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CAROLINA PIEDMONT HISTORY PROJECT

Interview

with

JOHN DAVID SUMMERLIN III

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Badin, North Carolina

By Rosemarie Hester

Transcribed by Rachel Osborn

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ROSEMARIE HESTER: What I wanted mostly to ask you about was working at Alcoa, and was wondering if you could describe the jobs that you did, up on from the first job that you had when you were there.

JOHN SUMMERLIN: The jobs that I did from the first job?

RH: Well, like from 1967. Say when you came back after you were in the Service; the construction part.

SUMMERLIN: When I came back, I just had a labor job. Common labor job: digging ditches, cutting grass, just whatever they needed done around the plant.

RH: How did the promotions happen, so that you could move from that construction job into the utility?

SUMMERLIN: Well, now, promotions don't just happen. You've got to bid on the job. In other words, a job vacancy comes open, you're in the bargaining group, you have to go bid on that job. And if your seniority is such that you're next in line for it, in other words, in that department. So when I came back as a laborer, then shortly thereafter, a job came open in what they call the utility job, and I bid the job and got the job.

RH: If you'd only been there a year, was that enough to acquire enough seniority to be the first one?

SUMMERLIN: It doesn't matter how long you've been on. As long as the vacancy exists, and nobody could say there's nobody else in the department that wanted the job, if you hadn't been there but a week, and you bid on the job. Now I think there is a clause, maybe, in the contract, where the company would not have to give you a job if they didn't want to. I'm not certain of that, but I think that's the way it was. Like if you had less than ninety days, if the company didn't think you could handle the job,

they didn't have to give it to you, or something of that nature. But I don't know as they've ever refused anybody a job, like that.

RH: So there weren't all that many people at that time bidding for the particular job?

SUMMERLIN: For that particular job, in that department, see. The plant's cut up into departments, and somebody in another department may have had more seniority than I did, but he couldn't get the job because he wasn't in that department. Now, if nobody in the department had taken the job, then somebody outside the department could have got it, with more seniority.

But, then, I stayed on the utility job, like I say. Part of the utility job was filling in at the filter pumps, on vacations and what. So I stayed up there; the biggest part of my time was when I was up there. But then they started the apprentice program, which I was one of the first. There was something like seven of us went into the first apprenticeship programs that they had here in the maintenance department. They had millwrights, machinists, welders, electricians, auto mechanics, and pipe fitters. And I was one of the first millwright's apprentices. And there were five millwright apprentices. So of those five, of the five millwright apprentices, two of us have become maintenance supervisors, and one that went into the machinist apprenticeship with us, in the same group, he's also a supervisor in the automotive part.

RH: Why did they start the apprenticeship program?

SUMMERLIN: Well, it was the union, I guess. I don't know all the details, really. But rather than the company going out and hiring journeymen all the time, off the street, it gave the people that were here an opportu-

ity to learn a trade. Which was good, at that time. My personal opinion; and, of course, I don't know that it's for the better, right now, but at that time it was really good. Right now we're not getting the same caliber of people that we had. I'm not trying to brag, I just know for a fact that we're not getting 'em. When we went in the apprentice program, it was something you wanted to do. You wanted to do this type of work. But now it seems we're getting people in that want the pay, and the money, but they really could care less about the job. A lot of that.

RH: Are they mostly people from this area?

SUMMERLIN: When you say "from this area" now, you see, you're talking about a fifty mile radius. Used to, back when I was growing up, the only people worked at Badin lived at Badin, just about. And maybe I was one of 'em. It's not true today. We've got people, like I say, it's fifty mile radius around: Waynesboro, Mt. Gilead, Salisbury, Charlotte, all around us.

RH: So are these people, who have heard that the wages at Alcoa are real good, and they're interested in working at Alcoa because of the benefits, and whatnot?

SUMMERLIN: I'm certain of it. Probably, other than construction-type work, I expect Alcoa at Badin is high paying place in the state. I think there are some construction-type work, in the crafts fields, that they's getting that, too.

RH: You said when you were working in the utility part, that you were filling in for people who were on vacations, most of the time?

