

CRIST: This is an interview with Mr. John J. Popa of 975  
Overlook in Alliance. The interview is being made on Sept-  
ember 8, 1976 in his living room. I'm Lyle Crist doing the  
interview and I'll ask you a few questions in a conversational way

## REMINISCENCES

OF

JOHN J. POPA

*John J. Popa*

Interview by  
Lyle M. Crist  
September 8, 1976

In the morning of September 8, 1976, I arrived at Mr. Popa's home at 9:00. After lunch, when I grabbed a sandwich and ate on the run because of the type of job I was helping service men to the core makers and doing some of their work and it was really something that kept a person quite busy.

CRIST: Now, maybe we should back up just a bit. Would you indicate when, are you a native of Alliance? If not when you came first.

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for the Oral History Project, Alliance, Ohio.

POPA: Yes, I was born in Alliance, Ohio in 1914 and lived in Alliance practically all of my life. During the war I did trans route to the coast and was not operated by the

1978

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American Steel Foundries. And we'll probably cover that in our interview a little bit later.

CRIST: This is an interview with Mr. John J. Popa of 975 Overlook in Alliance. The interview is being made on September 8, 1976 in his living room. I'm Lyle Crist doing the interview and I'm not known to Mr. Popa in a personal way prior to this conversation. We're going to talk a little bit about his background in local industry. And would you begin this by indicating when you began at that career in local industry.

POPA: I started May 7, 1936 at the American Steel Foundries. I got a job in the core department and started in there as a labor general. Well that was quite a chore at that time anyways because they talk about work and benefits now but we started there around, I believe it was around 30¢ an hour; in that range. And I mean work, because I started in the morning at 7:00 and just never stopped 'till quitting time at 3:00. Even lunch, why I grabbed a sandwich and ate on the run because my type of job I was helping service some of the core makers and doing some of their work and it was really something that kept a person quite busy.

CRIST: Now, maybe we should back up just a bit. Would you indicate when, are you a native of Alliance? If not when you came first.

POPA: Yes, I was born in Alliance, well in 1914 and lived in Alliance practically all of my life. During the war I did trans route to Cast Armor Plant again a plant operated by the

American Steel Foundries. And we'll probably cover that in our interview a little bit later.

CRIST: Well then your career has essentially been with the American Steel Foundries the entire time.

POPA: Practically all my life. I did work prior to American Steel, I worked in Canton for four years but the main, but my main lifetime has been with the American Steel Foundries.

CRIST: Now how did you make your contact with American Steel in the first place? What got you there?

POPA: Well while I was working in Canton that was quite a problem, I didn't have a car and ride the streetcar to Canton and then walk a half hour from the streetcar to the shop. It took me about two hours before work and two hours after work, so I did try to get a job here in town. And at that time you could ask somebody to put in a word for you at the various shops and industries. And that's what I did, I had a friend of mine ask if he could get me in down at the American Steel and he did talk to somebody and I believe it was George O'Brien, who was prominent in sports years ago here in town. But I did get a job that way through another person.

CRIST: And would you describe just a little bit of the specific nature of your work, in the core department. What did that involve?

POPA: Well eventually I moved up to oven operator in operating these ovens and that just gave me a lot more work and I think I got the overtime pay all right. I helped with the, another fellow and I helped, we hitched up these racks that was a great thing. Imagine getting twenty or twenty five

and stands and containers that the core makers would make their cores on and then we would take this container over to a baking oven and put the container in the oven where the cores would bake. You would leave them in various times depending on the size or the thickness of the cores. So it was a job like I said the core makers did work incentive but we worked by the hour and yet we had to keep the incentive workers busy because if they got even five minutes delay you would hear about it in a hurry.

CRIST: What specifically was being made, what was the end product?

POPA: It was the cores and the cores were used in molds and the molds eventually steel was poured into them in the making of railroad castings. American Steel Foundries makes, oh I would say 99% components for the railroad castings for the railroad cars. You might have notices these couplers that holds the cars together, the side frames that the wheel and the axle goes through, the bolster casting, the yolk, the housing. Many, many castings on the railroad cars itself, You see them on the boxcar, you see them on the gondola cars and such.

CRIST: Then would you describe for us your continuing career with American Steel, just perhaps go through the sequence of the other work that you did.

POPA: Well eventually I moved up to oven operator in operating these ovens and that just gave me a lot more work and I think I got two or three cents an hour increase though. So that was a great thing. Imagine getting twenty or twenty five

cents a day increase. But at that time we felt that it was quite important because it was a merit increase. It was something that the other fellow didn't get. And we were very happy.

CRIST: Now this was still in the 1930's?

