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## Interview with Robert Burton

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## **Robert Burton: Foreman and Supervisor in the 1950s-1980s**

### Relations with upper management

“It wasn’t that bad. I recognized what their job was, and they recognized what my job was. I felt they were pretty good to us, all in all. I can’t say they were better than now.

“But I think they relied too much on some of the information they were given. Information given at a lower level, or like, from industrial relations. I was unhappy with some of the decision that industrial relations would make.”

### Relations with Industrial Engineering

The engineers didn’t communicate with foremen in determining standards on bonus rates.

“I just felt that they didn’t listen to the foremen that were in place. They’re their own people . . . They didn’t come and ask the people they should’ve asked . . . No, no, the *last* person you ask is a person who knows something about it, about the job. . . They should have taken more of the input from the person involved.”

### Training when he became a foreman in 1951

“Yeah, the guy handed me a wrench, and said ‘you do this and this and this’ and go to work. (Laughs) I did train with another foreman for about a week, but I was doing it all in a couple of weeks.”

Q: Was the training mostly about equipment?

“Yes. At the time, the foreman set the machines for every order.”

This consisted of making out cards, doing machine set-up, lining up rolls of paper, and doing scheduling; finally, checking to make sure everything is set correctly.

### On Workers Getting Fired

“It was very seldom that a guy ever got fired. They’d get days off, weeks off, [unpaid], and that would be the extent of it.

“Many times, you would go to personnel, and they would come back to you and say: ‘you can’t fire that person now,’ and they would be rehired. They had people that should have been fired. It was very seldom people would get fired for not doing their job . . . You’d go after them, they might get a day off, but most of the time, it was a talking to, to get the person back in line. There was a person I know who got fired for drinking – we caught him drinking in the car, out on the parking lot. And he had been caught before, so this made it pretty hard not to do something about it.”

Q: And this was up to the personnel department – to fire?

A: “Yes, oh yes, we couldn’t fire. Actually, if you look up ‘supervisor’ as the person that has the ability to hire and fire, we had neither. Ok? And there were people that we felt that should have been fired, but we never had the right to do that. Personnel would be the one. And they bent backwards.”

Q: How did you make sense out of this? Why did the Personnel Department bend so far over backwards?

A: “I really don’t know. It seems to me that they defeated their own purpose. When you do that you’re, you look at every other person that’s doing their job, and ninety percent of them are doing an excellent job for you, and what are you saying to them? You’re saying you don’t really have to do their job. You can get drunk, you can do this, you can do that.”

#### Superintendent in Mechanical Department ignores foreman and leads to unionization

“They [the unions] went after the mechanical department first. The supervisor in the mechanical department wasn’t listening to what the foremen were telling him. These things are going on – you’ve got pay more attention to it, ok? And he [the supervisor] knew better – he knew, they [the foremen] were wrong, he was right, and kept feeding this to the mill manager. So when they voted the union in [in the skilled maintenance trades] – of course the union went in first in the mechanical department, then they went in the production – and he, the mill manager, was shocked. He said: ‘This is not what you told me. The things you are telling me now, that’s not what you told me, prior to.’”