

Surviving The 1,000-Mile Commute

Sharon Cohen, AP National Writer

JANESVILLE, Wis. (AP) — In the early dawn, after another week building cars, Michael Hanley leaves his job in Kansas. He quickly zips into Missouri, then heads up a ribbon of highway past grain silos and grazing deer, across the frozen fields of Iowa, over the Mississippi River and into the rolling hills of Wisconsin. Finally, he pulls into his driveway — 530 miles later.

It's one heck of a haul: more than 1,000 miles roundtrip, 16-plus hours of driving, every week.

"I like to say I gave up an eight-minute commute for an eight-hour commute," he says wearily, running a hand through salt-and-pepper hair as he watches his two sons play basketball for the first time this season.

After the aging General Motors plant where he worked for 23 years was idled about a year ago, Hanley faced a Hobson's choice: Stay with his family and search for an autoworker's salary (\$28 an hour) in a county where more than 40 percent of its manufacturing jobs disappeared from 2006 to 2009. Or hang on to his GM paycheck and health insurance and follow the job, no matter where it leads.

In his case, it led to Fairfax, Kan., the same place his brother and two brothers-in-law — also GM workers, and now his roommates — landed. For others, it has been Indiana or Texas.

The long commute is not just a story of hard times, tough choices and a shrinking American auto industry. It's also a case study of what happens when an aging industrial town loses an anchor, when workers too old to start over and too young to retire are caught in a squeeze and when economic survival means one family, but two far-flung ZIP codes.

Hanley is not one to complain.

"GM has been good for us," he says. "This whole town knows that."

For 90 years, the sprawling plant — it started out building tractors — became a different kind of family business. Through the decades, sons followed fathers onto the line, sometimes rubbing shoulders as they built Chevy Cavaliers, Caprices, Tahoes, Suburbans and more.

Hanley's father and brother worked there. So did his father-in-law, two brothers-in-law and an assortment of uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews.

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But as GM's financial troubles mounted, car and SUV sales fell and gas prices climbed, the automaker closed several plants, eliminating thousands of jobs.

Janesville — then the oldest of GM assembly plants — ended production of SUVs in December 2008, months before the automaker received billions of dollars in government loans and filed for bankruptcy. (The factory is on standby status; some hold out hope it will reopen one day.)

Some of about 1,200 remaining workers took buyouts or retired; some began new careers. Hundreds more stayed with GM, relocating, commuting or just waiting for an opening. The automaker has about 6,500 laid-off workers nationwide.

Even before the doors closed, Hanley began preparing for life after GM. He returned to college to complete two credits he needed for an accounting degree, but an offer in Kansas came first.

He didn't hesitate. Auto work these days is like playing musical chairs. You grab an opening where you can.

Hanley didn't want to lose his health insurance while his wife, Laura, was receiving costly chemotherapy treatments for a blood disease that will likely lead to cancer. The medical bills last year, she says, were in the tens of thousands of dollars.

"There's no way I could possibly go through one treatment without him having insurance," she says.

Like many other divided GM families, the Hanleys decided even though the job was important, there were reasons not to uproot everyone: Laura works at their sons' Catholic school, the boys are immersed in band, Scouts, basketball and church, and the sale of a house was an iffy and perhaps money-losing proposition.

Hanley knew it would be a trade-off — financial security for a lonely existence.

His eyes mist as he talks about what he misses: dinner with his family, coaching basketball, going to the YMCA with his boys, wrestling with them at night, attending their concerts and games, watching them grow up.

"It's an adjustment, not being home," he says. "I probably sounded cruel because I said I wouldn't miss my wife as much because she's going to be there when I come back, when I retire. But those years with the kids aren't going to be there. That's the hard part, not being able to be around them. ... I don't know if I really appreciated it before."

Hanley plans to commute another 18 months, until he turns 50, hoping for a retirement package then — something, he says, he "prays about every night."

Laura, meanwhile, does double duty as a single parent. It's all overwhelming — working, shuttling her sons around, keeping an eye on her elderly mother and worrying about her husband's long commutes.

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"The kids are tired of seeing mom cry because she's stressed and seeing dad cry when he needs to go back to work," she says. "We're really close — the four of us. You can't talk to a lot of people, either. They have no sympathy. They say at least he's working."

And that's nothing to take for granted in this southern Wisconsin county where unemployment has been in the double-digits for more than a year.

For every one of about 4,500 GM and auto supplier jobs that disappeared, another was lost outside the industry, says Bob Borremans, head of the Southwest Wisconsin Workforce Development Board. The ripple effect was enormous: About 9,000 of the county's 75,000 jobs vanished.

The plant, itself, had long been a polarizing presence in the community, he says.

"Because of the benefits, the working conditions, the pay ... it was THE coveted job in the area," he explains. "In many cases, people, because of who they knew, were able to walk in and get a job there. That created animosity."

"There are those people who worked there who have lost something they thought would be around forever and provided them with a real good lifestyle," he adds. "But there are others, I would say, who were jealous of folks who had that opportunity. And they don't have a lot of sympathy for the stress the (GM) people are feeling these days."

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After seven months of commuting, Brad Morrison measures his world in numbers.

—169,000 miles: The odometer reading on his 2002 Silverado.

—\$180: The cost of gas for weekly trips between Fairfax (just outside Kansas City) and Wisconsin.

—Six years, two months. That's when Morrison will have 30 years at GM and can retire with a full pension. He'll be 49 then.

Morrison started at GM as a teen, married his high school sweetheart, Sarah, and they had three children. With "two in college and one in braces," he says, he didn't consider changing careers.

