at the...

Brown: My job was taken away from me by the local 602 and by management. This is a sad story. There was a, a petition being passed around the factory to try and fire a co-worker and because of the General Motors rules and the local 602 rules, that is totally, you can't, that's not a right thing to do. That's the wrong thing to do.

IA: Why did they want to fire this person?

Brown: This person was a safety hazard in the shop but you should go through the safety...

IA: Right, you should go through the channels, yeah.

Brown: Go through the channels and they weren't going through the channels and they called Tim Shade a asshole on paper...

IB: Was he, he was, who was, what was his position?

Brown: Tim Shade was a material driver.

IB: Material driver.

Brown: He kept on messin' up. He'd tip over my bench on me and my tools would go all over.

IB: Was this on purpose?

Brown: Yeah, yeah, and the, Lansing BOC didn't care about it, you know. They put him back in trucking school or whatever but I wouldn't sign a petition and, because they wanted your name and social security number and I felt that if this was a very illegal petition, I was not going to sign it and I said no and Beverly Taylor, Gary Walker, Julie Houser and Charlie Kaiser all beat me up and I am on permanent disability and will never be able to get back into the shop again because Local 602, Ron Perry was zone and they wouldn't even give me a union call or a committee call because it's automatic that if somebody comes up and beats you up, you've got a week out the door. I never got back in because I wouldn't sign the petition.

IB: And the union wanted this person...

Brown: The union, no, the union, the union would rather have him in there than somebody that is actually legal and in the right and doing their job and that's why General Motors is falling apart today is because

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of how they're, like, well, we got Larry Johnson. He's been fired five times from the plant. The last one was on an embezzlement. He's back inside the plant. All I did was say no to a petition and I can't get back to work.

IB: Which you didn't feel was fair.

Brown: It was an illegal petition.

IB: It was illegal and you didn't want to be a part of it.

Brown: No, I didn't because I felt that they could come back and sue me if I put my name and social security number down there.

IB: Oh, I see, so you were protecting yourself in a way, too.

Brown: Right, and then Gary Walker and Julie Howers and Beverly Taylor and Charlie Kaiser, Charlie Kaiser was standing and watching while I was gettin' beat up by all these people.

IB: And nobody did anything to help you?

Brown: Management, management and a line worker, this was my foreman, one was my foreman.

IB: And they did nothing to help you? The union didn't try to help you?

Brown: No, I paid union dues and nobody helped me.

IB: Did you go to the union to ask...

Brown: I asked for help and they would not help me. They wouldn't let me, every time I, 'cause I was, my back was damaged, every time I went into physical therapy, General Motors would pull me out of my physical therapy and I ended up having to pay General Motors \$18,000 back because they wouldn't pay for my medical bills.

IA: Do you think there's some other reason that they didn't want you to be there besides the petition? Do you think it might of been an excuse?

Brown: I don't know why. I was a good worker. I was there every day. Like I say, foremens would grab me off the line and carry me on, Charlie Socier had me, George Holland, Ron Siebold or, yeah, Siebold and Bill Mullens is the one that...

IA: Right, and I'm not suggesting that there was, that they should have, you know, that there was anything wrong with your work and everything but maybe they just didn't want...

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inside the plant down in body shop. A guy was throwing the tobacco
tin inside of the forman's (end side 1)