

EckKenneth_19920316

RICHARD SHARPLESS: [00:00:00] This is an interview with Kenneth Eck, Kenny Eck. Five Flagler Street, Easton, Pennsylvania. It is March the 16th, 1992, 11:00 a.m. and we are recording this in Kenny's house in Raubsville. Okay, Kenny, first thing. How old are you?

KENNETH ECK: Fifty-two.

RS: Fifty-two, okay, and where are you from originally?

KE: Well, I was born in Kintnersville, and from Kintnersville, I moved to Durham, and from Durham, I moved to Riegelsville, and then back to Durham again. And I've been up here ever since. We moved up here after we were married.

RS: Okay, and how long have you been living in Raubsville?

KE: Well, it's been a good 25 years or better.

RS: Did you go to school around here too?

KE: [00:01:00] I went to Palisade, yes.

RS: Palisades?

KE: Yes, sir.

RS: Down in Bucks County?

KE: Yes, sir.

RS: What have you been working at all of these years, Kenny?

KE: Well, I quit school, and when I was in eighth grade, I worked for the township, Durham Township, for a while, and before that, I worked weekends, like, picking potatoes and towing cabbage. I worked for truck farmers. I worked for dairy farmers. I worked for beef farmers, and I've done restaurant work. Worked in the kitchens. I worked...let's see. Tree trimming outfits, and then finally in '58, I went to Keystone Box. [00:02:00] On September 29th, 1958 I went to Keystone Box, and then I've been there for 26 years with them.

RS: What did you do with them?

KE: I started like an apprentice. I bundled off a semi-taper. I then later became an operator on it. It's where you fold the box and run it through a machine, and it puts tape on the edge of your boxes. And I've done that for quite a while.

Then, I moved to machine operator, which was called a Comet. That was a glue machine. The printing presses and stuff would slot it, print it, and then all we did was just glue the sides of it. [00:03:00] And then, I was on that for quite a while, and back and forth between the box.

Well, it wasn't called the box. It was called something like a box stitch. That there slotted the boxes and glued them all in one operation. You had to set the scores and the knives.

And then, from there, I went to a post-gluer operator, and that was, like, a long ,thin machine that did die cut work like put glue on boxes for doll boxes, Barbie doll boxes, and stuff like that. Labeling.

RS: Where was this company located?

KE: In Riegelsville, New Jersey.

RS: Riegelsville, all right.

KE: Riegelsville, New Jersey. They have a Milford RD.

RS: [00:04:00] Okay, and you were there 26 years?

KE: And I was with Keystone for 10, which originally started it. I was there for Potlatch. They were there for 10 years, and after they sold out, they sold it to Western Kraft, and they were there for six years. Then, we were negotiating a contract after we found out that the father had bought, I think it was five plants, for his son and gave it to him as a birthday present.

RS: Oh, that's nice.

KE: Yeah. And I don't think the son really had that much interest in it.

RS: Remember this guy's name?

KE: No, I don't. I don't remember.

RS: Anyway, there were five?

KE: Five plants that he had. It was, I think, one in Chicago, Pittsburgh. I think there was one here and there was two others someplace. [00:05:00] I don't quite remember where they were at, but after the sixth year, we were negotiating a contract at the time.

RS: You had a union there, right?

KE: Yes, we were unionized.

RS: What union was it? Do you remember?

KE: Hm.

MARTIN DESHT: International Paper Workers?

KE: Yeah, International Paper, yeah.

RS: International Paper Workers.

MD: And a local in Tatamy?

KE: Pardon?

MD: A local in Tatamy?

KE: They worked out of Jersey. It was in International Paper.

RS: Anyway, you were negotiating the contract.

KE: Yeah, we were negotiating a contract, and we weren't really asking for money at the time. We were told that they wanted part of our half-hour paid lunch. [00:06:00] And

they were paying us for our half-hour paid lunch, for five years. Then, they decided that they wanted some of that back, so we decided that we weren't going to give it to them back, so we stayed out there for quite a while, and finally, they agreed to it, and we came back. And then, they said, "Well, no. We can't do this," so they just closed the place up, moved all the machinery out, and left."

RS: Where did they go?

KE: They went down to Bellmawr, New Jersey. They took all their machinery down there. It was less headaches. They could run their water and stuff like that into the sewer. And it was probably cheaper for them all the way around. Then putting in the -- well, the Environmental had stepped in then and found out they were putting stuff into the river. [00:07:00] And they wanted them to build one of those there things like they have in Easton to take the sewer out.

RS: A treatment plant?

KE: Treatment plant, yeah, which would have cost them a good penny. But then, well, they closed down in September of '84, the 29th. Almost the same time that I started back in '58, and then, I went as a guard for a while, and then I

went down here to Toyota place at Muller's and was supposed to prep cars. That was a joke, for \$4 and some cents an hour, you worked your butt off. And I didn't have any insurance or anything like that at the time, so I had to find a job, so I went back.

I looked all over the place for a job at that time.

[00:08:00] I was going through cornfields and everything else trying to find a place that would hire me because I don't have the education that most people do, so I had to take whatever would come naturally. You know, the lower-paying jobs, but then I know paper, so I tried back down there again, and they hired me on St. Patrick's Day of '85.

RS: This was?

