# ‘It’s Like Having Your Home Knocked Down’: Place, Identity and Community at General Motors-Holden’s Woodville Factory

CAROLYN COLLINS AND PAUL SENDZIUK

*Carolyn Collins is a research fellow in the Department of History at the University of Adelaide. She is currently employed on the Social Histories of Holden project. Her publications include* Trailblazers: 100 Inspiring South Australian Women *(2019) and* Save Our Sons: Women, Dissent and Conscription during the Vietnam War *(2021).*

*Paul Sendziuk is an associate professor at the University of Adelaide, with expertise in the histories of Australia, public health, immigration and labour. His most recent books are* A History of South Australia *(2018), and* In the Eye of the Storm: Volunteers and Australia’s Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis *(2021).*

In post-war Australia, General Motors-Holden and its factories were seen as symbols of progress, with newspapers and company literature emphasising the sheer size of the built structures (and the enormous machinery inside them), the speed of production lines and the massive outputs they generated. Usually located in industrialised, working-class suburbs, factories were built with utility, not aesthetics, in mind for work that was often dirty, repetitive, noisy and dangerous. Far from being places of untold Dickensian horrors, however, oral histories reveal how Holden’s workers inhabited these spaces and made them their own, creating socially constructed workplaces with which they forged deep connections that continued to resonate beyond their employment. This article focuses on GMH’s long-lasting factory at Woodville (Adelaide) and a group of workers who were employed there for various periods, doing a variety of jobs, between 1945 and 1990. Their memories challenge traditional impressions of factory life, and reveal deeply felt, if complicated, attachments to place that have outlasted the physical structures of the factory itself.

## INTRODUCTION

Anthony Vassallo spent four decades toiling as a blue-collar worker at General Motors-Holden's Woodville factory in Adelaide's western suburbs, his days regulated by the steam whistle that heralded the start and end of each shift. It was the place where he learned the strange ways and slang of his adopted country, earning promotion and a decent wage to support his family until his working life was cut short by a horrific industrial accident that 'crushed his leg to almost nothing'.[1] After years of pain, and multiple operations, he died aged 72, but he never lost his connection to his former workplace; his dying wish was to be buried in the cemetery facing the factory. Family members, many of them Holden workers themselves, were not surprised. His son George, who followed his father and grandfather into the Woodville factory when he turned 16, recalled his dad's fierce pride in having worked for 'Holden's', helping to produce 'Australia's own car'. 'My father was dedicated to his job and he loved his job … he loved it so much that he would spend 90 per cent of the time at Holden's and only 10 per cent at home', he said. 'His wishes were that if he was to pass away that he be buried in the Cheltenham Cemetery, which was opposite Holden's, and that he'd be facing the plant; he wanted to hear the whistle every day. So, that's what we did.'[2]

In post-war Australia, General Motors-Holden (GMH; colloquially known as Holden or Holden's) and its factories were seen as symbols of progress, with company literature emphasising the enormous size of the buildings and machinery, the speed of production lines, and the massive outputs they generated (see Figure 1). In 1969, the company employed 25,810 workers nationwide, with factories in New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland, and two each in Victoria and South Australia, including Woodville.[3] Usually located in industrialised, working-class suburbs, the factories were akin to small towns, built not with aesthetics but utility in mind for work that was often dirty, repetitive, noisy and dangerous. Far from being places

1 George Vassallo, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 10–11 February 2020, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA), TRC 7250/31.

2 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

3 General Motors-Holden, *Annual Report*, 1969, 13.

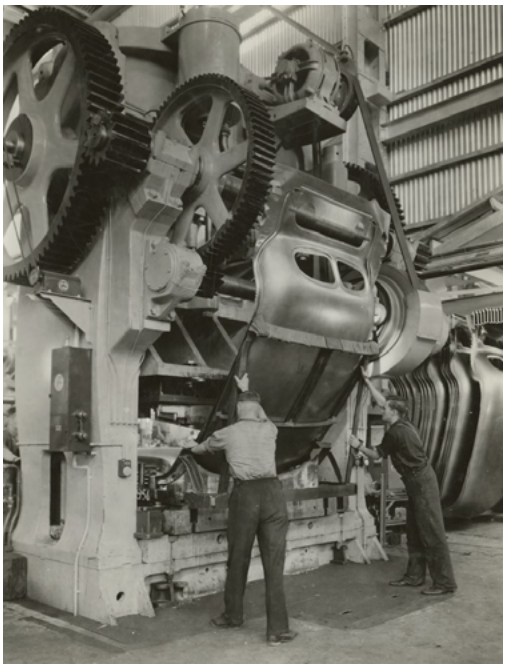

**Figure 1** The 720-ton single action Hamilton Press performs an operation on a roof panel in the Woodville press shop, c. 1939. State Library of South Australia, BRG 213/77/48/13.

of untold Dickensian horrors, however, oral histories reveal how workers inhabited these spaces and made them their own, creating socially constructed workplaces with which they forged deep connections that continued to resonate long after their employment there ended. These were places in which workers, like Anthony Vassallo, spent more time than they did in their own homes; where, like his son, they started as boys and became men; where migrants learned the ways and the language of their adopted country; and where employees forged sub-communities (as well as motor vehicles) that acted as second 'families', sometimes supplanting their real ones. Keen to keep and attract workers in a time of full-employment, GMH also sought to make the factories more 'worker-friendly', building social and sporting venues and sponsoring events to encourage its employees to spend their 'off duty' time involved with the factory. This article focuses on GMH's factory at Woodville, which operated between 1923 and 1990, drawing upon interviews conducted with a group of male workers who were employed there for various periods, doing a variety of jobs, post–World War II. Their memories challenge traditional impressions of factory life, and reveal deeply felt, if complicated, attachments to place that have outlasted the physical structures of the factory itself.

## PLACE, MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Place can have a variety of meanings. As Ruth Barton has noted, 'it can be a locale, a physical environment where everyday life occurs or as a locus of identity that acts as a focus of individual and collective feelings and commitments' while a 'sense of

place' refers to the emotions and feelings evoked by that space.[4] This sense of place is evident in a study of Woodville GMH workers, whose memories are linked to a strong sense of identity and belonging, not just to the physical domain of the factory, but to the community of people who worked there. Woodville was also a factory strongly embedded in a physical locality, with many of its workers living nearby, which may have deepened loyalty to the factory and made them less keen to later transfer to another area for work.

