

Title: Interview with Don Oehler

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DOSEN: OK, so just to start off, your name, Don, how do you spell that?

OEHLER: O-E-H-L-E-R.

DOSEN: And where were you born and when?

OEHLER: Born in Portland, Oregon and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

DOSEN: OK, and when were you born?

OEHLER: 1930.

DOSEN: Tell me about your family. How many family members did you have?

OEHLER: I had a brother, a mother – my father passed away when I was four so she was a widow, raising two boys. She was one of the early working moms.

DOSEN: What did she do?

OEHLER: She worked in advertising and cooking demonstrations for North Dakota Mill and Elevator – they were a flour mill [out of] the state of North Dakota.

DOSEN: OK. So tell me about Grand Forks. Did you like it there?

OEHLER: Well, yeah, Grand Forks was a university town – University of North Dakota – and... twenty to twenty-five thousand people in those days... about the same size as Bellingham at that time.

DOSEN: Were you a religious family at all?

OEHLER: We were active in our church – Methodist church.

DOSEN: OK. What was your childhood like?

OEHLER: Busy. [Laughs]

DOSEN: What did you do?

OEHLER: We worked on a... Since I was [inaudible] my mother made sure that we got to be with our uncles who lived on a farm... during the summertime.

DOSEN: In Grand Forks?

OEHLER: No, it was in the middle of North Dakota.

DOSEN: So you helped out with your uncle?

OEHLER: Yeah, on the farm for that, and then of course I had a summer job every summer.

DOSEN: What was your summer job?

OEHLER: Oh, picking potatoes, taking care of livestock, working at... paving one year, and all varied jobs. Let's see... and then, of course, helping on my grandfather's and uncle's farm. And there was farm chores – taking care of cattle, harvesting, plowing – that type of thing.

DOSEN: What kind of education did you [inaudible – check with audio] you go to school, finish high school?

OEHLER: Bachelor of Science in chemical engineering... at the University of North Dakota.

DOSEN: How did you come to Bellingham?

OEHLER: I was acquainted with the technical director from my university days, and I was in the Air Force for two years, and then when I was discharged from the Air Force I was looking for jobs and he had inquired through the university and so I came out and interviewed.

DOSEN: At the plant?

OEHLER: At the plant, yeah, 1954.

DOSEN: And then you got hired?

OEHLER: I got hired and started there October 1st, 1954.

DOSEN: What was your position?

OEHLER: Project engineer, technical group.

DOSEN: What did you do?

OEHLER: Well, that's involved in all the process operation. In a pulp and paper mill there is a series of processes that – pulping process, bleaching process, drying process, shipping, that type of thing – so there's a whole series of things. Then they also had a ... They were leaders in research – lignin research – so there was research going on there. And so they had what they call a co-products operation at that time and they were producing ethanol – which is very popular now – and then also lignin products. The lignin products were used in oil-well drilling, they were used in... There was also a product – multi-tracin – that's just one small product.

DOSEN: Called what, sorry?

OEHLER: Multi-tracin. Trace elements were applied to the orchards in eastern Washington so they'd have better fruit crops. There were a number of other... Lignin was used as a [Debla?] adhesive, a binder, as I said, in oil-well drilling. So we were one of the leading research... in lignin research and how to, you know, use the extra material that came off the pulping process.

DOSEN: OK. What was Bellingham and the waterfront like at that time?

OEHLER: Well, Bellingham waterfront... As you're probably well aware, all waterfronts – and probably in your research – have gone from... they started off as the easiest place to ship from because they were an over [inaudible] in the early days. And so shipping was big – commercial shipping, lumber out, finished goods in – and then the pulp mill, which started in 1926, was an outgrowth of that. They decided to get in that because of the trees – the natural resources available in the Northwest, trees being a primary one – and, of course, mining is another one. But anyway, the trees and the pulping was a natural marriage to start that process back in the twenties.

DOSEN: And so, when you arrived, was it very developed?

OEHLER: Oh yes. Yeah. The waterfront had changed. I mean, when I arrived the waterfront was pretty well established. Whatcom Waterway was the... They had the steam plant down on the waterfront. They had receiving for the wood chips that came in by barge down there. Shipping, pulp shipping went out through the port. Some of our products went out by tanker truck and a lot of it was shipped by rail and some by ship. It was all three methods of shipping.

DOSEN: Did you keep the same position the whole time you were there?

OEHLER: No, it changed. I went into supervision, became manager for the paperboard operation and – that was a mill that was built in 1946 – I didn't get directly involved with it until operation in '71 – and they made paperboard out of recycled, corrugated and newspaper. So we were one of the early... In fact, the Junior Chamber of Commerce back in those days raised their funds by waste paper collection drives. And so as a young fellow I got involved with Junior Chamber of Commerce and that was a good way to get involved within the community... and so we had interesting times there. Anyway, it was

about a fifty-ton a day operation, and so the President of Puget Sound Pulp and Timber in those days made donations to build a baler building and help the JC's get started in the wastepaper collections. And the idea behind that, of course, was to... make a disposable product into a useful resource... and they've been doing that down there for quite a number of years.

