

Oral History Interview with
Charles and Millie Shidler

Conducted November 14, 1996
by Marge Miller

Sesquicentennial Oral History Project
"150 Stories for 150 Years"

Sesquicentennial Oral History Interview
Interview with Charles and Millie Shidler
November 14, 1996
Interviewer: Marge Miller

MM: Charlie was one of the first people to come up here with GE, isn't that right Charlie?

CS: First one that moved here.

MM: Can you just reminisce a little bit for us?

CS: Yeah, we came here to look the place over, my first wife and I, the city, because we lived in Tiffin, Ohio. We were ready to move because we had reasons to move and we wanted to get where there was more nature and things of that nature than just the flat lands of Ohio. So we came up here on the third of December in 1953. It was snowing--lots of snow and so on--we stayed at the Warm Friends Tavern. Later, when I talked to my dear old mother and told her we stayed she said, "Why Charles, you didn't stay at the Tavern did you? That's a drinking place!" Anyway, I said, "Mom, that's what it was called when we first came." I was to meet C.C. Wood at the First National Bank along with Mr. Mance at about nine o'clock on the next morning. We got up and it had snowed through the night and my wife and my son, Edward, who came along, he was a sophomore in High School at that time, they stayed by the big fireplace at the Warm Friends, which was quite a nice place really. I went out and went over to the bank, and as went out the front door, the snow was yea deep. (gestures with hand) I just walked through it and I was crossing the street and the wind was blew up from the west, right from the lake, and I met a policeman walking, as I remember him, a big tall fellow. Later he used to direct traffic up on

the corner of Eighth and River. I said, "Good morning. Some snow." He looked down at me and said, "Just flurries." I learned after the years I've been here we do get a lot of snow. That was our first time here, and then, later of course, we were able to buy a home up on "mortgage hill," that's what they called the east end of Holland Heights at that time, from Russ Michmershuizen. We've been up here for forty-some years now, in three different homes.

MM: Where was your second home? You lived on Harvard....

CS: Then we built a new one, Mary and I, on Una Vista. On the corner, the white corner house there. We lived there sixteen years until she died of leukemia.

MM: Then, when you married Millie, you moved over here?

CS: Yes. She sold hers and I sold that and then we came here.

MM: Maybe you could tell us something about when you first came here, did they start the line at GE when you came?

CS: When we came I hired a lady and a man, and I also brought a maintenance man from Ft. Wayne here. We rented from DePree. The down floor they were using, but I had an office in the front, and then upstairs was where we set up a line to wind and finish out some motors. Then, we started hiring ladies. I think we ended up through that year '54 with about 12 or 14 starting out with 3, 4, 5, 6. The wife I have now was about the 10th one. We started winding, and Mr. Martin, the Vice-President, came once. So, that was the start of this over there, and we wound them and then we sent them to Ft. Wayne where they were finished out and shipped.

MM: Charlie, did people know that you were GE when you had that line at DePree's?

CS: Yes. I had very good association with Mr. Padnos. He came over and visited; I liked him and he liked me. That was my first reel.

MM: Was there some opposition from some of the others, like Holland Furnace and so forth, with GE coming? Did you ever feel any animosity from the other factories?

CS: No. I never did. If there was, it wasn't said to me. We were accepted and respected.

MM: You paid a little higher wages than some of them?

CS: Yes. We were pretty good paying wages. We couldn't get way out of line because that makes it tough on the other. Our wage scale, as we have found out since we left, was as good or better than most of them.

MM: When did you move the line up to the factory on 16th Street? Do you remember? Was it about a year or two when you moved over there?

CS: Yes. We moved over there in 1955 because we were still hiring people in '54 and still running that, so in '55 we went over there in May.

MM: That's when the headquarters office moved in, too?

CS: They came in too.

MM: Millie, you were one of the first workers on the line. Maybe you can tell us something about what your opinion was of GE coming to Holland, etc.

