

John B. Foster Oral History

Interview number: 91.1.1673.82

Reminiscences and Interview Recorded: 14 May 1986

Part of the Edsel B. Ford Design History Center Oral History Project

Transcript digitized by staff of Benson Ford Research Center: 2023

Note to Readers

The Automotive Design Oral History Project, Accession 91.1.1673, consists of over 120 interviews with designers and engineers conducted during the 1980s by David Crippen of The Henry Ford.

This copy was produced from a bound, hard copy final version of the interview.

For more information, please contact staff at the Benson Ford Research Center (research.center@thehenryford.org).

- Benson Ford Research Center staff, 2023

**AUTOMOTIVE DESIGN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

FOSTER, JOHN B.

1986

EDSEL B. FORD DESIGN HISTORY CENTER

Henry Ford Museum &

This is Dave Crippen of the Edsel B. Ford Design History Center, and this is May 14, 1986. Today we're in Los Altos, California, interviewing Mr. John B. Foster. Mr. Foster has had a long career in automotive design, and we've asked him to tell us of his various adventures in his career in his own way.

A I first started in Beloit, Wisconsin, where my aunt was the head librarian, and she'd allow me go down in the basement and look at the magazines that were outdated and look at all these car pictures. From the very beginning of my drawing experience, I was concentrating on transportation. I even did steam ships. We had taken a trip to England when I was a kid, and I was fascinated by the steamship that we were on. Anything that moved or had any aspect of movement was always fascinating to me.

When we got to England, I was fascinated by the old trains and the high-pitched whistles that they had.

Q Was this with your parents?

A This was with my parents, yes. Dad had gone over on business with the company he was with at the time, which was Yates American Machinery Company, and he did work in machinery.

Q What year was this?

A May, 1925. We were educated for a whole year in Gerrard's Cross near London. It was the territory where Milton got his inspiration in Chalfonte St. Giles and St. Peter. So we were fascinated by England. But, in all this time, I became fascinated by these strange little English automobiles.

Coming back to the States, we discovered that things were getting

into a depressed era, and we had to move about a bit. We had an ancient Dodge two-door coupe, which we were fascinated with. Then my Dad bought a Marquette, which was a Buick product, and he was a friend of a big Buick dealer there in Beloit, Wisconsin.

A friend of mine, Bob Koto, was also a native of Beloit, and we would summer together in Lake Kegonsa, and he later became chief designer for Studebaker [Mr. Koto died in 1988].

From there, I became interested in art in school, and while I should have been studying other subjects, I was busy doodling on my desk -- automobiles, boats, trains, airplanes, anything that moved. And I would always redesign them. They were never quite right for me.

So I went on from there and later, after the Depression, we moved to California, my dad assuming that things might be better on the West Coast. He became active with a Cadillac dealership in Pasadena. Through his exposing some of my drawings at the dealership, MacMinn saw them, and he encouraged me to apply for a design position at General Motors.

Q Where was Strother MacMinn at this time?

A Strother was in Pasadena, and I don't know whether he had already become active at General Motors or not.

Q What year was that?

A I'd say '35. We went on to discuss my possibilities with General Motors. I think MacMinn became an employee around '36. I had since gone to Art Center to hone up my talent. Art Center, at that time, was a series of motor courts, or, you might say, motel, operation with the housekeeping rooms in it, and they were finally taken out and used as studios. They were on Seventh Street in Los Angeles. Other than

becoming fascinated with my teacher, I don't recall too much of what I did there.

Q Who was your teacher?

A LeGakes -- Virginia LaGakes, who finally married Tink Adams, the owner of the school.

Q Was Tink a nickname?

A E.A. Adams. I never knew what his first name was.

She finally married him after he had divorced his first wife. I was fascinated with her. She was really a beautiful girl, and she had a big influence on my design techniques.

Q What course did she teach?

A She taught design. It encompassed a broad range of design. It encompassed basic design -- anything that was constructed of like circles and squares, whatever, was hers. She taught us to do posters, which used her concepts of design.

I was working in a bakery in Los Angeles and living in a room. It was down in the Grand Central Market in Los Angeles, so I commuted by streetcar from my room, which was near the Art Center school. At that time, they were called motor courts. They were a series of little apartments in a U-shaped configuration. They were not there too long after I left there.

Q Was it a four-year curriculum?

A I don't think it was. In fact, they didn't even have degrees at the time.

Q Just one, or two, or three years?

A Yes.

Q What was Mr. Adams' background?

A I didn't know too much about him. I never saw him doing any drawing or anything of a specific art nature. He had a good staff. Excellent photography instructors, and Virginia is a super artist. I don't recall much more of that school, because it wasn't too long after that that I got a call from General Motors.

Q You had talked to MacMinn?

A I had talked to MacMinn, and MacMinn had preceded me to General Motors.

Q What had he had been doing before that time?

A Gosh, I don't know. I think he was at Art Center, too, but he'd been there before I was. This may be totally wrong, because my memory of that era is not too clear.

So I got this call saying, "State salary and come." It was very simple.

Q Who was that from?

A It was from C.E. Pew. I wrote and told them what I thought I should get, which today would be a pittance, but they said, "Come, you're hired." They called and specified it would be a training period; that there would a period of probation.

Q Did they send you train fare?

A They sent train fare, yes, and I was hired. It was very simple in those days, and I had already sent them some sketches of cars; two or three of which I still have. They were radical, even for today. As I look back on them, I'm amazed that they even thought they would be feasible. It turned out they were really doing things like that in house

at the time, so it became a pleasant thing to discover that they were thinking about that, even though they were not on the boards.

So I was put into the Oldsmobile studio, which was headed by John Snyder. He was a very good designer; very eccentric.

Q This was your training program?

A This was my training period. At that time, the Art and Colour Section, as it was called, was in the building on Milwaukee Avenue in Detroit behind the General Motors Building.

Q Do you remember your impressions coming to Detroit?

A Depressing.

Q You'd been a Midwesterner, but coming from California in the mid-'Thirties to Detroit must have been a shock?

A It was a shock. The environment was no problem, because it was May, and it was gorgeous, and I really liked Spring in the Midwest. But I began to feel lonely. For some reason, it was my first time, really, away from home, and there was a certain loneliness about it, because you didn't necessarily want to hobnob with your fellow designers. By the same token, there wasn't much else that was interesting to you, except, perhaps, movies, and I was not much of a barfly, so it was a lonely time.

Q Where were your lodgings at that time?

A I was in a room at first with a friend of the woman who rented the room to MacMinn, and then later on Mac and I took an apartment together.

One day the woman in the apartment had to store a piano, and so I suggested that she store it in our apartment because MacMinn was quite a player -- or is. In any event, when he came home that night, I said, "I

got you a piano," and he thought I'd given it to him. He was quite crushed when he found out it was just a loaner. We had some fun about that. He still needles me about that.

But we both were active at General Motors, and it was fun knowing MacMinn. And it was not so lonely after we got together.

Q What was the regimen in the training program?

A It was not too heavy. The training program was strictly having somebody stand over your shoulder and tell you when to push the pencil. Paul Meyer was head of the Buick studio, and I had since been transferred to the Buick studio. I don't how it happened to work out. I was amazed at the amount of detail work that we had to do. I was appalled that most of the design shape of the body -- the fenders and whatever -- was done by the management. The rest of us would do the detail work -- the headlights, bumpers, taillights, the door handles, and the hood ornaments, as they had them then.

So I was not too pleased with the way the design was going. We had to do acres and acres of design on any one project, and I used to think what a futile time that is, but I think it was a learning period for all of us.

Q Were these sketches?

A Sketches, yes. And there was one chap -- what was his name? His technique was so great with a pencil that we all imitated him, and we found that it was a very graphic way of showing designs, particularly front ends and bumpers. MacMinn remembers that period very well.

Q Where was he at this point?

A I think he was in the Pontiac or one of the others, because he wasn't in my general area.

Q Back up a moment, and give us thumbnail sketches of George Snyder and Paul Meyer.

A George was a tall, dark-haired, fairly good-looking man. He had a lot of a charisma. I don't know why he left, but if he'd stayed on, he would have been far up in the hierarchy. But he had a few eccentricities, which, I'm sure, didn't sit too well with management. It was an indifference to management. That was my impression. Paul Meyer was an excellent designer. But I always had a feeling that he was more in the architectural field in his feelings than in the automotive field. I felt that was a translation of types of architecture into his work. He was an excellent teacher.

I can recall some crazy clay modelers, one of whom was named Jock Parke, who was an extreme eccentric and kept us all in stitches. There were a couple of other guys who needled Jock. I began to get the sense that the whole design center was nothing but a big country club. I think the discipline now is much better than it was then. Had we had a little more discipline at that time, it would have been better progress for everybody. As it was, we became so relaxed, that we thought, "Hey, this is a breeze. Let's sit back and enjoy it."

Q Wasn't Harley Earl running a tight ship?