DOSEN: So were those the only positions you had?

OEHLER: Well, I was involved in that for a number of years. I was involved in environmental control director. I was involved in capitol projects where we installed major machinery and projects. Let's see... I wrote down some things here... I was involved in the... When the chlorine plant started in 1965, I was a start-up engineer on that, and so there was a broad variety. I worked in the tissue mill operation, the pulp and the tissue mill were separated somewhat. They were separate organizations and Puget Sound... They used to be called Pacific Coast Paper Mills, the tissue mill operation, and Puget Sound Pulp and Timber purchased them in 1958, I think it was, and they became one and the same organization.

But both of the original mills were started by family or, you know, family start-ups, just kind of like businesses start today so... But anyway, the mergers go on and then the companies get bigger and then all of a sudden they're not so big anymore. [Laughs] So it's an evolution process that's what's going on.

DOSEN: When did you stop working with GP?

OEHLER: Pardon?

DOSEN: When did you stop working at GP?

OEHLER: April 1, 1995. I was there forty-one and a half years.

DOSEN: When you first started at GP, what [were] the community's feelings towards the plant?

OEHLER: Well, I think the community feeling was very positive. GP provided [inaudible] jobs. In addition to that – I just made a few comments about that – they were... the key people at the plant were involved in the community also, very much so. Because we're all part of the community we all want to see the community prosper, so trying to make a win-win situation. But for every manufacturing job down there it supported three or four other jobs [in] the community. ... It also supported, for example... I think they paid \$1 million a year to the city for the water and in addition to building the pipeline – the company built the pipeline themselves –water costs then [were] used to defray the average citizens' water cost, so their costs were less than than they would have been otherwise without the taxes from the pulp and paper mill.

So that's... I think GP was always a leader in environmental issues – wanted to be a good steward of the environment and, well, the waste treatment [inaudible]... what they're discussing now on the waterfront down there. When that was put in that was to reduce direct discharge into the bay. So they had treatment and an aeration, oxidation and reduce that effluent. And, of course, we [worked with the] Department of Ecology on those projects, along with the EPA – Environment Protection Agency. So it was... everybody working together. Now, my comment on that is that the burden of testing and everything for the effluence is on the corporation, and then the environmental regulators came in and review your data and so forth, take their own data and double check it. But it's a self monitoring thing. If we found that we our water might be out of compliance a little bit then we had to make an adjustment in the process to make sure we were in compliance. That was an ongoing thing.

DOSEN: How was your relationship with other people working at the plant? How many employees were there?

OEHLER: I think, top – and this is just an estimate – but 850. Something like that, in that ball park.

DOSEN: In the whole operation?

OEHLER: In the whole complex, yeah.

DOSEN: Out of those 850, how many of those people did you have to deal with?

OEHLER: Well, as a supervisor it depends on... like, in the paperboard operation we had about forty-five there in that particular operation. But, of course, the things you did and various parts of the mill, you work with those people also, and it impacted... what went on. If you were a like a process engineer like myself you're always interested in improving the process and making it more functional, making it more productive, more safe. So all of those things were key to when you're working with people on that. Even though you don't have direct supervision of them you do work with them on a basis. So you're part of the process engineer, you were part of the management team, you're working with fella's who are part of the union team but we're all part of the same company.

Yeah, I think everything went reasonably well. It wasn't a lot of... Well, there were a couple of strikes through the years, but that's a negotiating thing based on all the mills in western Washington and Oregon, not just the one here. So that's an ongoing labor negotiation type thing. But at the same time you get involved in your community. When you're involved then you realize that the company is a source... not only a source of employment but a source of a positive... neighbor, if you will... part of the community. Yeah, that's all. [Laughs]

DOSEN: How did people relate to you with you being their supervisor? I mean, did you have a good relationship with most of the people?

OEHLER: Yeah, I felt there was good relationship, yeah.

DOSEN: Did you have any other family members that worked for the plant?

OEHLER: No, no.

DOSEN: Did any of your family come out here at all?

OEHLER: Well, I had a daughter who worked a summer job there... type of thing, and my son helped work down there for... [Laughs] Unfortunately, he worked down there when they shut the paperboard mill down in '84 and then they sold the equipment out of it and he helped dismantle the equipment. [Laughs]

DOSEN: What was your favorite position you held down at the plant?

OEHLER: I think being the paperboard manager was the...

DOSEN: Any particular reason?