MS: Yes. I came in Holland on January 24th of 1955. I had been working at the shoe factory and they put applications in at GE. I thought, well, that's a good place let's just try that. I got hired and I was going to work three years and be a housewife and do my sewing, but that three years turned into thirty-three years and I'm not a bit

sorry. It's been a very good place to work. I bought a home and sent two children to college. I've got stocks and bonds from GE. I'm very satisfied with it. I can also remember that when I started I was a welder. I welded the wires together. We moved the plant from Seventh Street and River down to Sixteenth Street the week after Tulip Time of '55 because they thought they could move at Tulip Time. Of course, we being natives, knew that you couldn't move at Tulip Time. I can remember when I started there, I was welding and there was probably about a shift and a half, two shifts, not more than two shifts, and we moved over there. I was on second shift because they wanted to start a second shift to get more people trained. I worked on the welding for nine months and then I got to be a group leader. I stayed on that for about five years. Then Mr. Shidler asked me if I would like to be an auditor on quality control and I said, "Sure." But, he told me I had to go on night shift for six months. I wasn't very happy about that, but I had a salary of \$123.00 for a week.

MM: That was big wages?

MS: Yes it was! But, in six months I would be coming back on days and I would be getting a raise, so that sounded very good. I stayed there until 1988 as an auditor. I loved the job. It was interesting; something new all of the time. I met very many nice people. Hazel Plagenhoef was one of the first women there, and Herb Coppersmith was the first man. From Ft. Wayne, we had Ben Conner and Jean Baer. Those were the ones that worked on the floor with us. Of course, later there were a lot of the other ones from Ft. Wayne which, right now, I can't think of.

MM: Charlie, let's get back to you now and let's talk about when you first came to Holland, about you buying your first house.

CS: We came up one weekend, my wife Mary and I, hunting a house. We went up in Holland Heights and we saw a brick home on the corner of Glendale and Harvard which we both kind of liked. Mary, she wanted a brick home, and so there was one and it was pretty well along fixed and had a sign in the front. Anyway, we called that contractor that was building it and got together on it; got together on the price. He said, "I'll have a letter to you in a couple of days, tell you how I'm going to finish it out, and if there's anything in there that you don't like, call me back." We left it at that, and drove back to Tiffin, Ohio. Two or three days later, we did get a letter, and he said what he was going to do and I kept that letter. We gave him a date of the first of July when we wanted to move and I would come and settle for it. So, we came and visited him with that. Then, we went to the bank to get some money. The contractor said that he was dealing with the Zeeland Bank and that he knew them real well and that if we were interested he would take us over and introduce us to the president. So, over I went. I think his name was VandenBausch; John I believe. Then we bought a home on "Mortgage Hill."

MM: How much?

CS: Well, it was a brick home and a nice home. \$20,000 carpeted and everything. We lived there for sixteen years, I believe. Quite a few years anyway. Later, of course, I built one in Una Vista and that's the way that happened.

MM: When you came, Charlie, how about your children, Marilyn and Ed? How old were

they?

CS: Ed was a sophomore in High School. He played football here for two years.

Marilyn had graduated from High School in Tiffin and had a year or a year and a half in over at Hiedleburg, which is the college there. She was married to Bill Patterson, which they now have Shoreline Containers, and she lived in Warsaw at that particular time. That's the way that worked out.

MM: When you came, what church did you go to?

CS: Methodist, on Tenth Street.

MM: Were you involved?

CS: Yes. Over the years I was on the Board for several years. Four years at least. I also was into several different things. I always liked the hospital so, I was in the Hospital and on the Board there, and I was appointed President of the Board which I held for three years at the Hospital. That was very interesting, and since I've served about twelve years there as a volunteer. That was kind of in my blood. I liked that. Exchange Club, I joined that the first year it came, and I was a member there until just last year after 42 years. It gets a little harder to get around in the winter and part of the time we're gone. Now, they have it all through the summer and we didn't used to have that, and I liked that because of golf.

MM: Did you serve as an officer in the Exchange Club?

CS: I was President of the Exchange Club. I can't tell you the year right now. I enjoyed that and those times were always meeting at the Warm Friends Hotel, down below. Also, I was involved in Tulip Time. I was the Manager of Tulip Time for two years

in 1976-77.

MM: How did you enjoy that?

CS: Interesting. Busy. You learn a lot of things. It's a challenge. Besides that, I had to work as the shop manager at the General Electric Plant. That was busy; lot's of people. Before I came here, I had about 1,400 women in Tiffin where I had to fix some of there problems. Ladies do have problems. So do men.

MM: 1,400 women in Tiffin. So how did you find the work force here? There work habits and sector in comparison with the people in Tiffin?

CS: The only difference we had, the people here are good workers and I can't complain about that. I always had a motto that, "If you treat them right, they'll treat you right." It's a two-way street between workers and management. That's worked out quite well. We never had any particular trouble here. We paid pretty well.

