YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Crucible Steel Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 1149

FRANK M. PHELPS

Interviewed

by

Mark F. Twyford

on

November 23, 1987

FRANK PHELPS

Morris Frank Phelps, the son of William and Maggie Phelps, was born September 22, 1908, in Garrett County, Kentucky. Phelps' family left Kentucky when he was five and eventually wound up in Dayton, Ohio. It was there that Phelps received his formal education.

Phelps dropped out of school after completing the eighth grade and went to work repairing refrigerators. The refrigerator repair business, like most others, was hit hard by the Great Depression. As a result, Phelps moved to East Liverpool, Ohio, in 1934 and searched for work.

His search was a short one, as he was quickly hired at the Crucible Steel Company in Midland, Pennsylvania. Phelps stayed at Crucible Steel until his retirement in 1971. Most of his years on the job were spent as a roller.

Phelps, who in now divorced, is the father of five children. He spends his retirement working with wood and playing golf.

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANK M. PHELPS

INTERVIEWER: Mark F. Twyford

SUBJECT: All aspects of work at Crucible Steel

DATE: November 23, 1987

T: This is an interview with Frank Phelps for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Crucible Steel Project, by Mark Twyford, at East Liverpool, Ohio, on November 23, 1987, at 12:00 p.m.

Frank, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. I think we should start off with learning a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up, and things you did back then. What memories come to mind about your childhood?

P: Well, I used to make wagons and everything.

T: You were handy with you hands?

P: Yes, good with my hands and everything.

T: You weren't born in East Liverpool, right?

P: No.

T: Where were you born?

P: Kentucky.

T: What was it like growing up in Kentucky?

P: Good.

T: Was your family well off, or was it pretty tough for you?

P: Things were pretty well, there wasn't too much going on then.

T: What did your father do for a living?

P: He ran a farm. He worked on a farm.

T: Did you help him with that?

P: Yes.

T: Is he the one who taught you how to work with the wood and stuff?

P: Oh, yes.

T: He was pretty talented?

P: Yes.

T: So, you went to school in Kentucky?

P: No, I didn't go to school in Kentucky.

T: How old were you when you moved?

P: I was about five or six years old. I went to Illinois, and I stayed there for a little while. My dad was working over in Illinois on a farm, and I was there a little bit. Then, I came back to Dayton, Ohio, and that is where I got my schooling.

T: What made you go to Dayton? Did you have other relatives there?

P: No, we just moved there because there was a lot of work around there.

T: How long did you live in Dayton?

P: Well, until 1934.

T: Okay, that was when you started at Crucible, wasn't it?

P: Yes, that is when I first started at Crucible.

T: Well, what led you to come here? what made you come to East Liverpool and Crucible?

T: Well, my sister got married to a man up in Midland. She got married up there. I came over there sometimes, and would come over and take care of my brother-in-law with meals and everything. She went away, and that is the reason I was working for him. When I came home from

taking my sister back to Dayton to visit, the man at Crucible Steel in the ball machine department said, "I'm going to get you a job at Crucible."

T: That was okay with you, huh?

P: It was all right with me. So he said, "You go over and see them." I went over there two or three time or something like that. The boss says, " Do you know about that place over there, Crucible?" I said, "Well, I know some about it." He said, "I'm gonna send you over there and see if that guy is going to hire you." I went over there, and when I left I knew it was gonna be hard. That is when I first started.

T: What jobs had you done in Dayton?

P: Worked for Frigidaire Air.

T: Was that a good paying job?

P: Yes, that was working with refrigerators.

T: What happened? Did the Depression hurt the business, or what made you leave there?

P: That was when Hoover was president. Well, everything went bad. I got laid off and everything. Naturally, I went over to my sister's, and that is when I got hired at Crucible.

T: So, that guy that told you to go to the employment office, was he the guy that finally hired you?

P: He lived with my brother-in-law. He was rooming with him.

T: That turned out pretty lucky then.

P: Pretty good.

T: What was your first job at Crucible? Do you remember what that was?

P: I loaded up steel for the crane, then I made the steel balls.

T: I don't know how that works or what it is. Could you explain it?

