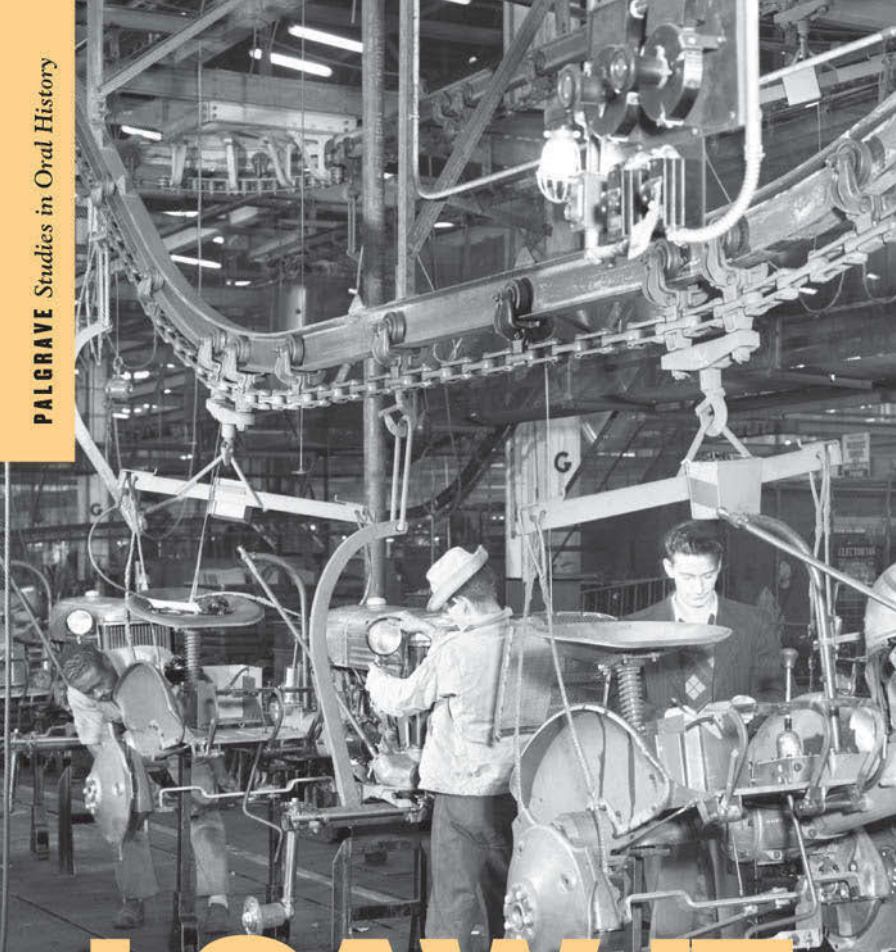
PALGRAVE *Studies in Oral History*



I SAW IT COMING

WORKER NARRATIVES OF PLANT CLOSINGS AND JOB LOSS

TRACY E. K'MEYER AND JOY L. HART

PALGRAVE *Studies in Oral History*

Series Editors: Linda Shopes and Bruce M. Stave

The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome, by Alessandro Portelli (2003)

Sticking to the Union: An Oral History of the Life and Times of Julia Ruuttila, by Sandy Polishuk (2003)

To Wear the Dust of War: From Bialystok to Shanghai to the Promised Land, an Oral History, by Samuel Iwry, edited by L. J. H. Kelley (2004)

Education as My Agenda: Gertrude Williams, Race, and the Baltimore Public Schools, by Jo Ann Robinson (2005)

Remembering: Oral History Performance, edited by Della Pollock (2005)

Postmemories of Terror: A New Generation Copes with the Legacy of the "Dirty War," by Susana Kaiser (2005)

Growing Up in The People's Republic: Conversations between Two Daughters of China's Revolution, by Ye Weili and Ma Xiaodong (2005)

Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change, by Kim Lacy Rogers (2006)

Creating Choice: A Community Responds to the Need for Abortion and Birth Control, 1961-1973, by David P. Cline (2006)

Voices from This Long Brown Land: Oral Recollections of Owens Valley Lives and Manzanar Pasts, by Jane Wehrey (2006)

Radicals, Rhetoric, and the War: The University of Nevada in the Wake of Kent State, by Brad E. Lucas (2006)

