

ABSTRACT - Wayne Leitch

Interviewee: Wayne Leitch

Interviewers: Jacob Kelley, Sarah Kitzen, and Kyle Martin

Date: October 11, 2017

Location: SUNY Cortland Facilities Building, Cortland, New York

Length: 18:29

Wayne Leitch was born on May 25, 1959 in Cortland, NY. He attended school at St. Mary's and lived in Cortland until he was eleven. He later graduated from Dryden High School in 1977. His father often worked two jobs at a time. The Wickwire factory, Smith-Corona, Brockway and Durkee were four places that he had worked at. He also was a 2nd infantry paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne. Wayne's mother worked for Smith-Corona. Wayne has an older brother named Charlie, younger brothers Jeff and Bob along with a younger sister named Carol. He spoke about the skin grafts his father received due to the working conditions he experienced working manual labor based jobs. Wayne recalls a story told to him by his father, about how an elevator shaft fell two floors onto a couple of workers during the late 19th century. Wayne began working at Cortland in the late 1970s after graduating from high school, and he ran a catering business on the side for 17 years. His job at Cortland primarily consists of doing fieldwork around campus and monitoring the various conditions of heating and temperatures throughout the buildings on campus. Although in recent years, Wayne has been forced to primarily stay put at his desk due to herniated disks. He decided to take his job at Cortland because he knew the other factories were either shutting down or moved overseas. Wayne also has experience working in the steam room, front-line supervising and as a department head, all at within the facilities department at SUNY Cortland. Wayne has three children, his older daughter, Megan, works at the city of Cortland. His middle child, David has been working at the facilities building for 6 months. Finally, his youngest son, Eric, works for spectrum. Wayne hopes for Cortland to remain strong and be able to keep the economy held up in order for its residents to be able to spend their money and raise a family here.

Field Notes- Wayne Leitch

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Length: 18:29

The Interviewee: Mr. Wayne Leitch is in charge of Building Management Systems at SUNY Cortland. He keeps track of the mechanical systems in each building on campus, and sends other workers out to make sure they stay in good repair. He was born in Cortland, but lived most of his early life in nearby Dryden. His father was a paratrooper, a factory worker, and finally a maintenance worker at SUNY Cortland. He then came back to Cortland for work, first at the Smith-Corona factory and then at SUNY Cortland, where he has been ever since.

The Interviewers: Jake, Kyle, and Sarah are all undergraduate history students in Professor Faulkenbury's Public History class, and are involved in the Wickwire Factory Public History Project. This interview is for the Fall 2017 Oral Histories for the 1890 House Museum.

Description of the Interview: The interview was held in Mr. Leitch's office in the Faculties building. The faculties department is at the end of the SUNY Cortland campus, just past the 281-parking lot. For the interview, Mr. Leitch sat at his desk, and we sat opposite of him across a table that held our recorders and script. We stayed at this position for 20 minutes without interruption.

Note on Recording: This interview was recorded on two iPhones, and due to an error, not on Professor Faulkenbury's recorder.

Transcript- Wayne Leitch

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Location: Cortland, New York, Facilities office

Length: 1 audio file, 00:18:29

Jacob Kelley: Today is October 11 2017, my name is Jake Kelley and I'm joined by Sarah Kitzen and Kyle Martin and we're interviewing Mr. Wayne Leitch in Cortland, New York.

Sarah Kitzen: Can you start by telling us about your childhood?

Wayne Leitch: Um yeah, I was born here in Cortland, May 25, 1959. I lived in Cortland for, till I was about eleven or so. I went to school at Saint Mary's. My parents both worked, my dad worked two jobs. My mother worked during the day and took care of us five kids. I got an older brother, Charlie, a younger brothers, Bob and Jeff, and younger sister Carol.

Kyle Martin: Can you please, can you tell us more about your parents?