P: Yes, we made those little round balls, some are real small and some are big. They are pretty well round. They use them in these machines to polish up, like castings or something. You put them in a machine a roll them around in there, and the balls polish the

thing up.

T: How did you make them? What was the process involved in that?

P: The machine was. . .Do you remember when they used to make railroad spikes?

T: A little bit.

P: Well, that is the machine they used, and they made it over to make these little round balls. Not spikes, but round balls. I would sit there, you know, and get a round bar about ten feet long or better. I would start it in the machine, and then sit there and wait. When it would get pretty close to the end, I would start another one right on the back of that. I kept going like that all the time.

T: In making the balls, was it kind of assembly line like? You would do your job and the next fellow would do his?

P: Yes.

T: Was your job hard, do you think?

P: No, it was pretty easy for me. Of course, once in awhile I would have to change an iron. I would have to change them if they got bad. 1936 is when they quit making ball machines, and they started up an older Crucible in the same building. They started making those things for automobiles, the knuckles for steering wheels. The thing on the front like a spindle on a wheel, we made them, and then they would have to go someplace over in Detroit. They would get them all polished up and Put them right on the wheel and put the hub on.

T: Was making them similar to making the balls?

P: No.

T: Totally different. When you started out making the balls, did you get to pick that job, or did they say, "Frank, you are going to make the balls."

P: No. They just said to me, "You just run this machine."

T: That is the same in 1936 when they started making the other things?

P: Yes. Then they said, "I'll give you a job." They called them ball machines, naturally. When they started making knuckles for the steering wheels, then he gave me the same job. Then, I was a roller.

T: A roller?

P: I had a pair of tongs that I held in my hands.

T: They were long tongs?

P: Long tongs. You had a hot bar that was one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. I would have to push this back in more to stop this. they were cut up in short pieces.

T: You used the tongs to do that?

P: Yes, I had a problem with round bars or square bars or other things. Then, all back through there in the back of the machine. Then, I pushed in this, and I turned it over. Then, I turned this back over again until I got to the last one and had to give it another hit. There was a guy in back of me doing the same thing. I could walk back there and then start it back again, the same thing. They were piled up down the shoot.

T: So, there were eight stages then.

P: Yes.

T: Were these good paying jobs?

P: Yes, that was good.

T: Do you remember about how much you were making?

P: Well, when I first started out it was $3.50.

T: $3.50 a day?

P: Yes, $3.50 a day for eight hours. It ended up I was making about fifty dollars a day when I went to work at the axle mill.

T: That was a good improvement. Were there any other jobs you had at the mill? You mentioned a roller, was that what that was?

P: Yes. See, when the war broke out, they deferred me. Then, we started making spindles for treads for Buick tanks. Those were big boy, they were big. We worked on those until the war was over, and then we went back to making spindles.

T: Making the pieces for the tank, was that a lot harder?

P: Oh, yes. They were heavy, too.

T: Did you have to lift them with tongs, or how did that precede your work?

P: Well, say the bar was square after we rolled it out, but the one end of it was round. The other end was still square. Next was tanks. I don't know what they were used for.

T: The title of that job was roller?

P: Roller, same as before.

T: What else did you do after you were a roller? Did they move you to any other jobs or was that your main job for most of the time?

P: Yes, it was the biggest part of my time after that, almost forty years.

T: Forty years you were a roller. Did you enjoy that work?

P: Yes, I liked it.

T: Did you ever have to do any jobs up there that you didn't like, or some that you didn't enjoy as much?

P: A couple. For the most part I was satisfied with everything.

T: Of the jobs you saw up there, which would you consider the least enjoyable or possibly the most dangerous?

P: Well, they are all pretty dangerous. In any of these things if you start the thing in there and you get off of line, or miss or bump it or something, you can get whacked up real good.

T: Did you ever see anyone get hurt up there?

P: Yes.

T: Was that pretty common?

P: Yes. I've seen some of them that have missed the bumper, and he got whacked up pretty good.

T: Did you ever get hurt doing your job?

P: No.

T: You were pretty lucky then. You always took care not to. Was there any type of compensation for men that were injured back when you started? Did they have anything like that, workman's compensation?

P: No, I don't think so. I think it started later on around 1940 or something like that. Sometimes a guy, say in the summer time, the guy would pass out.