A Harley would come in frequently, and he would, of course, run the show, so Snyder was, more or less, a subordinate to what he would do. He would say to Snyder, "It's too long," or, "It's too short," or, "It's too fat," and, "Let's start over," and then he'd walk out. Or sometimes he'd sit there in a chair and, literally, tell us where to put the lines. He had two favorite expressions. One of them was, "You don't want to be a

noncompoop, and you don't want to have too much 'chromium' on the car," which is ironic, because later on he laid the "chromium" on fairly well.

It was not too long after that that MacMinn became quite disgruntled with design in Detroit, generally, and set his eye on California. He didn't leave. We both were discharged after they had a recession in '38, and we were both....

Q It was a wholesale...?

A Yeah, wholesale layoff, and we were all sitting around there waiting for our names to be called, and Mac's was called, and Mac went back to -- where did Mac go? In any event, I got a job at Hudson under Frank Spring. They were still going strong at that time and trying to facelift an absolutely ugly car, and we were having a difficult time there doing things on it to make it anywhere near respectable.

Q What was Frank Spring like, and what was Hudson like in those days?

A Frank was a very casual, interesting character. I always felt he was more interested in other things than what he was doing, but he ran a tight ship, although he left it all to a guy named Art Kibiger, whose personality was very strange. He did all the dirty work for Frank Spring.

Q What did that mean?

A He just ran the ship, and Frank generally stayed aloof from it all. He'd come around on days where there was a decision to make, and that was it.

Q Show days?

A Show days.

Q Was that facelift successful?

A Yes. I felt we did a very good facelift. We did some contemporary design on the car, which was almost futile. After that -- I don't recall the dates -- I became pretty much disgruntled with Hudson because of the lack of ability to change anything and/or design. I'd left some feelers over at Chrysler. At that time, Chrysler was hiring like mad.

Q In the late 'Thirties?

A In the late 'Thirties. It was '38 -- the end of the recession, and things were starting to pick up. I went to Chrysler.

Q You all moved around quite a bit?

A They were very anxious to get a hold of designers, and we were taking advantage of it.

Q For the experience?

A Right. And General Motors was still not hiring anybody back. But I continued at Chrysler and met Buzz Grisinger there. I don't recall what I worked on. We played darts quite a bit.

Q Did you work with Briggs in those days?

A No, I don't remember Briggs at all. I think they had an account with Chrysler.

Q Yes, for body work.

A Right. So they would essentially do the body work, and we were still in the detail end of it. So I spent a heck of a lot of time from 1937 to 1940 doing detail work.

Q You met Buzz Grisinger at Chrysler?

A Yes, and Rhys Miller. And Ted Pietsch was there.

Q Quite a breeding ground for young designers?

A Yes. In any event, I went and tried to get back in General Motors

because I really wanted to be a G.M. man. They were a little reluctant to hire, but I talked them into it. I must have been a good salesman.

Q Who did you talk to?

A I talked to Howard O'Leary, who was administrative head under Harley Earl. And Harley was a little reluctant to hire me back, but O'Leary talked him into it. And from there I went back into the Olds studio.

Q Who headed it up?

A It was Art Ross.

Q Tell us about Art Ross.

A Art Ross was not too well liked by his employees.

Q What were his problems?

A He had a sense that nobody should be a better designer than he was. I always felt that if I proposed something, it was received, but not too well received, although I did a lot of designing for the Olds studio. This was '41. I think it was Art Ross, but I'm not sure who was the boss. There was such a short period there before I was drafted, that I can't recall who the principals were. So I had four years in the Army to cancel out my automotive experience, but I came back to General Motors.

Q Did you do anything unusual in your Army service?

A I was at the General Staff School as a graphic artist, and I did the charts and the slides for the Command School professors.

Q Where was that?

A At the Command General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth [Kansas]. I was there when the war broke out. I was drafted. I spent four years. I spent the first two years at Fort Leavenworth. I had my basic training

at Fort Walters, Texas. When they found out I was graphics-oriented, they sent me to Fort Leavenworth. From there, I got ambitious and went to officers training school, I had some run-ins with the tach officers, and I didn't graduate. I wasn't too gung-ho on discipline. Unfortunately, I learned later you had to do that, but it was too late.

From there I had overseas duty with the Counter-Intelligence Corps in Fort Walters, Texas, after I was relieved of my officers training course.

Q That must have been fascinating?

A It was fascinating, yes.

Q Where were you stationed overseas?

A I was stationed first at Camp Richie -- it was in northern Maryland within commuting distance of Washington, D.C. It was near Hagerstown. I can remember the town because I spent a lot of time in Hagerstown. I was sent overseas then. At that time, they were planning an invasion of Japan through China, and I was slated to go in there, but, meanwhile, they had sent me to Fort Riley, Kansas, to learn to ride horses, because, at that time, they were under General Stilwell using pack horses to get across China. Then I was slated to go with Stilwell, and whatever army that was there at the time were being trained to go to Japan through China.

Q Did you go to Chungking?

A No, I was never sent there, but the plan was to send me there. But, meanwhile, it appeared that MacArthur was making such progress up through the South Pacific that I wouldn't have to go to China, so they sent me, finally, to Okinawa to be part of the CIC contingent there.

They dropped The Bomb not too long after that. Everybody was shuffled around.

Q Had Okinawa been secured by the time you got there?

A Partially. They sent me up to the military government post in the middle of the island where there were still some snipers. We lost two officers just before they pulled me. I had two native sons with me, and I gave one of them a gun minus bullets, believe it or not, just to make him think he was being protected. Of course, he probably could have turned it on me.

I got through it all right, and we were sent to Japan, finally. Our job there was to ferret out war criminals, and one of our contingents was the one that got Tojo. They bungled that job by permitting him to shoot himself. But he wasn't killed. He was shot near the heart, and they tried to get the bullet. I guess the bullet was still there when they hanged him. He recovered, and then they hanged him, which I think was a mistake.

Q Why?

A It didn't do any good to hang him. I don't think hanging, in retribution, was any great act of decency on our part. I think he should have been jailed or interned. And I also felt that there was a lot we could have learned from some of those guys for future use. But, in any event, we spent the rest of the time just ferreting out war criminals.

We did have one contingent, of which I was the chief, who would look out for Communists who had infiltrated into Japan. Of course, we were beginning to get terrified about Reds at that time, so we thought it was a good idea at the home base. There were a lot of them in Japan at the time trying to overthrow the existing rule. We found several who had

been in Hiroshima when they dropped the bomb, and they still had the marks on them.

But from there I went to be based in the center of Tokyo, and it was at that time that I heard they were letting us out of the service because the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. Tokyo was a shambles. Tokyo had been pretty much obliterated by conventional weapons.

I was then discharged and made my way back to the States and was discharged at Fort Lewis. I made my way home and got discharged, and got friendly, again, with MacMinn, and we both came back to General Motors.

Mac lived in Pasadena at the time. So my brother picked me up at the hotel down in Los Angeles and drove me home, and that was reunion time, because we all had survived. One of my brothers survived the Pacific on the cruiser Denver. He was at Pearl Harbor when it was bombed, and, fortunately, he was on shore leave, which a lot of them were. It was a weekend. Then, Sam, of course, was in Eritrea, so he survived that. So the three of us all came back home at the same time, and it was a great time for my folks. I had to pack my grip and leave for General Motors.

Q You looked up MacMinn. Where was he at this time?

A MacMinn had been discharged about the same time I was, and we both got in his vintage '31 Ford and drove East.

Q Had they kept your seniority while you were gone?

A They had to. So I came back to the Olds studio. I remember getting a glimpse of the '49 Oldsmobile and thinking, "Gee, they're sure on the right track!" And even today, the car looks better than the average General Motors car.

I was coming up on the elevator with Harley Earl, and I said, "Mr. Earl, that car looks like it's really on the right track." And he said, "Yeah, I think we've got it this time." And he was not too communicative. I always felt that -- being as tall as he was -- you felt a little intimidated by him, anyway, and you hesitated to say frivolous things to him, and yet, I think, it was that very thing that would have made him unbend a bit, because he needed that kind of frivolity. He always felt a little isolated. I remember him coming over to the bowling alley and watching us bowl, and I always had a feeling that he'd really like to be talked to, but he didn't know how to communicate.

But, in any event, I stayed at General Motors about seven years.

Q They welcomed you back?

A Sort of.

Q O'Leary was still there?

A O'Leary was there.

Q Bill Mitchell?

A Bill Mitchell never went in the service. I don't think any of them did. Art Ross didn't. Henry Lauve didn't. All of them managed to survive through that period.

Q Was Jules Andrade there?

A Jules Andrade was just leaving when I came back.

Q Paul Gillan?

A Yes. Paul and I were good friends. He and I would double date, and then he went to another studio, and I didn't see him too often, but we still kept track of one another. I would say Paul, outside of MacMinn, who I knew from pre-service, was probably my best friend. But

then Paul got married, and I was still single, so we sort of drifted apart.

We went through all the period of the early 'Fifties, and I was beginning to get very frustrated because I felt there was a tendency to overdecorate and overchrome everything. I remember that the '51 Oldsmobile was a clean looking car; sort of upgraded from the '49/'50 series, And then came the '52, and the only way we could make it look different, at the time, was to redecorate it, and there was a tendency in those days for a facelift with chrome, which was not a valid way for me to upgrade the car. But, of course, they didn't want to spend the money for a major facelift, or, for that matter, a new body. They just didn't want to spend the money.