SUMMERLIN: That's filter plant operator, yes. They had four filter plant operators. Well, all four of 'em were people with twenty-five years or more seniority with the company. With twenty-five years seniority at

that time, you got four weeks vacation. So there you had four times four, that's sixteen weeks a year right there. And long about that same time there was one of the operators out with cataract operation on his eyes. And then there was another one, that had emphysema, that was out quite a bit. So I spent a lot of my time filling in the filter plant. /pause/

RH: As an apprentice millwright, who trained you?

SUMMERLIN: It was an OJT type thing, as far as the work itself. But we went through a ICS course, also.

RH: What's ICS?

SUMMERLIN: /laughs/ What is that? ICS is a . . . h'm.

RH: It'll probably come to you.

SUMMERLIN: I can't right now think of the name of it.

Anyway, it's a like a mill type thing, except Alcoa set up a program through ICS, and they handle all the books, and we sent our tests in to--

RH: Oh, correspondence.

SUMMERLIN: International Correspondence School, that's what I was trying to say. Alcoa set up this program through ICS. We had classes, class-work, and everything, right there at the plant. We had some of the engineers at the plant act as teachers.

RH: Was this apprentice program at all linked to the fact that the jobs were moving from unskilled to skilled at that time? Or was there no correlation there?

SUMMERLIN: Well, now, they've always had skilled, at Badin. They've always had the journeymen, as far as millwrights, machinists, welders, what have you. But, like I said, the union was trying to stop the company from going out on the street and hiring journeymen all the time. And that was

why they really started the apprentice program. Plus (I suspect--now, I don't know all the answers) it was getting harder for the company to hire journeymen also. It's a hard matter today, to just go out and hire a good millwright, or a good machinist, or a good welder.

RH: What does a millwright do?

SUMMERLIN: In the plant, we do anything that's to do with the maintenance, upkeep of the plant. As far as the mechanical part of it: gear boxes and elevators and screw conveyors, belt conveyors, all of the moving equipment in the plant, just about. 'Course now, in the automotive, they'll naturally take the auto mechanics, they'll do that.

RH: Why did you move from journeyman millwright to maintenance supervisor, and how did that happen?

SUMMERLIN: Well, when I became a journeyman millwright, the company had a program where when their regular supervisors were on vacation, they needed somebody to fill in for them. So, they asked several of us to fill in as fill-in foremen, to fill the vacancies when they were on vacation. And I did this for several years, I guess five or six years. And then when a vacancy came open, they offered one of the jobs to me.

RH: Would you have to work overtime to fill in for those who were out on vacation?

SUMMERLIN: It depended on what the situation was. Once in a while, you might. But you were paid for it, well paid for it.

RH: Overtime is double time, or is it--?

SUMMERLIN: Overtime is time and a half, through the week. Now, if it's seven days, after which it's double time. Actually, I think it's double time and a half, now. I've lost track of it.

RH: Being a maintenance supervisor, is that still an hourly job?

SUMMERLIN: No.

RH: So that's like a move from labor to management?

SUMMERLIN: Right.

RH: How'd you feel about making that change?

SUMMERLIN: Well, I don't know. You give it a lot of thought. You have to weigh both sides. It has its advantages and I guess, in some things, it has some of its disadvantages. I felt like it was more advantageous to me to go ahead, than it was to stay as a millwright.

RH: What are the advantages?

SUMMERLIN: Well . . . /laughs/ It's quite a few things, really. They have a program, a savings plan that I can participate in, a profit-sharing type thing; vacation benefits is better; insurance benefits are some better, a life insurance program that is some better. The pay, naturally, is some better, can't say it's not. And, of course, there you have everybody paid pretty well, you know. But, I don't know . . . some people might say, "Well, you're crazy for taking it." You know, it's a lot of headaches, too. You got a lot of problems that you have every day.

RH: Is there any feeling of sort of leaving your friends behind, who were still laborers for an hourly wage?

SUMMERLIN: No, not really. No, some of 'em were--well, of course, you know they'll always remind you, "Well, you was in our shoes before, you ought to do this-and so. " But it's just something you have to learn to live with.

RH: How many people do you supervise?

SUMMERLIN: Well, at this time, I got about fifteen on my crew.

RH: Do you work one particular shift, or do you rotate?