POPA: Yes. Yes, Uh huh. Then eventually after about three years on labor general and oven operator I moved to core making. And on core making you worked incentive and oh, I made big money then. I was making six and seven dollars a day, which was quite a lot of money to take home. Taxes weren't near as high and you could buy a lot for them at that time. I was on that job for a while and I noticed one time on the bulletin boards that they were opening up a class, a training course down at the shop and I was interested in definitely moving on to a better type job. I wasn't content to be a core maker. I felt that I was young and I felt I should learn something more than that. But I did go to the personnel department and apply and at that time I didn't get too much satisfaction from them. But I saw the works manager; Joe Wagner in the plant one day. And everybody was a little bit afraid of Joe Wagner. He was quite a person, he seemed tough and he acted tough but he was very kind, I feel. But anyways I talked to Mr. Wagner and I told him who I was and that I was interested in moving ahead and learning something, a trade or whatever. I told him that I noticed this course was starting up. He told me to go back to the personnel and tell them that he sent me to them and that I should be enrolled in that training course. And I was to go back to him again and tell

him the results of it, which I did. I eventually did get enrolled in a course and it was a course that we went two nights a week. It was supposed to be for three years but we went a total of four years altogether. Learning the duties and the responsibilities of the various departments in the shop. Well that gave me a start down there because I met the different foremen in the various departments and saw what was being done in the various departments. And that did help me an awful lot, because there was a job opened up, they called a molding practice job. It was a clerical type job, but consisted of some mechanical type drawings but mostly record keeping. And even though I had never done that I felt that I wanted to try it so that it would be a step forward. And I did get started on that.

CRIST: What time, what year are we talking about?

POPA: Well I would say that was about, let's see, I started in 1936 and this was around 1940. I was about four years or so on the other jobs. And this was about 1940 and I did go on this molding practice job and I was on that possibly about three months. And at that time Gordon Robertson - he just retired not too long ago as works manager down there - he was the assistant and he came up to me, he was sort of my boss. He came up to me one day and he said, "John I'm going to have to take you off of the job." Well I felt a little bad, I thought what the heck I did try to do the best that I could. And I told him, I said, "Mr. Robertson, I told you that I would try. I would try to do the best that I could." He said, "Well don't worry about." He said, "you did do a good

job on it." But he said, "We've got an opening as a unit foreman in production and we want to put you on that job."

CRIST: So he was bringing you good news.

POPA: He was bringing me good news but I at first thought that it was bad news. I thought gee he's going to take me off of the job. And I really did try though. I didn't have the actual ability to make drawings and such like the other individuals would but I tried. And they were passable I believe. But I did go on unit foreman and I was on that not too long. And again the word was out, through out the shop that they were looking for a foreman at a new plant that the company was going to operate for the government. It was a cast armor plant in East Chicago in Indiana. And there was a large foundry making components for tanks, the turrets and the front ends and hulls and all tank casting parts or the large castings.

CRIST: And would these be larger castings than what the American Steel did in Alliance?

POPA: Oh yes. There were castings that weighed up to 10,000 or 20,000 pounds. Here in Alliance we made castings weighing 700 or 800 pounds. So it was an entirely different type of work and quite advanced from the type of work that I had been doing but I was interested. And I did fill up an application for that and well eventually I did hear from them that I was accepted. I went to Granite City works down in Illinois in 1941 and I was there three months on the training course in cast armor work. They were doing some of the cast armor work at that time and then I went up to the cast armor plant in East

Chicago and worked there as an expiditer and followed different jobs. Because at that time there wasn't even a roof on the building when I went in. Eventually when that plant was completed it was the largest steel foundry in the world under one roof. Made tank castings for American tanks for the war and did quite a job. In fact there was, we received many citations from the government for their wonderful production that they got. We started in there with people that were completely untrained, a laborer. A laborer didn't, you know you tell a laborer to get that shovel and get that sand and put it in a core box and he'd say get what and put where. He had no idea what we were talking about. A craneman, a chainman, a oven operator, a lift truck driver, a tester, an inspector, every individual had to be trained.

CRIST: Alright now, this is at the time of World War II.

POPA: Right.

CRIST: Now were the employees in American Steel in the plant where you were, were they those who were not yet of draft age? Were those the ones that were being hired or were they predominately older men? Would you elaborate on that a bit.

POPA: They were, most of the draft age men were gone. We had people that were picked up from other type of jobs, well I'll tell you the truth, there were a lot of bartenders and car dealers and we had an awful lot of women working there. Their husbands were in the service and they wanted to do their duty for their country and they did a fantastic job, these women. Believe me.

CRIST: Now when did those years at American Steel terminate?  
CRIST: Now you were a foreman?

POPA: I was the assistant general foreman there eventually. I ended up the assistant general foreman in complete charge of one shift at cast armor plant.