Q What studio did you go back to?

A I went back to Olds.

Q Was Art Ross still there?

A Art Ross was still there. And I had a question whether Ross was there before the service or not. But, in any event, I don't remember him leaving. I don't think he was there before the war. It was strictly Snyder.

Now we were getting more into body design, because the bodies would come in. Although the body was crafted between the divisions, each studio was charged with doing the front ends, the rear ends, and the fenders, but there was a basic body, which, more or less, translated to each studio. The front ends were largely our part. Everything from the cowl forward became our territory. And then the grille was a story all by itself. The taillights. The problem there was interference from -- not

so much this time, but prewar there was a lot of interference on the part of Olds Division chief engineer. He would come in and do some design on his own. And I remember, particularly, one dreadful thing that went on the '41 Oldsmobile under the little parking lights on the front of the fender. This man had put what would now be called an art deco icicle. And, of course, we were all just furious about it, but you couldn't do much because the word came from division that this would stay. But when I got back, we had a very nice engineer named Tom Loring. Tom was just super because he recognized the trends that were going on and knew that we knew what we were doing. Prewar, they always suspected the designers of really not knowing what they were doing. And, of course, we all looked like a bunch of kids to them, anyway. But after the war, it was a little more serious. They trusted us, which was fine.

Jack Wolfram was chief engineer. Jack was dour.... He became chief engineer, and Loring really worked for him, but Loring was our liaison with division. At the time -- I can't remember the general manager, but he was a very nice man, and I just saw his picture just the other day in something, because it was a recall on that period. He was a very polished gentleman. One day he suggested to the design center that we do a low version of the car. There's real prophecy for you. It was a good three inches lower than the current car, and I have to hand it to this general manager because he perceived the proportions that were coming.

Q What year was that?

A About 1950. So we did one. We just literally chopped the cars, as we designers know the term. We brought it out on show day, and this poor general manager was fairly chewed out by the hierarchy above him.

Q Who would have been?

A I guess it would have been Sloan, Charlie Wilson and Harlow Curtice. Because, at that time, he had Buick under his wing. But I remember that scene with great sadness, because I thought here's a man with vision, and we were behind him a hundred percent, and he gets thrown out by the.... After that, I always felt that this very polished, very articulate general manager lost face with the chiefs -- with Charlie Wilson.

Q The Oldsmobile Rocket?

A 1949. We enjoyed doing little rockets and all that sort of thing.

Q Who thought of that?

A I don't remember who did. We were fascinated by the V-8 engine -- overhead valve, V-8 engine. Charles Kettering was the father of that. Put it first in the Cadillac, and Olds did their own version of it. We were just thrilled, because here you got a V-8 in a fairly light package, and you could really rev it up and be a hot rod all the time. I couldn't wait to get my hands on it --the '49. My first new car.

Q Did they have an employee purchase plan at that time?

A Yes. It wasn't very generous, but it was enough to get you to buy.

Then we started getting into that dreadful time, which has already been referred to as the garbage period when they over-decorated, and I was really getting very unhappy with it. We get getting bodies coming down. It was difficult to work with, especially after that thrilling '49 and '50. There again, the big problem, Dave, is the fact that we had this annual changeover -- annual obsolescence thing, because it forced

you to do something different. Once you got a beautiful car, you don't want to tamper with it. And this happened in the case of the Mustang, too. A classic example is the Mustang, which kept being enlarged. But, in those days, the word was to make a change. A customer had to trade up. He had to get rid of his old, obsolete car.

Q That became an obsession?

A Yes, yes. And I don't know why it became such an obsession. Of course, they didn't see it in terms of styling. They saw it more in terms of something new for the customer. Maybe it's got new seats in it, maybe it's got a new engine, a new axle, it's got better brakes, so they saw it as a change for the customer. Symbolically, the designers in styling had to go along with it, and, unfortunately, it led to some excesses which Mac and I will probably agree with.

Along about '53 I began to get pretty restless.

Q Who do you think was responsible for this trend at General Motors?

A I think it was Harley Earl.

Q He dictated the garbage trend?

A I have to hand it to Harley for one very important thing, he got rid of all the extraneous frames, and front-end frame exposure, the running boards, and the so-called isolated fenders -- the integrated fenders. And he forced the engineers to figure out ways to do this, which, to me, was his greatest breakthrough of all -- the LaSalle -- the first '49's. It even goes way back to 1940. So he did force them to do this.

Q The Cadillacs and the Buicks and the Olds.

A Right. But, on the other hand, he didn't know where to stop when it came to this planned obsolescence.

Q His flamboyance went on?

A Yes. Then I think the height of ugliness was the whole line of '58's, and it was when that line was becoming valid that I decided I couldn't handle it any more.

Q There was about a three or four year lag there?

A Yes. I left in '52.

Q Had someone also made overtures?

A No. I thought that automobile design was going downhill. I really thought it was. I thought there was not much you can do to fight the built-in hierarchy of obsolescence, and I was depressed by it -- I really was depressed. I thought why don't I try industrial design. I have a broad spectrum in industrial design, and I might as well try that. I enjoy it. I know people in the business. So I went over to Sundberg and Ferar and applied for a job.

Q Where are they?

A They were in Royal Oak, Michigan. Very well-known industrial designers. They had the account for the Packard car.

Q The actual design?

A Right. They hired Sundberg to do that. Sundberg is a Swede, and Ferar was a Jew, so you would have thought it would have been the other way around. It was an interesting combination.

Q How big an operation?

A Not too large. I would say three thousand square feet. About the size of a large house.

Q They were glad to have you come?

A Yes. I went down to the Packard account. I did the whole side

view on a blackboard, which was finally chosen. The front end was chosen, so I, literally, did the Packard for that year -- '53. Packard had problems, and they folded.

Q A couple of years later?

A Yes. But I worked on several accounts. I worked on the IBM Electronic Dew Line accounts in Poughkeepsie. I worked on the Carrier refrigeration account

Q What was the Dew Line?

A It was a line of computers that they were putting in the Arctic to detect for radar. There wasn't a heck of a lot of designing for it, but I was there to make sure it didn't look too ugly.

Q What was the second one?

A The Carrier refrigeration -- Sears. They had the Sears business; the Kenmore appliances. They had Coldspot. They had REO trucks. They had toys. They had Sylvania television.

I worked on a variety of accounts, which was a real pleasure, and we had a great team. And Monte Ferar was an almost self-effacing type. Sundberg was just the opposite; a real hyped-up sales type.

Prior to leaving to go to Poughkeepsie, I had called Frank Hershey, who I knew at General Motors. Frank is still around. He's down South someplace. [Hemet].

Q What had Frank been doing at General Motors?

A He was, actually, head of one of the studios -- Pontiac. Anyway, I had talked to Frank, and I talked to him again when I got to Poughkeepsie. He said, "Come and talk to us."

Q He was where?

A He was at Ford.

Q He had joined the exodus from General Motors?

A Right.

Q As your old boss Snyder did?

A I believe he did, right. And Bill Boyer had come over from G.M. Frank had sent me to Gene Bordinat, who was, at that time, in charge of design. Hershey somehow split the responsibility. To this day, I don't know how.

Q What year was that?

A '54.

Q Was the split between the Ford studio and Mercury studio?

A I think it may be true. I think Bordinat had Mercury and Lincoln, and Frank had the rest.

Q Was George Walker there yet?

A George was already active. At least, his people were called in for consulting purposes.

Q Joe Oros and Elwood Engel?

A Right. In any event, I talked to Bordinat and was hired.

Q Had you known Bordinat at General Motors?

A No. I didn't know him at all for some reason. I was given a head stylist job in Ford exterior. I started work on the '57 Fords, which Frank and Oros had already pretty much settled the design on. It was a handsome car. I was in charge of facelifting the '57. That was another classic example of how not to design a car. It was what to do with the rear end. A perfectly logical car.

Q What happened?

A We got an edict from Crusoe. Do you remember Lewis Crusoe? He was

general manager of Ford Division. But, in any event, he dictated that the rear end of the Ford should like, at that time, the Thunderbird, which had those four circles in the back. So we put those circles on the back on the Ford, to our disgust, and then they finally became ovals, which was even worse, because it turned out that there wasn't room for the circles in the trunklid. So that was finalized as a final design, and the '58 Ford was a disaster, as far as I was concerned. It was dreadful.

Later on, we went into -- the '59 was another facelift, which wasn't too bad. It was actually a good, logical step from the '57. Still not as attractive as the '57, but still carrying the symbols and fins which were beginning to be looked upon with some disfavor.

Then, of course, we got into finless configurations, which were fine with me. '60 was a facelifted '59. '62 came along, which was a new car, and the '60 and '61 were the new car. It was very nice looking. A very handsome car. Still are.

Q What were your duties there?

A My main duties, again, were the front ends and the rear ends. It was the grille and the sheet metal from the cowl forward and the configurations -- the general facelift. So there was very little to do with the body, because it was always done someplace else and brought in.