SUMMERLIN: I rotate, daylight and three to eleven.

RH: When did you join the union?

SUMMERLIN: When did I join the union? When I went to work for the company.

RH: Did you ever have any thought about not joining the union?

SUMMERLIN: Mm-mm, /signifying "no."/

RH: Did you ever know anybody who did?

SUMMERLIN: Who did have thought about not joining? It seems like there have been two people at Badin--I believe, now--that have not gone with the union. And then I think they actually joined the union before they left the company.

RH: When you joined, what was it that made you want to join?

SUMMERLIN: Well, it was just the thing to do. I mean, you felt like, well, the union's helping you get what benefits you got. There's never been any problem at Badin, in my lifetime. Now, back when the union first began, I'm sure they had a lot of problems. 'Fact, I know they did. But I recall some strikes, myself. I was not in 'em, personally, but my dad was. My dad was in the labor group, to start with. The union. But when I went to work, like I said, it was just the thing to do.

RH: Do you remember your father talking about those strikes?

SUMMERLIN: Talking about it? Well, I mean, I remember the strike itself. I remember the one in 1949, especially, 'cause it was at Christmastime.

RH: Do you remember how you felt about it at the time?

SUMMERLIN: The biggest thing I remember is, you know, at Christmastime, a kid thinks he's not going to get anything for Christmas. But, as it

turned out, I got my first shotgun then, so--/laughs/

RH: That was a happy Christmas for you.

SUMMERLIN: That's right, turned out to be a happy Christmas. /laughs/
But, no, really, they were out--gosh, I forgot how long they were out.
Several weeks, it seems. I know my dad, anyway, and several of them, they
had a big fishing camp down below the falls of the dam. They stayed down
there most of the time, fishing. /laughs/

RH: Do you think there are a lot of changes at Alcoa, from the time
your father worked there, to now?

SUMMERLIN: You mean, from the time he first went to work?

RH: Well, say about the time the union first started to now.

SUMMERLIN: The union was here when he first came.

RH: That's right. You said the strike you remembered was 1949. So
they were unionized during the thirties.

SUMMERLIN: Yeah.

RH: Well, I'd like to take it from that strike.

SUMMERLIN: Have there been changes since forty-nine? Oh, my goodness,
yes.

RH: What are some of the changes that you think are most important?

SUMMERLIN: Well, you've got a whole new plant over there. The old
plant was tore down, and the new one built, in that length of time. The
plant that we have today is just no comparison to what it was then. I mean,
I wasn't in that old plant. I did work for the company in fifty-seven, but
I didn't get into the plant enough to really know how the plant was. But I
was around it enough to know that there's a big difference.

The working conditions all the way around, from the health standpoint

to just going in there to work.

RH: What do you think the improvements in health conditions are?

SUMMERLIN: Well, today, you got all kinds of dust collectors, and gas collectors, you know, to take the gases off of the pots, and things they didn't have in the old plant. New carbon plant end of it. Back then, you saw the men, they got filthy black dirty, just working in the carbon plant. Today they don't. You see some get dirty, but nothing like you did in the old plant. In the pot rooms, as far as punching pots, is the pots there's no comparison to the pots. So in carbon, or any of that thing, it's nothing like it was in the old plant.

RH: Because it was more strenuous then?

SUMMERLIN: Definitely. See, they've got it now, they've got equipment and machines in there now that's just automatic. You just punch a button. Back then, it'd be with a sledge hammer. They still do a little with the sledge hammer now, but just because they want to, it's not 'cause they have to. Most cases.

RH: You remember what they struck for in 1949?

SUMMERLIN: Other than wages, and some, you know, insurance, or something of this nature, it's all I can remember of.

RH: Have there ever been strikes about the health conditions?

SUMMERLIN: No. Not at Badin.

RH: Well, how do you think the improvements in the health conditions have come about? And why?

SUMMERLIN: As far as, in dust collectors and things, I really don't know. I don't think the union really had that much to do with it. Probably,

a bit more so, the government had to do with it than the union.

RH: In setting standards?