T: From the heat?

P: That was hot drop. A lot of those guys passed out, and they had to take them over to the clinic and pack them in ice.

T: Is that right?

P: Yes.

T: Now, you mentioned to me earlier about working forty-five minutes then you got a fifteen minute break. Is that because of the heat?

P: Yes, it was because of the heat because it was awfully hot. The bars were red hot.

T: Yes. Was there a union back then when you started?

P: No, right then no. There was no union then. It started later on.

T: This was just a necessity that they give you the fifteen minutes off an hour then?

P: Yes, because it was too hot. You needed time off in order to get your air and get back in.

T: Was the mill a pretty rough place to work? Was there any violence between people, or did everyone get along pretty well?

P: Oh, they got along pretty well.

T: You have a lot of people of different nationalities there, right? Did that ever cause any trouble?

P: No. Well, there might have been a couple of them that fight every once in a while.

T: I remember talking to another fellow who worked there in the thirties, and he mentioned that at that time they paid you in cash, right?

P: Yes, they paid us in cash.

T: He told me some stories about people getting paid in cash, and they didn't make it home. They would get bopped on the head and get relieved of their money. Did you ever know of anything like that happening?

P: Oh, yes. I got paid in cash there for a long time, and then later on I got a check.

T: In the mill was your job one of the higher paying jobs in the mill?

P: Yes, the highest paid, unless it was some big shot like a superintendent. He would get more money than me.

T: Your job, did it depend any way on how much you turned out?

P: We wanted the turnout everytime. It was 2000 pieces of spindles everyday if we had a good run. If we had trouble we wouldn't always make 2000. If we finished up, say if we had 2000 pieces finished. . .Say it was time to go home at 3:00 and we finished up at 2:00, we could shut the mill down and wait until the other guys came and took over. Then, they would have to start it back up again.

T: Once you hit your quota, you could take it easy for awhile.

P: Yes, I could go take a shower and everything.

T: Did everybody pull their own weight on your crew?

P: Oh, yes. We all worked pretty good together.

T: During the time you were at Crucible you mentioned about injuries being common, dangers present at the mill. During the time you were there, did you notice an improvement in safety conditions?

P: Oh, yes.

T: What improvements do you remember? For example, in your particular job did they do anything to make your job safer?

P: Oh, yes.

T: Do you remember anything like making the machines safer or. . .

P: Yes. The machines, they put guards on them and made them a lot safer.

T: Did your job become easier with time with the new technology?

P: Well, it wasn't too much easier, but it was safer. They take care of the machines and fix them up and that made it easier for me to do the job.

T: Were you basically doing it the same way you did it. . .When you retired from Crucible, were you still performing the job in almost the same way as you had when you started?

P: Yes.

T: So, it didn't really change a lot, it just became a little safer.

P: Those things, I had to do that all the time anyway. They changed it around and made it a lot easier for me to do it.

T: You think the union came in around 1940 or so.

P: I think it was around 1940 or so.

T: Were you supportive of a union when it came? Did you want a union to come, or did the men in general want a union to come? Do you remember?

P: Yes, I think they did. I think they wanted to get a union set up.

T: When the union came, did things improve a lot because of the union?

P: Yes. Then, you know, if you didn't like something they, the mill, were doing, the union was standing behind you.

T: You lived here in East Liverpool?

P: Yes.

T: Did you drive to Midland, or how did you get up to Crucible?

P: Oh, I drove.

T: What I would like you to do now is to take your time and put this together in your mind a typical day. Like when you get up in the morning, what time, what you had to do, and what you did at work that day. Can you do that?

P: Like in the morning?

T: Yes, what time would you get up?

P: Well, I had to be to work at 7:00 in the morning.

T: That is a little early.

P: So, I would get up at 5:00 or 6:00, get ready, and then get in my automobile and go up to be there at 7:00. those guys would just be finishing up, and I would take over one of there places.

T: Did you get any breaks during the day other than your fifteen minute break and hour?

P: Well, there is always a break if there was anything about the mill that broke down. You would get some time then. You would go to the shower and sit in there and wait until the millwrights took care of everything got everything running again.

T: Excluding your hourly wage, did the mill offer any other benefits to its employees? You probably had hospitalization or something like that, right?