"I'm kind of trapped now," he says.

With his shock of white-blond hair, Morrison looks a decade younger than 43 but says 24 years of stooping, lifting car parts and standing have taken a toll — three surgeries on his knees, one on his left shoulder, another on his left wrist.

Now, he says, there's a grueling Monday to Friday work schedule, heading home at

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2:40, arriving around 10 p.m., often too wired to sleep. On Saturdays, it's reconnect-with-the-family time. And that can mean more driving: His 15-year-old son's recent choral competition put him on the road five more hours one Saturday.

On Sundays, he heads back at about 1 p.m. — 39 hours after arriving.

"I'm worn down," Morrison says. "You never get any rest. You're always on the move. ... It's hard to have a family life or marriage. Try to be a husband or father at 500 miles away."

He never considers skipping a weekend. "I don't know how a wife or kids can be too much of a hassle," he says. "The hassle is just not having them with me."

Morrison and his wife, a school aide, talk several times a day. In between, they text each other with endearing "I miss you" and "I love you" messages. "We're hopeless romantics," he says. She concurs: "He's my best friend."

But living apart is more than an emotional strain. It's expensive, too.

Morrison refinanced his house to free up more money for monthly expenses that include gas — \$720 when he drives alone — and \$425 in rent and utilities for an apartment he shares with another Janesville transplant. (GM, in many cases, provides some compensation for workers who relocate.)

But this is just temporary.

The Morrisons decided they don't want to live this way; they plan to sell their Wisconsin house and Sarah and their youngest son, Austin, will move when the school year ends.

Though they'll be together, Morrison doesn't feel secure.

"This plant is no safer (from downsizing) than any other," he says. "I don't take my job for granted anymore. ... Do I regret working for them? No. It's good money. It was a good company back then. It still is."

"The auto industry is a lot like a roller coaster," he adds. "When the going is good and you're at the top, everything is boom. When it's times like this, you're at the bottom. But I still feel fortunate even to be there. I can still hold on. And I count my blessings for that."

John Dohner can be forgiven if he has that feeling of déjà vu when he pulls into the parking lot of the GM plant outside Fort Wayne, Ind.

He has been there before. Decades ago.

Then a fresh-faced 20 year old, Dohner moved from Janesville to Indiana, following

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his job building pickup trucks. He returned to Janesville when a spot opened seven years later.

Now he's reversing course as a 44-year-old family man with a wife, three kids (21, 17 and 15), a house, a 13-acre farm and a good life almost 300 miles and one time zone away — a life he's not about to abandon.

Ditto for his job.

"I'm not going to walk away," he says. "I'm not giving them the satisfaction of giving them 25 years of my life and not get anything in return."

Like others, he has his eye on the prize: the 30-year finish line.

Dohner is among dozens of Janesville commuters who form a caravan every Saturday morning to make the 275-mile trek home. (He turned down a GM job in Kansas. The drive was too long, he said.)

Soon, one of his laid-off brothers will join him in Indiana; another still is waiting. Their father, John Sr., heads United Auto Workers Local 95.

With Dohner gone, his wife, Jane, has become skilled at everything from repairing water tanks to installing furnace filters. Her day starts at 4:45 a.m., when she and the kids feed the dogs, rabbits, cows, chickens and horses. The two boys take care of their dad's snow plow business. Dohner still keeps up his duties as chair of the tiny township (population 800), using vacation days to attend monthly meetings.

On Sundays, Jane gives her husband spaghetti casseroles, brownies and other dishes for the week, and waves goodbye.

It's much easier than last summer. She sat on the front porch and cried the first time he left. "You can't think of five years," she says. "I think I can't do it for so long. ... I just texted him Thursday night and said, 'This stinks.'"

But there seems no good solution.

"We built this place and worked so hard to get it to where it is, so do you want to leave?" she says, glancing outside at the tranquil snow-covered countryside where the dogs frolic and horses graze. "But some days," she says, "I think we should have all gone as a family."

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Steve Kerl now knows about the rodeo, the Texas Rangers and traffic jams — all part of his new surroundings.

He works at the GM plant in Arlington, Texas. His home remains in Janesville, about 1,000 miles away, making it impossible to return more than a handful of times in the past year, though his wife, Kristy, and two children have visited.

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When Kerl first drove down last March with his wife, they talked several times about turning around. He forged on, but his wife didn't like what she saw, so she returned home.

If it's any comfort, Kerl can look around the factory floor and see others who've picked up stakes, coming from Michigan, Tennessee, Missouri — and, of course, Wisconsin.

Kerl says he transferred to Texas because it was the only option then and auto jobs were fast disappearing. "I figured it would be better being on the inside looking out rather than the outside looking in," he says.

He wishes he could see his daughter's cheerleader activities and would have liked to have taken his son to college. "He's only going to be a freshman once," he says.

And yet, he's reluctant to gripe about his life.

"You can't put a negative spin on it and say you hate it. I'm working long hours, making good money," he says. "My kids' educations are being paid for. ... I can tell you right now that a lot of the people who took the buyouts are struggling now. They can't find a job anywhere."

It may get worse, too, this summer when health care and unemployment benefits expire for some former GM workers.

"I don't think the community has felt the entire blow yet," says the elder Dohner, the UAW local president. When the benefits are gone "and it's time to build roads and keep the schools open, everyone is going to realize there's a big, big hole."

Now 43, Kerl has seven more years to reach the 30-year milestone.

He doesn't expect he'll spend all that time in Texas. But that's fine.

"If they announced this plant was closing, I'd pack up my stuff and go to the next one," he says. "We'll get through it. I'm going to ride this to the end."

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