Q So you're ensconced in the Ford studio working for Frank Hershey? What sort of a boss was he?

A Later Bordinat took over the whole -- Hershey was a very nervous type. I always had a feeling that he was impatient in all the meetings. He wanted to get on with things and stop this dillydallying.

Q Endless meetings?

A Endless. And particularly out in the courtyard. There always seemed to be times when nobody could decide and make up their minds, and there was a lot of indecision between executives, particularly when we had a major decision day, which was people like young Bill Ford, and, at that time, it was Bob McNamara, and people like Charlie Beecham. There was a classic confrontation between Beecham and McNamara.

Q What happened?

A Because McNamara had decided that the car we were putting out -- it was the '61 Ford -- they had to sell one at a very low price and just take everything off of it that they could, including belt moldings, and wheel covers. They just put hubcaps on it, and get rid of a lot of the chrome, which, in these days, is a good word, but, in those days, it was considered bad form. And this car could have used a little chrome because it had little else to recommend it.

But Charlie Beecham walked into this meeting, and he looked at that car, and he said, "Bob, that car looks like it's all pooped out. Looks like my wife looks after an all-night party," and this was all said with a classic Texas accent. You could have heard a pin drop, because all this intellectual whiz-kid atmosphere was hovering over this car hoping it would go. And that just broke the ice, and that car never got to first base. From then on, it was just whole hog on the cars, because Beecham, interestingly enough, had come from his big sales successes in Texas where he loaded cars, and they'd been salable to the -- well, typically -- in Texas.

Q The McNamara era was a bit spartan?

A Very spartan. One of the things that really shook me at Ford was they had gone from no management to too much management. By that I mean this weekly show was such a crunch time for us because of our trying to get things out to the show. We didn't have any time to really think about design. So, consequently, we were spinning our wheels week after week, and there would be no decision. There would be no final decision.

Q You were grinding out the clays?

A We were grinding out clays and not having much thought behind them. There was a cost committee that would come in midweek and try to cost out what we were trying to get into clay. And it wasn't into clay yet. We would be chewed out by the cost committee because we didn't have it ready, and then we'd be chewed out by management because it didn't look right on Friday. It was week after week of this. I would tell people, "Hey, let's skip a week, because we can then get our design intact, we can then get our costs intact, and the car will look a lot a better, and it'll get us a commitment and a decision." Never happened!

Finally, they did decide long after -- months after I left Ford -- to have an alternate week whereby interiors were shown one week, and exteriors the next. And that seemed to work much better. Now, I understand, it's a much better procedure.

You mentioned it was an austere period with McNamara. It continued to be for quite awhile. They lost sales in a boom period, which didn't matter too much, because everybody was making money.

Q His vision of a people's car fell totally in the Falcon?

A Yeah, which was fine, and it outsold the Corvair something like two to one. The big breakthrough was with Iacocca.

Q What happened there?

A He sensed that there was room for a sports car because he had seen the success of the Corvair Monza, which was a tricked-up Corvair. Even though it couldn't get out of its own way, it was still a sportier-looking car. So that was his clue, and, of course, he said, "There's room in our line-up for a sports car." This is what started the whole thing.

Q The Thunderbird had gotten big and bulbous by this time?

A Right, which was another fiasco. It was obsolescence. It was still pervading the whole industry. They were all fearful of changing that policy because they were afraid that General Motors would out-manuever them, and that's competition.

In any event, the Mustang was given birth to, and the package, of course, was worked out by using some components from the Falcon.

Q Do you remember some of the details of putting that together?

A I was in charge of the interior. There was a chap that preceded me who is now in Florida whose name I've forgotten. In any event, I inherited the Mustang, partially designed already in its interior. But it was my responsibility to get the interior out. We did the instrument panel, the seats, and the door panels, and whatever else.

Q Was Charlie Phaneuf involved?

A No, no. Charlie Phaneuf literally designed the Mustang. He should get credit for it.

Q Basically, what was the outline of the story?

A The sense of it was that he got the package, more or less, and the body was a composite of several designers. But they got the idea from

the success of the Lincoln Continental. It was the Mark III -- the 1960/'61 Continental. It had those nice, straight lines. There was a little hop up in the rear fender, and it went straight back. They thought they'd take that theme and do it on a small car, which they did. And, of course, it worked beautifully.

Charlie then was charged with doing the front end and the components. I don't know how much he had to do with the body. I'm sure he had something to do with it. But, in any event, it was done in his studio. He was the head stylist. Dave Ash was over him. Bordinat was over Ash. There was someone in between them as an executive designer -- Joe Oros.

Q Yes, he was an executive designer.

A Ash was interiors. I reported to Ash. Then I reported later to Damon Woods, who, unfortunately, lost his life in an automobile accident.

Q Was Gale Halderman involved at that time?

A I don't remember where Gale was. Gale worked for me for awhile.

Q What was Charlie Phaneuf's responsibility?

A Charlie did the general front end, and he did part of the body. I'm not sure. Anyway, the whole thing was done in his studio. One of the chaps that worked for him -- his name was Shumaker -- devised this high grille with the headlamps faired into it, so they put that on there. The bumper was underneath.

When it was finally shown to Iacocca, it was a success. There was one other model along side it, which, as it turned out, became the Cougar. I seem to recall that they were seriously thinking of the

Mustang as the Cougar, but then they switched gears and did the Mustang, and the Cougar became the Cougar. The Cougar design became the Cougar, which were both huge successes. Then they went on to facelift the Cougar, and they facelifted the Mustang, and things went from good, to bad, to worse!

Q Do you remember John Najjar?

A Najjar was my boss, finally. I was still working with Damon Woods, and I told Damon, "I don't think my talents were best used in the interior. I know you have this policy of having designers broaden themselves by going to different disciplines, but I'm really not too content with the interiors. I feel much more an exterior man." So it wasn't long after that that he transferred me to what was known as the advanced Cougar studio, and we did some excellent designs, I thought, and most of which were shelved.

Politically, Dave, I wasn't too in, and I don't know whether it was because my attitude was not right or what.

Q You didn't play the game?

A I didn't play the game. That's an old alibi, I realize that. But I didn't know at the time that a lot of these people -- even the superiors -- were reaching out to me for some kind of friendship and some security, because the whole design business was a very insecure business by itself as people probably can confirm. I felt that they were looking to me for some kind of security and friendship -- call it friendship. My one real fan was Damon Woods, and I lost him.

Q Can you tell us a little bit about Damon Woods? Because of his tragic death, people have mentioned him, but we don't know too much about him.

A Damon was an intellectual type. He made his home in Ann Arbor, which was a logical place to be for an intellectual. He had a....

Q So did McNamara?

A Yeah, they were both commuting back and forth, and it was during the commute that he had that accident. Damon and I were real close. I felt that there was some rapport there that I rarely had with anybody. And he was a very gregarious and very brilliant man. He probably came from an engineering background rather than styling, although he was exposed to styling. He was at Kaiser-Fraser and came to Ford from there. And he had good credentials, having had an excellent education, which very few of us designers had, as far as academics go. So he would have parties in Ann Arbor, and we'd go there. It was becoming a very close friendship. So I lost out after that because I didn't really have a mentor, so to speak.

Q What about Hershey?

A Hershey, I think he was let go. I'm not sure.

Q There were some problems?

A Yes. One man that I had lots of run-ins with was Bob McGuire.

Q What was the problem there?

A He was a very sarcastic person. And I admit I had problems, too, because I was a little bit insecure about having what I was showing constantly rejected. Not because I didn't think they were attractive, but because I didn't feel like I was in quite as solidly as I could have been. And McGuire was sarcastic to everybody, including Oros. The miracle to me was that he kept his job in the face of Walker's commitment to Ford. Because all Walker had to do was talk to Bordinat and say get

rid of him, but he never did. And I don't know what the story was. McGuire had no consciousness of what was a good design or not.

I did one bad thing, Dave. Each one of us, as head stylist, was given an opportunity to do a whole car, and, at the time, I was very conscious of industrial design and a how a car could look if an industrial designer had done it. So I did my car in that concept. It had a stiffened air. It was more like present-day General Motors cars, which are losing favor because of their stiff backlights and things. So he asked me to change it, and I did, and the car came out beautifully, even after that. Among its unusual features were two lights high up on the deck on either side of the greenhouse, which acted as stoplights, which are now here. And then later on, I noticed it came out on an Oldsmobile, so I was a little bit piqued that they hadn't picked up on it at Ford.

Q What did he decide? What was his reaction?

A Whose -- Bordinat's?

Q No, McGuire.

A I never found out the reaction after that because my car had been finished, and it was generally well accepted. Except, of course, none of these cars were really used as actual operational cars, so it was hard to tell who won that battle and who didn't. In any event, I was pleased with the car. And others were. Others remarked that it came out pretty nice.

But, at that time, of course, we were trying to maintain a certain windshield angle, and, of course, nowadays, the angles are extreme. And it might have been better had I been able to use a more extreme windshield angle.

However, it was not long after that that I was, as I mentioned previously, put into the Cougar studio under Bud Kaufman. We did a lot of interesting things. We did some very nice things. But, to get back to my original point. To show you a typical example of politics, I put my car out into the courtyard for viewing by Bordinat, and it no sooner got out there than Bordinat said, "Get that car out of here," and he sent it back to the studio.