KE: This was CPG then. There was another company in there out of Texas that had run it, and it's still the same name, CPG. They didn't change their name, but now another outfit has it out of Illinois, and they are strictly sheet plant. They do not make boxes there or anything else. It's strictly sheet.

RS: It's the same plant though?

KE: [00:09:00] It's the same plant, yeah.

RS: In other words, you went back after a certain period of years to the same place you'd worked at before?

KE: Right, correct.

RS: This other company that took it over managed to run it, though.

KE: They managed to run it, yeah. This fella that owned it from Texas had other box companies around the area, and they were, like, drawing sheets from this plant and distributing them throughout the area. Now, these people here have put new machinery in, and it's faster. And they're really making a good job of it. They're finally putting money back into the business, instead of taking money out of the business.

RS: Right. In other words, unlike the previous guy, they find that they can run it.

KE: Right, they can run it. They have more access, like I-78 now, and they can get the trucks out. [00:10:00] So they have better distributing than they used to have.

RS: And how long have you been working there then?

KE: This will be almost -- well, I started in '85.

RS: So almost seven years.

KE: Almost seven years, yeah. St. Patrick's Day will be seven years, and that will be coming up shortly, I think.

RS: Let's go back a minute. When you were at the old company

--

KE: Western Kraft?

RS: -- Western Kraft, right, what were they paying you at that time? Do you recall what you got?

KE: \$8 and I think around 85 cents, or something like that, same thing I'm making now.

RS: Same thing you're making now?

KE: Yeah.

RS: Only this is 10 years later.

KE: Ten years later, yeah.

RS: Now, did you have any benefits with the old company?

KE: [00:11:00] Yeah, we had insurance.

RS: Medical insurance?

KE: Medical insurance, yes, and we had -- there was a few other benefits, but I can't remember right off hand what they were. And another thing, that probably teed them off a little bit, was they had to pay our pension, which came into effect, so they had to drop back almost 10 years or better.

RS: This is the old company?

KE: Yeah, this is Western Kraft had to drop back maybe about 10 years to pick up the slack that Potlatch never gave us a

full -- or even Keystone gave us a full pension plan or anything like that, and so they had to drop back and pick all that up. And then, at the same token, they got nailed for -- (laughs) well, they got nailed after this company had taken over. [00:12:00] The Environmental stepped in and found out that this stuff was going into the river and everything, so they got nailed for all that. Ferguson actually owns the building that we're now working in.

RS: The previous owner?

KE: No. Ferguson had bought the building off Western Kraft, so Ferguson owns the building, and he wasn't going to get stuck with paying all this environmental clean-up, so that went back to Western Kraft. So they're paying him a good bundle to get all this stuff cleaned up.

RS: So Western Kraft is still paying?

KE: Yep.

RS: Western Kraft, but it's a new --

KE: In fact, the business inside the building is separate from the building itself. They do not own the building.

RS: Okay. They lease it?

KE: Right, they're leasing it from Ferguson, which owns the building.

RS: And the new company you're working for now is called what?

KE: [00:13:00] The new company we're working for is out of Illinois, but we still work under the name of CPG.

RS: CPG.

KE: Right.

RS: Now, do you have a union now?

KE: No, there's no union now. There was when we worked with Western Kraft, and Potlatch, and Keystone Box.

RS: Do you have benefits now?

KE: Well, we have insurance, which we pay some toward, and we have dental, which we'd have to pay for, and that's about it.

RS: Do you have a pension anymore?

KE: Yeah, we have a good pension now. This company that owns it now is putting the money -- the years that you put in with them, they'll put money into a government --

RS: Okay, bonds?

KE: -- bond or something like that, which they can't touch, and we can't touch until the day of retirement.

RS: [00:14:00] In other words, they match your contribution?

KE: Right.

RS: Now, let's go back to the other company. When they closed down and you left, what happened to your pension at that point?

KE: They put it in a Prudential policy.

RS: So you will collect that eventually?

KE: Eventually, yeah, I will collect it. I could show it to you if you want.

RS: No, that's okay. That's okay.

KE: There were some that weren't there as long, that they paid them right in cash, but then there was some of us, like I was number four on the seniority list out of all them years. I worked my way up to number four out of about a 100-and-some people. Then, they couldn't give it to me all in cash. I imagine they could have if I had asked for it, but I figured I'd rather have something to look forward to, even though it wasn't maybe that much.

RS: [00:15:00] During those 26 years with the first company, did you ever have any layoffs or strikes during that period of time?

KE: Well, Keystone was a real comedy thing for some reason or another. It seemed like you could almost bet when you come down, over the hill in the morning, somebody would be out on strike. A lot of times, they were sitting out there on strike, and if you'd ask anybody why we were there, nobody seemed to know. You know? It was one of these things where you come over the hill in the morning, and you come

down, and everybody was out on the road, but nobody knew why.

One night, I was sitting there, eating my lunch and I turned around, and everybody was gone. And finally, the boss came in. He said, "Ain't you going with them?" I said, "Where are we going?" He said, "Well, they're all out on strike." I said, "What for?" He said, "I don't know." I said, "I didn't even know they were going."

[00:16:00] So, I had to pick all my stuff up and shut my stuff down, and go out on strike, but I didn't know why I was there, but if it was a nice night, they were out in the road.

RS: So they had a lot of that stuff.

