Transferred GM Workers Adjust To Life In Lansing

Lindsay Vanhulle, Lansing State Journal

DELTA TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — Scott Mitchell drives 600 miles so he can mow the lawn.

He's only half-kidding. Every other weekend, he and his roommate pack the car and drive straight to Tennessee at the end of their graveyard shift at General Motors Co.'s Lansing Delta Township assembly plant. They share the driving so the other can nap.

They're home for about a day and a half before it's back to Michigan and back to work.

"You get home, you fix the stuff that's got to be fixed, you change your oil, you mow the lawn — you know, you fix the hole in the wall or whatever — and then you're leaving again," said Mitchell, 47, who will mark 25 years with GM in June. "You're a visitor in your own house, quite honestly."

John Peila, Mitchell's roommate, only sees his wife and granddaughter on these short trips. Mindy Lara logs onto the Internet to talk to her husband every day before she starts her overnight shift.

These are the "transplants" — GM workers represented by the United Auto Workers union who headed north two years ago when the Detroit carmaker shut down part of its Spring Hill, Tenn., operation and shifted production of the Chevrolet Traverse to the Delta plant, adding a third shift of about 1,000 workers in the process.

They are among the 560 General Motors employees still living in Lansing who have spent the past two years living, in essence, double lives: full-time worker at the Lansing Delta Township assembly plant, part-time family member — in person, at least — in Tennessee.

For some of them, the choice to take the carmaker up on a three-year transfer wasn't much of a choice at all: Anything to stay employed. Many have worked for GM for decades and are among the set of UAW-represented workers whose pay averages about $29 per hour. Add in benefits and the relocation package GM offered them — $30,000 and the ability to retain their seniority toward their pensions — and transferring for many appeared to be the best decision.

But it also has meant a radical departure from their daily lives, geographically and figuratively, as they adapt to communicating with their families via cellphone or computer, paying rent along with their mortgages on houses they own in Tennessee and missing family birthdays and other milestone events.

GM plans to reopen the manufacturing plant in Spring Hill, initially to make the

Chevrolet Equinox small crossover later this year. A company labor executive last fall said the idled plant could see an initial infusion of $62 million and 685 workers. Spring Hill also could land new midsize vehicles for the 2015 model year, which would boost production there by as many as 1,200 jobs and $183 million.

They hear rumblings now, the Tennessee workers, that the UAW and GM are trying to work out a deal to let some Spring Hill transfers, who are spread out in factories nationwide, return home before their three-year terms end. They don't know if it's true. The company and the union are silent on the question. Some local workers say they could be packed to leave in 20 minutes if it happens.

They don't have anything against Lansing. But, they figure, why should they tie up a job in a place that doesn't belong to them when there are plenty of Michiganders who would line up at the mere thought of a "now hiring" sign and spend their paychecks here?

Mitchell and his wife are native Michiganders. Mitchell was born in Battle Creek, Dana in Owosso. For years, he'd worked at GM's Flint Truck and Bus before he was laid off and moved to Tennessee.

For the first several years, Dana wanted out. Take me home, she'd say. In the late 1990s, Mitchell said, GM again offered jobs in Flint. He told his wife.

"She said, 'I ain't leaving,' " he recalls. "I said, 'Well, when did this happen?' "

By then, the couple and their daughters, Brooke and Kirsten, were settled in Bon Aqua, a Nashville suburb about an hour's drive from Spring Hill. It was decided. Tennessee was where they would retire.

When the plant idled, Mitchell said he planned to take the first transfer offer that came up. And Lansing's Delta Township plant needed people to build the popular crossovers — the Buick Enclave, the GMC Acadia and the Traverse.

As soon as he accepted a relocation offer, he and Dana didn't talk much about Michigan. So long as it wasn't part of conversation, it didn't have to be real.

Mitchell left early one morning in January 2010, his birthday. He opened the car door and drove away. And Dana fell apart.

"It's hard to prepare for it," Dana says. "I think I was hoping it would just work its way out. It's hard when you've been together 25 years and haven't been apart maybe one or two days ever, and then to just be told you're going to be ripped apart?

"I thought it wasn't going to be as hard, but it is hard. It's extremely hard."

They talk every day. Sometimes, she says, the conversation grows quiet, as though there's nothing to say. Eventually, the topic shifts back to Spring Hill and the reopening of the GM plant. Is there news?

The Traverse started rolling off the Lansing Delta Township assembly line as part of GM's recovery plan after its quick trip through bankruptcy in 2009 to consolidate its operations and improve efficiency. Some of that plan involved shutting down and selling off brands — it jettisoned the Pontiac, Saturn, Hummer and Saab nameplates — closing plants and turning the remaining facilities into three-shift operations running basically around the clock.

Now, nearly six years after the Delta plant opened in late 2006, 3,123 hourly and 257 salaried workers have jobs at the facility, boosted partly by a third shift added in 2010 when the Traverse went into full production locally.

Most of the 560 Spring Hill workers like Mitchell, Peila and Lara, accepted $30,000 relocation agreements that require them to work three years in Lansing before they would be eligible to transfer elsewhere, said Bill Grotz, a company spokesman in Detroit. They aren't guaranteed jobs in Spring Hill. Twenty-five are here on $4,800 basic relocation deals that grant them contractual recall rights, or top preference, to return to Tennessee as jobs arise.

Erin Davis, a Lansing-based GM spokeswoman, said she doesn't expect plans to reopen the Tennessee factory to have an immediate impact on Delta Township production. Bill Reed, president of UAW Local 602, which represents Delta Township workers, didn't return messages seeking comment.