Studies of factory workers conducted in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom have recognised similar links between place and workers' identity.[5] In her 1994 study of the closure of a car factory in Wisconsin, Kathryn Marie Dudley, for example, explores the displacement that occurs when workers lose not only their work but the social structures that this work once supported.[6] Steven High also looks at workplace attachment and loss in his book *Industrial Sunset*.[7] Similarly, Tim Strangleman examines the erosion of workplace identity and culture in a number of UK workplaces, including coal mines where workers expressed a yearning to return to the pits after they closed, despite the 'hard, sometimes dangerous and often boring work', because they missed 'the banter, humour, and camaraderie of their former jobs'.[8] While not all were engaged in dangerous or dull work, Woodville employees similarly shared strong attachments to both the physical and imagined places where they worked, and experienced a sense of displacement when their employment ended.

This article stems from an ongoing larger project, in which interviews are being conducted with 100 men and women who worked at GMH's South Australian and

4 Ruth Barton, '"Our Tarkine, Our Future": The Australian Workers Union Use of Narrative Around Place and Community in West and North West Tasmania, Australia', *Antipode* 50, no. 1 (2018): 43.

5 See, for example, Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Joy L. Hart and Tracey E. K'Meyer, 'Worker Memory and Narrative: Personal Stories of Deindustrialization in Louisville, Kentucky', in Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (eds), *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 284–304.

6 Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

7 Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969–1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

8 Tim Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness: An Oral History of the Park Royal Brewery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

Victorian factories.[9] During the initial recruitment process, we were surprised by the strong response from former Woodville workers, given the factory closed more than 30 years earlier and had long been demolished. We had expected the larger response to come from workers at GMH's Elizabeth factory, it being only relatively recently closed in 2017. It soon became clear, however, that many (though not all) of the former Woodville workers had remained in touch with other workmates on a semi-regular basis, often as members of the Woodville Tool Room 25-year Club, which still meets annually, and were spreading news of our project through these personal networks. This was valuable for recruitment, but it also signalled the existence of a strong collective memory of work life at Woodville, one that was frequently overlaid with a heavy sense of nostalgia for a way of life that no longer existed. This so-called 'smoke-stack nostalgia' is not unique to Woodville; it has been noted in other studies of factory workers.[10] Collective memory is valuable in establishing the symbolic meanings and emotional significance the factory is seen to hold for workers as a group, but we were also aware that it could prevent other stories being told that did not fit the accepted narrative. The 'life story' framework and length of our interviews (often conducted over multiple sessions) allowed interviewers to gently probe behind networked memories, setting free other memories that had not been moulded over the years by contact with others. Sometimes these were counter to the accepted 'good times, good people' narrative but even those who shared negative experiences (such as sackings, bullying, disciplinary action, and clashes with other workers) still articulated an underlying and continuing attachment to their former workplace, and the work they did there.

At the time of our interviews, our narrators ranged in age from their mid-fifties to early nineties. Some had long careers at Holden; others left after finishing their apprenticeships, were laid off or quit after only a few years. There were clear

9 People, Places and Promises: Social Histories of Holden, funded by the Australian Research Council (LP170100860), General Motors-Holden, the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the National Motor Museum. The research team consists of Jennifer Clark, Paul Sendziuk, Carolyn Collins (all University of Adelaide), and Alistair Thomson and Graeme Davison (Monash University). All of the interviews undertaken for the project are being transferred to the NLA and will be available, subject to the conditions imposed by the interviewees.

10 See, for example, Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness*, 3–4; McIvor, *Working Lives*, 69–70.

generational differences. Older men, in their eighties and nineties, had ridden the boom times of the post-war years, often rising from teenage apprentices to senior supervisors or other 'staff' positions. This meant they were recollecting a time when they were not only at their physical peak, but when they were at their most powerful in terms of the authority and respect they commanded in both the workplace and at home, where they were mostly the sole breadwinners. Men who started during the more unstable economic periods of the 1970s tended not to stay as long and to have more mixed memories of Woodville as a workplace. Strangleman also noted this difference in perspective among Guinness workers in the UK who had worked during 'the long boom', compared to those who experienced the instability of the era of deindustrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s.[11]

Our narrators worked across the factory in production jobs, as tradespeople and as supervisors on the factory floor. They include migrants (and sons of migrants) and members of the same family (it was common for two or three generations to work there). While women who worked at Woodville have been interviewed for the larger project, this article restricts itself to male workers. This reflects the fact that Woodville's workforce was heavily male dominated (some men did not even remember seeing any women on the factory floor, only in the offices, canteen and medical centre). By comparison, female apprentices, tradespeople, factory workers and supervisors were more common in the later decades at Elizabeth. Our narrators included men who transferred to Elizabeth when Woodville was closing (and were thus able to compare the culture at both factories) and others who had their careers at Holden cut short through layoffs or plant closures. It was not uncommon for these men to express deep regret, even grief, that they had not been able to have 'a job for life' like their fathers. Yet, whatever their experiences (positive or negative), and no matter how long (or short) a period they worked there, it was clear that all the workers interviewed retained a strong connection with their former workplace – and were keen to talk about it.

11 Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness*, 4.

## THE WOODVILLE FACTORY

The Holden name has a special place in South Australia's history, and deep roots that extend back to the 1850s when English settler James Alexander Holden set up a leather and saddlery business in Adelaide. After the Australian Government banned the import of complete vehicles, a new company, Holden Motor Body Builders' Ltd (HMBB) was formed in 1917 to manufacture car bodies. By 1923, the company was building more than 50 per cent of all car bodies in Australia, the local paper noting with pride how it had developed from 'an unpretentious shop' five years earlier into 'the largest institution of its kind in the British Empire outside Canada'.[12] That same year, the company purchased 22 acres of land at Woodville, and entered into an agreement with the US car maker General Motors Export Company to manufacture its car bodies at the new factory.[13] In 1931, following a severe downturn in business during the Great Depression, HMBB merged with General Motors (Australia) Ltd, to become General Motors-Holden's Ltd (GMH). During the war, Woodville, along with GMH's other factories, was made available for the war effort, manufacturing a vast number of products ranging from aircraft, boats and specialised army vehicles to guns, torpedo parts and canvas stretchers.

From 1948, after GMH struck a deal with the federal government to produce an Australian car, Woodville was responsible for producing all the bodies and metal pressings for the new vehicle, along with the tools, jig and fixtures (GMH's Fishermen's Bend plant in Victoria manufactured the engine, transmission and other basic components). While the final car was not assembled at Woodville, the first production body of each Holden model was always assembled, in top secret, in the factory's Die and Fixture Department's pilot room, a source of great pride among its workers.[14] In November 1973, when the Woodville factory celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, more than 5,000 people were employed in its Body, Tool Design and

12 'Holden's Need Bigger Works', *Advertiser* [Adelaide], 2 October 1923, 18.

