

Interview with Joseph Sonor, retired teamster

by Robert Kushen

July 21, 1971

Time - 1 hour

Table of Contents

Childhood	1
Early Work Experience	2-4
Depression	5
Union	6-7

Oral History Project

I, Joseph J. Sonor, hereby direct that the interview

Date recorded July 21, 1971 at Location my home

Robert Kushen by the Roosevelt University Oral

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Elizabeth Balanoff
Director, Oral History Project

* Joseph J. Sonor
Signature of interviewee

Interviewer: Robert Kushen

Respondant: Joseph J. Sonor

July 19, 1971

I. Mr. Sonor, will you tell me a little about yourself.

R. I just don't have the gift of conversation like the fellows today, They have advanced education you know; they are quick. My concentration is slow, see, and that is the reason I didn't continue school. I saw that I did not have it. I enjoyed school. I could not digest what I was taught.

I. So you went to school through the 8th grade?

R. Yes. I know my mind. I had spinal meningitis when I was a baby. I think this is what it left me with. an after effect. So, although I got through life, I got everything I wanted, but I worked hard for it. I had opportunities where other people that had the aducation did not. I did not want to go further in school because of lack of concentration. My memory was poor and I knew that all through my life. And that is the reason I went to work. And I figured that's the way I have to make my living, through practical experience.

I. Did you go to school here in Chicago?

R. Yes, I went to Walsh school, Canalport and Peoria. I was born in 1904, graduated school in 1920.

I. So when you graduated from 8th grade you then went out started to work.

Sonor -2-

R. Yes.

I. What year was that, may I ask?

R. It was 1920. I was 16 years old when I graduated grammar school. That should prove to you that I did not have it. My mother said that I had spinal meningitis and I nearly died in the county hospital. It was one out of a million, at that time, that survived.

I. It might have slowed you down but you did have the strength to survive it.

R. Yes, my mind could have been affected but my strong body got me through and that I will always cherish.

I. So, getting back to you, from 8th grade when you graduated school, what did you first start doing then?

R. While going to school I went down to the loop and worked in an office for Butler Paper Company. I shaved the sound-effects off the dictaphone cylinders.

I. The old fashioned dictaphones?

R. Year, I put them cylinders into a machine and shaved the sound affects. This was after school for two hours.

I. How, do you remember about what year was it when you started work?

R. 1920 is when I started to work as an errand boy for a printing company in the Loop. I worked there one year. I worked for Carson, Pirie, Scott

Sonor -3-

at their warehouse, 18th and the Chicago river. I lived at Canalport and Halsted, 1/2 mile away. I was a helper on a truck in the City, then on a suburban run. In due time I got to be in charge of this run which had two helpers and a driver, and took in part of the northwest city and suburbs and in them clays a lot of the streets were not paved and the northwest highway was not paved. This was a responsible job. I collected C.O.D. I was under bonds. We worked late hours on this run, and no overtime pay. It could be four years I worked this run when I asked for a split of the run and was refused. And after two more requests I decided to do something about it. I told the driver we will stay in Parkridge all day then come in with the load at 5 p.m. We did this and I got fired, but they split the run. After I left a driver tried to unionize the help and got fired. I then worked at the Fair Store Warehouse as a furniture loader for a year; which was at 14th and State Street. Then I applied at 1414 S. Wabash where they needed a driver. I was a poor driver but took the job and practiced while picking up freight and got to be a good driver. This job did not pay overtime pay but I was Setting \$50.00 a week which was more than the previous jobs; prorate the \$50.00 by the long hours I was putting in-1 was not Setting much, and jobs were not easy to Set, We got over the scale but no overtime. This man was in the furniture cartage business and he had about 15 accounts in the loop. There wholesale furniture stores did not have their own trucks. We picked up the furniture from these stores and unloaded