Q Why?

A I have never been able to find out. And yet to a man, they loved that car. The designers -- everybody -- thought it was a great car. It still is to this day. Of course, it doesn't have the bumper configuration that's required. I was taking advantage of no bumpers, and fragile bumpers.

Not long after that, they formed an industrial design studio, which had to do with designing things other than cars.

Q Was it the 'Sixties?

A It was about '68, I'd say, or '69.

Q Who headed the studio?

A That was John Najjar. John was a fine man, still is. Excellent. Very compassionate. A very good businessman. Very orderly. Very well liked.

So this was formed to supply Ford companies that they bought and who were interested in, to supply them with designs. There was a mobile-home design. There was a lawnmower company design. There were automobile showrooms to design. There was one chap....

Q In the industrial design area?

A Yes, and he was my superior, between me and Najjar. Tom Scherer! I was not a politically-motivated animal, so I was slowly losing ground at Ford. When I had an opportunity to retire, I took it.

Q Early retirement?

A Yes, early retirement. I've since gone back to visit, and it's been pleasant.

Q Back up a bit and tell us about the industrial design studio and how it worked.

A It's since been dissolved, especially in the austerity of the early 'Eighties. But it was a pleasant thing. We actually did some rooms. I can't remember what these rooms were for, but I think they were for this mobilehome concept. We did little models of promotional things for the -- at that time, they were playing with the anti-lock brakes, and so we had a little model of a car going down an incline.

Q Did you work on the people-mover?

A No. I don't remember that one. It must have happened after I left. It was kind of an interesting area because we were working on various things. The nicest things were for auto shows. We did some auto show exhibits, which were real fine. Scherer was very active in that. And we did one presentation where he parted the curtains, and we played Richard Strauss' "Also Sprach Zarathustra" -- that popular thing. So we had a very imaginative group. I always had the feeling the industrial design section was a boondoggle. It was something for Bordinat to dip his fingers into. At that time, Bordinat was showing signs of getting into industrial design himself, or, at least, that was the rumor.

But, in any event, I don't recall all the things we did. We did a

booklet for the Dearborn school system for automobile design, which was an excellent booklet. I was doing a few things on the side by this time. I was moonlighting, and I was becoming interested in industrial design again. I guess I was one of these people that as long as I couldn't do the whole thing, I wasn't interested. As long as I couldn't sit up there and direct people things, I'm really not that happy. Although I've had several of the younger designers say, "You're the only one of the whole head stylists group or executive group who could draw," and I really thought I put a lot of importance of picturing the car the way it should be.

Then we spent a lot of time in the car studios doing full-size tape drawings.

Q Explain those.

A It was usually eighth inch tape that was cut in the metal shop. We took these rolls of half inch and inch tape and had them cut. This tape got down to as little as an eighth of an inch, and then we'd literally draw by stretching the tape on the blackboard. Of course, we had some visual good grid lines to indicate coordinates -- five inch grid lines -- five inch intervals up and down. So we always knew where we were, package-wise. The most interesting part of the whole project was working with the package people, although they were as frustrated as we were. For instance, now I feel on all Ford cars, the cowls are too high. You have a tendency to feel inhibited by this highness. You have it in your Thunderbird?

Q Yes.

A Whereas you get in a BMW, and you're looking down on the dash, which is the way it should be, not that the windshield should be so high,

but the whole configuration should be down, down, down. I see one sports car they're coming up with for the Ford line -- two-seater, mid-engine -- it has a depressed cowl, which, I think, is a real breakthrough. I'm still a car nut. I don't know how many of these people there are, but I could turn around tomorrow and start all over again. I just love cars.

Q You have a very young outlook on things?

A I stay young by keeping active. I keep my finger in it. Now I'm into my minor, which is advertising. It's remote from design, but it's still fun. The guys have got me working too hard, and I'm ready to give up.

Q How did the early retirement come about?

A I had almost asked for it. I knew they were dangling it at several people. I might still be there -- I mean up to my final retirement -- if I hadn't asked for it. They used a very devious ploy by saying, "If you don't take this, you may never get it." So I had visions of being fired if I didn't take it, so I took it.

Q Who did you talk to about it?

A I don't remember the chap I talked to. It wasn't anybody in management.

Q You didn't talk to Bordinat or anyone?

A No. I was just feeling the atmosphere, and I had this friend in personnel -- a nice young chap -- who expressed an interest in design. I talked to him one day about early retirement. I said, "What's it all about -- early retirement? Is it still a valid thing?" A few weeks later they offered it to me. I think it seeped through the woodwork. I think he told them. I took it, and they made it partially attractive.

Q John Foster, before we hear what happened after the Ford Motor Company, you and I thought it would be instructive at this point for you to give us the sum of your experience in automotive design and a peek at your individual philosophy of design and what aesthetics and architectronics went into it. If you were to give a lecture before a group of design students, what could you tell them about your own philosophical world in the design profession? How do you feel about automotive design -- industrial design?

A I would say that I had a very broad viewpoint toward design, which may have been more broad than the average automotive designer. I tended to look upon the environment as an architectural experience, an industrial design experience, an interior design experience, a landscape design experience. I felt that these all were tied together, including even the automotive experience, because it had to move in and out of spaces, had to be an event in itself in any of these disciplines, so that there was really a very nice capsule of design when I was with the automobile business, because it was related to all these things that you move in and out of: your garage, your house, your landscape, your streets, your driveway, anything that had an affinity for the wheel, so to speak.

Looking back on my own experience, it's easy to say, "Oh, it's somebody else's fault," but, in summing it up, you're only as good as you think you are. You sometimes don't think big enough. You think in too narrow confines. You tend to not be political enough, and by that I don't mean to imply that politics is the name of the game, but I do think that we all tend to want to be friends with one another and to understand each other. Perhaps the designer has a secret desire to separate and to

think to himself, "Oh, I can do it better than that," or "I'm the one who's the best designer in this group," or, "Why did you do that?" or "Why didn't we have a better-looking car here or there?" and "Why did mine get shunted off into the boondocks, and why is mine still in the basement?" And you tend to think in terms of the material car per se instead of thinking of how politically involved you could be by understanding what other people's motives are and to be friends with them. I, frankly, never found a friend there. The closest one I had was Damon Woods. I also had friends among the designers, because I appreciated what their aspirations were. There were several I thought who were good management material, and there were several I thought who were good potential designers in any discipline.

But, generally speaking, I'd look at a studio, and I'd see these guys sitting there drawing, and I'd think to myself, "Are they really understanding that they can contribute? Are they really understanding that they can feed something into the system? Or do they ever feel part of it? Do they sometimes feel isolated? Do they feel like they're just doing window dressing? Are they really just there for decoration?" I sometimes think the whole design system was a bit awkward. To be able to pick something out from one guy's drawing and see him put it into clay was a nice experience, but, oftentimes, he wouldn't know quite how to interpret his own drawing in the clay, or how to get a clay modeler to do it right, or how to get a clay modeler, for that matter, to do a line that was not awkward and have the designer understand that it was awkward. Too often we spent hours and hours piddling over the design of a headlamp, or a bumperguard, or a taillight bezel when really the overall

look of the car was being neglected. On other occasions, we were so busy getting ready for our Friday show that we really never got around to designing. We never felt that there was an overall pattern.

General Motors was completely different. My experience there was that they'd set a date two months hence as a target, at which point everything would come together: the costs, the engineering, the aesthetics would all come into one focus on a certain day. True, maybe they weren't all thought out as well as sometimes they were at Ford, but, at least, the deadlines were met, and there was no screaming, or hollering, or fighting between costs, and engineering, and styling to meet deadlines.

There was so much wastage at the Design Center, it was appalling. Just having these Friday shows and spinning one's wheels was a waste in itself. And there was so much overhead. There were so many little studios devoted to advance this and advance that, and still nobody was picking anything out of them to do the current car or to take pieces off of it to do a current car. There were studios, upon studios, upon studios. A terrible waste of money.

Looking back on it now with a fresh perspective, I can be critical. But, at the time, it seemed like sort of a normal way to live. As you thought of it and thought of the budget that was involved, you began to think, "Hey, why do we waste all this money when it could be thrown into pulling the cost of the car down, making it more marketable?" Sure, you could jazz it up a little bit with some hot performance items just for saving the cost of the styling.

But we were in a long period of craziness where we changed the car every year. Changed its face one year, and its body the third or the

fourth year depending on the expenses or depressions or whatever. So, it was an interesting period. I can't speak for the designer today, because I'm not there. I don't know what he's going through. I don't know whether there's three guys in the studio that came out of Art Center and think they're the world's greatest designer and who have no opportunity to show it, or whether they are actually showing it. It's an interesting period.

I must say this, the cars they're doing now, are the cars I wish we were able to do in the 'Fifties, and the 'Sixties, and the 'Seventies.

Q Which ones?