13 General Motors-Holden, *Holden: The First 25 Years* (Melbourne: Public Relations Dept, GMH, c. 1973).

14 'Woodville – 50 Yr. History', *People*, December 1973, 2. *People*, GMH's inhouse magazine for employees nationwide, was produced by its public affairs department between 1947 and 2017, initially monthly, then bi-monthly and, later, quarterly. It featured stories about individual employees and factories as well as communicating company information. The full collection is available online through Holden Retirees Club website at https://www.hrc.org.au/holden/people-magazine.html.

Manufacture, Automatic Transmission, Metal Stamping and Electroplating plants.[15] Until 1988, all GMH's South Australian apprentices were trained at Woodville in its Apprentice Training Centre.

Located about 10 kilometres from Adelaide's CBD, the main part of the Woodville factory was bounded on its three longest sides by two railway lines and Cheltenham Parade (a small site on the other side of this road, next to the cemetery, was also later developed) – see Figure 2. The factory's shortest side fronted Port Road, the main artery linking Port Adelaide with the city. A canal originally planned for the centre of the road to ferry goods to and from the port never eventuated and in the 1950s the wide grassy expanse dividing the traffic lanes was leased from the Woodville City Council by GMH to provide a car park and sporting and recreation grounds for the factory's workers.[16] In 1964 this included several bowling greens, an arena for 'electric light cricket', and courts for tennis, netball and basketball. Inside the factory gates, the site was progressively filled by industrial buildings, housing various plants and huge pieces of machinery that dwarfed those who operated them.[17]

In company publications, the giant-like proportions of Woodville's buildings, machinery, workforce and output were consistently emphasised. In 1964, for example, the company's magazine *People* reported that Woodville now covered a 72 acre site, employing 6,000 workers, including 233 apprentices, with its press shop alone covering an area of 215,355 square feet and housing '22 heavy, 101 medium and 31 portable presses which use 500 tons of steel daily to produce 200,000 parts'.[18] 'Two new giant machines' installed in the toolroom in 1955 measured 15 feet and 10 feet high, but were by no means the largest. A company film showed the 'monumental' Hamilton press being slowly towed along Port Road by a convoy of trucks to its new home. The wharf had to be reinforced before it could be unloaded from the ship.[19]

15 'Woodville – 50 Yr. History', *People*, December 1973, 2.

16 'Sports and Social Club's New Sports Park at GMH Woodville', *People*, July 1951, 13.

17 See, for example, front cover of GMH's *People* magazine, May 1965, showing a worker operating a 'giant' HiPro Draw press, recently installed in Woodville's new press shop.

18 'Spotlight on Woodville', *People*, September 1964, 20.

19 Patrick Miller, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 23 October 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/5; General Motors-Holden, 'Hamilton Press arriving at General Motors-Holden's, Woodville' [video], 1938. State Library of South Australia, BRG 213/F-115.

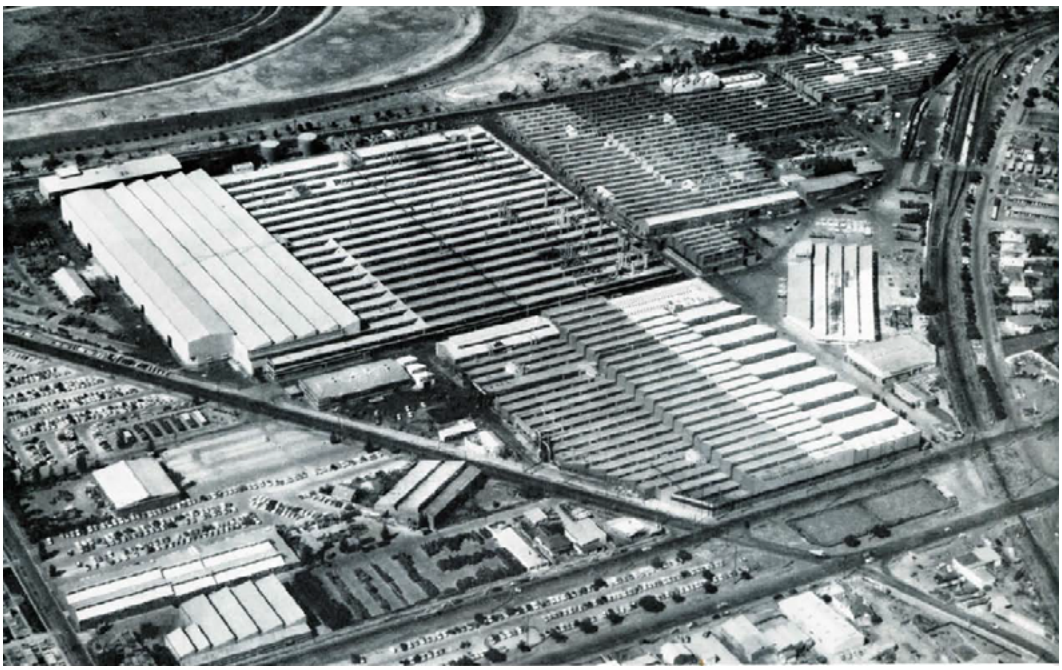

**Figure 2** The Woodville factory site showing the various plants and proximity to the railway line (left of picture) and Port Road (with Holden's car park and playing fields) in the foreground, c. 1964. GMH, *People*, September 1964, back cover.

In the mid-twentieth century, factories like Woodville were designed for efficiency, not human comfort. Factory planners devised buildings and workspaces that were geared towards producing more, faster. They were highly regulated spaces, with strict rules and consequences. Activities within the factory site, and within specific plants, were clearly demarcated, so that most workers never left the specific space allocated to their job. Buildings that had to accommodate huge machinery and large volumes of workers were cavernous constructions of steel and corrugated iron, boiling hot in summer and freezing in winter. Depending on the work being done, the physical environment was frequently dirty, noisy, smelly and dangerous. While there was a strong emphasis on safety, and a fully staffed medical centre (equipped with its own X-ray machine) located on site, the underlying motivation, articulated in the company's annual reports, was to avoid disruptions to production and to get injured workers back on the job as soon as possible. Injuries were counted in terms of lost 'man hours'.[20] To outsiders, who had never stepped foot in a factory, and whose ideas of factory life were conditioned by nineteenth-century depictions in books and movies, factories often appeared grim places with little to recommend them.

20 GMH, *Annual Report*, 1952, 8.

## WORKERS' MEMORIES OF THE WORKPLACE

The experience of GMH workers is largely missing from the written archives and the many, frequently car-centric, commemorative histories of GMH that have been produced over the decades.[21] But, as labour historian Peter Winn notes, oral history provides us with an opportunity to study not just 'the structural and statistical parameters' of a factory but also 'the concrete everyday experiences of workers in the factory and community'.[22] While GMH emphasised the rational side of the workplace at Woodville, and popular representations of the factory accentuate its alienating, grim and unhealthy characteristics, interviews with former GMH workers provide an alternative window into daily life inside the factory, stressing the workers' emotional attachments, social interactions and sensory responses.