KE: In the first 10 years, I would say that was quite frequent to be out on strike for something or the other. A lot of times, you didn't know why, and Potlatch, it settled down a little bit there. We had a few contract strikes, but nothing like when Keystone owned it, but each one of the companies that were there said that they could make money, but they always complained that they were in the red. Well, maybe they had different problems of getting out of there too because they're rural roads. [00:17:00] And they

had to go through Alpha at the time to get out onto 22. And underneath that underpass that they had up there at Alpha, it really wrecked a lot of trucks. But now that that's gone, and they have more access to different highways, it makes it a whole lot better.

RS: How about layoffs? Did they ever have any layoffs?

KE: Yeah, there was a few back when Potlatch owned it. We got slow and they had several layoffs, but they brought them back after maybe about two weeks or so.

RS: Never anything real long?

KE: Nothing real long, no.

RS: Did you consider that a pretty good place to work at? The old company that we're talking about.

KE: The old company? Well, I would say it's just like any other place. You had to do what you were told. [00:18:00] As long as you followed the basic rules, I mean, there was one thing you could do a little bit more than you can do now without a union and that's argue a little bit. If you thought you were right, you could stand up for your rights. I mean, the union did protect the man's job. Regardless, sometimes they protected a man that wouldn't necessarily have to be protected, but since he was in the union, why, they'd protect him, but you could argue a little more than

you can now. Without a union, you have to keep your mouth shut, and you can give them a little flak but if you told it the wrong way, you're out, and there's too many people right now looking for jobs, so you have to kind of just keep your mouth shut and go with the flow.

RS: Do you think the present management of the company takes advantage of that situation?

KE: I would say so now, yeah. I would say they would, yeah, because they know in their own minds that you're there to do a job. [00:19:00] And as long as you do that job, you'll have a job, but they feel that, I mean, if you start causing more trouble than you can handle or they can handle, you're out the door. There's no advancement after that.

RS: Has that happened to anybody you know?

KE: That happened quite a few times already. I mean, if you're not there and you can't do the job, you're gone.

RS: How would you compare working for the two different companies? Let's say the old company and the one you're working for now? How are the working conditions there?

KE: The working conditions are about the same. The only thing, like I said, would be your union and non-union. That would be your difference. The non-union, like I said, don't keep

your job. I mean, you really haven't got anybody to back you up. They take a selection of three men from each shift as a committee to go in and talk to the company.

[00:20:00] And they have meetings, and that's up to them to decide whether you're going or not, so if they guy don't like you, he's going to vote that he don't like you, and you're gone. Where, at the union part of it, the only thing a union, in my feelings, were, to keep your job. That's all. You had job security.

RS: What's this three-person committee you're talking about?

KE: Well, they formed, like, a committee. It's the general manager, the plant manager, and three guys taken from each shift. There's one from each shift that goes in to represent you. You have any problems, you tell them, and they'll go in and sit down, but it's usually swayed toward the company because the three guys don't have any power.

RS: So it's still what the management wants to do.

KE: Right, it's still under the management control. If they feel like it's necessary, then they will change it. If they don't feel like it's necessary, they won't change it.

[00:21:00] So, I mean, it's still in their ballpark.

RS: Do you think that they push the workers harder today?

KE: Well, everything has gotten faster. Now, with this new machinery that they've put in, you're working almost twice as fast as you did before.

RS: You attribute that to the machinery?

KE: Yeah, the faster machinery and they want more production. The production is up higher now than it ever was.

RS: So you actually yourself, you find yourself working harder --

KE: Harder.

RS: -- than you did before?

KE: Right, right.

RS: Are there more men working now than there were before or less?

KE: Well, there's less men working now than there was before. When we worked for Western Kraft, there was at least 100 men or better working, and now they have cut that down maybe I'd say a good 70, 75 men at the most, and that's including truck drivers.

RS: [00:22:00] So they cut it by almost half really.

KE: Yeah, they almost cut it in half.

RS: And they're getting the same amount of production or more.

KE: They're getting more production now than they did before due to the computerized machinery and all that stuff.

RS: Where does this machinery come from? Where is it made?

KE: I think most of it's made in the United States. It's coming from out in the Midwest someplace, they got some of this stuff, and it takes a while before they get it here, but everything is in place now. They just recently put in another computerized, and they changed the double backer and the single facers now that they had put in. All you got to do is just change rolls. You just shove a roll in, and it will run maybe C flute, B flute, or E flute.

[00:23:00] And after they put this other piece in and get it going, then we'll be back to double wall, different kinds of paper now, that they're going to run. They're trying to run, anyhow, so they'll be up with everybody.

RS: Now, how many workers are there that worked with the old company like yourself? Do you have any idea?

KE: Let's see. I'd say maybe about 10 to 15.

RS: But most of the old guys have essentially gone?

KE: Yeah, yeah. They got other jobs at different places. Some of them went back to Macungie. Well, they live up that way, and they went back to a box company there in Macungie.

RS: Was that part of the same --

KE: No.

RS: Oh, it was a different company.

KE: No, it's just like a private box company that they buy sheets of stuff off of.

RS: [00:24:00] How do you feel about -- they hired you back and they knew you worked for the previous company there, right? And you started at roughly the same amount of hourly wage, or a little less?

KE: Well, when I started back there, I was \$7-something an hour.

