

News, Updates, & More

Varner Family Genealogy

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May 2016

FROM THE ADMINISTRATOR

Copies of old newsletters and additional genealogy information downloadable from the Varner Family website.

<http://brucevarner.com/VarnerGenealogy.htm>

Continue to look for ideas to include in future newsletters.

Please attend the reunion in Macks Creek on the 28th! Tentative subject matter for the discussions this year--

Expanding the Circle: Who are these new folks? Billy Joe Varner & William Virgil Varner families....

DNA Results of Billy Joe Varner: What we learned.

Why Varner's, Newton's, & Williams Reunion together: The connections.

There will be **no newsletter next month** (June) as I will be out of the country. Next newsletter will be in July.

I will place a copy of the Power Point used at the reunion, on the Varner Family Genealogy website after the reunion completes. Check it out.

QUESTIONS / NEWS

No questions this month.

George Varner of Missouri Direct Line DNA

Updates being held for this year's reunion the end of this month. Look forward to seeing many of you there.

Varner/Riggs Updates

Updates to be discussed at the reunion.

Leed's Chevy Plant & Unionization

I am being a little selfish with this month's topic. Not sure how much importance the subject will be to others. None the less, it is an interesting piece of history.

My grandfather, Bert Lonzo Varner worked at the Fisher Body plant at Leed's (In Kansas City, MO.) more than 30 years.

After Bert and Flo left Mack's Creek, there were several periods back and forth between Kansas City and Mack's Creek until his auto manufacturing job was obtained.

In Kansas City Bert's jobs consisted of: A mechanic with the FWD Garage for General Repair at 2704 E. 15th Street. Redcap and baggage handler at KC

Terminal Railway in 1925, and as a passenger usher in 1929.

Then in 1936 Bert was hired on at the Leed's Fisher Body plant which produced Chevrolet automobiles. This move cemented Bert's career and shortly thereafter, his politics for life.

Fisher Body Corporation opened its Leeds, Missouri plant in January 1929. The plant was attached to Chevrolet Assembly Plant Code #K.¹ The site was located in the small settlement of Leeds within Kansas City, Missouri. It was not until 1926 that General Motors completed acquisition of Fisher Body.²

Although two divisions of the same corporation, each division had its own staff. To include all engineers & administrative positions. To that end, what was called "THE WALL", ran the full length of the Leeds facility, completely separating operations of Fisher Body & Chevrolet. Car bodies were literally pushed through a hole in the wall from Fisher Body to the Chevrolet side.³ The wall finally came down in 1969, but by this time Bert had retired. The aging plant finely closed for good in 1988.⁴

Bert's political views were forged shortly after his hiring by Fisher Body.

¹ The letter "K" was used in the vehicles VIN to reference where the auto had been manufactured.

² Coachbuilt:

<http://www.coachbuilt.com/bui/f/fisher/fisher.htm>

³ Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leeds_Assembly

⁴ Ibid

Fisher Body had been its own stand along corporation for over 20 years before being acquired by General Motors. As such, the hiring guidelines, pay, and working conditions were separate, and different than those of the GM employees on the other side of "THE WALL". At this exact time, would come the push to unionize the auto industry.

On December 16th, 1936, (Just weeks after Bert had come to work for Fisher Body) 1,000 employees of the Fisher Body plant located in the Leeds district of Kansas City sat down on the job to protest the recent firing of a worker and demand that General Motors recognize the unionization of autoworkers. What could have been merely a local dispute instead gave early momentum to one of the most significant labor-management confrontations of the twentieth century, the so-called General Motors Strike of 1936-37.⁵

The national union that led the strike, the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW), was founded in 1935. The UAW soon demanded formal recognition from General Motors and other automakers as a legitimate representative of auto factory workers. The UAW hoped for unprecedented legal support for its efforts due to the 1933 Wagner Act, which for the first

time provided federal recognition of workers' rights to bargain collectively. Despite this legislation, however, the major automakers still resisted unionization of their workers, in part because the Supreme Court had not yet upheld the constitutionality of the Wagner Act.