OEHLER: Well, I think that you had a chance to do the planning, you had a chance to plan for improvements, you worked with engineering, you worked with sales, you worked with various groups. So it was kind of like having your own little business within a business. Your profit and loss statement was every month so you could see directly how you impacted the profit and loss and the decisions you made. Then, as a result of that you were able to get involved in industry groups and were able to be involved in various professional groups... as a result of that. So that was... it gave you a chance to get a broader view of what's going on in the industry rather than just a narrow view... and what the other mills are facing, what they are doing, and so forth. And you get to know the people at other places and become friends with them and that type of thing. So that was good. But I think the biggest thing was the fact it was an opportunity to kind of run your own business, and I think a lot of people... some people enjoy that and others don't.

DOSEN: What, if anything, in your work changed over time?

OEHLER: Well, your work changes as a result of your experience and knowledge. When you first come into a business you have to learn the business from the ground up. You've never been exposed to pulp and paper before, other than lab work in the process and school. You have to immediately decide, you know, what makes this thing function, be able to learn it inside and out, and that takes extra study, and hopefully that your technical background will help you interpret what's going on. And then, as that happens of course, you have to learn how to work with people and what makes other people... what, how to read people, what turns one person on and another person off, and that type of thing. And then also you get a broader view of the industry as you go on. You say, "What's good for the industry? What's good for us?" And you have to anticipate changes that are coming up and have a Plan A and a Plan B in mind when that happens. So you become more

management-oriented as you progress through that... probably not as technical, but still involved in management. But your technical background - your ability to problem solve - changes, and that needs to be an ongoing thing. I think what you learn in college is that you've got a starting point, but it's... you never stop learning when you get it. If you stop learning and think you know it all, you're wasting your time! [Laughs]

DOSEN: Did your opinion of the plant change over time while you were working there?

OEHLER: Pardon me?

DOSEN: Did your opinion of the plant while you were working there change at all?

OEHLER: No, I don't... I always had good friends in the general manager's position and so I pretty well know what was going on. But I think what happens is, when you go from a local control - like Puget Sound Pulp and Timber was - and then you're merged in '63 to Georgia Pacific which was national, then that changes the scope of the answer, too. Now Georgia Pacific, just recently, last year as a matter of fact, went private again with Koch Industries, which means they don't have to worry about answering to the... And you'll see this happening. [Irrelevant material omitted] You'll see that happens a lot in Industries: they go private 'cause they don't want to be holding to the SEC - the Security Exchange Commission - for all the reports and everything they have to do [or] they get a chance to. So you can respond quicker. In today's environment, for example, because of the computer and the internet and so forth, information moves instantaneously across the globe and so decisions have to be made reasonably quickly based on that.

So it's a different world, a different environment now with that type of thing. It wasn't quite so fast. It was bad enough back in those days - phone calls and faxes - we didn't have the internet. [Irrelevant material omitted] But anyway, it's a little different situation in terms of, you know, what's somebody doing in China or what's somebody doing in Asia? Oh, well, we better look out for what they're doing and adjust accordingly. So it's a global community compared to what it was - big difference.

DOSEN: When the pulp and timber was bought... merged with GP, how did the community react?

OEHLER: Well I think they were... unknowing, like, that is, kind of apprehensive. But I think the local leadership was taken into GP, they were put on... our president was put on the GP board to tie the facilities in better, and I think it was fairly positive. One of the advantages of large - there are advantages and disadvantages - one of the advantages is you have access to more capital than you would have otherwise. You have access to more customers. For example, your paper products can be used at other plants that GP owned. You can exchange information with other tissue operations, for example, or that type of thing... And so the market's broader because any time you are making a product, you're trying to market it to, for example, the chain stores, and they, in turn, want to market it to their customers, who [are] the average consumer, and so you get into that type of thing.

Well, the bigger marketing program you have... Let's say we only had a hundred tons a day of tissue products, whereas Georgia Pacific had a, oh, say five thousand tons a day. Well, the same effort with very little extra costs could be used to advertise your hundred ton a day at more cost. One of the key things is, as you've probably heard on the radio and news is productivity... In other words, productivity increases, you make the same product with fewer man hours because you're more effective, more efficient. Maybe a new process control, new computer control, obviously is a big factor. A lot of things are computer control nowadays and that makes it more responsive so you can make it for less man hours. And at today's climbing rates, why, man hours is a big thing... as we're all getting into that. [Irrelevant material omitted]

DOSEN: When you started in 1954, it's my understanding there were a bunch of different operations at GP, and were they all in operation at the time or did any of them open?

OEHLER: Yeah, they had... in the '30s they had gone from two digesters to six. In the '40s during World War II they were involved in... they put in the ethanol plant which the sugar... When you pulp wood chips, [during] part of the pulping process you extract into the liquid form... you separate the fiber from the lignin – the lignin is a binding material – and there are sugars involved in that lignin, and rather than just put that down the sewer, they said, “Well, why don't we ferment that, convert it to a commercial product like ethanol, which it is, and then we can sell it?” Well, they got the approval to do that from the War Production Board in the '40s, built the plant and started making ethanol. So that, rather than just letting it go.