The Unquiet Nisei: An Oral History of the Life of Sue Kunitomi Embrey, by Diana Meyers Bahr (2007)

Sisters in the Brotherhoods: Working Women Organizing for Equality in New York City, by Jane LaTour (2008)

Iraq's Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon, edited by Tamar Morad, Dennis Shasha, and Robert Shasha (2008)

Soldiers and Citizens: An Oral History of Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Battlefield to the Pentagon, by Carl Mirra (2008)

Overcoming Katrina: African American Voices from the Crescent City and Beyond, by D'Ann R. Penner and Keith C. Ferdinand (2009)

Bringing Desegregation Home: Memories of the Struggle toward School Integration in Rural North Carolina, by Kate Willink (2009)

I Saw it Coming: Worker Narratives of Plant Closings and Job Loss, by Tracy E. K'Meyer and Joy L. Hart (2010)

Speaking History: Oral Histories of the American Past, 1865–Present, by Sue Armitage and Laurie Mercier (2010)

Surviving Bhopal: Dancing Bodies, Written Texts, and Oral Testimonials of Women in the Wake of an Industrial Disaster, by Suroopa Mukherjee (2010)

Living with Jim Crow: African American Women and Memories of the Segregated South, by Leslie Brown and Anne Valk (2010)

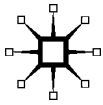
Stories from the Gulag, by Jehanne Gheith and Katherine Jolluck (2010)

I Saw It Coming

Worker Narratives of Plant Closings and Job Loss

Tracy E. K'Meyer and Joy L. Hart

palgrave
macmillan



I SAW IT COMING

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2009 978-1-4039-7745-8

First published in 2009 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-53750-1 ISBN 978-0-230-10226-2 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230102262

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2009

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the memory of Jean K'Meyer and
with loving thanks to Jim K'Meyer
and
To Florene L. and Charles H. Hart
with appreciation for lifelong lessons
about work and play

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Series Editors' Foreword

Long after the Great Depression of the 1930s and long before the severe economic downturn at the conclusion of the first decade of the twenty-first century, workers across the nation's rustbelt suffered from deindustrialization. Plant closings became commonplace as jobs moved to cheaper labor markets at home or abroad. This study, based on the oral histories of sixteen workers in Louisville, Kentucky's International Harvester (IH) and Johnson Controls (JC) factories that shut down during the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, transcends that locality to reveal a general portrait of the impact of deindustrialization on individuals, families, and communities.

The volume is organized by subject, not individual biographies, so that personal stories of the interviewees appear throughout all of the chapters. This permits the authors to cover a variety of work-related topics including narratives that discuss how workers obtained their jobs, the nature of work at IH and JC, the process of the closings, their impact on the workers, and the lessons learned from the experience. Job loss is always difficult, and in the words of one worker, "It was almost like an airplane crash. You don't prepare when you get on a plane for it to crash. It happens . . . , and that's pretty much the way that was." While, perhaps, they were not prepared, workers had distinct ideas about the cause of plant closings. They frequently cited bad management and, in the case of the Johnson Controls shutdown during the 1990s, jobs lost to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which made it easier for foreign companies to sell in U.S. markets. While interviewees may have been victims of economic policies that led to job loss, the oral histories clearly showed they exerted agency in ways that permitted them to mitigate poor shop floor conditions. Overall, the narratives reveal the complexity of their experience, and the ambivalence they felt about the loss of a job on the one hand and the release it offered for new life opportunities on the other.

From the perspective of oral history methodology, the authors pursued an unusual approach. Joy Hart, an expert in organizational

communication, conducted a general interview that began with the very open-ended question, "Can you tell me about your job?" This often elicited a great deal of information about health, safety, and working conditions. Two weeks later, Tracy K'Meyer, an oral historian, followed by asking more specific questions about the interviewee's personal history—their family background and life outside of work. The combined synthesis of the two sessions provided a broad array of information that permitted the book to be organized in its final form. By providing the narrators the opportunity to elaborate on their working lives and reactions to plant closings, the authors confirm their assertion that oral history adds the complexity of human experience to the generally one-dimensional story of deindustrialization.