MM: Did you find out about coffee breaks and deer hunting? I always heard of this...

CS: That was new to us. I can't remember any coffee breaks that we had prior to this, when I came here. I got inducted into that pretty quick. I took my car to the Ford Garage to get something fixed on it when I first came here. They've still got the name on it, Barber. I got the bill and it was so much that I asked them, "What's this for?" He said, "Well, it was about an hour's time!" I said, "Well they only worked on it about fifteen minutes!" "Well," he said, "Coffee break. They go for coffee." "Well, I don't pay for coffee breaks." "Well, you do here!" I said, "No, I don't!" I didn't, but I hadn't learned that you do and those are just things you learn.

MM: How about deer hunting?

CS: Deer hunting and pheasant hunting. That's just it. You might as well forget it. They're going deer hunting or pheasant hunting. We didn't have as many deer hunters as we did pheasant.

MM: But, they expected time off for that?

CS: You bet! That's what they had been used to. You can't come into the community and change it overnight.

MM: How about when you first came here, you didn't have the union here did you?

CS: No.

MM: I think Bob Snyder told me a couple years later, or somebody did, that you had to vote in the union. Was that it?

CS: I think she (Millie) would know more about that than I would.

MM: Millie, do you remember anything about that?

MS: Well, I can remember going to the first meeting at the Civic Center. Mr. Al Wassink was very big on that. They voted on so many things! I was not a very good union member. In fact, I did not join the union until it was mandatory. I think that was probably three years before I quit, and it was a closed shop by that time. I can't remember all of the things they voted for, but it didn't go over fairly well. Why, I never knew because I always thought that the union always took care of just the lazy people. Like the ones that wanted more breaks than they were entitled to, or came in late, or things like that. Of course, I'm sure they don't think that.

MM: How about the strike that GE had, Millie, do you remember that?

MS: Oh, my. I sure do. I went to work. I crossed the picket line with two other girls.

Only one day. When I got home my telephone rang day and night. There were obscene phone calls. My poor mother-in-law lived two blocks from me and they got phone calls, they were up all the time. I finally called Mr. Wassink and told him to please not bother those older people, it's not their fault: keep calling me if it's got to be that way. But it did last for a long time. I think the strike itself lasted two weeks, maybe three. But I did not cross the line after that.

MM: Just one time....

MS: Just one day.

MM: Because they really intimidated you?

MS: Oh, my yes.

MM: Do you remember the strike, Charlie? Anything special?

CS: I just came and went because salaried people weren't bothered. I was never hooted at or hollered at or anything. Of course, I wasn't producing any pieces, but it went along pretty good.

MS: But there was another strike later, wasn't there? That was on salary. I remember because I had to teach the foremen how to run Kaisers and Voorblocks and Winders, how to lace and tie and weld. I and another girl, Hazel Plachenhauf, the salary people that was allowed to cross that picket line. We were teaching all the foreman how to run the machines, and girls from the office came down to run some of the easier machines, and then they put me in the sample shop to teach how to make a motor. I had to make two of them, and I had never shifted main winders before. I made the right one right as Mr. Don ---- helped me and taught me how to do the first

one, but then I did the second one and I did it all wrong, so I had to make one over again. I didn't like to stand around. It was busy there and you had a lot of things to do, but when you didn't have a lot of things to do, you had to wipe machines and wipe windows just to stay busy, or, you read magazines which was not allowed.

CS: I watched them for that.

MM: Charlie, another thing I know, Ronald Reagan visited the GE plant. Do you remember anything about that?

CS: I remember that I was with him on the tour through the winding room. I had the winding room at that time, maybe Chuck Scott had the mechanical section. Very nice gentleman. Then, I went where he spoke at all the clubs here in town. It was at some church because we did not have the facilities that we have now. He gave a good speech.

MM: Do you remember that Millie?

MS: I sure do. I can remember how all of the girls came up and shook hands and wanted his autograph. One of the girls even had him autograph her t-shirt, which she kept for many, many years. Yes, he was a very nice gentleman. Now, that poor gentleman doesn't hardly know his name.

MM: That was probably one of the public highlights, GE was, when he came. So, Charlie, how was your relationship with the town in general, and how was Mary, your first wife, involved? She was a quilter, is that right?

CS: She was a quilter, and she taught quilting. She had classes in our sunken living room out at Una Vista where she taught. Five or six women would come and they quilted.