Then at the same time they also got involved with... You take the liquor, concentrate it, say, to fifty percent solids and then spray dry it into a powder. In the meantime, you can treat the lignin with various chemicals once you get the end product that you want then spray dry it, and then you bag it. So they had a bagging operation, they had an operation selling concentrate[ed] lignin, they had an operation for trucking it... so it went out of here in different forms. The ethanol went into paint manufacture, that's just one. I think we had a bulletin board down there at one time that just showed the end-use of all our products and there [were] twenty-five different end-use products for the ethanol, for example.

So that's how you expanded. Then they decided, “Well we gotta make our pulp whiter if we're going to be competitive. We can't just make unbleached pulp,” so they put in the bleach plant back in 1952... they started up. At the same time they were also involved with American Viscose for making what they call rayon-grade pulp – you're familiar with rayon-grade fiber, rayon dresses, and so forth – well, American Viscose was a leader in making rayon and they decided to go together with Puget Sound Pulp and Timber, put the pulp mill in Ketchikan, Alaska, and they were making the pulp then for rayon-grade. So that's how things develop: you fill a need, you know, you start your business, or you see a need out there and you say, “OK, how can we get into that business and be competitive?” And that's what we did.

Then, after that, I think the next thing we did... 'Course there was constant process improvement all the time. We put in the chlorine plant in '65 and then the chlorine caustic... we were using chlorine and caustic in our bleaching process, and then the excess we sold from the plant. Then we also had a... They put in a small operation that made [floc?]. They took the pulp and ground it with a rotating drum with sharp knives on it and through a screen and you made [floc?], and the [floc?] was used for – not the main purpose – but, for example, [flocking?] Christmas trees. You could put [floc?] on Christmas trees, and there was a number of other things it was used for. But anyway, that wasn't very many people and they didn't do a lot of tonnage but they did that. ...

But that was the kind of thing where they said, "Well, how can we... Here's a good business to be in, let's get into it." And that's how you grow a business. In the meantime, you have to have people, you know, that are challenged, that are interested... in making improvements. They see a need and fill it. We had fella's that were good at marketing that were selling the material, they'd come back and say, "Hey, so and so is doing this, can we do that?" You know, type of thing. So it was very interesting from that point of view 'cause it wasn't the same job day after day. You were constantly changing, doing different things.

DOSEN: What do you think were the most important events at the plant?

OEHLER: Most important events... Well, I guess... in terms of... making the decision to go from the pulp... from the unbleached to the bleached pulp, going into research products and becoming a world leader in lignin research. And we worked with, say, the University of Washington. We also had some of the people from... Well, Doctor Eddie was down there one time. He worked at the chemistry department, I believe, up at the university – Western Washington. Anyway, there was a certain amount of synergism between the universities. Then down at the University of Washington there was... a pulp and paper school down there, a pulping school under Doctor Joe McCarthy, and so there was a lot of coordination and consulting on that type of thing.

But... then, of course, the thing that did the mill... caused it to decline [were], well, improvements elsewhere. But, for example, you can make... you could land pulp from Indonesia cheaper on the dock, cheaper than you could manufacture it here. Then, when the price of power went up, that was a blow. That hurt, too. So I think the main thing was that we continued to... the people that were making the decisions continued to grow the business, and that was the type of forward-looking... is what made a difference. You could have a business that didn't recognize how competitive they were and pretty soon, if they weren't keeping up, they were out of business – we have that all the time.

But that was the thing that hurt: the costs. I think the cost of wood and the cost of labor versus the Asia community made a difference... although we marketed our pulp in Asia, China, different places. So, and... I think the other thing is, if you're on the same playing field, are the environmental laws as tight in Indonesia as they are in the United States, for example? Are the wages the same? Is the safety factor the same? You have to compare

apples and apples, and not apples and oranges, and if you don't do that then you're not making a fair comparison of what kind of competition you're in.

It's kind of like what's happening right now with, let's say, Microsoft. They're developing programs twenty-four hours a day. They have a group of engineers in India, China, and when they finish the eight hour shift here it automatically transfers to computers over there and they work on it during their shift, and then it automatically comes back here. So it's a twenty-four/seven type of thing going on. We didn't have to deal with that in those days... So that's a little different. And I think the other thing is, you know, maintaining competitiveness in a situation is your location and your resource. At one time we had... the pulp mill here had enough timber to maintain a sustained yield. I think there was over 150,000 acres of timberland that the pulp mill owned, and that on a six-year growth cycle. [That] would have sustained the mill wood-wise forever. But other decisions, other accounting, the rules that are passed out of Washington D.C. have an impact on your business environment. So all those things slowly have an impact on the viability of the local operation.

But to summarize, the expansion... starting in the '30s and right on through to the... '70s was ongoing, there was always something going on. Well, it wasn't until... Well, the first major shutdown that I'm familiar with was the paperboard mill in '84 – and that had been built in '46 – so it was here about thirty-eight years. ... All the parts of the Georgia Pacific from the early parts to the tissue mill were still running, of course, but the pulp area and all that were... it lasted from '26 to – what was it? 2001? Was it, 2002? I don't know – three or four years ago. But here there are other mills that had been, well, I don't know if they'd been built down there, other mills that had gone down...