RS: Which was actually less than you were getting when you were laid off.

KE: Right, right. Well, it was almost five years before they gave me another raise because I'm on a machine like the baler. I'm on the baler that chops the paper up, puts it into big bales, and then they haul it back for recycling. And they claim that that's a non-job as far as they're concerned. They're just concerned about one thing, and that's the main machine. Now, those guys make good money up there.

RS: What do you mean by that though?

KE: [00:25:00] The men that have to run the top of the machine, they make around \$11.71 an hour, and I'm in the age where running up and down steps and chasing sheets around is just

a little bit out of the question. I mean, I don't think I could keep up with it anymore. And the floorman, well, that's the fellow that straightens up the stacks and puts tickets in them, out of the computer now. Before, we used to have to hand count them, the sheets, and then give the guy an estimate of how many was in a unit. Well, that paid \$8.60 for that job, and then they done away with that. They were going to keep two men on the machine. Well, that didn't work because there was nobody on the floor to pick up the stuff after it fell over or anything like that, so they put the man back on the floor, and he's also making \$11-something an hour. [00:26:00] And your double backer, and your operator are making \$11-something an hour.

RS: Was anybody at the old company making that kind of money when they shut down?

KE: Only maintenance.

RS: Only maintenance people?

KE: I think so, yeah.

RS: Mechanics, and otherwise?

KE: Mechanics, yeah.

RS: Right, right, but still, they're making more money now with less people than they were before.

KE: Right.

RS: How do you feel about that? What do you think about -- how do you feel about the fact that here it is, 10 years later, and you're still roughly making the same amount of money when everything else has increased in value?

KE: Well, I know I haven't got the education for it, and I can't keep up with the younger ones, so I'm just happy I've got a job.

RS: Just happy you have a job? Mm-hmm.

KE: And I've got some kind of insurance to protect me because, today, the insurance is so high that an ordinary person couldn't really afford it.

RS: [00:27:00] With the old company, when did you realize that they were having difficulties, they looked like they were going to close down? The last year or two?

KE: The last year. We heard rumors earlier that day, "May close." They closed the plant in Pittsburgh, and we felt that it was getting close, because they told Pittsburgh they could have anything they wanted, and they asked for \$1 or some cents an hour more. And when the negotiator for the company said, "Yeah, you can have it," and then immediately closed the plant down, we knew we were in trouble. But we figured if we don't ask for anything, any money or anything like that, and just try and keep what we

had, we could get away with it, but it didn't turn out that way.

RS: You think they were going to close anyway?

KE: Yeah, I had a feeling they were going to do it anyhow because I think there was also a little bit more involved in this here Environmental thing. [00:28:00] They start fining them I guess, and they figured, well, they weren't going to be involved in building a new plant out back to take care of it all or anything like that. It would cost them a good million dollars or better, so they figured they'd just sneak off and --

RS: Get away with it.

KE: -- get away with it.

RS: Do you think that they could have taken care of this if they had better management at the time?

KE: Well, I think that would have helped, but I also think that if they would have went ahead and built their plant back there,

MD: The treatment plant?

KE: The treatment plant, yeah. I think they would still be making money. I think they would make more money now and everything than ever.

RS: So you think it was really a management problem?

KE: I think so. I don't think the son was very interested in the box companies that his father bought him, really.

[00:29:00] I really don't think so. I don't think he wanted to get really involved with it, so the father said, "Okay, then I'll just take the stuff out of the one plant," because it was mostly all new machinery that came from Sweden or Germany, like the Bopps. That was a labeler.

RS: So actually, they did get new machinery in them.

KE: Yeah, they did. That machinery in the old plant, toward the end there, they were starting to -- they didn't do nothing for the machine that made the paper, but they did get machinery in that was labeling. They did put labels on the boxes, like doll boxes and Barbie sailboat and Barbie cars and all that kind of stuff. It would lay a label right over the top of the boxes and glue it faster in one operation, and then we would get it and glue the box together.

RS: So apparently, it was just management. They were indifferent to it.

KE: [00:30:00] Yeah, I would say it was, yeah.

RS: How is this new management with this new place compared to the old one?

KE: Well, they're much better. At least they'll listen to you, but like I said, they still have the power to do what they want to do. They have more power now than I think they did before. Because the union would say, "Hey, you know, you can't do this" or "This ain't the way it's done," and then they would have an argument about that. But this company here, the fellow that's in charge from Illinois, he comes in, the main man, and he likes the way things are going, and he's willing to sink money into putting a faster machine in.

RS: As long as the men can keep up with it.

KE: As long as the men can keep up with it, yeah.

RS: So, you're essentially describing a job situation where you really, you've got to be young to keep up.

KE: [00:31:00] To keep up with it, yeah. You should be a little younger, but the job that I have, as long as they are not going to change it or anything, I guess I still have a job.

RS: You hear a lot of comments --

[INTERRUPTION]

KE: -- Japanese people over here and see if they could keep up with that machine that we have now. Just to watch and see what they could do with it, because the minute you stop,

everything is piling right up on you, and it's going to get faster. I don't see anybody slacking off over there because we're putting in close to 70 square feet, 70 million square feet out in a week, and that's a lot of paper going out that door.

RS: That's right, good.

KE: That's a lot of paper going out that door.

