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GM'S CLOSED LORDSTOWN FACTORY SPAWNS A WAVE OF INDUSTRIAL MIGRANTS

Workers leave their families behind in Ohio in search of good pay and benefits in other states.

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On Zach Sherry's first day of work at the General Motors Co. factory in Bedford, Ind., trainers gave a safety presentation that included an image of a cartoon hand spurting blood from the ring finger.

The overt message was straightforward: Rings can get caught in the machinery, so don't wear them on the job.

The symbolism wasn't lost on the 48-year-old Mr. Sherry, who had transferred to the Indiana facility after losing his previous job at the GM plant in Lordstown, Ohio, that shut down last year. The transfer meant leaving his family behind one state away.

"You just took me 450 miles from my home and you're telling me to take my wedding ring off," he says.

Mr. Sherry is one of a cadre of Lordstown workers turned middle-aged industrial migrants, venturing out alone in search of good pay and benefits.

Itinerant work has long been common in manufacturing, including people moving around the country for fracking jobs. Auto workers haven't been immune to chasing their livelihoods across state lines, either. When GM and Chrysler LLC. closed plants as part of their bankruptcy restructurings a decade ago, workers were moved to the factories that survived.

The workers in Lordstown, many of whom are multigenerational GM employees, never planned to be among them. The plant was an example of American manufacturing might when it opened in 1966, churning out Chevrolet Impalas, Bel Airs and Caprices.

It has since become a symbol of the economic struggles of those who work in factory jobs. American auto workers in particular, already losing work due to advances in automation and shifts to overseas plants, now also face dwindling job prospects as car makers increasingly look to move to easier-to-assemble electric models.

Manufacturing jobs have grown during the economic expansion over the past decade, though the numbers have shrunk over the long term. In Ohio, the number of employees in manufacturing has dropped 35 percent since 2000, to around 660,700 in September, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

A few months after taking office, President Trump traveled to Youngstown, a short drive from Lordstown, addressing blue-collar supporters who worried their factory jobs were gone for good.

"They're all coming back," he said. "Don't move. Don't sell your house."

Instead, cratering demand for the Chevrolet Cruze left the Lordstown plant without a car to build, and, following a 40-day strike, company and United Auto Workers union officials agreed on terms for closing the plant. A large cadre of veteran employees faced the choice between staying home with their families but uncertain financial futures, or relocating to other GM plants where they'd hang onto their union pay and benefits.

When the assembly lines at Lordstown finally stopped, nearly all of the plant's roughly 1,400 hourly auto workers were able to find jobs at other GM plants. The vast majority were in Texas, Missouri, Tennessee and other out-of-state locations, according to the company.

Some Lordstown workers sold their houses and hauled spouses and children to their new job sites. About half ventured out on their own, leaving families and homes in Ohio, according to people in the union who helped with transfers.

Lordstown Motors Corp., an electric-truck startup that bought GM's factory in town, has promised to create jobs for 4,000 to 5,000 workers. Nearby, GM is building a \$2.3 billion battery factory jointly operated with LG Chem that the companies say will employ 1,100 people.

Neither the battery nor the truck factory has begun full operations. The UAW will represent battery-plant workers, and Lordstown Motors has said it's open to union representation for its workers but doesn't have a contract. Still, it's likely many of the jobs created at both factories will pay less than those lost at GM.

Veteran GM workers have an incentive to stay with the company. For decades, good pay and defined-benefit pensions were guaranteed in contracts negotiated by United Auto Workers for workers at GM, Ford Motor Co. and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV. US car companies and the union agreed to eliminate pensions for new hires in 2007.

The reduced benefits paralleled a larger decline in UAW strength. Membership, which reached 1.5 million in the late 1970s, was just under 400,000 last year.

GM's Bedford, Ind., facility, which took some 60 former Lordstown workers, churns out engine and transmission components 24 hours a day. The company often requires employees there to work seven days a week. There's abundant additional overtime for those who want it.

The result is that many Lordstown migrants have seen their lives reduced to work-eat-sleep-work cycles, clocking in and clocking out until they can rejoin their families.

FIRST SHIFT: JAY DYE

It's almost like the bright yellow Chevy Cobalt is taunting Jay Dye.