For some, these memories began even before their employment, with the oral histories allowing us to see the deep connections between the factory and the wider community. The Woodville factory was a prominent landmark in Adelaide's west, a place within a place, imprinting upon the childhood memories of those growing up in the surrounding suburbs.[23] Indeed, many of our interviewees' first memories of Holden were from outside, not inside the company gates. Several, for example, recalled the factory's steam whistle that signalled the start and finish of each shift, and which was 'heard by four generations of residents living in a five-kilometre radius of the plant for 65 years'.[24] Others remembered the surrounding roads being clogged by pushbikes as workers headed home after their shifts. Bruce Heaft recalled being a newsboy selling papers to workers as they rushed out the gates. 'At knock-off

21 See, for example, Will Hagon and Toby Hagon, *Holden: Our Car 1856–2017* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2016); John Wright, *Heart of a Lion: The 50 Year History of Australia's Holden* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Don Loffler, *She's a Beauty: The Story of the First Holdens* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1998). Susan Marsden interviewed Holden workers for her history of Woodville but these interviews are not publicly available. See Susan Marsden, *A History of Woodville* (Woodville: Corporation of the City of Woodville, 1977) and her 1987 update available at http://www.sahistorians.org.au/175/bm.doc/a-history-of-woodville---susan-marsden---1987.pdf. Accessed 8 June 2021.

22 Peter Winn, 'Oral History and the Factory Study: New Approaches to Labor History', *Latin American Research Review* 14, no. 2 (1979): 130.

23 The western suburbs, where Woodville was located, was the site of several large manufacturers including Phillips and Actil. In 1957, almost half of Adelaide's factory workers lived or travelled to work in Woodville, Hindmarsh and Port Adelaide. See, Marsden, *A History of Woodville*, 231.

24 'Wally's Final Whistle', *People*, April 1989, 8.

time you would have these thousands of people coming out, buying papers from you … it was just a body of people, just running out', he said.[25] Older interviewees, like Cam Johnson, Don McDonald and Bob Hack, remembered fears during World War II that the factory would be bombed. As a young boy Bob Hack walked past the factory every day and during the war earned a few coins filling the sandbags used to protect it.[26] Don McDonald and his mates were paid to ensure the surrounding homes obeyed curfew, turning lights off at night.[27] Others had strong memories of family members, relatives or neighbours considered lucky enough to work at the factory – and to have Holden motor cars in their driveway – and the pride they had in the company and the products they made. 'My uncle Fred Baker worked there … and he used to say, "General Motors Holden's is the greatest organisation in the world"', recalled Bob Both, whose family ran a nursery near the Woodville factory. 'We used to laugh about that. We didn't know anything about factories, we were garden people.'[28] For young boys growing up in the western suburbs after the war, the Woodville factory was part of the fabric of their community. Offering steady, secure and well-paid employment, working at Holden seemed like the dream job.

The connection with Holden as a workplace began at an early age. Many of our interviewees started their careers at Woodville as impressionable 15- or 16-year-old apprentices; most were straight out of school and had never been inside a factory before. When asked for their first impressions, they highlighted the size of the buildings and the machinery, but they also emphasised other sensory experiences: the smell, feel and sounds of the factory. As Paula Hamilton has noted, senses 'act as a mnemonic device or a trigger to remembering'.[29] For Stephen Hack, who joined Woodville as a 17-year-old electrical apprentice in 1953, these sensory memories were woven through his mind's map of the factory:

25 Bruce Heaft, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 28 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/26.

26 Robert Hack, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 30 October 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/7.

27 Don McDonald, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Williamstown, 22–23 February 2020, NLA, TRC 7250/33.

28 Robert Both, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Encounter Bay, 16 December 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/29.

29 Paula Hamilton, 'Oral History and the Senses', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (3rd ed., Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 105.

> It smelt of soluble oil, very loud, very noisy. People everywhere. And then other parts of the plant were quiet. Down in what they called the central maintenance area was quiet. You'd go into the plating plant and it smelt of acid and again noisy with whistles and sirens going off. The press shop was massive, HUGE machines in there, huge machines, which I ended up working on, and noisy. Very, very noisy. You had to wear earmuffs. And then you'd go across to the tool room, it wasn't as noisy as the press shop, it was more quieter, lots and lots of machines, massive machines in there where they were machining tools and building dies and what have you.[30]

As a 15-year-old apprentice in 1945, Don McDonald struggled with the noise: 'It was very noisy, so noisy in fact that a couple of times I went and knocked off at lunchtime and went home, I couldn't tolerate the noise'.[31] Many workers blamed the high noise levels for their later loss of hearing. Bob Hack also recalled the noise, and the dust:

> High speed bandsaws cutting the sheet metal, that screams, oh that's bad for the ears … they are a bit dirty, a lot of cast iron dust comes up and all that sort of thing and you make a lot of swarf … They're the chips, metal chips that the cutter cuts off the cast iron and they call it swarf … this cast-iron dust is like sprinkling bloody coal dust all over the place because it is as black as coal … You could get face masks if you decided you needed it … but very rarely they did it.[32]

George Vassallo likened it to 'going into a coal mine':

> There was no such thing as extraction fans or anything so you would come home and your face, the only bit you could see is your eyes. Your face would be black … unfortunately that type of environment did kill a lot of friends of mine.[33]

30 Stephen Hack, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Normanville, 26 October 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/6.

31 Don McDonald, 22–23 February 2020.

32 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

33 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

Grime was not the only problem. Woodville's buildings were remembered as 'freezing in winter and stifling hot in summer'. [34] There was no early knock off in the hot weather – 'you would stay there until the whistle blew'[35] – while in winter, McDonald recalled:

> They had what they called jumbos, they were like a stove, a circular stove about … a metre and a half high. They used to put all the scrap wood in there of the morning to heat the place up because your fingers became that cold that you couldn't hold your tools [laughs].[36]

Not surprisingly, in their early days, some young men questioned their career choices. George Vassallo remembers complaining to this father at the end of his three-month probation period that his hands were 'black and blue' and he did not think he was going to last. He stayed after his father reassured him: 'you've gone through the worst of it, it'll get better'.[37] Bruce Heaft, who started as a 17-year-old apprentice, also had second thoughts when he spied his old school from the factory rooftop: 'I could see Woody High School there and I can remember having a tear in my eye thinking, what have I done?'[38] Despite their doubts both went on to have long careers, earning their 25-year service gold watches, and notching up 40 and 43 years' service respectively.