By 1936, the UAW was considering nationwide strikes to obtain this recognition, along with better working conditions, increased job security, and higher wages. Workers at Fisher Body plants were in a solid position to lead a strike against GM. Since 1926, General Motors owned a controlling interest in the Fisher Body Corporation, which produced most of the car bodies for GM vehicles.

Fisher Body workers endured notably inferior working conditions and less job security than regular GM employees. Additionally, without a steady supply of Fisher car bodies, GM would not be able to keep up with production demands, which were actually recovering robustly from the worst years of the Great Depression. In 1936, GM was the world's largest automaker, supplying 37% of world's total demand for cars and trucks. In that year, GM was earning an after-tax profit in excess of \$239 million, which was edging upward toward the \$296 million in profits that GM had attained in 1928, when production peaked before the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

⁵ Striking a Chord, by Dr. Jason Roe:
<http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/week-kansas-city-history/striking-chord>

On November 18, 1936, workers at the Fisher Body plant in Atlanta, Georgia, held the first sit-down strike against a U.S. automaker. A relatively new term, "sit-down strikes" differed from older versions of strikes because workers physically occupied the factories, thus ensuring that management could not bring in other workers to continue operations. If police took the side of management and attempted to forcibly remove the strikers (as happened to outdoor picketers in 1930), the officers would have more difficulty doing so without damaging the factories. The only drawback was the occasional difficulty in bringing food to the strikers so that they could remain in place.

The UAW workers at the Fisher Body plant in Kansas City adopted the sit-down strategy on December 16, 1936, ostensibly in response to the firing of a UAW employee the day before. The 1,000 Kansas City strikers prepared for the long haul by creating their own informal police force, singing pro-labor music, and holding their own church services. Meanwhile, with no new car bodies being produced by the Fisher plant, the nearby Chevrolet factory in the Leeds district soon shut down as well, and its workers joined the strike. In total, 2,400 Kansas City autoworkers ceased performing their jobs.

If the strike had been simply a response to local issues, it might have been short-lived. Instead, when General Motors offered Christmas bonuses to the Kansas

City workers, they refused until the UAW could win national recognition....

After December 23, the Kansas City strikers abandoned the sit-down strategy due to their inability to bring food inside the facility. They moved their protests outdoors and continued the strike. In contrast to many previous labor strikes, though, the police did not interfere. On December 28, workers at the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland, Ohio joined the strike, and on December 30, workers at two Fisher Body plants at Flint, Michigan followed suit. In total, 140,000 employees at 50 GM and Fisher plants either joined the strikes or ran out of work due to production stoppages.

By this time, the main strike was centered in Flint, Michigan. Violence erupted there when the National Guard and the local police used tear gas, fixed bayonets, and the threat of gunfire to confront the strikers. Finally, Frank Murphy, the governor of Michigan, helped convince GM to acquiesce. On February 17, 1937, two months after the Kansas City UAW members sat down on their jobs, GM recognized the UAW, forever altering labor relations in the American automobile industry. By 1941, Chrysler and Ford both followed suit and recognized the UAW. For the Fisher Body and GM employees at Leeds, this quickly translated into a wage increase from 45 to 75 cents per hour. For tens of thousands of UAW members nationwide, the successful 1936-1937

strike against GM was an important stepping stone toward attaining middle-class wages and benefits in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶

I think that sometimes in this day and age we forget how little voice workers had in those pre-WWII days. Management had all the authority. Police and politicians sided with the companies and often did their enforcement.

So it is easy to see why playing a part in these events, produced in Bert a lifelong support for all unions. And because those unions supported the Democratic Party, he in turn always supported the Democratic Party.

New cars, assembly line at Leeds 1956.



2016 Varner/Newton/Williams Reunion

Saturday, May 28th, 2016. The event will be held in Macks Creek:

Macks Creek Baptist Church

⁶ Striking a Chord, by Dr. Jason Roe:

<http://www.kclibrary.org/blog/week-kansas-city-history/striking-chord>

Fellowship Hall

Macks Creek, MO. 65786

Opening at 10:00am with most folks arriving sometime before lunch.

Please attend.

Everyone's input is important! Please voice your opinions, suggestions, and family details to the discussion.

Reunion the end of May! Be ready and be there.....

Bruce Varner