She made quilts for all of the grandchildren. She must have made eight or nine quilts herself. Then we bought some quilts because we always went to the quilting show at Alcott County Goshen, Menonite, sale that they had. It's interesting to go. Everyone should go there once, I say, to that because they sell quilts and they sell one every two minutes. They range from \$400 - \$4,000 and that's how they raise money for their relief. I used to get finance reports and they would sell \$100,000 to \$200,000 worth of quilts in eight hours with sixteen auctioneers, and they changed every fifteen minutes.

MM: Mary was especially interested because of her interest in quilting. How about your son, Ed, in school? He was involved in sports?

CS: Yeah, he was a football player. He played two years while he was here. When we came into to Holland the first time with Ed, and he was a Sophomore and he had a girlfriend in Tiffin, I said, "Now Ed, down in there someplace down in those lights is your wife. This is where you're going to get her." He wasn't so sure of that. But the truth of the matter was, we had went by his wife in Hamilton.

MM: He married a girl in Hamilton?

CS: Yes. Marlene Folkert. She's a nurse and has spent thirty years in the Hospital. So, I was a little late in telling where she was. So, now he has his own business. He was a tool maker for twenty-three years for GE and then he went into business for himself.

MM: Marilyn's husband worked for GE, your son-in-law?

CS: Yes, for a while. Then he started a little cardboard business on eighth street making

little things for some companies; whatever he could get some companies. That's history. It went great, just fine. Now he lives in Ft. Myers Florida.

MM: But, he started Shoreline Containers?

CS: Oh, yes. Shoreline Containers just north of 136th Street. It used to be called Pat's Paper Specialties. He has a couple hundred employees, and they've got a huge building, maybe 200,000 square feet. His two sons run it now. Doris Brinks runs the office, just the same as she did for Abe Martin.

MM: What do you remember about Abe?

CS: Oh, so many things really. We were pretty close. He was a different character. He was the manager of the division which included four or five plants. I ran into him early and I always had great respect for Abe. He was a good manager. When I was in Tiffin he'd call me. He was quite a golfer, and I played golf with him quite a lot. Sometimes he would call for me to come down if he was in trouble 17 to 2 or 3 on some lines and would ask me to stay a week or two to straighten it out. I was kind of a handyman for him at some times.

MM: Did he ask you to speak at one time?

CS: Yes, to the engineers of southwest Michigan. He was supposed to speak to them somewhere around South Haven. He got a call at about three o'clock in the afternoon from the vice-president in Ft. Wayne and he was to be there at eight o'clock that evening for a meeting that evening. So he called me up and he said that he wanted me to speak to the engineers. I wasn't in on his group like Mr. Snyder and Mr. Bose and those. I'm down the next escalator in the factory. "Gee," I said, "I don't know."

He said, "You know about GE. Tell them about it." So, I went down there. I worked it out pretty good that I talked so long and I cut it off before questions and answers because there's where they got me. The engineers knew more about that stuff than I did! Not on running a factory, but on the product and what they were building.

MM: What you talked about was running the factory? Was that it?

CS: Yes. People and stuff of that nature.

MM: Anything interesting about Abe would be....

CS: I didn't hunt. Abe did a lot of hunting. He was great about going out and deer hunting. When they came along with snowmobiles, I got one, he had one and Bob Snyder. We were out and Abe had two or three hundred acres where he bought out the east side in the Richmond area.

MM: Were you involved any in picking Holland as a location?

CS: No, I wasn't up that high. I asked Abe about that and he said we brought Mr. Ray Herrick here one time and we had to make a decision on where we were going to have it. Ray said that he was born and raised at Pigeon Lake and he said that Holland could stand some industry. That was good enough for Abe. The plant was to be located in Michigan and the plant choices were narrowed down to Marshall or Holland. Abe Martin who was in charge of the new plant mentioned that Ray Herrick, owner of Tecumseh Products, with whom GE did a lot of business, had grown up in the Holland area.

MM: When you and Mary came to Holland, what did you think about the blue laws?

Everything in Holland was closed on Sunday. You couldn't hardly buy a bottle of milk or anything.

CS: Well, I'll tell you. If you're going in, and I've worked for several plants for GE. The one at Tiffin and Ft. Wayne Supercharger plant, you have to swing with the people. You can't change them that fast. They'll change eventually if what you do is okay. It never bothered me. We were church going people, Sunday was Sunday, and we respected that. We never had any particular trouble. Like you said, though, sometimes what you wanted on Sunday you couldn't buy, but you learned after a couple times to buy ahead of time. Now, the stores are all open. Lot's of changes.