On the surface, workers' memories of these harsh conditions tend to reinforce outside impressions of factory life. When weighing up their overall experience of working for Holden, however, workers prioritised memories of social interactions with workmates, pride in both the company and the products they made, and the satisfaction of a job well done. When it was suggested to Vassallo, for example, that he was not creating a very appealing picture of factory life, he responded that the conditions were just part of the job:

34 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

35 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

36 Don McDonald, 22–23 February 2020.

37 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

38 Bruce Heaft, 28 November 2019.

> You know, it's like being a farmer and you've got to get up in the morning and milk the cows and then work with shit and everything else [laughs] … it can't all be good but you have to look at the long-term effect, you know, how you felt.[39]

He then went on to stress the positives: personal achievement, good pay, job satisfaction and being part of the Holden 'family'. '[It] was part of my family. The people, I think, were more important than anything else', he said when asked to sum up what working for Holden had meant to him.

In a similar vein, when asked to pick the highlights of his 38 years at Woodville, Bob Hack, who rose through the ranks from fitter and turner to become general superintendent of the tool room, deadpanned that they were mostly 'lowlights', describing disputes with company management, long hours, shift work, and problems managing particular workers, before going on to fondly recall amusing pranks, social events and memorable workmates. When it was suggested it might have been a good place to work after all, he refused to concede, saying: 'Oh yeah, it was a circus, 24 hours, seven days a week'. But asked at the end of the interview what he wanted people listening to his interview to know about his time at Holden, he became serious, responding: 'I enjoyed every minute of it … I loved the place'.[40]

Workers' memories of the workplace frequently emphasised social interactions. These often focused on a perceived sense of community which they commonly referred to as 'the Holden family'. Metaphors of 'home' and 'family' have long been recognised in oral history interviews with industrial workers but while other studies have highlighted the idea of corporate paternalism as a means of enforcing social control in a factory,[41] the 'Holden family', as expressed by Woodville workers, was

39 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

40 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

41 See, for example, Emma M. Wainwright, 'Dundee's Jute Mills and Factories: Spaces of Production, Surveillance and Discipline', *Scottish Geographical Journal* 12, no. 2 (2005): 121–40; Jeremy Stein, 'Time, Space and Social Discipline: Factory Life in Cornwall, Ontario, 1867–1893', *Journal of Historical Geography* 21, no. 3 (1995): 278–99; and James Newbery, 'Space of Discipline and Governmentality: The Singer Sewing Machine Factory, Clydebank, in the Twentieth Century', *Scottish Geographical Journal* 129, no. 1 (2013):

based on a perceived kinship with their workmates, a shared geographical proximity and engagement in a common project. Older Woodville workers also saw themselves as having a direct link to the original Holden family through its descendants who were still associated with the factory. In this sense, place was important to workers' historical consciousness of their role in South Australia's industrial history, powerfully connecting them both to the past and the present. Bob Smith, an apprentice in the 1950s, recalled 'Mr Holden' attending his apprentice 'wind-up night' and his pride in working for a factory with strong links to the past. 'Mr Holden being one of the directors or managers of the company used to make himself known in the shop and throughout our days at canteens and picnics and you felt you were part of the family', he said.[42] The concept of family at the workplace also extended to more experienced tradespeople playing a paternal role in mentoring and training young apprentices, while workmates who spent more time together than they did with their actual families, often became life-long friends. The emphasis on family in the workplace imbued a sense of belonging and security.

Not all felt this way. Trevor Chesson worked as a carpenter in the model room until 1971, when he was sacked with 650 others. Only a month shy of the cut-off 10 years of service, he was 'devastated'.[43] Others, like Daryl Nettleton and Geoff Rilling, who witnessed this as young apprentices, are still appalled at the way GMH treated these workers.[44] But Chesson has managed to compartmentalise this traumatic memory from the otherwise good times at Woodville, which he still counts as the best years of his life: 'GMH was an excellent company to work for and I thoroughly enjoyed my stay there'.[45] In his home, he still displays framed photos of his time at GMH, even though he went on to have a long career at another workplace, and did not keep in contact with any former Woodville workmates. Nettleton's relationship

15–35; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

42 Robert Smith, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Wallaroo, 9 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/10.

43 Trevor Chesson, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 4 May 2021, NLA, TRC 7250/65.

44 Geoff Rilling, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 7 & 8 April 2021, NLA, TRC 7250/60; Daryl Nettleton, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021, NLA, TRC 7250/55.

45 Trevor Chesson, 4 May 2021.

with the workplace was also complicated. He began as one of the 135 apprentices starting at GMH in 1969 'and the only one with long hair!'[46] He saw Woodville as 'a prison', and his fellow workers as inmates in a strict, disciplinarian environment. His involvement with the anti-war movement, colourful wardrobe, and anti-authoritarian attitude saw him clash repeatedly with some supervisors. He admits he was given more than his fair share of second chances and still does not know why. Eventually, a respected supervisor issued him with an ultimatum to 'shape up' within three months 'or ship out'. 'From that day on, I changed my outlook to my job and my life in general', Nettleton said. 'At the end of the three months I applied for a redundancy package but I was told I was now too valuable.'[47] He stayed on but never saw GMH as 'a job for life'. He left in 1985 and regrets he did not leave earlier 'but I do not regret working at GMH … the lessons I learnt over 16 years I have used every day in my life since'.[48] He also made lifelong friends at Woodville with whom he still keeps in touch.

Planners and architects allocated different areas within the factory for specific work and management laid down strict rules about how these spaces were to be used. Workers, too, recalled a highly regulated workplace, but their memories frequently involved rules being broken and illustrate the way in which they sought to make the place their own: colleagues falling asleep on the job during night shift; listening to illicit radios kept hidden in workbench drawers; workmates who moonlighted as illegal bookmakers; doing private off-the-books jobs for bosses; painting workmates' goggles with blue dye; illegal toilet breaks and skiving off to spend an afternoon on the factory roof or at the beach.[49] Gullible young apprentices were frequently sent on impossible errands to fetch left-handed screwdrivers or the Hamilton Press (which was 'like a block of flats').[50] At the same time there was a strong work ethic among those interviewed, and a disdain for those who did not pull their weight; fun was

46 Daryl Nettleton, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021.

47 Daryl Nettleton, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021.

48 Daryl Nettleton, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021.

49 See interviews with Robert Hack, Stephen Hack, Johnson, Miller, Smith, Vassallo and Heaft.

50 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

fine, as long as the work got done. In this sense, workers developed their own workplace code of conduct.