A The Thunderbird. I have a few misgivings about the Cougar, because I'm not too clear on that greenhouse, but it has become a cult car because of its extremities. I think the Lincoln is superb -- the latest Mark -- and get rid of the funny hump on the back and spare tire, which is no longer there, and do something interesting with the deck. But it is a superb automobile, and the car magazines are ecstatic. They compare with the BMW and Mercedes.

Q And the big Lincoln is still a beauty?

A The big Lincoln is a classic box that the car came in, but who can argue with success; they're selling them. I like the Tempo line. I think it got a little mushy around the wheel openings, and the same with its sister the Topaz. I like the Taurus/Sable. They're fantastic cars. It's the way they should be. I think General Motors is losing sales.

Q What's happened at General Motors in recent years? They seem to have atrophied in terms of design?

A Somebody got the notion up at headquarters that the stiff back, and the fast windshield, and the commonness of the front ends was the way to

go. Obviously, it's hurt them. I don't think it's hurt Oldsmobile; they seem to be rolling along on momentum. But they've got a new coupe which looks fairly decent, even though it's not nearly as fast as a T-Bird. But, I would say, generally, they've made everything look alike. The guy who buys an Eldorado has got a car that looks like the Skylark. Why would he trade up to an Eldorado? Why would he go up to a Riviera, especially when it looks like the Eldorado? Why would he go down to a Riviera or up to an Eldorado? That classic ad on TV, the guy calling for his Cadillac is a good point if you think about it in relation to G.M. design.

Q There seems to be a marked conservative streak there in the last ten/fifteen years?

A Actually, I don't think they thought they were being conservative, but I think it's the stiffness of the backlight that's doing it. And, not only that, but it's on every one of their cars which is such an identifying feature that everybody thinks he's got the same car. He can't trade up or trade down. And I don't say the designs are that bad. They're clean.

Q Clean and well-executed.

A The lines go through without interruption, there's no little funny loops in the belt lines, and everything is executed fabulously well, but there's a sameness about all of their cars that is not a good marketing plan. I also think they've got too many models. I think that's just total overkill. Who knows whether he's getting the Skylark, or what's the downgraded one? The Cavalier. There's a similarity there in size that is appalling. Why not drop some of these others? I'm talking like

I would to a typical stylist or designer. Out here, everything is BMW. You can't get into Silicone Valley without a BMW. They won't let you in! A Mercedes is the next step up, but that's for the likes of Wosniak, and David Packard, and whoever else is up in that bracket.

I notice a lot of Saabs, a lot of Volvos. The family car is the Volvo. Mama drives the Volvo to the market, papa drives the BMW to work. It's become total image, because my friend who started the agency in which I'm working at this time has a BMW, and his repair costs have almost put him out of his wallet. But who can argue with him? What can we do? We can look more European, we can import Merkurs, and it still doesn't hack the BMW market for some reason. Merkur is a superb car, but it has some obvious design negatives, one of them is the double spoiler, the other is the overall height, which, obviously, is a great favorite with interior seaters. The back seat is superb for passengers, and it's the only one in the whole European market that is. I'm sitting here now in judgment and enjoying it.

Q What do you think might be the trend in the next few decades?
Longer and lower?

A I think we're going to get some ways to get lower. I don't know how we'll do it, but I think we're beginning to go....

Q Form a wedge both fore and aft?

A The wedge may be overdone. The wedge may be wearing itself out, but I like the wedge look. Front ends are going to be a problem, because to make them more aerodynamic, they're all going to look alike. All the sports cars look alike now. Can you tell me the difference between an RX7, and a Toyota Supra, and the Celica, and the 300ZX, the little MR-2

Toyota, the Fiero? Can you really sit down and tell me the difference in any of those front ends? No, you can't. Maybe we don't bother with front ends any more. Maybe they're all supposed to be just rounded with flush headlamps, and you'll get your identity in the back with three circles.

Q The Taurus and the Sable, which are scoring big sales, are they redos of the Audi?

A People have been saying that. The story is that they were actually started before the Audi came out, so there can't be.... Although, I'm sure they knew about the Audi having their European intelligence network working. They're even more snoopier over there than they are here.

Q Developed to a fine edge?

A Right.

Q Did you know Telnack before you retired?

A Yeah, I know Jack pretty well. I like Jack. He worked for me at one time, but it's nice to know he's doing as well as he is. He's a superb designer and a superb person. Very interesting guy. He's a well-rounded guy. He knows design from all the aspects, which is a rarity. He's another Damon Woods, although he may not have the educational background that Damon had, but still he's a superb guy.

The other chap who's head of the Design Center under Bill Ford?

Q Don Kopka?

A Kopka. A very nice chap. I don't know much about his design sense, but....

Q His group is doing all the advanced work.

A I like what he's saying in public. I think that's great. The company has got two great guys there at the head of the Design Center, and

they've got a superb chairman, Don Petersen.

Q You've probably worked with him?

A I was on the receiving end when he was general manager of the Ford Division. Then before that he was product planning manager, and, subsequently, became automotive -- I guess he was adviser to the president.

Q President for awhile, yes.

A I knew Caldwell when I had a brief tour in the truck studio.

Q That's where he started.

A But they are a couple of superb guys. I see Don Petersen every year at the Concours at Pebble Beach.

Q Does he come out for that?

A He's a judge. Strother MacMinn is there. Do you know Herman Brunn?

Q I've met him.

A He's up in San Mateo. For awhile there we were all being asked to come back to Palm Springs and judge the colors as West Coast retirees. I had fun doing that. Only Herman and I showed up, and we had a ball. I went over there this time when I visited Palm Springs, and they let me peek in there, but that was about it. They had nothing to show. I was hoping to see the new Thunderbird, which comes out next year. Popular Science has a picture of the T-Bird front end, and I hope they don't do that. It's just got slots in the front like the Tempo, and they can't do that to the Thunderbird. I'd rather go back to the old grille. The new car is superb.

Q And the Cougar front grille is very well done.

A I like the whole Ford line. I had a few misgivings about the

Tempo/Topaz because of the mushiness of the wheel openings. You can't argue with success; they're selling.

Q They've tinkered with it?

A Yes. The front end on the Topaz is a disaster; chrome flashed across the whole thing. Whoever did that?

Q I don't know. I suppose Telnack had to approve it?

A Yeah. What are you doing, Jack? I enjoy the whole aspect of the Design Center. But it's kind of nice being away from it. There were some fun times, there were some dreadful times. I had some run-ins with [Bob] McGuire. You can't blame anybody. You can only blame yourself, because if you know what you're doing wrong, you should correct it. You can't change the system, which is the big problem. It's probably changed now since I left, because I don't think they could come out with the cars they have got on the road without some serious design input.

Q Engineering has come back into the forefront. The Taurus was developed by a team: body engineers, product planners, engineering designers.

A I like the Sable, probably, better, except that I don't care for the phony glass in the front, which substitutes for a front end. It would have looked a bit less bulky if there had been a line along the side instead of quite so much mass. But those are nitpicking things. But I think the greenhouse is superb the way the belt goes around and follows around the backlight. Superb design.

Q Yes. And the station wagon is a real winner. They'll recoup on that. What happened at General Motors during the last ten or fifteen years? Can you put your finger on it?

A Entrenchment. I have no way of knowing of what's going on over there. The management has got too much to say in design. They have decided that they should all look somewhere.

Q Everybody's a designer from Roger Smith on down?

A Right. That's the old saying in the whole design business, "Everybody's a designer," particularly the product planners, because they think since they've heard from the man on the street that they know exactly what the car should look like.

Q Those infamous Toledo housewife interviews that everyone rails against.

A You've got a good handle on this stuff.

Q I've just heard from the other designers. But, interestingly, Jack TeInack swears by it.

A By what?

Q By the market research. I was surprised at that. Others think it's a waste of time.

A Then how do explain the General Motors look? TeInack may have heard from marketing people that the Topaz front end needed some chrome, but I am sure Jack wasn't too receptive to that idea. I know Jack better than that. He was railroaded. Of course you see a lot of them around here, because of the Ford Aerospace. They're all on the lease plan.

Q Where is that located?

A You just follow that road right straight East, and you get down to the freeway, and there's Ford Aerospace -- they're almost at the freeway. And, of course, the parking lot is full of Thunderbirds and Topaz, so you get a little distorted view here. You begin to think that Ford is the only make in town, besides BMW, of course.

Q It seems like General Motors, after the drastic downsizing they did, decided to sort of stand pat with the box? And, as you said before, the straight backlight.

A Interestingly enough, there are newer cars coming out in '87/'88. They've all got sporty models with fast backlights. They've finally conceded. There is the fact that they want to react against having them all look alike. They don't want to have the sameness. It's interesting to me marketing aspects are as much fun as the designing part. Especially being out of the business now, I think in terms of the marketing. What really markets? What really sells? And sometimes you have to realize that maybe it isn't design at all. Maybe it's just hype and image, because the BMW -- I can't tell you the number of friends that have got them -- friends of ours.

Q It's the in thing to have?

A Looking back, I'd have done things differently. I'd have been more forceful, I'd have been more let the chips fall off the table type of person, and I'd have been more political. I don't mean that "political," I mean friendly, outgoing, interested. But, of course, the system was still there; the terrible grinding Friday show.