"We had a crew of people that came right out of the chute there that said, 'I'm going to follow my job to Lansing,' " said Mike Herron, chairman of UAW Local 1853 in Spring Hill. "There's a lot of companies that, when those things happen, the workers are just flat-out out of work."

Herron is a Michigan native himself, born in Flint and a 1980 graduate of Flushing High School. He worked for the automaker in Flint and Grand Blanc before establishing his own roots in Tennessee, so he understands how uprooted his Spring Hill colleagues feel now. He's also uniquely qualified to vouch for Lansing, and he did.

He told them about the strong partnership between the company and organized labor, and about the strong relationship between the company and the region — especially now that GM has committed to its new assembly plants, including Delta, by introducing new vehicles and adding shifts.

"I've told all of our people who were leaving to go up there, Lansing's a great town," Herron said. "At the end of the day, there's just no replacement for being home with your wife and kids."

Scott Mitchell and John Peila share an apartment near the Lansing Mall. They have little furniture. They don't have a dining room table. Between them, Mitchell estimates they have three plates, two forks and a frying pan. They haven't hung pictures on the walls.

Peila, 56, and his wife built a house in Tennessee shortly before he transferred to Michigan, and he has rent to pay. He packs a lunch to take with him to work every night. Occasionally, he'll treat himself to an ice cream or a $9.99 Friday night fish special.

This month, Peila will have 27 years with GM. Michigan is the third state in which he's worked.

Had he known that Spring Hill's factory would be reactivated, he thinks he would have stayed behind and waited it out. He hasn't been to one of his nearly 3-year-old granddaughter's birthday parties. He sees her for about a day every weekend he's home. For Easter, they painted eggs. Those are the days when Peila isn't sure moving to Michigan was worth it.

Mitchell and his wife are glad for the job.

"That's probably what gets us through, knowing that he's doing the right thing," Dana said. "It was the right thing for our family, even though I don't like it."

In less than a decade, Mindy Lara will have worked at GM long enough to be eligible to draw her pension. She toyed with the idea of waiting for Spring Hill operations to resume, or going back to school, or trying a new career.

But Lara, 49, didn't want to risk losing her seniority and, subsequently, her pension.

"We were thinking it probably wasn't going to happen in three years," Lara said. "At that point, we just really didn't have a choice."

For Christmas 2009, she came north and booked a hotel room so she could search for an apartment. She started at Lansing Delta Township a month later. Her husband Henry stayed behind, since he had enough seniority to continue working at Spring Hill.

Together, they built their retirement home in Tennessee about six years ago. Now she lives with a roommate in a two-bedroom apartment in Delta Township. Lara assembles door panels, the first time the former engine and transmission builder has ever worked on a vehicle line.

She looks forward to the monthly vacations she and Henry arrange together, when they alternate turns traveling between their home and her adopted home.

For the days in between, they have Skype. Lara can watch her grandsons, still toddlers, grow up on camera — "Now they just come running up to the screen because they know where to find you," she says — and capture precious moments with her husband.

They blow each other kisses. "I love you," Henry says.

"I love you, too, baby," she says.

And then his picture disappears. Until tomorrow.

Spring Hill, Tenn., is a suburban city of 29,000 about 40 miles southwest of Nashville. Its website heralds its "blend of commerce, history and country living." For awhile, its name was synonymous with Saturn, as the small city's assembly plant was for a time the only place in the country where the General Motors Co. brand was built. Locals know State Route 396, on which the plant is found, as Saturn Parkway.

Saturn was supposed to be "a different kind of car company," and for awhile it was. Spring Hill landed the facility in 1985, and the first vehicle came off the line five years later. It was intended to be GM's answer to small-car competition from foreign automakers. Mike Herron, chairman of United Auto Workers Local 1853 in Spring Hill, said people came from 45 states and 144 different plants to work at Saturn before the company ended the division in 2010.

To understand the impact GM has had on the Middle Tennessee community, it's important to understand two distinct trends. Spring Hill in the last decade experienced what can only fairly be called a population explosion. In 2000, the number of people who lived there numbered only 7,715. That figure soared 276 percent by the 2010 Census. It was so rapid, in fact, that in January of that year, Little Rock, Ark.-based data production firm Gadberry Group ranked Spring Hill as one of the nation's fastest-growing cities in 2009. The reason? General Motors.

And in that same decade, which saw GM executives idle production there in 2009 amid corporate-wide restructuring and bankruptcy proceedings, unemployment in Maury County quadrupled — from 3.6 percent in 2000 to 14.1 percent in 2010, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics seasonally unadjusted data.

While that can't entirely be attributed to idling the plant — it happened in the midst of the nation's most devastating economic downturn since the 1930s — it does offer some insight into how influential the auto industry became there.

Spring Hill Manufacturing never truly shut down. About 1,000 people remained on the job, mostly those with the highest seniority. At its lowest point, about 600 people worked there, Herron said. The plant didn't manufacture any vehicles, but instead focused on engines, steel stamping operations and injection molding.

The factory is positioned on more than 2,000 acres on what once was agrarian land. To this day, it's still a working farm. The region served as a Civil War battleground, first in the Battle of Spring Hill in November 1864 and, a day later, in the Battle of Franklin. Re-enactors occasionally set up near the plant.

The economic impact after the Traverse moved out, Herron said last month in an email, "was instantaneous and tremendous."

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