This volume, the latest in the Palgrave Studies in Oral History series, joins two other books, Sandy Polishuk's *Sticking to the Union* (2003) and Jane LaTour's *Sisters in the Brotherhoods* (2008), that focus upon work and workers. Other themes in the series include African Americans and desegregation, women's history, and major events outside of the borders of the United States such as the Holocaust, China's Cultural Revolution, Argentina's "dirty war," and the upheaval of Iraq's last Jews. In bringing these and other subjects to print, we continue our effort to publish the best in oral history for scholars, students, and the general reader.

Bruce M. Stave
University of Connecticut

Linda Shopes
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Acknowledgments

Without the cooperation and enthusiasm of the interviewees, this project would have been impossible. We thank them for sharing their time, their stories, and their insights with us and for allowing us to share these with a broader audience. We also thank the Kentucky Oral History Commission and the University of Louisville for providing funding critical to completing this book. In addition, several other individuals provided vital assistance during the project. Several unions, as well as past and current officials, facilitated recruiting interviewees. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott helped us refine ideas in an earlier essay on this material. Further, we greatly enjoyed working with Linda Shopes and Bruce Stave at Palgrave. They provided helpful feedback and quick responses throughout the process.

Tracy K'Meyer thanks A. Glenn Crothers—husband, colleague, and editor—for being a sounding board and source of moral support throughout this project and all her work. Joy Hart also thanks her family and friends—two- and four-legged—for their support and encouragement. They made the project both more rewarding and more fun.

Introduction

In 1997 when Joy Hart interviewed Rob McQueen, a former employee of the International Harvester plant in Louisville, Kentucky, McQueen struggled to explain how he felt about losing his job, saying:

> Whoever listens to this will think I'm nuts. I have so many mixed emotions on it. When Harvester shut down, I was devastated but yet—God, I was so happy. It was just such a hell but, yet, it was my income, it was my life. I was overjoyed, I was sad, I was hurt. Every emotion that you can feel, I think I went through it. I was relieved because I didn't have to work like that. I was hurt and sad because I was losing a lot of friends. I was losing a lot of my benefits, insurance and what have you. But, at the same time, I was almost happy. I know that doesn't make sense. . . . I'm glad that I don't still work there, but, man, I wish I still worked there. Does that make sense to you?

He continued in the course of two multi-hour recording sessions to describe the brutal heat and pressure of the workplace, his talent and reliability on the job, and the process of losing his livelihood when the company shut its doors. In doing so he made clear not only why he was happy to lose the job—the unbearable conditions that left him with permanent scars—but what he saw as the reasons for the shutdown and the long-term impact on himself and others. His emotional struggle to convey his perspective to the interviewers and the imagined larger audience for his story highlighted not only the personal difficulty of trying to summarize one's own story, but also the complexity of workers' experiences and memories of deindustrialization.

Stories of plant closings such as the one McQueen experienced have become commonplace in both the popular media and scholarly publications. As deindustrialization spread across the country, news coverage and popular press writings chronicled the stranglehold on many factories and communities.[1] The initial wave of studies of this phenomenon focused primarily on the large-scale social and economic consequences. By employing surveys and statistics this work produced aggregate data on general trends and responses, but told us little about the experiences of individual workers displaced by job loss.[2] When workers were invited to speak for themselves in news reports or quotes to support survey findings, only small sections of their stories were used and these were typically employed for dramatic effect—to highlight the anguish and resentment associated with plant closings. In short, former employees were rarely allowed to reflect on the causes, process, or meaning of deindustrialization.[3] While these reports of plant closings did address shifts in the national economy and types of labor as well as impacts on communities devastated by loss of major employers, they obscured the effects on individuals and the responses of the working class.

In the past twenty years scholars from a range of disciplines have employed ethnographic methods of participant observation and extended interviews to explore deindustrialization from a grassroots perspective. An early example was *Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community*, in which David Bensman and Roberta Lynch combine a portrait of a south Chicago neighborhood with a call to action to prevent such devastation from recurring in other communities. Scholars have used personal narrative not only to give firsthand views of events and their results but to draw conclusions about the nature of work and worker identity. Kathryn Marie Dudley, for example, in *End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America*, sees in the individual stories of the death of an automobile factory a larger transition in the nature of work from a "culture of hand" to a "culture of mind." In a comparative study of the decline of the steel industry in the United States and Canada, Steven High likewise uses personal narratives to illustrate the differing responses on the part of workers on either side of the border, and how that was shaped by national identity. The theme of the collective memory of deindustrialization and its meaning for communities has begun to emerge in this literature, reflecting a broader interest in memory and commemoration in the academy. Thus in *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown*, Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo employ a variety of texts, including oral histories, to demonstrate how the rise and fall of steel is represented in the collective consciousness of the people of Youngstown, Ohio. Much of this work,