SUMMERLIN: Um-hum. /affirmative/ And Alcoa, as far as I can tell, has bent over backwards to try to improve. I won't say they're perfect, or this, but they have spent a lot of money on, though, in the last ten years, trying to improve everything. Like I said, from dust to gas to even heat, now, they're even doing things to conserve the heat going out the top of the plant. /pause/ Energy, I should say. Energy-saving program. And another thing is cleaning up the lakes, and things. They stress, highly, on oil spills, or anything of that nature. We don't put nothing into the streams any more.

RH: Have you ever been laid off from Alcoa?

SUMMERLIN: Have I ever been laid off? Yeah, I got laid off in fifty-seven. It was when they started tearing the plant down.

RH: That was when they were modernizing the plant?

SUMMERLIN: They were fixing to. See, the old plant was still with us. And they decided to tear it down. At that time, they didn't know they was going to build anything. They were just going to tear it down.

RH: What made them change their minds?

SUMMERLIN: Power cost, I imagine, at other places. See, I left, and went in the Air Force, and while I was in the Air Force, all that took place. But at one point there, I think, most of them that were laid off were told to hunt 'em another job, that Alcoa wouldn't be starting back up here. And then they decided to build the Tuckertown Dam, and that was the final--'course, that was the decision to go ahead with the plant there. But power cost, naturally, is a big factor with Alcoa. If it wasn't for

power, we wouldn't be here now. Alcoa, right now, has got plants on the West Coast shut down because of power shortage.

RH: Does that bring more work here?

SUMMERLIN: I expect it does, in some cases. I'm sure **our** metal that we're shipping out, is probably because some of the plants being there. We're shipping everything we make from there. We're not stockpiling anything.

RH: Will there be more people hired, now that the plant has been expanded to sheet metal also?

SUMMERLIN: 'Bout the only way you'll see more hired right now would be another pot line.

RH: How many pot lines do they have right now?

SUMMERLIN: Well, we got what we call two lines. It's actually four rooms, but it's two lines. See, line one started up in sixty-three, and then line two started in sixty-seven. /pause./

RH: Is this a scary place to work?

SUMMERLIN: Scary?

RH: Yeah. I mean, a lot of people have told me about how dangerous it is, and how high the voltage is, in some of the parts of the plant.

SUMMERLIN: Ah, it was more scary in the old plant, than it is today, now. You know, it might be scary, say, if you've never been there before, and you walk right in the pot room. Or, well, I don't know, the pot room really, there's nothing really to scare you any more, actually. The ingot department would probably, maybe, scare you more then. You know, seeing all the heat and furnaces, and fires, and what have you. But, really, I don't see it being a scary place to work. In the old plant, it was dark, you know. I

would say in the old plant it was probably more scary, than it is today.

RH: Does everybody in the plant have a nickname?

SUMMERLIN: Does everybody in the plant have a nickname. Well, I don't know about everybody, but I guess a lot of 'em do.

RH: What changes have you seen in the union, since you've been--

SUMMERLIN: In the union? No great changes, other than just presidents, and leadership. Actually, I guess, the ^{higher} ^{echelon} of one of the unions hasn't really changed that much. Get local, you know, local people. And that's just voted on by membership here. 'Course they have built the new union hall since I've been here.

RH: Did you ever go to the union meetings there?

SUMMERLIN: Yeah. 'Course.

RH: They have one every week?

SUMMERLIN: Every month.

RH: What's the name of the president of the union now?

SUMMERLIN: Marshall Owens.

RH: Marshall Owens. /pause/ People usually pretty satisfied with the presidents, once they get in?

SUMMERLIN: No.

RH: No? They're not? What are their general objections?

SUMMERLIN: /laughs/ Well, you know, it's just like anything else. When you get in there, President of the United States, it's the same thing, you know. You can't please everybody; no way in the world to please everybody. Now they have a Black, he's a Black president.

RH: Is he the first Black president?

SUMMERLIN: Yup. In Badin. /pause/ You know, you get the general

talk. Some like him, some don't. The ones that voted for him, like him, the one that didn't, don't. I mean, that's about the way it goes. Democratic way of doing.

RH: You think he's all right?