Q Do they still do that?

A I don't know if they do or not. I don't think they do, because I know they reverted. Just before I left, they reverted to an alternate week, which, to me, is still wrong. It's got to be, maybe, a month away, and I know they worry about that because they think tooling deadlines are going to creep up. As a matter of fact, they did creep up on me once in the '56 Ford. We had a do a facelift, and the '55 had too big, huge

bombs for parking lights. What do you do the next year? Well. I finally came up with a design which was accepted, but, unfortunately, the parking lights were made out of diecast material, and there was a time element in there to get it into production, and we literally had to fly the parts to the plants to get them on the car.

Q After you left Ford you went back into industrial design in Los Angeles?

A Yes. I opened an office in Laguna Miguel just off of Route 5, which I thought was paradise as far as environment went. Unfortunately, there were no clients out there. I spent half of my time on the road. And, of course, being on the road is like bumper-to-bumper, so I was pretty much turned off even though our personal environment was lovely, and we got those delightful sea breezes, and I had my beach which I dearly loved, and Betty couldn't like less. But there was business to be gotten, and, if gotten, it was pretty hard to service, because it was pretty difficult to get around down there, especially since I was miles from anything that was industry. I was in a resort area at that time. Now, it would be a little different.

Then I heard of a job in Palo Alto, so we moved up here with encouragement from my son, and I went to work up here doing architectural work, since that was one of my all-time loves.

Q Coming directly out of the automotive industry, you went to work for a semi-aftermarket outfit?

A Oh, yeah. Everybody knows Jim Powers.

Q He's well known?

A Yes.

Q One of the Ford designers?

A Sure. Great guy. He opened his own advertising agency in Los Angeles, he and two other partners. They were known as Marks, Hazelquist and Powers, and he has since lost both of them. They've gone the way as all partners do. They started out with a jewelry account, which Hazelquist had, more or less, worked on, and did some superb photography and designing and marketing, but there was sort of -- I don't know what happened to it, but Marks left him, and Hazelquist left him, and he formed his own agency called James R. Powers and Associates.

I was down there visiting people, and I walked in and talked to him and asked him if he needed any help, which was something I don't usually do, and he put me on. But I was living up here in an Eichler house in Palo Alto. Eichler is a typical, contemporary subdivision type house where you have very little insulation in the pitched roof. You have nice interiors with high-pitched roofs, but you don't have much insulation. You're hot.

Q Was he the developer or...?

A He was both the developer and the architect.

Q He was very popular?

A No, he wasn't the architect, either, but he'd got onto this style to, more or less, feature it as a California style with lots of glass, enclosed patios, and a lot of glass, and very bad insulation, because he assumed, of course, since it's a fairly temperate climate, he didn't need a lot of insulation.

Q The climatic patterns have changed?

A He found out that in the floor radiant heating was not working too well. They put some aluminum tubing in, which deteriorated rapidly.

A lot of people were left holding the bag with no heat, so most of them put in perimeter electric heat and/or forced air from some obscure corner of the house.

Anyway, we had to sell the Eichler house, and we bought this disastrous condominium near Century City. I did a lot of work for Powers for only about nine months. Betty was having a hell of a time with her ceramics, and we had three floors in this condo. The bottom was hers for her ceramics. She had her kiln in an abandoned elevator shaft, and we had to put a flue up top to exhaust the heat, and it worked beautifully, except she was terribly cramped. And then we had these noises coming from bedrooms across the way -- drug addicts. That was a nice neighborhood, but these people were expensive drug addicts. And there were people ruining the jacuzzi. The kids were throwing sandwiches into them. So one thing led to another. My son visited us, and then my daughter called us, and we came up here. And I no sooner got up here and worked for awhile in architecture, and I got an offer.

Q Tell us about the architecture firm. How did that work out?

A I was doing illustration in Palo Alto, and I had a lot of business, but it was tiring. But then I was called into Powers. I was visiting down there, so we had sold this house and moved out of the condo, and then we came back up here, and I had nothing to do, period. Literally nothing, and I became very discontented with it, because I just happen to be that type of person. Suddenly I visited this friend of mine in Palo Alto, and he said, "Come on board. I've got a great job for you in advertising." So he put me to work doing ads for recruitment. This wasn't the most exciting job in the world, but, at least, it kept me

busy. It kept me out of trouble. It kept me from nagging Betty.

Finally, he went with another agency and brought me along. Now, he's opened his own agency and brought me along, so that's where I am today. This is my minor, anyway, from way back in Art Center. I did a lot of advertising on the side when I was moonlighting.

Q So you're becoming well known in the field -- at least, sought after?

A Yes. I've enjoyed the whole scene, but I'm still a frustrated designer from the standpoint of all design. I enjoyed that series, "Pride of Place," with Robert Stern, and it should have been done long ago. It should have been done by the AIA. I was active in the IDSA while I was with Ford. I was the chairman of the local chapter. I put on several meetings connected with Ford. Nobody came from Ford. I was disgusted. That's one thing that I was really disgusted about, but then I realized industrial design is not a big thing in automotive design, even though all the car companies were members -- company members and subsidizers.

Q Is it because they don't want to be known as industrial designers? They want to keep their identity?

A That's possible. Contrary-wise, no industrial designer wants to be known as an automotive designer, and for years they threw brickbats at the automotive industry, and rightly so.

Q It's gotten much better during your lifetime?

A Oh, yes. Industrial designers are still having a problem just identifying themselves. They don't know what they are. They're having troubles with that.

Q Looking back on your career, what do you think the impact of Harley Earl has been?

A I think he's had one of the most massive impacts that ever occurred, particularly in light of his changing from the running boards and all that period; exposing exposed frames to completely covered design -- envelope design. I think it's been a tremendous impact. He was really a marvelous impact on the business. Unfortunately, he didn't know when to pull out the stopper and let the crap go down the drain.

Q Bordinat calls it the Age of Gorp.

A That's about it. We were all in it.

Q I have the feeling from what you've said that you are just a little unhappy that your professional design career didn't quite follow your professional design instincts. That you really wanted to be a polymath, an all-around designer from architect to artist?

A I don't why I have that feeling for all design aspects. I get a kick out of a Platner chair or an Eames chair, and, I suppose, many of the automotive designers did, because I know a lot of their houses reflected their concepts of design. I know Damon Wood's was superb. Dave Ash had a well-designed, contemporary house. So did Bud Kaufman, although having brought up kids, you tend not to think in terms of high-quality furniture. You think, "Hey, I don't want any Platner chair in there where the kids are going to play a tune on it." He was one of the great architects [Platner] -- very conservative, considering, first of all, the modern period and post-modern period, he fit somewhere in between.

Q If you'd followed architecture, where do you think you might have been in terms of...?

A In the poor house!

Q Aesthetically, I mean, if you could have made a living at it? Which trend would you have...?

A I probably would have fallen into the trap of the European school, which is the Mies van der Rohe glass box; Philip Johnson glass box. He's now gotten out of that, by the way. He's into post-modern. The best building he ever did was the Boston Public Library, and it was neither.

I don't know where I'd be. I would be somewhere in between. I'd probably be a Platner, because I think it would be most durable. It wouldn't be a flash in the pan like some of this post-modern stuff is. Michael Graves' Portland City Hall is a real piece of cake. I mean that literally. So I don't know whether I would have ever gone into that direction or not. I doubt if I would have. I'd have stayed somewhere in the I.M. Pei-Platner plateau.

Q What attracted you to Platner?

A His organization for one thing. Everything was well-organized. There was a lot of glass, but there was also a lot of stone, a lot of neat materials. A lot of marble, a lot of beautiful use of materials, and interesting roof concepts that were different from the run of the mill. And he'd always get his furniture into these houses, and they'd add a finishing touch. Those are Platner chairs there. They're stools, I would say. These are Bertoaia's, of course. And I've got a Saarinen womb chair in my office. But these things excite me, and always have. I don't know where I'd be architecturally. There are times during the day that I think, "Hey, why not try it?" People have told me, "Hey, it's never too late!" So I might. I still get a thrill out of it. I was

totally glued to the tube in that "Pride of Place." It's a tough life, architecture is. I mean, you know how popular Portman was for a long time. There were lobbies that he did for Marriott's. He's done the Marriott in San Francisco with the huge lobby and big sculpture in it. But Portman is now out of favor because nobody can identify him. He's neither modern nor post-modern, so I don't know where he fits in.

Q Did you read that Minoru Yamasaki died about a month ago?

A No. I'll never forget the flap that was going on about his moving into Bloomfield Hills.

Q They wouldn't let him in.

A I know.

Q So he said the heck with it, and he went to Troy. His office was in Troy for many years.

A Sick, sick, sick. It wouldn't happen in Ann Arbor. It wouldn't happen here.

Q Do you think you'll ever go back to automotive design or industrial design?

A I don't have too much of a desire to get back into industrial design.

Q Consulting work?

A If the right opportunity came along, yes. The industrial design firms that have opened up in this area have all failed. Part of it is bad management, and the other part is that most of the Silicone Valley firms have their in-house design staff, and the third element is that engineers are doing the designing.

Q That's a new trend?