drawing as it does on life stories of the displaced, allows readers to begin to understand the experiences of the workers, to view the impact of deindustrialization from their perspective, and to consider the personal and communal meaning of events through the lens of memory. But, because most of this literature is in the form of traditional monographs, the dominant voice is that of the scholar; at times individual workers are not named, and at others they are represented as composite characters or only quoted in brief selections as evidence for the author's argument.[4]

Using combinations of oral history and photography, in recent years scholars have experimented with moving away from the monograph format, in order to present, as Michael Frisch describes his contribution, a portrait of the workers that allows relatively unmediated access to their experience. Frisch's *Portraits in Steel*, with photographs by Milton Rogovin, contains edited transcripts of interviews with steelworkers in Buffalo, New York, and aims to allow the men and women to present themselves to the reader with both their posed images and their stories. In similar fashion, historian Thomas Dublin and photographer George Harvan document the stories of residents of the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania in *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times*. In both cases Dublin and Frisch provide an introduction that gives a short historical background and context for the interviews, but choose to refrain from extended analysis, though Dublin goes further in laying out the themes he sees in the interviews.[5]

Contemporaneous with Dublin's work, Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky released *Town without Steel: Envisioning Homestead*, which likewise employs visual images and personal narratives to bring the story of that community to readers, but also includes a longer opening chapter of interpretation and commentary. In the recent volume *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*, historian Steven High and photographer David W. Lewis combine analytical essays, photographs, and the voices of workers to examine the effects of deindustrialization and the transnational forces affecting it. With this approach, High and Lewis blend elements of the edited oral history collection with the interpretive work of the monograph, making the book an experiment in bringing different voices—of both those who experienced deindustrialization and those who study them—into conversation. The idea of conversation is also modeled by the authors of *"I Was Content and Not Content": The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry*, in which extended excerpts of the interview with Lord are combined with photographs and interpretive essays from a number of scholars. In each of these works, the

story of deindustrialization's impact on individuals and communities is presented in lengthy edited oral histories, allowing the reader to "hear" firsthand the workers' experiences. To the extent practical in a written text of necessarily limited length the language of the workers is preserved, so that they are telling their own stories in their own words and readers can make their own interpretations of these histories.[6]

Extending these latter models, we hope in this volume to welcome the reader into a conversation, among the workers primarily but including our voice and interpretation as well, about the experience of work and deindustrialization in two plants in Louisville, Kentucky. In doing so we seek both to convey workers' self-presentation and interpretation of their stories and to fulfill our responsibility as scholars to draw meaning from the narratives. Oral histories do not stand alone as simple statements about the past but in fact are heavily mediated and constructed documents that convey stories shaped by the circumstances under which they are created. We as scholars chose the subject, selected the workers who then had the opportunity to share their perspectives, asked the questions, and provided an immediate audience about whom the narrators likely had preconceived notions—young, female, middle class, with no industrial experience. As important, in the end, we selected the excerpts, edited them, and arranged them in this volume. At the same time, the workers chose how to answer the questions. Most made it very clear that they recognized they were speaking to a larger unseen audience, and in fact appeared to relish the opportunity to pass their interpretation of events—and advice—on to later generations. In short, they told their story as they want that future audience to understand it. Put another way, borrowing from Frisch and Rogovin, they presented their autobiography, experience of work, understanding of the causes of deindustrialization, and interpretation of its personal and societal impact in their own terms. In this volume we sought to allow the narrators to speak with a minimum of introductory historical background and context, and then to add our voice to the conversation in a concluding chapter.[7]

In order to explore questions of how deindustrialization affects workers and their families, and how they understand and explain plant closings, we identified three businesses in and near Louisville, Kentucky: International Harvester, which closed its doors in the mid-1980s, Johnson Controls, which shut down in the early 1990s, and M. Fine and Sons, a shirt manufacturing facility just across the river in Indiana that had closed a year before our study. Our intention was to compare the experience in three industries across nearly three decades to see if and how it differed. We began with Johnson Controls because Joy Hart

had met some laid-off employees through her volleyball league and had become intrigued by their stories. Indeed, the genesis of the project was Hart's desire to understand what had happened to these men and women, both as a scholar of workplace communication—how workers share their stories—and as a friend. Harvester was an obvious choice because it had been one of the largest single industrial employers in the community. We selected M. Fine because it had closed so recently. Ultimately, we had to drop the garment facility from the study because we found too few interviewees to make a reasonable sample.