MM: Back then the theaters and the bowling alleys weren't even open. Millie how did you think the GE families coming affected Holland? Were you here when GE opened?

MS: Yes. I was born outside of Holland near Overisel. When GE came in, it was a well respected company. I wanted to get in there because I thought the reputation was good and the people that came from Ft. Wayne, some of the office people, were well respected business people. I thought they really did a good thing by coming into Holland. It upgraded our community to a higher class of people. They did hire some black girls from Muskegon. We had very few Hispanic people at that time in Holland so we really didn't hire a lot of those. I always thought the people that came were very well-respected and above the class; I thought they were very nice. Very well spoke of; they were in lot's of clubs that helped our Holland people.

MM: Was Mary involved in the Literary Club or any of that?

CS: No. Mary was no speaker. She didn't like to get up, but she belonged to a church

circle and she went to that.

MS: Didn't someone once ask you to be the Mayor of Holland?

CS: Well, they asked me to run for it, but I didn't want to. Mary didn't want to be the First Lady of Holland. She didn't like the publicity.

MM: Were you ever on city council, or a school board or anything involved in schools?

CS: I was on the one in Indiana, but never here.

MS: Mary was a very quiet woman, but very respected. I didn't know her real well. I'd seen her and I talked to her, but as far as knowing her personally, I didn't.

CS: She was a great lady. I had her 53 years.

MS: Her children speak highly of her, and the church spoke very highly of her. She made beautiful, beautiful quilts. In fact, when she died she was making her grand-daughter, Terri, a quilt that she never got to finish. So, Charlie took it to the church and the women in there that she had taught finished it for Charlie and then he gave it to his grand-daughter.

CS: The WHSMA, of which I was a member for four years, was a group that had the say on what buildings were built as far as hospitals in four or five counties in the state. There were about thirty of us on that board representing different places, two from Holland. I was one, and I can't think of the other real-estate man. I sat next to Fred Meijer and he and I became very close. Very, very smart man. He now owns the Meijer store. His father started it, but now he owns it. Of course now I suppose his sons run it. That was an interesting experience. We would go to Grand Rapids every month for the meeting. You'd learn a lot. We had a lot of people who had a lot of

knowledge. You know, if you keep your eyes and ears open you can learn.

MM: Were you involved in scouting Charlie?

CS: No. She's the scouter.

MS: Well, my ex-husband was. He worked in Boy Scouts for many years through the Third Reformed Church. He ended up having a Beaver Award which is almost the highest a man can go. Very knowledgeable in knots. He started the Sea Scouts. He loved boy scouts and I always thought that it was a very good thing for boys to join in.

MM: I know that Abe Martin was involved in the Scout Circus, as was Carl. What about Ed? He has a business as well as your son-in-law, that's Bill Patterson's Shoreline Containers. Your son Ed has his own company?

CS: Edmar. South of town. He has about sixty employees and a pretty good size shop. He has a very outstanding tool and die shop. A new building built and there's ten to twelve in there building dies for other companies.

MM: Would you mind telling us how old you are?

CS: I was born in 1909. I'm trying to get two and a half more years in and I'll be ninety. I'm eighty-seven going on eighty eight. I'm fortunate because sometimes I have a little memory loss on something that I know, and it takes me a little bit to grasp it. Outside of that I play golf, stay active. We go, we go... We've been around the world.

MS: We've been to Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, Figi Islands. We have been very happy together. He has a great memory, and he can remember his Christmas present

when he was four years old. He's wrote a book about his life.

CS: My mother was the same way. I got that from my mom. She can remember...

MM: Where were you born, Charlie?

CS: Pierston, Indiana near Wooster. It's not Wooster anymore because their main line of the Pennsylvania railroad ran through there and their east end goes to Masselin, Ohio and on this side of Masselin there's the town of Wooster. It's a pretty good size town. Just west of Ft. Wayne was Wooster, and they didn't want two Woosters in the one division, so they changed that little burg to Casiasco, that's a county. That's the history of that.

MM: Well, this has been nice chatting with you and Millie, and we thank you for your time.

CS: I want to say that this has been home to me for forty some years and I wouldn't want to be any place else.

MM: Thank you Charlie, thank you Millie.