RS: So as far as you're concerned, the American worker is working maybe harder than he was.

KE: He's working a lot harder and he's working longer.

RS: And he's not getting as much money.

KE: And not getting as much money, no. But this company now claims that, you know, due to the machinery coming in and everything like that, they have to borrow the money, so now it's up to us, you know, to make a profit for them to pay this machinery off. And I guess they're just going to keep it tight for a while, but one thing about this outfit now, they do try and keep up with the rates that are in the area that the people are getting.

RS: You mean comparable --

KE: In comparable with --

RS: -- industries?

KE: -- yeah, with other thing. In fact, I think we're a little more paid higher than what they are paid in the Midwest. Like, in Illinois and those places, because things are a little cheaper out there than they are here.

RS: Yeah, because things are more expensive on the East.

KE: Yeah.

RS: [00:33:00] Has there ever been any talk about getting the union back?

KE: Well, there was one time, but they soon dropped the idea because the older guys that worked here before knowing pretty much about what happens when you have a union. I had problems, and I asked the union to help. They could never give you a satisfactory answer, so if you go to the company yourself and tell them what the problem was, you usually had it solved before the union would even get their butts in gear to do anything about it. So, I'm not saying the union is bad. Like I said, the only thing a union does for you is keep your job, and it keeps a guy that will slow you down, and it will keep his job too. Where here, now, you're going to have to work without it, and as long as you do your job, mind your own business, you're home free.

[00:34:00] At least you'll have a job to go to and come home from.

RS: So you feel the union probably wasn't all that much help to you, other than the job security?

KE: Other than job security, no. I wouldn't say so, and I think if you'd ask most of the older fellows that work there, and they'll probably tell you the same thing. Because every time you seem to ask them about a seniority problem or something else, why they couldn't seem to help you out. I never got an answer from them. You'd ask them one week, and two weeks later, you ask them again, and, well, they forgot about it. Mostly your union representatives didn't help the situation any either. I mean, they didn't know about it, unions. They didn't went through school or anything like that to learn about them, so we were kind of hanging out there alone.

RS: [00:35:00] Did you take your seniority with you? In other words, did you get it back when you went back to the company?

KE: No, no. We lost everything. I lost my seniority. I lost everything. It was first come, first serve when they first went back, when this other company from Texas opened it. It was most likely first serve, and then they restart the union again.

RS: When they hired you back, or you went back with the new company, did they say anything to you about your previous work?

KE: Well, they asked me about, you know, where I worked and stuff like that, and I told them I had worked there, and the first thing they did was put me on a baler, which I'm on right now, and they didn't give me any instructions or anything like that, you know?

RS: Right, right. Right, right.

KE: They were pretty decent about it.

RS: [00:36:00] In other words, there was no problem with you working with the previous company as far as they were concerned.

KE: Right, right. I think they could find out real quick if you were a troublemaker or not, and if you were a heap of trouble, I don't think they would take you back.

RS: Now, how many guys did they take back? Do you recall?

KE: I'd say around -- I think there's, on all the shifts, I'd say at least -- we have three shifts operating right now, and I'd say out of the three shifts that there was 10 to 15 that they had brought back.

RS: How do they feel about working with this company as opposed to the other one? Do they feel pretty much the way you do?

KE: Yeah, they feel pretty much the way I do. I think they feel too that as long as they have a job and they have insurance, it's a job. That's all it is, is a job. You go to it, you come home, and that's it.

RS: [00:37:00] Sort of putting in your years.

KE: Yeah, yeah, instead of worrying about what you're going to get out of it at the end of the year, they're just worried about security. That's all.

RS: Has this attitude changed, you think, from before when you were working back, say, in the '70s?

KE: Yeah, it has. It has changed a lot because back then, people weren't as worried about having job security or anything like that because they knew the union would step in and protect their job. So I mean, if a problem arose and, say, an operator had a problem with something and the foreman said, well, it was no problem, then they would have a big argument. You could almost tell the foreman to go jump in a lake, which the union would step in and help him out, but now when they have a big problem or anything like that, you just tell them about it and hope for the best.

MD: [00:38:00] Hope you still have your job.

KE: Yeah, right. You've still got to not push the issue so far that you don't have a job. That you can't do no more.

RS: Plus in the old days, there was other jobs.

KE: There was other jobs. There were more jobs than even back before the paper companies. I mean, there was Whippany and there was --

MD: Did you work at Whippany in Riegelsville, PA right by the gas station?

KE: No.

MD: You didn't?

KE: No. As a kid, I used to go in. We used to go in the top of the plant and get comic books and stuff like that when the baled paper come in. The guys up there knew us, and they'd save the comic books and stuff like that for us, and we used to go in and pick them up.

MD: But you never worked there?

KE: No, I never worked there. No, only as a guard.

MD: As a guard?

KE: Security guard, yeah.

MD: When did that close?

KE: The plant itself?

MD: Yeah, that plant.

KE: [00:39:00] I don't know right off hand, but Whippany owned it, and then it closed, Whippany closed, and then Durham owned it for a little while, for a couple years I think,

and then they closed. Then, it tried to reopen again under Durham name, and I think, well, they had too many bolts against them too. They had this environmental thing with the ponds and stuff, and they had to get all that stuff cleaned up.