Every day around 7:30 p.m., after another 12-hour shift at the Bedford factory, Mr. Dye unwinds with a stroll around the Eagle Pointe Golf Resort, where he shares a two-bedroom rental unit with another transient GM forklift driver. The route leads him past the home of a GM family with the Cobalt in the driveway.

The model used to be assembled at the Lordstown factory. The chances are pretty good that Mr. Dye installed the speedometer or the radio on the yellow one.

"Seeing that car every day is a kick in the gut," he says.

Mr. Dye, 45 years old, started out studying special education at Kent State University. But the \$18,000 he expected to earn as a teacher after college couldn't match the \$50,000 he'd make at GM with a high-school diploma. So he quit school and, in 1996, took a job at Lordstown, a ticket to the middle class. In six years he'll complete three decades at GM and be eligible to retire with a \$3,400 monthly pension.

As rumors swirled about Lordstown's closure in 2017, Mr. Dye found comfort in Mr. Trump's words and in the UAW's reassurances that union leaders would press GM to find some use for the plant.

"My whole life I thought Lordstown was going to be there," he says.

His daughter, 17-year-old Gianna, is a drum majorette and a competitive golfer and dancer. Neither Mr. Dye nor his wife, clinical social worker Cathy Dye, wanted to tear her away from her high school and activities in Ohio.

Some co-workers transferred to other factories in the months before GM and the UAW agreed on terms for closing Lordstown. Mr. Dye held out until just a month before the shutdown and found himself with limited options.

He settled for a \$5,000 relocation bonus, which committed him to work one year in Bedford, 6½ hours by car from home.

He brought very little with him: Five pairs of Dickies work pants, four pairs of jeans, some T-shirts and a few sweatshirts. He figures he can pack it all, start the car and be gone in two minutes.

The Dyes' youngest, nine-year-old Jaxon, has taken his father's absence the hardest of their three children. During his evening walks, Mr. Dye fields calls from Jaxon about football or his favorite hobby – racing small, high-powered cars on a dirt track.

When Mr. Dye visits home, every third weekend, he usually sleeps in Jaxon's room.

In Bedford, he punches in each day between 6:54 and 6:56 a.m., and starts driving the forklift at seven. He usually logs 84 hours a week – 12 hours a day over seven days – loading trucks with parts for factories in Mexico, Canada, New York and other states.

"Right now I'm existing," Mr. Dye says. "I'm not really living."

This fall, Mr. Dye got a reprieve of sorts. GM granted his request to transfer to a plant in Toledo, and he started there Monday. Unlike the Bedford factory, Toledo doesn't have mandatory weekend shifts, so he plans to visit home every week. And the plant is just 2½ hours away, adding eight hours of family time to every weekend visit.

SECOND SHIFT: ZACH SHERRY

Before he punches in at the factory by 3 each afternoon, Mr. Sherry takes off his wedding ring, secures it in an Altoids tin and tucks it into his lunchbox.

He and his wife, Liz Sherry, 48, were high-school sweethearts. Thirty years later, he is still happy to warm up her cold feet at night. "It's just a little thing, but it makes me miss him," says Mrs. Sherry.

One morning after he left for Indiana, she woke up to discover that during the night she had organized his pillows into the shape of a person.

Mrs. Sherry lives on her family farm in East Palestine, Ohio, in the dream house she and Mr. Sherry built together, sunflowers lining the driveway.

In Indiana, Mr. Sherry rented for a while. In July he bought a two-bedroom condo, complete with furniture, in the Eagle Pointe development where Mr. Dye lived. The condo retains the impersonal cleanliness of a real-estate developer's model home.

The house backs onto a wooded hillside leading down to Monroe Lake. Most mornings before work, Mr. Sherry carves a couple of steps into the steep slope, gradually building a staircase connecting the condo to the shore.

It's a ploy to make Indiana an appealing place to stay for his kids, 19-year-old Parker, a quarterback at West Liberty University in Wheeling, W.Va., and 17-year-old Payton, in her senior year of high school.

Mr. Sherry bought two kayaks and fantasizes that Parker will do his online studies at the condo and they'll paddle around the lake together. He watches Payton's basketball games online and plans vacations around her golf tournaments.

