Dick Smith ponders life after Tenneco.

A shiny 1969 Chevelle Super Sport helped seal Dick Smith's fate at Monroe Auto Equipment Co. more than four decades ago.

Today, the sports car is long gone and Smith's employment is coming to an end at what is now Tenneco Automotive.

"I was told I might be needed there as long as possible, maybe through October, but I need to find something," Smith said from his home in Gothenburg where, a few weeks ago, he put together a resume for the first time in his life.

In 2009, Tenneco officials announced the closure of the plant. Manufacturing will be taken over by other Tenneco facilities in Hartwell, GA, and Paragould, AK.

After June 3, officials said a skeleton crew is expected to continue to make and ship piston rods until May or June of 2012.

The way Smith tells the story is that he was 17 the summer he joined the shock-absorber manufacturer as a machine welder 43 years ago.

Instead of going to college, the teen bought the Chevelle and decided to work another year to pay for it.

When the Army came calling, he spent a couple of years in the service—one in Viet Nam—and returned home where he had 90 days to decide whether to stay at Monroe's or get another job.

"Monroe's was the best-paying job around," Smith explained. "With insurance and making $1.85 an hour, it was good money."

At Monroe's, Smith worked the night shift and joined the product engineering department in 1975.

Since then, he's worked in packaging and most recently as a customer service specialist in the shipping office.

There he works with Ford Motor Company downloading orders, scheduling shipments, following orders through the plant, bar coding packages and following them to the trucking dock.

The day the 60-year-old learned his life-long job would be eliminated, Smith said he and the other 499 employees were in shock.

Even though officials had talked of closing the plant a decade ago because of higher shipping costs than other facilities, Smith said he didn't think it would happen.

"We're the most profitable and productive and the best in safety so it was hard to understand," he said.

However the knowledge that Dawson Area Development and other local, area officials worked to keep the plant open made people feel better, Smith said.

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