But, you know, it's just competitiveness. I think Georgia Pacific had all of their pulp mills up for sale at one time. It just wasn't competitive with the foreign markets. So they said, "OK, well, we gotta be in the products so we can make a profit!" [Laughs] If we can't make a profit then there's no point in being in business... and that's what happens.

DOSEN: You mentioned a couple strikes. How did those affect the plant?

OEHLER: Well, the hourly workers were on strike for one time. I think there was ten days one time in '64, and then it was for... in '78 they struck for... it was four months, I guess, from August to February.

DOSEN: Who was striking?

OEHLER: The hourly workers. The whole Western region were striking at that time..., and so the mill was running on limited basis with salary people... still kept going but on limited... You know, it wasn't as good as if the hourly... And here, again, of course, it was wages and benefits were the issue and that's always... usually the way it is. That's what's happened to the auto industry in this country, and unfunded pension plans and everything else, and airlines are... A lot of people thought they had a good pension plan for retirement and the next thing you know, they don't have it. That's a problem.

DOSEN: Did you ever participate in the strikes?

OEHLER: I was involved in keeping the place running. We had to keep the place going, that was part of the deal. They brought in other people from elsewhere to help assist. But, yeah, that's not a friendly time when that happens. You feel for the guys who are out in the strike and you hope that the negotiators and them can see eye to eye. [Laughs] Sometimes you're pawns in those things.

DOSEN: Where those strikes related to anything else going on historically at the time?

OEHLER: No, no, just wages, and wages and benefits type of thing.

DOSEN: What were the best things about working in Bellingham and this plant?

OEHLER: Working in Bellingham? What's the best thing about working in Bellingham? Well, you can see the advantages of the community. It's a great location because of the influx of people we're having right now. They've finally found out! But great environment, good school system... We've been in this place, this home since 1960, then we added on to it. It was a little golden oldie house when we bought it and then we added on to it. ... So you have the chance to enjoy a quality of life that you can't have any place else. Great place to raise a family. We were active in the outdoor sports, in swimming, and skiing, and so forth. To this day it's great to enjoy the outdoors around here. And the people that live here, for the same reason, they all have the same reason, they want a nice place to live. [Laughs]

Yeah, it's a great place, too, if you're interested... my wife's interested in gardening so she's active in that, very much so. And you're always learning something there. When I first got here, as I mentioned earlier, I started with the JC so I got involved with a community of people and you get to meet a cross section of people through that particular group that you wouldn't meet otherwise, and that was a very interesting and fun time. I've been active in the various groups through the years: Boy Scouts and YMCA and different things. I was involved in the community. Right now I'm enjoying the retirement years: do a bit of travel and play a little golf, and that kind of thing.

DOSEN: Do you plan on remaining in Bellingham?

OEHLER: As far as we know, yeah. We plan on [it] right now. Our fiftieth anniversary is coming up in June, so we're going to stick around for awhile. [Laughing] You never know!

DOSEN: What was the best thing about working at the plant?

OEHLER: Well, I think the people you work with and the... challenges that the job presented and... the environment that you worked in, in other words. We were always with the idea that it would be a community, a good community citizen type of thing. So

you got to work with different people. [Irrelevant material omitted] For example, Pete Zuanich was a commercial fisherman and then, because of his activ[ities] he was on the port commission for – I don't how many years – forty – but he was also active with JC's. I met him through JC but he was also active in the wastepaper business. So we bought wastepaper from him. He was in our paperboard operation. So I use him as an example because you meet people like that, they're active in the community, want to improve the community, and it's small enough you can get involved that way.

You know, you don't have to be... a wealthy person to be involved, if you will. So I think that's important... that you have the interest and the desire. But, you know, as I stated, it was... the people you worked with, the challenge to the people and the challenges of the business that you were... Honestly, I wish I had an opportunity to make improvements... Never quite be satisfied with the status quo, OK? [Laughs]

DOSEN: Were there any difficult moments working at the plant?

OEHLER: Oh, I think there's always difficult moments. I think the strike was a difficult moment. Sometimes projects didn't turn out exactly as you planned they would and that's kind of a difficult moment. If you let somebody down, that's a difficult moment. You know, they expect you to have something accomplished and you don't get it accomplished, that's a difficult moment. But, I think one of the difficult moments [was] when they changed general managers and they brought another man in – the general manager – and... one of his goals was to have a reduction in force... in other words, lay people off. And so that was very difficult... Some good friends got early retirements and things like that.

DOSEN: When was that?

OEHLER: Oh, that was back in, oh, '80...eighties... '87, somewhere in there..., maybe just before that. So, yeah... one of our general managers was transferred to Atlanta as a big – and I'm just second guessing this – but he would not carry out what the corporate headquarters wanted and so they brought somebody else in. And so that was a difficult time... when you have a change like that.