After Mr. Sherry finishes cutting stairs, he goes for a short hike or jumps in the lake. One recent morning he pointed across the cove toward the home of another Lordstown bachelor. "He's got three kids," Mr. Sherry said, before pivoting and pointing toward a house in the other direction. "He's got kids."

Stories circulate among the Lordstown transplants of marriages crumbling under the pressure of separation.

Payton feels guilty for not making more time for phone calls with her dad. To compensate, she saved their favorite shows from Shark Week to watch with him.

Parker worries about his dad's loneliness, and about his own. "It's like I lost my best friend," Parker says, his voice catching.

After high school, Mr. Sherry worked in a country-club locker room, before starting his own cleaning service. He felt lucky when his brother hooked him up with GM in 2000. "In our area there aren't many jobs," he says.

Now he's 10 years away from being eligible to retire and, having grown up poor himself, hopes to have enough money when he dies to leave something for Payton and Parker.

To do that, he took on one of the most dangerous jobs at the Bedford factory – mixing alloys in a foundry that burns at 1,700 degrees. He spends all day in a smock and a full sweat, melting down rejected parts and other aluminum scrap.

“I don’t know if I’ve got 10 years in me,” Mr. Sherry admits.

THIRD SHIFT: DAN SANTANGELO

On the wall of Dan Santangelo’s rented house at Eagle Pointe is a cluster of framed photos. Happy grandkids. An expectant couple. Palm trees and a grinning vacationer.

It’s a typical display of family photos. But it’s the landlord’s family on the wall, not Mr. Santangelo’s.

Mr. Santangelo, 50, started missing his family even before he left them to work at Bedford last year. Day after day he sat silently in a recliner at the house in New Middleton, Ohio, and stared into the void like a man facing a prison sentence – five years away from home until he could retire.

He’d chew over the what-ifs. What if his parents got sick? What if something happened to his two kids, or his wife? What if he didn’t earn enough to cover two households?

He stopped eating but couldn’t stop throwing up. His wife, Anna Santangelo, finally convinced him to seek help.

The doctor put him on “happy pills,” as Mr. Santangelo calls the antidepressants. He’s not happy. But the drugs keep him suspended above the abyss.

The blackness was familiar and frightening. In 2009, the Santangelos found themselves in a deep financial hole, having overspent on their three-bedroom ranch house. The national recession led GM to cut shifts at the Lordstown plant, and the combination of growing debt and reduced income forced the family to seek refuge in bankruptcy.

Mr. Santangelo contemplated suicide, contriving ways to make it look accidental so that his wife could get his life-insurance payout. “I felt like I failed as a man, a husband and a father,” he says.

His family talked him back from the brink, and life settled down into a happy decade of basketball games with his daughter, 19-year-old Gianna, and working at the volunteer fire department with his son, 22-year-old Joe. The family shared Sunday night pasta dinners with his parents.

Mr. Santangelo admits he cheated his way through high school and struggled with the book work when he tried aircraft mechanics.

His father, Perry Santangelo, worked at the GM Lordstown plant from 1966 to 2000. He pulled strings with the union to get Dan a job in 1995.

“I knew if I got into GM, my worries were over,” say the younger Mr. Santangelo.

When Lordstown shut its doors, Mr. Santangelo took a \$30,000 bonus for a three-year commitment to relocate to Bedford. "You've got no choice, buddy," his father told him. "You can't just quit GM."

Until Mr. Dye moved to Toledo this month, he and Mr. Santangelo shared the two-bedroom unit at Eagle Pointe. Some days, the only time they saw each other was when Mr. Santangelo finished the overnight shift, which starts at 11 p.m., and handed off the forklift to Mr. Dye in the morning.

Every day Mr. Santangelo packs the same sandwich – ham, turkey, cheese and Miracle Whip on wheat – for the unnamed meal that comes in the middle of his shift.

He frets over the possibility that he won't be close enough to help if something bad happens to his family. He calls Joe to remind him to replace the smoke-detector batteries. It was mere chance that he was home in May, when Mrs. Santangelo's father grew fevered and delirious and died of Covid-19 alone in the hospital.

The stability and security Mr. Santangelo thought would be his when he joined GM remain just out of reach. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think Lordstown would close," he says.