Sonor -4-

at 1414 S. Wabash at his dock. They had four city drivers, one delivered north, one south, and one west and one on freight. Leaving about 2 p.m, for deliveries would bring you in about ten to eleven at night. After five years and jobs were still hard to get, I asked for a raise and was refused. So I threatened to quit and this was at Jack Wiles Furniture store, 8th and Michigan boulevard. And I was telling the shopping clerk that I was going to quit. Already I had a place to go to, Jacob Joseph Cohen, Maxwell and Halsted Street, The shipping clerk called my boss and told him I had another job to go to. The pay envelope had an extra ten in it, so I forgot about the other job and stayed with him. The next envelope did not have the extra ten so I quit. The other job was taken which I was offered. After looking for a job and not Getting one I went back to my former job and was refused. After a few weeks he hired me back. I worked a month, left and went in the Cartage business which my mother loaned me \$300.00. I bought a truck, was in business for two years and just about made ends meet, sold the truck, paid my mother the \$300.00 and got a job through a good friend of mine, Mr. Jim Daily, who was dispatcher at Air Reduction Sales Inc., 22nd and Lumbard Street. Now this company was in the union and I got paid for overtime. At my former job, the furniture cartage, we did not get overtime pay, nor did I see a business agent to ask about conditions there. At that time the unions were not as powerful as they are now.

- I. If you had a complaint about something that your boss was doing or about the long hours or something like that, there wasn't anybody in the union that you could call up to go complain to?
- R. No. Air Reduction Sales Inc. drivers belong to the Chicago Truck Drivers', Chauffeur's, and Helper's Union Independent. I was an extra driver for two months, then was a steady driver. I drove a ten ton chain drive mack truck. We delivered oxygen and cetelyne, hydrogen and various other gasses. From 22nd and Lombard we moved to 31st and Roman and here we had tractors and trailers and straight jobs.
- I. Now this was at the time of the depression. So you were able to keep a job then during the depression for the most part?
- R. Yes and I was being paid overtime.
- I. Did you get overtime?
- R. On this job at Airco, yes We started at six in the morning and most of the time worked to seven at night and sometimes later. It was a good paying job, you had to be recommended to get in.
- I. Do you remember roughly what you were making then?
- R. Yes, about \$55 .00 a week. This, I think was the year 1935.
- I. So it was a responsible job.

- R. Yes, I picked up a lot of knowledge on this job. I worked here about eight years, then went to work for Fleet Maintenance Inc. and worked there till retirement, which I had twenty-five years of driving. September 6, 1944 I started to work for Fleet Maintenance Inc. and retired January 1st 1969.

It was in my last year at Air Reduction Sales Inc. when the union members decided they wanted to have an election of officers. The members won but they did not have the business mind of the union officers. They asked Mr. Fenner, who was an officer in the union, He said only on his terms would he accept. This was at a union meeting and the members approved unanimously. Mr. Fenner from then on was executive director of the union and was elected and the first thing Mr. Fenner did was move the members out of the so called union hall, which was more like a pool room, located at Sangamon and Madison St. Mr. Fenner leased the fourth floor and fifth floor of the Mid State Bank Building, then had these offices remodeled to suit the convenience of the drivers, set the term of office every five years and the steward's every three years. We have general meetings four times a year and for the first time the drivers enjoy coming to the meetings. The capacity crowd of happy truck drivers now knowing they have a voice in their union -- this is democracy working, thanks to Mr. Fenner. Mr. Fenner presides at the meetings with his officers and secretary, who take down all business of the meeting, and all complaints would be rectified. With the help of Mr. Fenner, the union has the best Health-Welfare plan which the drivers talk about

today. The labor writer for the Daily News, Mr. Robert M. Levin in his column in the Daily News had this to say; "The Chicago union has developed a Health and Welfare program that is enough to make almost any working man green with envy. It is a model program in health and hospital care. It could be a pace setter for the rest of the country. The union is the Chicago Truck Driver's Union Independent."

Mr. Fenner also set up a pension plan for the drivers which we didn't have. Mr. Fenner has a welcome sign on the door of his office to all concerned and his staff is marvelous. The admiration Mr. Fenner receives from the truck drivers is tremendous. You can see this at the general meetings. He has kept his members in harmony with one another. Mr. Fenner, at contract period, works hard to get what he promised his drivers and he knows they deserve it. The truck drivers know they have the best representatives negotiating their contract. This man has a pleasant personality; he's diplomatic, distinguished and has the appearance of an ambassador. And thanks to Mr. Fenner, that or my retirement I have a pension in my late years. Mr. Fenner knows the responsibility the drivers have in the equipment they are consigned to. Some of these tractors and trailers cost over \$40,000 dollars and they are 40 to 50 feet long. Today you pay for instructions to have the knowledge to handle these modern equipments. The title should be engineer instead of truck driver.