DOSEN: How did that change affect the rest of the employees and the plant?

OEHLER: Well, that affected them and the corporation. He was here for a couple of years. They... corporate headquarters made a change and brought somebody else in. [Laughs]. That's what happened there.

DOSEN: When you told people that you worked for GP, how did they react?

OEHLER: They thought it was... good. ... I mean, GP, of course, had a... If they smelled an odor downtown then of course that's a problem... or it was a problem... perceived problem, let's put it that way. You know, if it's distasteful, it's distasteful, there's no argument about that, and so we were constantly improving our systems so that

they would keep things under control. ... Unfortunately you're in the magnifying glass when you're down there on the waterfront, from both the college... or the university, and the citizens downtown. I think the first Earth Day was in 1970 and we were, I think, concerned that hopefully things wouldn't get out of hand... But we put up some extra fencing and things like that to make sure that there wasn't a problem that way.

DOSEN: Did anything... were there any problems?

OEHLER: No, there were no problems, no. No, it was a non-event. You know, people are free to express their feelings and viewpoints, that's one thing that's great about this country, but at the same time, emotions rather than facts sometimes get in the way. [Irrelevant material omitted] You say, "Well, I've heard that side of the story, now, let's see, is there another side to the story?" [laughing] and then make a decision. And I think that's a problem, that's an issue. As you probably have heard before, the pendulum will tend to go this way and then come back here, and then go this way and then come back here, and so you have those kinds of things going on, too.

DOSEN: What was the most memorable thing about working at the plant?

OEHLER: Hmm, let's see... Well, I think... you know, I don't know about the most memorable, but I think we talked a little bit about... I think, you know, as I mentioned before, the most memorable thing is the people that you work with, and that was important there. I suppose your retirement dinner is always memorable. [Laughs]

But, when we first started, when I first started at Puget Sound Pulp and Timber, they always... shut the plant down at Christmas time and they had a Christmas party, and everybody that was – there was about 250 or so then in those days and there was still some security down at the plant – but they shut everything down and they all had a big dinner at the Leopold Hotel. And that was kind of fun. It was sort of like a big family, you know, just getting together and sharing stories. That was probably memorable. And then, obviously memorable was when Georgia Pacific took over. Everybody was concerned about the workers down there. "Well, what does this mean to us now? What's our... where do we go from here?" type of thing and... Then it was memorable when your good friends got promoted to bigger jobs and more responsibility and that type of thing. That's always memorable.

And I think it's just, for me personally, I think the first thing was when I first got in to be production manager of the paperboard mill, that was memorable for me. And in the meantime there was always, you know, somebody always gave you a compliment for the good work you did. Well that's always nice too. So never forget that. [Laughs] Compliment when you can and criticize minimally, but don't forget constructive criticism. That's critical. [Laughs]

DOSEN: Do you keep in contact with anyone from the plant still?

OEHLER: Oh yeah, yeah. The fellow that hired me, he's been a good friend... for how many years now? Sixty-four years... and he lives just over here on Euclid Avenue. Another fellow I worked with down there replaced him at the paperboard mill. I still get together with him all the time. We play a little golf together and so forth. And there's other people. There's a group of guys that get together or – I'm not so regular – but they have a Tuesday morning breakfast meeting, they get together – all ex-employees type thing – and there's others that have a Wednesday group and, I mean, there's different groups. There's also a retirees' group that meets once a month and bring[s] in speakers to talk about current issues and things like that. So that goes down, and then, on a social basis, you get together with other folks... type of thing. So, yeah, you maintain those contacts. ... I think that's all I have on that.

DOSEN: Do you think that your life in Bellingham has revolved mostly around the plant and the people that you were in contact with and interacted with?

OEHLER: Now, I think you're involved... yes, it did. But I think you're also involved in the community. I mean, if you're involved with the church or with social organizations type of thing... and once you retire then your networking is involved... Well, the thing that you had when you were working, you were always seeing some of the same people every day. But there was a broader spectrum of people than when you retire, that's a little different. Then you start doing things that you didn't have time or take time to do when you were working. That's what's nice about the retirement part. My wife and I have had a chance to travel all over the world, in various ways, through [the] Elderhostel program. [Irrelevant material omitted] It was started by a group of teachers way back when, 1970s, and... the general theme is continuous learning and they have one week to one month programs all over the globe type of thing. I think - I know – Western used to have some of those. They bring people in in the summer time, stay up at the dorms and put on a five-day class or something like that. They still do it, though. They still do it in the... oh, lets see, there's a group there. They go up on the cruise ships from Seattle to Alaska, and then the San Juan Islands..., they have one and they have different... Anyway, that's the type of thing you're able to do when you're [retired]... Hopefully you keep that interest up.

DOSEN: So how did you feel when the plant closed?