SUMMERLIN: Marshall? Well, far as I know, as a person, Marshall's all right. He has gone into president, since I went into the management side. So I haven't had any real dealings with him. He went into the shop as an electrical apprentice. He's now electrician, journeyman. And he's got a lot to learn, I'm sure of that, but, as far as I know, Marshall's all right.

RH: Is he pretty young?

SUMMERLIN: Yeah, I'd say Marshall's probably maybe about my age. He might be little younger than I am. Little bit hard to tell with Blacks, sometimes. I don't know exactly his age. Marshall's probably a little bit younger than I am. You know, thirty-eight, maybe, something.

RH: What about now that women are in the plant? Does that make any difference at all?

SUMMERLIN: Oh, yeah. It make a lot of difference.

RH: What kind of differences does it make?

SUMMERLIN: Well . . . before women were in the plant, the men didn't have to worry about their language, they didn't have to worry about the clothing they had on. You know, how they acted around the plant. There's just a lot of things difference that women makes. You take the bathrooms, for instance. There was no women's bathrooms in the plant. We had just gotten over a program of splitting up the Blacks and the white bathrooms, you know. The Black and the white washing rooms. We had just gone through

that, and then all of a sudden you're coming to women, so you got to go back down, you got to separate all the bathrooms again. And it took a little adjusting to get even that done. And then . . . I don't know, there's some women in some jobs; they're in the jobs now, but I wonder how they're going to be when they become fifty years old.

RH: What do you mean?

SUMMERLIN: Well . . . /pause/ You take a maintenance job, like some of them that got over there as maintenance millwrights. A millwright has to get in to a lot of dirty, greasy situations; climbing. Don't get me wrong, I'm not against women in there, I'm all for 'em, if that's what they want. But I just wonder how they're going to be--

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Fifty to sixty year old woman over here, climbing the ore towers, like I can a fifty to sixty year old man.

RH: I see. So you think that these jobs are just for certain periods in their lifetimes, and they can't continue it on.

SUMMERLIN: I think they can handle it now, at a young age, but I'm wondering how they gonna be at an older age. I mean, I know we've got older men over there that have troubles, and maybe they'll be just in the same shape. I don't know. But it's just hard for me to see a woman doing some of the things that they're attempting to do. But, so far . . . They're there, I won't say they're doing all the things. They still got a lot to learn, when it comes to some jobs. On a production type job, where you drive a fork truck all day long, I'd say, no problem. You run a crane all day, that's the only problem. We've got some that's in the welding classification. Fine; they can stand there and weld all

day. But they gonna be places that they gonna have to go, as welders, that's going to be hard to. And we've got two female welders. We've got two female millwrights, and we've got an opening for a machinist right now. I understand they're going to put one there. That's another good place. I can see one as a machinist better than I can as a millwright, as a matter of fact. 'Cause a machinist is here running a lathe, or going a drill press. One type of thing all the time. Millwright work is a whole lot different. You'd be all over the whole plant: up, down, under, around. I can't see a fifty or sixty year old woman doing this.

RH: Did you know Barbara Britt?

SUMMERLIN: Barbara Britt. Yeah, knew Barbara.

RH: I spoke with her, about two, three years ago, I believe, when she was working at Alcoa. Is she still working at Alcoa?

SUMMERLIN: She still works at Alcoa.

RH: I wasn't sure if she was or not.

SUMMERLIN: She fell and hurt her back.

RH: Well, I knew that. I didn't know if she'd gone back, or if she'd not gone back.

SUMMERLIN: Yeah, she's still here. Still in the same department

RH: Still working in the pot rooms?

SUMMERLIN: Pot lines. /pause/

RH: For example, if a woman files a grievance through the Union, when it comes to things like that, do you think that she gets the same kind kind of support that a man would get?

SUMMERLIN: When a woman files a grievance?

RH: Yeah. If she thinks there's either some job condition, or some-

thing that's happened to her, that she files a grievance for.

SUMMERLIN: The only thing she could be filing a grievance on would be of a nature that a man would have to file a grievance also. I mean, I say that's the only thing. That's the only thing I've seen in I don't know; I don't even think we've had a . . . I don't know of a woman that's filed a grievance yet. Unless it was the ones that got fired. And they wound up with their jobs back, with back pay.