RS: How do you feel candidly about this whole situation? In other words, back in the '70s, you sort of had feelings that maybe there was a -- you know, things would improve, but now I guess it's a matter of just hanging on? I mean, this is not just your industry. This is --

KE: All over.

RS: -- all over.

KE: I don't know. I look at it like this. People back in the earlier years had more jobs. [00:40:00] There was more fruit growers, there was more vegetable growers, so if you couldn't get a job with one, you could get a job with the other one, and they had more dairies, they had more beef farms.

RS: They had more factories.

KE: And there was more factories.

RS: Steel mill [door?]

KE: And there was just more people working without really worrying about the future. I mean, they had a job where

they were secure, they were making their living, and people just didn't realize what was going to happen in the future.

RS: In the workforce there now, what's the average age do you think, of the average worker?

KE: Well, I'm 52 and I'd say, well, there's some there older than I am. I'd say maybe up in the fifties, maybe 56, 57, somewhere in that neighborhood.

RS: So it's actually an older workforce.

KE: Right.

RS: [00:41:00] Well, how about the guys that are working on these fast-moving machines?

KE: Well, the younger workforce, those guys I'd say were in their 20s and 30s.

RS: How do they feel about this?

KE: Well, I think most of them are just happy to be working, really. It's younger families starting out, and they're just happy for the money that they can get and have insurance. I don't think any of them could really afford not to be working right now because, I mean, they're just starting out with their families, and just got married, and things like that.

RS: Do they have sort of the same attitude you have? Try to hope the damned job stays there?

KE: Yep.

RS: Or do they see a future, for example, with the company?

KE: Well, they're just hoping like the rest of us that the company stays and that we have work there as long as we can. [00:42:00] Usually, it lasts about 10 to 5 years. Well, Western Kraft lasted six, and that was amazing, because they -- like I said, after the son got a hold of them, I don't think he really was that interested in the whole thing anyhow. It's a hell of a birthday present, but I just don't think it was his intentions to do anything with it once he had it. I think that's mostly the main reason why they pulled us up out of there, and with the Environment too. That kind of closed down on them kind of quick.

In fact, they did on most companies. They just start fining them. Instead of helping them solve the problem, they just went to work, and they said, "Hey, we're going to fine you for this and we're going to fine you for that." Well, I mean, Environmental's a great thing, but they didn't go to the company and say, "Look, we can help you

out of this mess so that you don't have to close down and get rid of your workers."

RS: [00:43:00] So you think the government was at fault too here.

KE: Yeah, it's a combination of the Environmental -- years ago when there was a free-for-all, let's say. They could do whatever they wanted to do, and as soon as the Environmental people came and said, "Well, you can't do this no more." Well, I mean, them lines may have been in there for 10, 20 years long before this other thing, and you ain't just going to pull it up overnight and change your habits that quick, and study the environment. And people come and say, "Look, we'll help you figure a way out of this." It wasn't done that way. It was just wham, bam, alakazam, and this killed a lot of companies too.

RS: [00:44:00] So you think really the government should have been more understanding a little bit?

KE: Right, more on top of things. I guess mostly it reverts back to them, and your management too. I mean, your management in some cases never put money back into their business. Instead, they stuck it in their pockets. They were living good. They had no worries. Their people were being paid. The walls may have been falling down in their

factory, but who the hell cared? You know, they were sticking money in their pocket. They could do what they wanted to do. Then, all of a sudden, things started to pick up. They got faster. The machinery got newer. People were doing faster things with better pieces of machinery. Then, all of a sudden, they didn't have the money to put back into the company, so there, the walls are falling down. The machinery is falling apart. Now, what do I do now?

RS: [00:45:00] So management over the years really was shortsighted too?

KE: Yeah.

RS: They didn't put stuff back and reinvest.

KE: Right, they never put any money back into the business to see that the machinery was updated every year. Or whenever a good piece of machinery came along, they never updated it. I mean, they'd go with the old shit, and make as much money as they could off of it, and once it was shot, nobody knew how to fix it anymore, and it was outdated.

RS: Right, that sounds familiar. The same thing happened in a lot of industries, yeah.

MD: It seems that they were in it for a quick profit.

KE: That's about it.

MD: And when the machines wore out, they just closed up and went (inaudible).

KE: That's about the same thing with Bethlehem Steel. They knew that the other companies in the foreign countries were going to pick up their machinery and make it better. There's always an improvement on a piece of machinery that makes it faster, or better, or different than what they have, but why didn't Bethlehem Steel pick all this up and start to roll with it? [00:46:00] Today, they may do it with less people, but they would still have jobs. I mean, there would still be enough people there to have jobs.

RS: Right. This new outfit you're working for does, though? They seem to be keeping up.

KE: They have been upgrading everything with computer. Everything is now computer. Mostly, the machine takes care of itself, but you've still got to be there to make it go. There's only one little hitch. If that computer breaks down, and you don't have anybody around to know how to fix this computer, you're down for quite a while.

RS: Do they have people like that?

KE: They have an engineer that knows how to take care of a computer, and if he gets stumped, then they call in the

company that they bought this machinery from, and they're there within so much time.

RS: Do the jobs require more skills than when you started there with the old company?

KE: [00:47:00] I would say so, yeah, as far as learning how to put the orders into the computers, how to start the machines, and different rolls and stuff like that that make the paper much better grade of paper, stuff like that. It's all computerized like I said, and it takes --

RS: The operators themselves, do they have to know more?