OEHLER: Well, I felt... sad, let's put it this way, for the people still working down there. And I felt sad for young people coming in that didn't have the same opportunity that, you know: here's how everything will get started and work at the same place for all my working career. And I had opportunities to go elsewhere but I just chose to stay here and primarily was because of the quality of life that, you know... I went elsewhere and interviewed when the paperboard mill shut down and, yeah, it just wasn't the same. [Laughs] So, what you do is you say, "OK, what are we going to do now? What decisions are we going to make?" So anyway... So there was a...it's kind of like a, I suppose... I don't know if it's critical, the death of an old friend, but it's part of our evolutionary process. Nothing lasts forever and it's just, you know, there are people that have retired out of the mill way back when. They started there in the twenties and thirties and retired in the fifties and sixties, for example. ... But the mill kept going at that time.

I can remember one guy – he was a World War II veteran and they were hiring temporarily right after WWII down there – but he said he went down... Every day they wanted somebody off the street to work, he was down there. I don't know how many months he went down before they picked him to hire – he was that interested in getting the job down there. Well, when you lose a place like that, that let's say you've got 850 people, and you retire... fifty a year for example, and you bring in another fifty type of thing.

I remember one time I had some students from Western working down there. They were trying to do a summer job type thing like that – that's when we could hire them in those days – and I enjoyed having them because they were interested in working because they had a greater goal, and they would do a good job, and then they would go back to school and have more interest in their education and the doors that would open for them when they got out. And I think that's critical... So there are a lot of closed doors, if you will, when this happens. Now, obviously, when one door closes another one opens, but you have to be ready for that door to be opened and step in, you know. [Laughs] Being at the right place at the right time can be beneficial, but sometimes knowing where to be at the right time is critical.

Anyway... But that was my general feeling. It was kind of sad there because a lot of lost opportunity, a lot of people that were key active in the community no longer will be involved in the community. They're relocated or did something else. So you lose a resource, a tremendous resource there. It would be like if, for whatever reason, Western shut down. You'd lose a fantastic resource, I figure. But I think we have to be cautious about understanding what makes our capital[ist] system run... I was looking at the top twenty-five businesses they have in the paper here a month or so ago, and out of the top ten, six were tax supported institutions: schools, Western, the Port's trying to be... But that type of thing is what I'm referring to: hospitals, for example – although that's a private enterprise... But it's pensions and tax dollars that are supporting that type of thing. So my point is, if we lose the tax generation-type business, then what's going to support the rest of them? [Laughs] Is that the perspective you wanted?

DOSEN: How do you think future generations should remember the work that you did, the plant... the company, in general?

OEHLER: Well, I think... I'm not sure. It's kind of like, we've had resource-oriented, we had mines running in downtown Bellingham, for example, that were run by Chinese, that were shut down... coal mines [inaudible]. They have mines here at the other end of the lake. They ran here, you know. It wasn't viable to continue that type of thing. I think... what I would say about the business here is they did the best they could for as long as they could. As I can remember back in the late eighties, our general manager then said, "Well, you know, GP is a finite time. If you don't put money back into the business," – and this is what's critical is that capitol projects, in other words, a piece of equipment is wearing out and there's new modern equipment out there – but we're not making enough money we can afford to replace that, pretty soon productivity goes downhill. You're

shutting it down to repair it all the time and you can't [because] it's not modern. You're [using] more energy for it and so forth, on and on and on. That's the, you know, evolution process right now.

Right now we're seeing this country and what's happening with... energy, for example, it's impacted you and me dramatically, and if you're able to walk to school or maybe take the transit... [Irrelevant material omitted] But, let's say, when you go out to find a job [irrelevant material omitted] that will be one of the things you'll be looking at – you know, “Where am I going to live and what's the access to the job?” and so forth. So it's going to be tough. I mean, [there] could be difficult decisions to make. You say, “OK, well I want to be close to the commuter line, I don't want to drive. I'm going to bicycle and I'm going to walk and I'm going to ride the bus.” And really, when you're first out that's probably really what you should be thinking about. But, here again, what's going to impact that again is the cost of rental, wherever you're at. [Irrelevant material omitted] Anyway, those are all problems, or challenges. I shouldn't say problems... challenges.

DOSEN: What do you think will happen to the waterfront and Bellingham in the near future and in the long run?

OEHLER: Well other communities have... What I don't have a handle on... nobody's told me is how many dollars are coming in to this community, from not only new business but also retirees that are relocating here and bringing their assets with them. So they need service jobs. [With] land spaces at a premium, if we don't do good planning and work with business – and I'm talking about, OK, this community has set aside this many acres for industrial park... And Oregon has done a pretty good job of planning for their land use, we've not done as good a job as Oregon. But you know, across the road in Oregon, you know that's going to be rural and you can't touch that. But we've set enough side of land to be urbanized type of thing.