Woodville was also a melting pot for post-war migrants from Europe, who picked up the strange ways and the language of their adopted country on the job, while also maintaining strong ties with other workers from their own countries. Often their first job after arriving in Australia, migrant workers like Anthony Vassallo, Don Vella and Sergio Scarpa formed deep connections with their workplace, grateful for the opportunity to forge a new life and build financial security. (Scarpa served at GMH Woodville for 30 years and then at Elizabeth for nearly 26 years more, retiring aged 84 in 2013 as the company's oldest employee.)[51] Given their importance to GMH's operations, much could be written about their contribution and workplace experiences, and we shall do so when more scope is allowed in other publications. In terms of the theme of this particular article – place – we note how the specific confines of the plant literally put migrant workers of different cultures into close contact with each other and with Anglo-Australians, and compelled them to come to terms with the other. Duncan Hockley, who worked as a maintenance electrician fixing machines at Woodville, might never have spoken to a German or a Pole or a Greek had he learnt his trade wiring homes or fixing appliances in the suburbs of Adelaide. As an apprentice at GMH Woodville, he listened, enthralled, as tradespeople and other workers from Germany, Poland and Italy spoke about their experiences of World War II, the ruined landscapes of Europe and what brought them to Australia. Some of our interviewees perceived a slight tension between Woodville's migrant workers from different ethnic backgrounds, and how they tended to segregate when eating lunch or having a smoke, but equally they were still able to work effectively side by side when 10 or 15 years earlier they might have been facing off in opposing armies. Hockley was amazed by their ability to get along:

> What I got from all this was a wide education in contemporary European history by people who had lived through it and escaped. What I also remember from working with them was that there seemed to be little or no

51 Sergio Scarpa, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 20–22 February 2020, NLA, TRC 7250/44.

> animosities amongst them as a result of their previous life experiences. There seemed to be an attitude of a new start in a new country.[52]

For recently arrived migrants seeking to learn or improve their English expression, GMH Woodville provided a means. For a period of time, language classes were offered onsite by the company in one of the quieter spaces in the factory. As they greeted their workmates at the start of the shift, took smoko, mingled over lunch or lunchtime games, and spoke with their supervisors, migrant workers also picked up and practised basic English phrases. Of course, in Woodville's noisy areas, clear verbal communication was not always possible, and workers and their supervisors relied on a mixture of hand gestures, basic commands and practical demonstration. In this sense, the workplace developed its own language and the disadvantage that non-English speakers found themselves in when emigrating to Australia was lessened. Recalling the din of the press shop, Pat Miller said, 'you went in there, you couldn't speak normally, it was so noisy you had to communicate with sign language or yell in somebody's ear'.[53] GMH maintenance electrician Stephen Hack 'got good at reading hand signals and deciphering Italian mixed with English mixed with Greek'.[54] Similarly, Don Vella and Tony Pitrakkou, who were given jobs operating presses at Woodville after respectively emigrating from Italy and Cyprus, barely spoke a word of English and did not find it was a barrier to securing their jobs or succeeding in them.[55]

The lines between the workplace and home were frequently blurred with workers spending long hours at the factory, regularly working extra shifts and overtime on weekends during busy periods. (GMH was regarded as paying higher than average wages, but this was mainly due to the ubiquitous availability of overtime.) Several workers echoed Anthony Vassallo's experience of spending more time at work than at home. In one nine-month period leading up to the release of a new car model

52 Duncan Hockley, Expression of Interest form sent to the 'Social Histories of Holden' project.

53 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

54 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

55 Don Vella, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 16 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/35; Tony Pitrakkou, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 19–20 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/37.

in 1961, Duncan Hockley spent every day of the week except Christmas Day at the Woodville factory.[56] Sometimes this was a choice – more overtime meant extra money to build family homes and financial security. With hindsight, however, some workers expressed regret and resentment at the time spent away from their families. Learned behaviours from the workplace, particularly those related to organisation and timekeeping, also often carried over to the home. Stephen Hack recalled his father adhering to a strict after-work schedule, requiring his children to cut short their after-school adventures in order to be at the dinner table at 5 o'clock sharp: 'if you weren't home on time, by Crikey, you'd get in strife, yeah, you had to be home on time'. After working there himself, he understood why his father insisted on such a regimented homelife:

> Holden's does that to you. You start work at 7.30, there's a 7.28 whistle where you should be at your workstation, changed, ready to go. Whistle goes, 7.30 start work. Morning tea was at whatever time it was, you'd have a whistle … Right through … 4.08 the whistle would go, knock off. And if you got to work late, you were docked for every six minutes.[57]

Just as workplace attitudes and regulations seeped into domestic life, the family often infiltrated the workplace – a feature overlooked in popular representations of factory life that focus on its grim and uncomfortable aspects. Different generations of the same family, as well as brothers and (less commonly) sisters, were often employed at Woodville; indeed, this was actively encouraged by GMH. In 1956, the company noted that 75 per cent of its apprentices had family members already at the factory, suggesting this had had a positive effect on retention rates.[58] In the post-war years, when there were severe labour shortages, GMH even paid bonuses to workers who recruited family members and friends. George Vassallo's dad saw this as a quick way to make money: 'My father and my grandfather, his brothers, his sons, my cousins … sometimes when they would have functions, we would have

56 Duncan Hockley, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 29 January 2020, NLA, TRC 7250/39.

57 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

58 'GMH Apprentices', *People*, May 1956, 16.

occupied most of the tables that are supplied at Holden's', he said. '[My father] brought 90 per cent of the family into Holden's … because money was very tight, the bonus meant a lot.'[59] Harold Onley's two sons, his father and three uncles all worked at Woodville, although Harold is adamant his father did not help him secure an apprenticeship when he joined during the war. Three of them were awarded gold watches for more than 25 years' service, with Harold himself working at Woodville for nearly 40 years.[60] Duncan Hockley, an electrician at Woodville between 1956 and 1968, noted that five of his uncles (three of whom earned a gold watch) and three of his cousins worked there too.[61]

Family connections strengthened emotional connections to the workplace though it did sometimes create interesting dynamics when, for example, fathers had to supervise sons (or vice versa). Leo Corrieri recalled feeling 'awkward' when he ran into his father, a foreman, at the factory. 'I wasn't sure whether to say "hey dad" or "how are you going Mick" … he said "when you are at home, you call me dad. Here, I'll leave it up to you", so, yeah, he was pretty good.'[62] There was also some sage advice for Leo on his first day: 'I always remember Dad saying to me "don't stuff it up, I don't want you to make me look bad. Don't take sickies, don't do anything wrong, just do what you're told"'.[63] Stephen Hack's father, Bob, was also a supervisor while his mother, Joan, who worked as a secretary in the finance department, used to hand him his pay packet. It was a family joke that Holden was 'part of the Hack DNA'.[64] His grandfather, W.K. 'Bill' Hack, who joined GMH in 1929 as a jig maker, had been sent to the United States in 1948 as part of the original 'Holden project'.[65] Stephen's brother and an uncle also worked at Woodville while another uncle worked at Elizabeth. At one stage his mother's father, at a loose end after retiring from the tramways, also took a job as a 'tea lady' at Holden, wheeling a trolley through the factory

59 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

60 Harold Onley, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 18 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/36.