WL: Yeah, my mom, she worked for Smith Corona for many years. My dad worked jobs all over Cortland. He worked for Wickwire. I was too young to remember that, but I do remember he got injured there and was most of his life had skin grafts from the injury. I always remember him doing gauze bandages and ace bandages, he developed leg ulcers but he still worked his entire career. He spent his last thirteen years up here. He

worked for Brockway. He spent a lot of years at Smith Corona. He worked for Durkee. My mom she worked just for a lot of years at Smith Corona and then eventually my dad went over to Smith Corona and he was there when I got out of high school. So obviously I went there too, you know it was either that. My father was a paratrooper 82nd Airborne, and I had no interest in jumping out of airplanes. They were both working at the factory so that's what I did. I spent ten years there until the day we moved to Mexico for business and that's when I came up here in 1987. My dad was already here working in the custodian department, he got thirteen years in here before he retired. Unfortunately, he had only one good year, was diagnosed with melanoma, fought cancer for a couple of years and passed when he was sixty-five. My mom she's still with us but she's dealing with her own health issues. Stage four colon cancer. My parents were active in the American, for the eagles I guess it was, American Legion. We went to church on Sunday's and that's pretty much the background on my parents.

JK: Now, when your father worked at the factory, do you know if he interacted with any of the actual Wickwires? Any stories about that?

WL: I was too young to remember. Much of him working there. I remember when I was a kid, I remember it being closed and abandoned. I think I was what nine or ten when it burned, somewhere around 1970, 1971, something like that.

KM: Yup

JK: Yup

WL: The only real story, he told me one time that when the plant was young like late 19th century, I forget the year now, but I think they only had the one death in the plant, and he had heard about that. Elevator fell a couple of floors, two people were

injured, one was killed. I guess they blamed it on overloading the weight on the unit.

Then he was, Charles Wickwire, that donated the pool to grandeur right, grandeur, to the pool over in grandeur park (Pool in Suggett Park). They just rehabbed it, they just rehabbed it a couple of years ago.

JK: I didn't know that, but that would be interesting.

WL: Yeah

JK: So, how do you think the factory closing affected the city of Cortland and the surrounding area?

WL: Well, it was the largest employer at the time. It was like the second business dealer to come around after railroads came into Cortland. It was the wagon company, I believe it was horse drawn buggies and stuff like that. But when Wickwire came, I mean it was industry that built all those houses down Tompkins Street and particularly the Wickwire building, the 1890 House, and what is now the Alumni House. Which we do HVAC work at the facilities, so I've been to that facility many times, but I have not been to the 1890 House. But yeah it affected it as much as when Smith Corona left Groton, when they had the, the Groton plant, I mean there was a lot of people. Smith Corona was the largest employer as well now for, it was for quite some time. But without sourcing of jobs, which is still a problem today, you know. Business going overseas and Cortland had a lot of business, businesses that went, I myself only worked for Smith Corona because I got out of high school in 1987 and some of those places had already closed, closed you know, so both my parents had decades in at the factory, so you know it was, that was a little bit little bit of nepotism back then and you know in the 1970's too. If you knew somebody that worked there it was easier to get in if than if you didn't. And I think that

was kind of true here when I first came here. I did run a catering business on the side for about seventeen years until my back problems came around, I couldn't do it anymore, but the first time I worked for someone here, I think it was high school graduation or something. I just couldn't believe the number of people that were there and you know they're all family and they all worked here. But that was back in the late 1970's or 1980's. The good places, it's like the elevator business now, your father does it, your son does it, your uncle does it and you know some of the best jobs, that's how you got in, by knowing somebody. To some extent I think that's true today.

KM: Yeah. Can you just tell us a little bit about your education?

WL: I went to Saint Mary's for the elementary school, my parents bought a house in Dryden, right on main street and I graduated from it was seventh grade I think it was, maybe sixth. Then I went to um Dryden High School and I graduated from there in seventy-eight. But I went to Saint Mary's for a little bit when I was a kid, um when I was very young. First grade through fifth grade, sixth grade, something like that and when my parents bought a house. We went to school in Dryden, and my parents worked at the factory in Groton. Just a few miles away, so they lived in Dryden, worked in Groton and when I got out of high school I went and did the same thing.

JK: So, you went right into work out of high school?

WL: Yeah, both my parents had worked there and it was either that or the military and I really wasn't interested in military, you know, I would have liked to put myself through college but that wasn't feasible either at the time you know. The economy the way it was.

JK: It's still hard today. So, what exactly is your job here at SUNY Cortland now?