So the first question you ask yourself, “What's the best, highest of best use of a piece property for the citizens of this community?” And as I think commented to you before, it's economics and quality of life. You know, everybody's perception of that is a little bit different. I'm sure you've run into that. [Laughs] And so I think it's [a] compromise, I think, done... It's just like GP helped put in Boulevard Park down there – used to be a city dump. C Street used to be a city dump. You know, we're all evolving on this, both the community and, say, Georgia Pacific. But sometimes a corporation, because they can take a lead...

But all that park down there is very nice to have. It's great, people enjoy using it and it's a marvelous waterfront. I think you're probably, as a [inaudible], but at the same time I think there used to be sustainability in terms of, let's say, a park. One of the problems this city has right now is they've got more park land than they have money to take care of them. So what good is that? There's a park right over here, when you came out here it's right here. It's a county park and it'll never be developed and I hope it isn't, but it belongs to the county park. Well, that land has been taken off the tax rolls, which is fine, so there's no... so the citizens of this community have said, “We will, we'll own that

property,” knowing that it doesn’t generate anything. So I think the property owners – there’s 137 acres down there – and I think they have to look at it and say, “This has to generate a certain amount of income, taxes if you will, to unleash the offset cost of the parks you want to put in.” And more than that, actually, you want enough income to come off that property so that it helps support the kinds of things you want to do – say downtown kind of thing.

Right now, you know, they’re deciding on... we need more urban density, I mean municipal density, not urban density, municipal density – make it attractive for people who want to move downtown and use that space. Well that’s fine. So they build those high rise buildings. Now, well all of a sudden now, you know... You had the same thing happen in Seattle, you know: who can build the tallest building? and so forth. And then, I know in Vancouver, they had a software program where somebody proposes a building. They immediately look at the shadow that’s going to fall, where it’s going to fall and they do a – what’s the word I want to use – a... Well, [laughs] it’s a three dimensional, not three dimensional, but objective type. So they decided on the permit, building permit. Right now permits are... in a state of flux down there right now, and how this evolves will be interesting to see. I imagine if somebody comes down with enough dollars and says, “I want to put a business in there,” – which, you know, it used to be a heavy industrial. We’re talking about combination of commercial and light industrial. Here again, it depends on the kind of business that’s down there. I think some businesses are better remote. They don’t intrude on their neighbors as much or as... if you’re downtown, you have to have soundproof walls. You can’t let out any vapor ‘cause people think, if you let out water vapor you’re polluting the atmosphere [laughs], and so forth.

And so you’ve got those issues to deal with. But the city has to provide infrastructure: streets, services, water, sewer, and that takes upfront money. Anyway, I hope that the city, the port... and a private enterprise can come up with the... more reasonable use of the property. And it’s not going to be instantaneous. It’s going to be twenty years of developing. But if they zone it properly, it can be a real benefit. But, here again, what kind of business do you want? What kind of transportation do you want? Do you want trucks rolling down there? Do you want railroads down there? How are goods and services going to be moved around without disrupting the traffic? And in and out of this downtown central there, you’ve got those issues to deal with. So I’ll let somebody else study that one.

DOSEN: Is there anything else that you want to add about your experience at the plant, or Bellingham in general?

OEHLER: Bellingham and the county are at a crossroads. The people that move up from California say we don’t want another L.A. or San Francisco, or that... we’ve just moved in here and we like it the way it is so let’s slam the gate and do that. Now you can set up a situation like Carmel, California where they mowed down the infrastructure. You know, if you want to increase the water system or that, they have to have a bond issue and they just vote it down. You can legally do that. So what happens then, they’ve limited the size

of the community and only the very wealthy can afford to move there. The average Joe Bo can't live there.

So to me, this community, we have to be really wise as to... One of the problems of, like, a college graduate is, you know, "How do I get started on buying a house without mortgaging my soul?" so to speak. And I think we need to have urban villages first, you know, that type of thing. Make it structured such that people can do that. But at the same time, use that adequate open space. I like the trail system. I like the idea that... It would be ideal if a person was... like, my son said, if they could decide on a trail system that would allow, say, three wheel electric carts to run and stay off the main streets and combine with, I don't know... I know in Europe they have some nice trails down there where the narrow roads are only accessed [by] the people that live on those roads – but they're walking on the bicycle trails at the same time. So portability of getting people around, it's not easy.

There's going to have to be some tough decisions made. It's gonna tramp on somebody's toes, you know. I'm sure some people that own land... are speculating the land, are gonna be disappointed. [Laughing] But that's what's going to have to happen. But it's critical, the planning right now is critical, and it's not easy, it's not an easy task. It's... you know, everybody has their own idea of what's good and I like... for example, the traffic that comes from Sudden Valley now and is... When I first came to work, lived out here – I moved here in 1960 – if we had five cars ahead of me that was a crowd. Now, you've gotta wait for twenty or thirty to go by before you – and I'm turning right, not left, and the poor people coming out and turning left – well, it's going to be more frustration than it's worth, right? [Laughs] [Irrelevant materials omitted]