A Yes. You take a picture tube, and it's the same throughout the industry, so you know that nobody had a hand in designing it.

Q You -- the automotive designers -- had to fend them off in your day. They always wanted to tell you what to do with the skin?

A Who, do you mean the management or...?

Q The design engineers.

A They only did that because they didn't think they could do it. They were forced to do a lot of things. This is another plus for Harley Earl. He forced them to do a lot of things that they didn't think they could do. They'd bend sheet metal that could never be bent.

Q He stretched their horizons.

A Harley had a big impact. I mean that, literally. He was six foot seven.

Q The Buick Wildcat was a revelation?

A Yes, but look what a clean job it was. All of them were clean, refined, small grille pieces.

Q Something went wrong.

A There was a pressure from general managers, too. I ran into Harley down in Palm Beach not long before he passed away.

Q 1958?

A Yes. It was probably '56. I was on vacation. I was single then, and I was floating around Florida, and here comes Harley up beside me in that exotic Oldsmobile he had made for himself -- nice smooth lines and no garbage on it -- no gorp. And I said, "Nice to see you driving something so simple, and plain, and so gorgeous." He said, "Yeah, it's surprising what you can do without a general manager to hassle you." Those were his Achilles heel.

Q Paul Gillan tells us the story about Harlow Curtice giving him a bad time on a Buick design, so Earl picks up the phone and calls Alfred Sloan and said, "We've got to straighten Harlow out, Alfred,"

I remember once a classic thing that Harley should never have said. They were all in a big meeting discussing the merits of this particular car, and one of the general managers said, "Harley, can't we get this car just a little bit lower?" And Harley said, "You know, there's a limit to how low we can get." And whoever it was, turned to him and said, "Harley, I want that repeated, and I want to put it on tape," because, you know, nobody wanted to do a car lower than Harley did. The trouble with Harley was, he always thought a car looked lower if he got the components lower, like the old Cadillac -- '52 Cadillac. He said, "I want to get that bumper real low, because this car is going to look a lot lower if you get it down." Well, it didn't, because what it did, it stretched the distance between the top of the hood and the bumper, so you effectively made the car look higher, but he couldn't see that. He thought it looked lower, because the bumper was lower. But these are little idiosyncrasies that we all have, then he'd turn to you and say, "You don't want to be a noncompoop."

Q His use of his technical styling and his use of clay -- what were some milestones in styling and innovation that he was credited with?

A I can't pick out specific cars, but I know the LaSalle was a real breakthrough, and so was the '49/'50 C cars and the C bodies.

Q Which encompassed?

A Olds, Buick, Pontiac. I don't think Pontiac shared that body, but Olds, Buick, and Cadillac had that similar opportunity to have a unique-

looking body. Particularly Oldsmobile. Oldsmobile was the cleanest of the bunch, and I was really pleased to be in that studio. Now, of course, they look strange.

Q Who was responsible for the Toronado? Do you have any idea?

A The original one?

Q Yes.

A I don't know, but it's still a handsome car. There's one in the block in back of me here, and the guy keeps it in mint condition. Did Chuck Jordan had something to do with that? [Stan Wilen] No, he did the Riviera with the boat tail, which, to me, is a good-looking car. I will never say that is not a good-looking car. And, Chuck, if you hear me, I want you to know that. But it wasn't well received. It was a total disaster on the market. But those are examples of a stylist thinking he knows everything. A lot of stylists like that AMC Pacer, and you know what a disaster that was, but I still think it's a cute little thing. It's well designed, well integrated, a little too high on the glass, but, other than that, it was.... But, there again, the designer was wrong, you see. Somehow or another, you've got to have a good synthesis of marketing and design sense, and I don't know where you find that kind of a person. I guess it wasn't me.

Q In the latter part of your career, you were there when Bunkie Knudsen came to Ford. Was he a divisive force?

A I could see the problems that were traceable to Henry [Ford II]. Henry, as we well know, almost killed the company because he didn't recognize the trend of the front-wheel drive, and he was fighting Iacocca on this, despite the fact that the Fiesta was a raging success in Europe with its front-wheel drive.

Q The one they brought here had rear-wheel drive?

A No. It was the one they brought in. It was still front-wheel drive, but it was sold as a foreign -- it was the European charter.

Q There were very few of them?

A Yes. And also it didn't have automatic and a lot of things that Americans buy, which I don't necessarily recommend, but....

Q It's what they want.

A That was a strange period -- strange.

Q Ford resisted downsizing?

A Yes.

Q Do you remember a bright young product planner engineer named Hal Sperlich?

A Yes. I probably had more intercourse verbally with him than anybody else because he was product planning manager, and I was at the Ford end program. I heard him talk to industrial design groups, and it was so interesting and had such an insight into marketing that I've never got over it. The guy is brilliant -- absolutely brilliant. He's Iacocca's eyes, ears and nose. I like Hal very much.

Q He was an advocate of downsizing?

A Yes. And he had the good sense to see good styling, too. Although, they're in a very conservative mode in their smaller cars.

Q At Chrysler?

A Yes. The LeBaron has done very well, and the Lancer, so, you see, there's a trend there. But I've noticed in the last few weeks, G.M. and Chrysler are both losing market sharing. Ford is going up, up, up.

Q Right. They've done very well. The new Taurus/Sable should give them a big boost.

A They can't make enough of them, that's the problem.

Q If you had it all to do over again, what would you have done differently?

A I probably would have been a little more forceful, because I would figure, hell, you had nothing to lose. I came out of industrial design where I had pretty much control over what I was doing, and it was a little bit difficult to answer to so many people. I had a design executive over me. Over him was a design director. Over the design director was a vice-president in charge of design. Over him was a vice-president of engineering and design. So, you always had a feeling where am I? -- way down here around in the basement. I suppose a lot of guys felt that way. I'm sure they all did. I'm sure everybody who had a boss feels that way, so it's old hat.

If I had been much more forceful, much more convincing to my immediate superiors, I would have been much more convincing to Joe Oros, who I spent a helluva lot of time with.

Q Those were trying times?

A It was a trying time.

Q You would have spoken up more?

A I would have been much more effective as a -- also, I didn't know some of the management tricks. I didn't have frequent meetings, which I should have had, mainly because there was nothing to report, except that Friday we had another frenzy. I tended not to want to have meetings. In retrospect, it would have been good to have them, and I did have them occasionally whenever there was something really important. I would have been more aware of those around me, particularly the management. Been more friendly to them.

Q But you didn't play the game?

A Kissing the foot?

Q You wanted to be your own person?

A Yes, pretty much.

Q That's quite standard. It doesn't always work!

A You always felt there was no one to talk to. I got Damon's ear on several occasions, and he was influential in helping the situation, but he was the only one I knew who would listen. George [Walker] never listened. Oros never listened. Of course, I was never very articulate to Oros either.

Q They were islands unto themselves.

A And I ran into some weird problems with personnel. I was told to fire a guy, and I was so reluctant to do it, and finally had to, but the finger was pointed at me.

Q Basically, you called it as you saw it, and you did what you thought you had to do?

A Yes. The thing was difficult to begin with. The whole studio structure was a bit difficult, having guys sitting around drawing, having guys doing tape drawings on the wall and blackboards, and not feeling that they were going in the right direction, changing them.

Q Was it too fragmented? Did you feel you were trying to put together a giant jigsaw puzzle?

A No, I didn't think so. I thought the jigsaw puzzle was falling into place with all bad pieces -- all funny-looking pieces.

Q All because it was designed by committee?

A No, not just that, but the frenzy with which we had to get it out.

It all boils down to that weekly thing pretty much. Had it not been for that, the other pieces would have fallen into place.

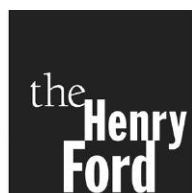
Q It became a cliché of the automobile design business to have frequent shows? You said General Motors stretched their's and that Chrysler and American Motors probably had...?

A Monthly.

Q Ford was the only one that had a weekly show come hell or high water?

A I think it's since gone by the boards, but you would be able to confirm it with other people. Ask Telnack and any of those people. You might get back to him and ask if this has straightened out. Maybe they're on a monthly schedule for all I know. They must be, because the cars are coming out better. If anybody knows how to do it, it's Jack.

#



The copyright status of photographs and printed material is often difficult to determine, because it is affected by such things as the employment status of the creator, the date material was created, the date material was first published, what information accompanied the first publication, and whether the copyright holder exercised his/her/its rights to extension. The Henry Ford has not determined copyright status for many of the photographs and published materials in our collection. Therefore, the Henry Ford is acting only as an owner of the physical original.

- The Henry Ford is not responsible for either determining the copyright status of the material or for securing copyright permission.
- Possession of a photocopy does not constitute permission to use it.
- Permission to use copies other than for private study, scholarship, or research requires the permission of both The Henry Ford and the copyright holder.

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, U.S. Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specific conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” Such uses are considered “fair use,” and by law do not require permission of the copyright holder. If a patron later uses a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of “fair use” - including but by no means limited to posting on a Web page or to an Internet Use group, or publication in a book or magazine - the patron may be liable for copyright infringement.