WL: Right now, I'm in charge of building management systems. I can see pretty much every building system on campus and I can pretty much control it from here. This for example, I was looking at it earlier because they wanted to run the chiller but there's no command in the building, but I can click on any room, in Dragon Hall and then get an idea of what the temperatures are with the heaters and coolers are going. This just happens to be the chill water system at the library, they're doing cooling towers today, so I offer a lot of support out in the field as far as technical support. I can pretty much look at anything I want, I can turn things on or off. This you know, I sometimes program algorithms and right now this is what I do because can't work out in the field as much as I used to, I've got herniated disks and some other problems that I can't climb up ladder's anymore and things like that, which doesn't allow me to get as much exercise as I could, you know, sitting in front of this computer, but I'm going to be retiring by the end of next month.

JK: Congratulations!

WL: I have three and a half years, I was going to wait a little longer but with my health the way it is, I got to, I suspect I'll get more exercise in retirement than I will sitting in front of these machines.

JK: That is very possible.

SK: Why did you take the job here at Cortland?

WL: Everybody at Smith Corona was looking for work. Well my father had already left to come up here. He was on the final inspection line, he would take the type writers off the line and give them their final inspection and go off to packing. But, I took the job here because we were looking for, all of us guys in my age bracket, if you will,

were looking for work somewhere else because there were, the type writing company was moving to Mexico, and they were moving and it was going to be within the next six months, so, we were all looking for work. I thought about staying in industry, you know, so I could probably with the ten years I had, I was a machine setter when I left in piece work department. So, we all made, you know, we had to fill quotas and I kept the machines running so they could fill those quotas and there were pretty well-paying jobs. But they were taking them all overseas, so, you know, I was looking anywhere that I could find work. And at the time, you still, I still think they hire the same way. My son he's been bouncing around doing different stuff, for about eight years now, he was going to WyoTech, it wasn't working for him. He didn't want to go and so he just started up here last, oh I don't know, about six, seven months ago. So, he wants to, eventually, do what I do. I spent a lot of years in a steam plant firing boilers and answering trouble calls, heat calls, cold calls. I had to go through a three-year apprenticeship to get a journeymen's title, and then I was a front-line supervisor for a few years and then I took over as department head for two and a half years, but when they closed the heating plant, you know, I didn't like where my position was going, so, I resigned my position and started doing this.

JK: You've stuck with it ever since.

WL: Yeah, it's a good place to work, you know, right now SUNY Cortland's the largest employer around.

KM: Yeah pretty huge.

WL: Yeah it is pretty, and I believe if you run the numbers, I think it is. In this county, anyway.

JK: So, could you tell us about your immediate family?

WL: Yeah, I have three kids', Meghan, is my oldest daughter, she's thirty-two. She works for the city of Cortland. My son David, he got halfway through, he's working on a degree in collision and refinishing technology and got halfway through and decided he didn't want to do it anymore, so he's been a welder. He's worked as a mason. He's bouncing around doing different things, and the boy's got skills but he's just bouncing around. So, he's working here now, he's only been here six months, but I suspect being that he's twenty-nine years old, I started here when I was twenty-eight. He should be able to get thirty years in. Raise his family and make a good buck. My youngest son is Eric and he's twenty-seven, and he's a technician for, it used to be Time Warner Cable, it's Spectrum now. So, he works out of his van, goes into the office once a week to fill out paperwork. They send him his work via the laptop. He pretty much, he likes working on his own, and you know, it's sometimes not the best business to be in, because when the cable goes down, it's not, it's the cable guy that, that gets the attitude, you know. But, he's a real good customer service guy.

SK: That's great.

KM: So, what would you say is important to you about Cortland?

WL: Well, right now, I mean Cortland is, it's got really the college and I believe there's, you know, the jobs are starting to slow down over there at Pall Trinity and I don't know, I just hope that Cortland can stay as popular an area as, I think a lot of it has to do with the merging a lot with downtown and the ski resort and stuff like that. That's going to pull some people in but you know, it's like a lot of cities, you got to have jobs for people to want to stay and spend their money in, and I hope that's what's in Cortland's

future. It used to be a real thriving town, you can tell anytime you drive up and down Tompkins Street, you know. It's like when you go into Auburn, you go down 34 into Auburn. It's the same way, it's just lined with double mansions, there was a lot of money in Auburn at one time.

JK: Alright, well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about? Anything you want to tell us?

WL: No, I appreciate the opportunity.

JK: We appreciate you doing the interview for us.

KM: Thank you very much for your time.

WL: No problem.