We chose Louisville because it is our home and we wanted to explore the impact of these economic changes in our own community. Tracy K'Meyer's interest in part stemmed from a desire to augment the archival collections of oral histories about the Louisville metropolitan area. But the location had the benefit of contributing new insights to the existing literature in two ways. First, at the time when most of these narrators entered the working world and when the plants closed, Louisville had a relatively mixed economy with a wide variety of small- and large manufacturers. It was not dependent on one large employer, and thus could form a contrast with the literature that focuses on the decline of a major industry or large-scale employer, such as steel or automobile production. The project's multiple plant approach reflects this mixed industry setting. Second, its geographic location in the upper South provides an alternative view in a literature dominated by the rust belt and upper Midwest. Louisville has previously been the subject of one comparative study of the response to deindustrialization, *The Politics of Plant Closings*, by John Portz. Portz focused, however, on the actions of civic leaders and the political response. Our study complements this work and brings the insider perspective of the workers themselves.[8]

The Louisville economy was tied to commerce and manufacturing almost from the beginning. In the 1800s the city was a hub for transportation systems between both east and west and north and south first because of its location on the Ohio River and later as a railroad center. Although that role declined after the Civil War when Cincinnati built a competing rail line, the city's economy remained focused on commerce and increasingly on industry as local citizens launched the first wave of manufacturing enterprises, mainly small and local and aimed at the southern market. After World War I the city joined the nationwide boom of the roaring 1920s, as Louisvillians opened over 150 new manufacturing facilities employing over 36,000 people by the end of the decade. This development included the Ford Motor Company, which built its first plant in 1914 and expanded it in 1925.[9]

The period of national crises during the Great Depression and World War II was relatively kind to Louisville, by the end triggering a dramatic acceleration in economic growth and industrialization in the city. While Louisvillians shared the hard times caused by high unemployment and bank failures after the stock market crash that triggered the Depression, the city was buffered to some extent by continuing demand for one of its major products—tobacco—and increased consumption of another—alcohol. Indeed, the end of Prohibition helped to cause a minor economic boom in the city by 1937. It was the massive industrial effort accompanying World War II that made the most significant impact on Louisville, however. Even before the United States formally entered the war, defense industries and facilities, such as the powder plant and naval ordinance center in nearby southern Indiana and more importantly the rubber and chemical industry in the western neighborhoods of Louisville, created an 18 percent rise in industrial employment by spring 1940. During the war, as more local plants converted to military production, employment in manufacturing reached a peak of 80,000 men and women. Though focused on defense production, many of these businesses either remained in operation after the war, or the facilities were converted into peacetime production by other firms.[10]

The industrial expansion continued after World War II and through the next three decades. Between 1940 and 1970 manufacturing accounted for 42 percent of the increased employment in the Louisville metropolitan area, creating approximately 53,000 jobs. According to census figures, by 1950, 31 percent of the city's employed population worked in manufacturing, a figure that remained almost the same for 1960 and 1970. This boom was part of a wave of southern industrialization, fueled by the rise of branch plants of large national firms that moved into the region to tap the postwar wealth of its inhabitants. In Louisville this expansion included the largest employer in the city, General Electric, as well as other "corporate giants" such as B. F. Goodrich and Anaconda Aluminum. International Harvester joined this migration in 1946 when it bought the Curtiss-Wright airplane plant and converted it to produce farm tractors. At the same time, large numbers of smaller firms also set up shop, giving Louisville a diverse industrial base. For example, in 1956 the Globe Union Company of Milwaukee—later bought by Johnson Controls, Inc.—opened a small facility employing one hundred people producing batteries. According to Chamber of Commerce president Kenneth P. Vinsel, this company was one of seventeen in just one year to start "pilot" facilities with the possibility of expansion later in the

community. The result of this growth was a period of high employment and diverse options for people seeking manufacturing jobs, just at the time when many of the narrators in this volume were embarking on their work careers.[11]