KE: They have to know a little more, yeah.

RS: Does the company train them at all?

KE: Yeah, they get training.

RS: Do they do any on-the-job training?

KE: They get training off of the main engineer and the people that come in with the machinery that teach them how to run it and show them how to run it. It doesn't take long to catch on, if you work with it every day. It doesn't take long to catch on, whether you have an education or you don't. You can catch on pretty quick.

RS: [00:48:00] What effect do you think that this -- obviously your own personal situation hasn't changed. And probably

since you're making more money than you were before, it's actually declined, right?

KE: Right, right, but when they laid us off, when they said that, well, we were done, well, we had severance pay and stuff like that, so I paid most of my bills off with severance pay, 'cause I knew I wasn't going to get a job right away, at that time, jobs were getting kind of hard to get a hold of then already back in '84. So I paid most of my heavy bills off with the money that I got from my severance pay and my paychecks and stuff like that. And then, like I said, the only thing I could find right off the hand was the security job down there. [00:49:00] That was the only thing, like, available, and that was minimum wage, \$3-and-some-cents an hour.

RS: That was quite a change.

KE: Drop. That was a drop.

RS: What about the other workers in there? What happened to them?

KE: Well, they just scattered. Some went into business for themselves, and some just plain went to other factories if they could get in. It broke up pretty well.

RS: Do you think the company had more of an obligation to the workers when they closed?

KE: Well, they could have, but they send us to the unemployment office, which the unemployment office said that you have a schooling that you can go to, to learn a different trade, but I really didn't want to get into another trade because I had been with paper for 26 years. You learn paper, that's mostly the main thing you were used to. [00:50:00] I mean, then you have to get used to something else. It was kind of a funny feeling to work 26 years and then all of the sudden, boom. There was nothing. I mean, there wasn't enough to go out and kill yourself over, but it just gave you an odd feeling that -- I can't really describe it. It was a feeling like you had lost something that had been with you for 26 years, like losing a family member or something like that. It was kind of weird.

RS: Yeah, I guess it was. Did this have any effect on your family at all?

KE: Well, it did when I went through a, a lo --

[INTERRUPTION]

KE: -- wage. We had no insurance. The money that we were getting in, we were paying our mortgage to keep the house as ours, and a few other items, and then finally, we just couldn't handle it no more. [00:51:00] So we went for food

stamps, and luckily between the food stamps and the money I was working, or getting, we could make out.

RS: Did your wife work at all?

KE: She was working part time. She was working at the library at the time, at Wilson Borough, Mary Mueser, and with the little bit of income that she was getting, she was only like getting minimum too. Between the two of them, it helped us keep the mortgage and the light bill paid, and the rest of that, phone bill and stuff like that paid.

RS: How old were your kids at this time? They were gone, right?

KE: The oldest one, Joann, was gone. [00:52:00] I had Paula at home yet, and she was just graduating, getting ready to graduate, and Cheryl, my youngest, she was at home, so it was actually two at home yet. I had no insurance for them if anything were to ever happen. Seems to be the toughest thing going these days is insurance.

RS: Do you think the government, the federal government, should do more in terms of helping American workers in these regards? In other words, what about national health insurance? Some kind of national health plan to take care of situations like this.

KE: Well, I think so, yeah. I think the government could do a little bit more for the people besides sitting around discussing who was in bed with who, I could tell you that right now. I mean, that's a waste of our money, and now this other scandal that came out, they were spending all this money and writing bad checks. [00:53:00] I mean, who the hell pays for that anyhow? Nobody but us.

We've got to pay for their salary, which they put into a bank, which they wrote bad checks on. I mean, when do we get a break? Then, you've got guys now that are campaigning saying, "Hey, let's not give the middle class a tax break or let's not give them a break. They got money." I'd like to know where these people get these ideas from because if they had to come out here and live like we do, they'd soon go out in a tree some place and take a rope with them, I think.

They could turn themselves around and worry about the people in this country instead of other countries. I realize that we have to pay attention to other countries because, if we don't, they're going to be over here, they're going to be fighting amongst themselves, they're

going to be doing everything else. But let them fight amongst themselves. Maybe it will work something out that will help them, I don't know.

RS: [00:54:00] In other words, you're saying we ought to invest in this country rather than in other countries first.

KE: I would say so, yeah. Let's keep the money here in our country once, then let's put people back to work, and start making people happier, and get people off the streets that are living out there in boxes, and do a little more for our AIDS patients and other diseases that we have here in this country, and I think if the government would really get their butts off of their seat instead of sitting around, chawing who's doing what to who, I think we could get something done.

RS: You've been on the squad how many years? This is a change of subject a little bit.

KE: I've been on the squad now coming up on eight years.

RS: Has the economic situation affected the squad at all? The work of the squad.

KE: Well, we're strictly a volunteer squad. [00:55:00] We don't ask for any pay or anything like that. I mean, it's all volunteer. And we do ask for subscribers to our thing, and we just, I think, raised that this year, but we were

the cheapest ones around at \$15 for a family and \$10 for a single person.

RS: By the way, I never got my thing for this year.

KE: They're coming. We just stuffed them the other night.

RS: I remember I got the fire, but I didn't get the squad out there.