CRIST: Then when did you come back to Alliance?

POPA: I came back to Alliance, well the war started to taper down and I came back to Alliance in March of 1944. And I came back on special assignment work here. Well we relined up the departments, the core department when I had worked there it used to be all entirely crane service and one of my first jobs was to set up a department for lift truck service. And we did accomplish that and actually, eventually the cranes were taken down and the moving of the supplies and cores and materials was done by lift truck. Then I had other types of work similar to that in the various departments. And on June 1, 1944 they made a change in a department and I was assigned general foreman or department head in the department. In the core department. And I was on that job for twenty years. In the meantime I was also assistant to the works manager again on special assignment. In 1952 I went back to the cast armor plant on temporary basis. We set up various projects in the plant, various departments, job inspections, job method training. We organized the people in setting up specific methods so on particular jobs, we put it down on the record so that the same job would be done the same way from one shift to another. And job evaluation program I worked on that. And just many, many duties in my years at American Steel.

CRIST: Now when did those years at American Steel terminate?

POPA: It terminated, well to make it just a little more, to it, I did work, eventually I went on safety program as a safety supervisor at the American Steel. And I worked about eight years on that job. And my duties at the American Steel terminated on June 1, 1974. After a little over 38 years of service.

CRIST: Now you've seen industry in Alliance, Ohio over this span of 38 years. And the role which American Steel Foundries played certainly has been a significant one. Do you have any thoughts about, well I gather from your comment that much of your work had to do with training, and education and getting people to learn skills and so on. What has all of this meant to Alliance, Ohio? Dollars and cents yes, but is there any thought that you have about the role of industry in terms of the quality of life. Has yours been a good life as an industrially orientated experience?

POPA: Very much so. I had a lot of wonderful opportunities at the American Steel. I had a high school diploma, I graduated in 1932 and although I had planned prior to that to go on to college we ended up in a Depression period and there was no thought of college anymore. I still felt that I wanted to do better than just the ordinary person. So through the American Steel I did get the opportunities. I had a chance for advancement. I received a lot of training. I was on many, many, training courses through out my years at the shop. That's one thing about the shop and industry in general, they will train you forever it seems like. It's because they want you to improve. And as long as you have the ability to learn and want to learn they will train you and it makes a big difference.

in your life. It makes a much better person out of you. I saw many, many changes down at the shop. When I started in there much of the work was heavy manual work and dirty work. Very dusty, very dirty, very smokey. But over the years you could see the improvement in air conditioners and dust removers and equipment to lift, to take the manual work out of, away from the employees so that he could use his skills to make a better product. And a railroad casting has to be a good product because again when you see a freight train go by and there's 100 and 125 cars or more on that train them castings must hold and pull the weight and hold the weight of the railroad cars and the total package in it. And you can't have a poor product. So I think that has improved and the product has improved over the years. It has made better people there, many people on salary in industry and down at the American Steel primarily. And they end up with nice homes. I was fortunate, like I say with a high school diploma, I ended up as a department head for 20 years. I was able to buy my home, pay for my home. It's not a large home but it's ours, it's mine, and it is paid for thank God. And we do enjoy our life here. We were able to travel some, we were able to live a nice life as results of our efforts at the American Steel.

CRIST: I appreciate all those comments and I'm not sure that there are any areas that we've missed. I'd like to ask you that. Is there any other comment you care to make about the type of work that you did or its influence in your life.

POPA: Nothing in particular. There was, a, one thing that I thought might be of interest. We had a lot of interesting things

happened during our years there. And just happen to think of one when I was working at the cast armor plant there in East Chicago. Coming home over the holidays the trains were crowded, soldier boys were on the move in all directions in the country. I remember one Christmas I went to Englewood Station to get on the train there. The train pulled up and not a soul got on there. So there were about 20 or 25 people waiting there and they couldn't get on but I noticed several fellows running to the baggage car. And I thought I wonder what they're doing. So anyways the next, the third train that came in I run to the baggage car and I went to climb into the car the brakeman or conductor was there and he said, "you can't get on here." And there was some soldier boys there and they said, "leave him get on he wants to get home just as bad as we do." And they helped me get in a car and we actually sat on a casket all the way home to Alliance. And that's how crowded the trains were. But it was wanting to get home for the holidays. And that was a incident that stuck with me because I can remember those boys saying, "He wants to get home just as bad as we do."

CRIST: Well that shows that in the time of war or peace big town or small town there are certain emotions we all have that that's good to share in that way. Well John it's been a pleasure chatting with you on this 8th of September 1976. Sharing some of your experiences and thought about your 38 years of experience with American Steel Foundries, here in Alliance, Ohio. On behalf of the Oral History Project I thank you very much.

POPA: Thank you.