By the end of the 1970s, however, there were signs of a downturn in manufacturing in the Louisville area, a trend that would continue into the ensuing decades and include the shutdown of both International Harvester and Johnson Controls. Louisville again reflected national patterns, in this case the decline of American industry that began in the rust belt and urban north and spread across the country. Between 1974 and 1978 alone Louisville and Jefferson County lost 9,500 manufacturing jobs. The decade saw downsizing at some of the largest firms, including General Electric, which went from a peak of 23,000 workers to 15,000. Harvester shared in this belt-tightening, cutting its workforce from its high point of 6,500 to 4,000. During this slowdown in 1978 Globe Union sold the Louisville facility to Johnson Controls, Inc. The diminishing of the manufacturing base of the local economy continued into the 1980s as some of the city's largest manufacturers began closing their doors. In 1979 the Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corporation ceased production in the city, though it maintained a white-collar workforce at its downtown headquarters. Soon thereafter American Standard, Seagram's, Lorillard Tobacco, and finally International Harvester shut their plants. As a result by the mid-1980s manufacturing employment in the county had dropped another 17 percent. Some of these losses were offset by a rise in white-collar and service-oriented employment in downtown financial and other enterprises, as Louisville made a transition to a postindustrial economy. Yet the overall unemployment rate still reached 8.3 percent.

The Louisville economy rebounded somewhat in the 1990s, but by the end of the century the movement away from a manufacturing base had proceeded. In 1998 the U.S. Department of Commerce issued a report listing the community as one of several rebounding rust-belt cities because its economy had seen a 4.7 percent growth and unemployment had fallen to 4.4 percent. The decade had brought a rise in new business starts and even the creation of over 7,000 manufacturing jobs. This growth appeared to be a last hurrah for industrial expansion, however, as over the next few years those gains quickly and dramatically reversed. In the five years after 1998 the community saw a 9.5 percent decrease in manufacturing employment, and by mid-decade a total of 16,900 jobs were lost. This late 1990s downturn, coming as it did in the aftermath of the 1994 adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), set the context for the interviews, and thus likely

colored not only the narrators' outlook of their own future prospects but their views of the economy as a whole.[12]

For our study we interviewed twenty-four men and women, although in the process of preparing this collection we narrowed our base to sixteen people, seven former employees of International Harvester and nine from Johnson Controls. At the time of the interviews, some of these former employees had retired, others were in school, and some had launched new careers, usually making less money than they were at these factories. We identified the first interviewees through Hart's social ties. In addition, we were able to contact some narrators through union officials and meetings. Both International Harvester and Globe Union were unionized and closed shop facilities before any of our narrators started working there. The United Auto Workers was the dominant union in each facility, though there were a number of smaller unions such as the machinists and electrical workers present at Harvester. Although all the narrators just by being employed were union members, they displayed a range of attachment from those who served as long-time officers and for whom it was a primary identification to others for whom membership was a formality only. The union presidents in the plants at the time of the closings assisted us in recruiting participants and allowed us to speak to meetings of "alumni." Finally, and most fruitfully, once we started talking to former employees they suggested other people, and our list snowballed.

As in any oral history project, our methods for identifying and contacting narrators influenced the types of stories we heard. Our primary means of making contact, social networks and activity in union meetings, produced a sample loaded with people who likely shared similar outlooks and situations—that is why they are friends—and those with an attachment to the union and presumably the values of cooperation and solidarity that that implies. Just their ability and willingness to participate indicates that the narrators were or saw themselves as survivors, as people who landed on their feet. They had phones so we could contact them, homes they were willing to invite us into, and time to spend with us. There was a range of experiences, however, as some of the older, more infirm interviewees were having more of a financial and personal struggle at the time of our meetings. These, and other narrators, may have been motivated by the opportunity to air grievances. Two notes should be made of who is not in the sample. Those who left the community are not heard from here. In part, our original goals included documenting the impact of deindustrialization on this community, requiring narrators who could speak to the experience in Louisville after the closing. Moreover, people who left fell out of the