KE: We just stuffed them. (laughs)

RS: How many hours a week do you put in on average on the squad? I know you're on call a lot.

KE: I run from 6:00 in the morning till 1:00 in the afternoon, and then I have a weekend that's mine, yeah. That's 24 hours, 48 hours. And then, I go back to 6:00 till 1:00 again on Monday.

RS: So you put in a lot of hours --

KE: I put in a lot of time, yeah.

RS: [00:56:00] This is non-paid.

KE: Non-paid.

RS: Obviously, you get some kind of satisfaction out of it, right?

KE: Yeah, I do. In a way, I feel that this all began too when I was laid off. I didn't know what to do with myself. I mean, like I said, it was a weird feeling, and I felt maybe I could help somebody that, you know, would need help, so I

didn't get a chance to take the first aid classes or anything like that. What I did was hoping, you know, in some small way I could help somebody else.

RS: So you put in a lot of time.

KE: I put in a lot of time, and that sort of took my mind off of being without a job and everything like that.

RS: How many people are on the squad?

KE: [00:57:00] Right now, I think there is 20 people right now.

RS: Twenty people?

KE: Yeah.

RS: Is this an increase in the numbers from, say, about eight years ago when you started, or is it about the same?

KE: Well, it varies. It goes up and down. Some quit, some come on. So, it kind of varies back and forth. Sometimes, you have a little more, sometimes you have a little less, so it just seems to, like, vary.

RS: Martin?

MD: How old is Cheryl?

KE: How old is Cheryl? I think she's 12. She'll soon be 13.

MD: Any of your children go to college? Your older daughters?

KE: No, none of them went. They did manage -- I told them, I said since I didn't have an education, I was going to make sure they at least went through high school. [00:58:00]

And so far, they did. They stuck it out, and all of them except my youngest now have a diploma from Wilson High School.

RS: Is your wife still working?

KE: Yeah. She's now a -- like a, not a visiting nurse, but a health aide.

RS: A health aide?

KE: A health aide, yeah. She washes people and stuff like that.

RS: You feel that both you and your wife have to work now? Of course, the hardest years are over, your kids are essentially --

KE: Right, the hardest years are over, but still, if you want to have anything extra to help the youngest one coming along, like she wants to be in the band and stuff like that, then it's going to take money for different things. That money comes in handy. I mean, it's extra money that comes in handy. So I really wouldn't -- [00:59:00] it's up to her. If she really wants to quit or she wants to continue, as long as she feels that she can do it, it's fine with me. If she feels she can't do it, it's fine with me too.

RS: How about you? What are you looking forward to?

KE: What am I looking forward to in the future? Well, I hope someday I can sit my ass on a chair and say, "To hell with the world." I can go fishing and do whatever I want when I want to do it. I hope someday that will happen, but only the Lord can tell you.

RS: You planning to retire when you're 62? Sixty-five? You got ten years.

KE: I'll try it at 62. Seems like that isn't long after you retire, you're gone.

RS: Yeah, that's true.

KE: You don't get much of a chance to enjoy life.

RS: That's right. That's right.

KE: Some people are more fortunate than others, but I think, I don't know, maybe I'll try it around 62. [01:00:00] I have to see what happens. I've got a little bursitis and arthritis in my arms now, and I just hope for the best. That's all I can say.

RS: Hope the job lasts too.

KE: Hope the job lasts and hope that it'll go that long, and that I'll be covered, and hope everything goes alright. That's all you can do.

RS: Suppose you manage to make it to 62 and you do retire, do you have any -- do medical benefits carry with you?

KE: This, I don't know. I kind of doubt it. They'll probably give you an option to buy it, but this is strictly through the company, so I don't know. It's not an individual plan.

RS: Do you have to pay anything towards those medical benefits?

KE: Yeah. We pay \$11-and-some-cents toward them. I can look it up.

RS: That's okay. Is this Blue Cross Blue Shield?

KE: No. This is strictly, like, a pool that all the employees that just got the --

RS: Oh, I see, like an HMO.

KE: Something like that. It comes directly out of the company.

RS: I see. Does it cover most illnesses?

KE: Yeah, we have medical and major. You have to pay a certain -- or cover -- what do they call that?

RS: Yeah, minimum coverage.

KE: Yeah, and they have a deductible.

MD: They have copay?

KE: No, it's a deductible.

RS: Oh, it's a deductible.

KE: Yeah.

RS: Right.

KE: You have to cover your deductible before they'll cover the rest of it, and it's only, like, 80 percent, which ain't bad.

MD: How about dental?

KE: How about what?

MD: Dental? You have dental or eyeglasses?

KE: We have dental, but that you have to pay for too.

MD: All of it or part?

KE: Just part of it, and that's pretty expensive.

RS: These medical benefits you have now are actually less than you had before then, right?

KE: [01:02:00] Well, we have regular medical, and we have the major medical.

RS: Right, no, but I mean in terms of what the coverage is.

KE: Yeah, in terms of what the coverage is, yeah. A little bit less, yeah, but Blue Cross and Blue Shield got way out of hand.

RS: Really?

KE: They went through the roof, so other companies won't even bother with them anymore.

MD: If Cheryl decides she wants to go to college, what are you going to tell her?

KE: Well, if she decides she wants to go to college, I'll do my best to help her.

END OF AUDIO FILE