61 Duncan Hockley, 29 January 2020.

62 Leo Corrieri, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 16 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/23.

63 Leo Corrieri, 16 November 2019.

64 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

65 '38 Years', *People*, December 1967, 12.

distributing free tea and selling cakes and pies. 'Dinner time was always interesting', Stephen Hack recalled:

> When I was working there, my mum was working there, my brother was working there and dad so we virtually had all the plants covered [laughs]. If something was happening at Holden, we knew about it … Something would happen at Holden's in the press shop and I'd talk to dad about it. For example, like 'today we broke a die, somebody chucked a spanner in a die and broke it' and dad said, 'yeah, I know, I've got it, it's in my machine shop'. And mum would talk about what was happening in the office…[66]

Bob Hack recalls telling his father he had 'met a nice girl and she works at Holden's'. 'He said, "what [the one] we call the princess?" I said, "well, she's not bad". [laughs] Yeah, he knew her.'[67] A photo of the happy couple emerging from nearby St Margaret's Church on Port Road, Woodville, after their marriage in 1953 featured in the company's magazine.[68] Romances were not uncommon. Pat Miller was best man for a workmate who proposed to the tea lady three months after escorting her to the plant Christmas picnic. 'They're still happily married with two grown-up children and two or three grandchildren', he said.[69]

The workplace was not limited to the physical confines of the factory floor. Workers were encouraged to maintain their links to the workplace during their off-duty hours through social activities and sporting clubs associated with the company. In 1964, *People* magazine reported that Woodville's 'vigorous' Sports and Social Club had 60 affiliated clubs.[70] Some of these, like lunchtime carpet bowls and darts competitions, Friday night dances in the canteen, debating and camera clubs took place within the factory's grounds; other team sports were played on the grounds outside the gates while annual picnics were held at other locations, such as the Adelaide Hills. Harold

66 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

67 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

68 'Met in GMH Plants', *People*, September 1953, 6.

69 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

70 'Spotlight on Woodville', *People*, September 1964, 20.

Onley recalls attending two picnics each year, one for the 'tool room' – the plant in which he worked – and the other for all of Woodville's employees. Held on Sundays, the slowest day production-wise at the factory, enabling employees to attend, the picnics featured novelty races for workers and their kids, with sacks, eggs and spoons, as well as more high-level running races in which only well-trained athletes competed (see Figures 3 and 4).[71] Then there were the famous Holden Christmas parties, which were the envy of non-Holden employees. These were organised by the Holden workers' social committee and catered mainly for the children of Holden employees, who received free ice creams, lollies, fizzy drinks, and one substantial and carefully chosen present. Our interviewees recall Father Christmas arriving by various means, including the latest model Monaro and on the tray of a Holden ute.

**Figure 3** The Maintenance team defeats a team from the Tool Room in the final of the tug-of-war competition at the GMH Woodville employees' picnic held at Belair National Park, 3 October 1948. Approximately 6,000 Holden employees and family members attended, most of them transported by three specially commissioned trains and 30 feeder buses. The company's magazine noted the cost to the Sports and Social Club was £800, paid by workers' weekly subscription fees, which covered the cost of transport, two merry-go-rounds, 15,500 ice creams, 150 gallons of milk, and 200 dozen soft drinks. GMH, *People*, November 1948, 7.

71 Harold Onley, 18 November 2019.

**Figure 4** Children enjoying a bun-on-a-string eating game, GMH Woodville employees' picnic, Belair National Park, 3 October 1948. With the picnic being held in forest surrounds and attended by about 6,000 people, 53 children were reported 'lost' during the day (and hopefully found!). GMH, *People*, November 1948, 7.

GMH workers' connections with their workplace co-existed on multiple levels. While they proudly identified with the company overall, referring to themselves as 'Holden workers', there were also strong connections along state lines (reinforced by interstate sporting competitions) and with individual factories. During the interviews, it quickly became evident that Woodville workers saw themselves as being part of a distinct culture within the company, as well as within South Australia. This came to the fore when many later chose not to transfer to Elizabeth.

The move to the new factory was a gradual transition that occurred in phases and over several decades, beginning in the late 1950s (though this was partially offset by the opening of a new Automatic Transmission plant in 1970).[72] Eventually, however, the Woodville factory's ageing facilities were deemed too expensive to refurbish.

72 GMH, *Annual Report*, 1970, 7.

In 1983, following years of rumours, GMH announced that its Woodville factory would be sold, and activities progressively phased out by 1988.[73] This took a couple of extra years. In 1990, after enduring what one of its workers described as 'a death by a thousand cuts', GMH Woodville shut its gates for good.[74]

Company publications record the rationale of the move (the Woodville site was now 'completely utilised')[75] and the enormity of the task (10,000 tons of equipment moved from Woodville to Elizabeth in just four months in 1959)[76], but not the emotion of its workers. A feature article about the new factory in GMH's *People* magazine in March 1960 noted that Woodville employees had 'the option of transferring and were notified well ahead of time'. The South Australian Housing Trust, which had undertaken to provide housing for Elizabeth's workforce, held information nights at Woodville and employees and their families were given 'ample time' to inspect the type of housing available. In May 1960, *People* featured an interview with fitter and turner Peter Moore, who had moved with his family to Adelaide's new 'satellite city' soon after finishing his apprenticeship at Woodville and was now 'happily installed in their own home in model surroundings'.[77]

The oral history interviews, however, revealed another side of the story: the stress and grief of watching the slow demise of what had become a de facto 'home' for many, and the dispersal of the 'Woodville family'. For those who lived around the factory, a transfer meant considerable extra commuting time or an upheaval for their family to relocate to Elizabeth, a place many openly detested. 'It was a bit of a Woodville versus Elizabeth thing', Stephen Hack recalled, explaining the loyalty workers had to the old factory.

> Woodville because it was the original plant, rightly or wrongly, we looked upon ourselves as the ants' pants. We were IT, we were THE plant. We were

73 GMH, *Annual Report*, 1983, 4.

74 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

75 'GMH's Newest Plant … Elizabeth', *People*, March 1960, 4–5.

76 'GMH's Newest Plant … Elizabeth', *People*, March 1960, 4–5.