P: I don't remember.

T: I know they did. . .

P: Hospitalization or something, I know. Between 1940 and 1950 they had paid vacations after the war.

T: That was pretty good, wasn't it? At least for awhile it was, I know. Did you have a boss that was over your department? Did you find him to be a fair man?

P: Oh, yes. He was all for the union.

T: For the most part do you think. . .

P: I used to play golf with him.

T: Well, he liked you.

P: Oh, yes.

T: Was he fair with everyone do you think?

P: I think so.

T: Do you think that most of the bosses were pretty fair with the men?

P: I think so.

T: So, there was no animosity towards the management or anything like that?

P: No.

T: Let's see, you retired in 1971, and the mill was still

doing real well then.

P: That's when they finished up. That is when they quit in 1971. They started stamping them out over in Detroit. That is when they changed over.

T: Oh, is that when they quit the rollers?

P: Yes.

T: They took those out in 1971?

P: Yes, 1971. Then, they started making for the front wheel drive cars and everything, and they had to use a different thing. They couldn't roll them like we were rolling them. They had to do something different. The big machine pressed those things out.

T: They made it a lot easier?

P: Yes.

T: You were only sixty-three when you retired, right?

P: I was sixty-two.

T: Did you have the option of staying on at another job if you wanted to?

P: Yes, I could have went another place. They wanted me to move to another place, but I said, "No, I've been here long enough." Of course, I got cut twenty percent.

T: Of your pay?

P: Yes.

T: Do you feel your pension served you well? Do you think it was an adequate pension?

P: Oh, yes. I liked the pension.

T: During the time you were there, you indicated that you thought the union did a good job. Did you follow what went on at the mill after you left around its closing? What were your thoughts when you thought the mill was going to close?

P: Well, I was retired, so it didn't really make a difference to me.

T: Were you surprised that that happened?

P: Mostly, yes.

T: Everything was going strong when you retired. I want you to give some thought to this. During the time you were at the mill, were there any changes in safety conditions, in improving your job, or anything that went on up there that if you were in power you would have made up there. Was there anything that you thought wasn't right or that could be better? Did you ever think along those lines at the mill? Was there anything that anybody ever complained about a lot?

P: No. At my job when I was in there, they were pretty well satisfied. Of course, when they said they were going to finish up and they shut it down, probably a lot of them went right then.

T: You worked hard enough all your life, right?

P: Right.

T: You and I talked about the accidental injuries. They were somewhat common with the machines and such. Were there any other health hazards at Crucible. I know that in the East Liverpool potteries the dust caused a lot of respiratory diseases. Were there any other things like that at Crucible that you know of.

P: Yes. Men that worked in Crucible that would fall off of something, not in my part but in other parts of the mill. If they fell in one of those vats of hot stuff, they were just a speck. That was all it was.

T: Did you ever see anyone get killed at the mill?

P: Oh, yes.

T: As time went on that happened less and less, right?

P: Yes.

T: Back in those days, if a man was killed or if a man was hurt bad, his family was just out of luck. They didn't have compensation.

P: Yes, before the union got in there.

T: Aside from that, were there any diseases which could be attributed to working at the mill?

P: In the blast furnace it was pretty hard for men.

T: With all the smoke?

P: No, it wasn't that, but that dust from the iron ore. They had to wear masks. If they got too much of that dust, then they would have problems.

T: Now that you're retired from the mill. . .You look in pretty good shape to me, but has anything from the mill caused you any problems since you left.

P: No, I didn't get anything from the mill. I had a hernia operation and bursitis in my shoulders, but that was more my own fault.

T: So, working at the mill kept you in pretty good shape then. You job was more muscle oriented.

P: Yes.

T: Well, I think that is about all I wanted to cover. Is there any thing else along the subjects we have already covered, or maybe a subject that I haven't thought to cover that you think might be important to add about working at Crucible?

P: No.

T: You worked there all those years, and I am just learning about it. There might be a lot of things I don't know about.

P: Well, I think that is about all I know about.

T: Well, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. I will get this to the university, get a transcript made of it, and then I will get it to you to look over. Okay?

P: Okay.

T: Thanks a lot, Frank. I really appreciate that.

END OF INTERVIEW