RH: They did? I remembered hearing about that case, but I didn't know what happened from that.

SUMMERLIN: Far as I know, that was. Well, the union had to stand by 'em, and get their job back. They were on that. Now, I don't think there'd be any-- If I go in there in the morning, and ask Nancy or Diane Birch to do pipe fitting work, and she filed a grievance because I had her do it, she'd get the same treatment, I'm sure of that.

RH: Are there women in your crew?

SUMMERLIN: Oh yes. I don't have any this week, but I did last week.

RH: You think they can keep up just as well as men, in their jobs?

SUMMERLIN: Not now.

RH: But they will be able to, once they--

SUMMERLIN: I hope so. See, they're our apprentice right now, they going through a training program.. No, right now, they can't do the work right now, without my showing them how, and telling them what to do. Our welders, now, we've got welders that can. But they've gone through the apprentice program. Well, I say they've gone through it. They're not actually journeymen yet, but they're close to being journeymen. And right now, like I said, they're doing fine. Far as I'm concerned, they do their

job. /pause/ Why are you so concerned with Alcoa questions? I'm going to ask that.

RH: Okay. Well, I'll tell you, it's because, in town I've talked to so many other people about the past, that I'd kind of like to know what goes on here now. And the only other person I've ever talked to about working at Alcoa has been Barbara Britt. Since Alcoa is such an important part of this town, I feel like I need some more interviews to know what goes on there, and what working conditions are like, and how people feel about the plant.

SUMMERLIN: Alcoa today is not as important a thing to the town, as it once was.

RH: You don't think so.

SUMMERLIN: I know it. I mean, it's just obvious that they're Well, I mean, I know that they're trying to eventually get out of the town business. They turned over the water system to the county. They still support the fire department, but they're gradually leaving them out on their own. And that's fine. I have nothing against that. Oh, they've still got ties with Badin, now don't get me wrong there. But they're gradually getting out of the town business.

They're buying up these old buildings, and tearing 'em down. To me, I personally hate to see all the old buildings go, but they're nothing but fire traps, the way they are, if the people that own 'em won't take care of them. So I think they're doing the town a favor by doing it now, although I'd like to see them all restored. But it wasn't going to be a thing that got done on them, sorry to say. /pause/

RH: Think you'll work at Alcoa till you retire? That's my last Alcoa

question. /laughs/

SUMMERLIN: I have no-- I'm planning on staying here till . . . I can leave. /laughs/

RH: You have the beginnings of a town museum in your antique shop. Why are you so interested in Badin history?

SUMMERLIN: Well, because it's my home. And the fact of things being tore down, you hate to see 'em all go, so I guess maybe that's the biggest thing. We just want to try to keep some of it. We can't keep it all, so we try to keep what we can, and that's all. If I could do it, I'd buy all the buildings, and restore them myself, but I can't do it. I think Badin would have been an ideal resort town, but it'd take millions of dollars to promote it, and I don't have thousands, much less millions.

RH: Well, there has been a lot of interest, though, in people in the town. They have a certain sense about the historical nature of Badin.

SUMMERLIN: Yeah. There have. There's still a few people around Badin that care, but there's a lot more now that don't care than there are that do, I'm afraid. Badin's had quite a turnover in the last twenty years, anyway. Well, even in the last ten years.

RH: When I talked to Reverend Hunter today on the 'phone, he told me something that was interesting about how all the churches have stairs here. Lots of stairs, twenty-five, thirty stairs. And he said, well, it was because when the churches were built, everybody was real young, and it was nothing to go climbing up the stairs. Now that everybody's old, they regret the fact that they built all those stairs on their churches. So that says a little bit of something about the change in the town's population.

SUMMERLIN: Yeah, guess so. 'Course, the Methodist Church, they've

since fixed that situation. Since they've built theirs, theirs doesn't have stairs anymore. New. But the old one did. Yeah, I hadn't thought about it, but I guess that's the truth. Very true.

RH: Well, that's the end of my questions. Is there anything else you want to say?

SUMMERLIN: Well, I don't know . . . anything else, really, that would help you.

RH: Timothy, you want to say anything about living in Badin? No? Okay.

/END OF INTERVIEW/