77 'A New Life at Elizabeth', *People*, May 1960, 14.

> Holden's. Elizabeth was just an assembly plant. They are all the plebs out there [laughs].[78]

Many simply refused to move, opting instead for redundancies, which for workers like Bob Hack and Brian Barnes meant premature retirement. Others were retrenched. In 1983, it was finally announced that Woodville would close. In February 1989, its famous steam whistle gave one last blast before falling silent after regulating the factory for 65 years, though a small section of the tool room remained until the following year. Stephen Hack recalled the slow death of the factory:

> There were rumours going on and I was a leading hand electrician at the time when they started to pull out presses, like the small press lines went first, B line, C line, they went. They were only small presses, then they started to take bits of A line out and then they sold L line and the writing was on the wall and then it got announced that Woodville was going to close. How it got announced, I can't remember. I just remember that we had a list of all the electricians at Woodville and their years of service because it was last on first off, and as they kept winding down and winding down, they started sacking or retrenching people.

After 38 years, Bob Hack was one of the last to leave in August 1990. He was 57. He recalled:

> The only thing that was left was the tool room, nothing else, the whole lot went and the tooling main line stayed there because two of the machines were too much, gigantic things, too much trouble, too much cost to move the things. We had one reprieve, I suppose, when we got a job from Mitsubishi to do some dies for them, that kept us going for a while but when they ran out, that was it, we had nothing. I remember, I stayed until the very last die, until it was complete and then they came up to me and told me, you can go tomorrow [laughs]. They had kept me there until they had one die left.[79]

78 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

79 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

Stephen Hack had dreamed of following in his father's footsteps, instead he took a redundancy when he was just 27, ending 10 and a half years at Holden. Ironically, his last day in 1985 was spent at Elizabeth, rewiring one of the Woodville presses. 'I saw it as a job for life', he recalled. 'There was no way I was going anywhere … if they hadn't shut Woodville I would have stayed. They asked me to go to Elizabeth but I didn't want to.'[80]

Hack was not alone. Several interviewees insisted that Woodville had a different culture to Elizabeth, including his father, Bob. 'I wasn't going to go to Elizabeth if they paid me double', he said. 'No, I didn't want to work at Elizabeth, the culture … annoyed me.' Asked how it was different from Woodville he replied: 'It's very different, it just didn't sit right with me'.[81] George Vassallo recalled that at times it felt 'like we were working for two different companies'. He was one of the workers who accepted a transfer, although it meant relinquishing his position as a work group leader and returning to the shop floor. Only one of his many relatives at Woodville went with him; the others retired or found work elsewhere. He said he was happy with the situation: 'I still had a job, I still loved my job, so it didn't worry me at all really'.[82] At Elizabeth however, he encountered a boss who 'didn't like anybody from Woodville at all'. Vassallo recalled:

> The only thing that he didn't realise [was] that the people that were working out at Elizabeth, they were made up of people that originally worked at Woodville. And believe it or not, what actually happened, if you were a no-hoper and they wanted to get rid of you, instead of sacking you they sent you to Elizabeth. So, and that's the truth, yeah.[83]

Initially, the Woodville workers stuck together at Elizabeth 'because they're the only people that you really know' but Vassallo also grew attached to his new workplace:

80 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

81 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

82 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

83 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

'eventually we mixed and we mingled and then, you know, we became a part of a family as well'.

Loyalty to Woodville was clearly strong but within the factory distinct sub-communities also emerged that were linked to individual work areas (maintenance, stamping, trim, paint shop, tool room, for example) and work classifications (tradespeople, office workers, factory floor employees, management, etc.). The deep connection to these constructed communities is evident in the case of the Woodville tool room. The tool room occupied a large section of the Port Road end of the factory and was the place where expert tradespeople, engineers, designers and draftsmen conceived and built the tools and equipment for the manufacture of vehicle panels and bodies. At the peak of GMH's production, the tool room was producing the dies, jigs and fixtures for a new model Holden car every two to four years, with a 'facelift' every year. An area within the tool room also served as the Apprentice Training Centre, where hundreds of young men, and later women, learned their trades between 1934 and 1988. The tool room had its own social club and held its own Christmas events, cabarets and other activities, including a popular annual general meeting at a local hotel. Bob Hack was president of the social club and remembered a special sense of community that, he felt, set the tool room apart from the rest of the factory. 'Even the Holden management commented on the togetherness of the Woodville tool room', he said. 'There was an attitude in the tool room, but not so much anywhere else.'[84]

Many of the tool room's employees notched up long service, earning their gold watches after 25 years. When GMH scrapped its popular annual '25 year' dinners in the early 1980s, the tool room started holding its own. The brainchild of Peter 'Bomber' Lancaster, the 25-year club's first dinner in 1983 was attended by 162 current and retired tool room workers including three – Alex Cooper, Len Symonds and Geoff Owensworth – who were 50-year veterans. Bob Hack acted as master of ceremonies and reportedly 'created a bright and entertaining mood for the evening

84 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

with his gags and quips'.[85] The club continued to grow in popularity, with 350 diners attending at its peak. The comradeship has outlasted the factory. In 2011, the club celebrated its thirtieth anniversary and was still attracting an average of 200 former workers to its dinners, including many fathers and sons. By 2019, when Bob Hack stepped down as treasurer, that number had dwindled to 92. It was 'a good one and good food', he said, despite being the smallest gathering to date. 'Our numbers were down because people are dying all the time and they're getting too old to get there', he said. But the spirit of comradeship remained, and the old stories still flowed. 'It's just great to see them, and we relive all those old moments and it's all good fun', Bruce Heaft reflected.[86]

## CONCLUSION

The lament that often surrounds factory closures is for workers' lost livelihoods. What the experience of GMH Woodville shows is that workers also grieved the loss of community and place. While workers' memories of their physical environment accorded, in many cases, with archival records, their recollections of emotional connections and social interactions provide a different window by which to view and understand factory life. Workers' memories of place were deeply connected to their sense of identity and enmeshed in a web of social connections which gave them a sense of security and belonging. It is a connection that continued to resonate even after the factory ceased to exist. It is the reason why Anthony Vassallo wanted to be buried in the cemetery outside its gates and why old mates from the tool room continue to gather each year. Today, a Bunnings hardware store and carpark stands on the footprint of the old tool room. For Bruce Heaft, who still lives nearby, passing the site always brings back memories: 'I think I used to play cricket out here at lunchtimes [laughs] or sleep up on the roof in the sun … [Woodville] was like a home to me and it's like having your home knocked down'.[87]

85 '25ers Relive Good Times', *People*, March/April 1983, 7.

86 Bruce Heaft, 28 November 2019.

87 Bruce Heaft, 28 November 2019.