

BOOK 20

J O S E P H M A R T I N

Interview with Joseph Martin

by Martin Hardaman

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Joseph Martin
Signature of interviewee

Respondant: Joseph Martin

Interviewer: Martin, Hardaman

Date:

I. First thing I want you to do is tell me your name.

R. My name is Joseph Martin.

I. Where were you born and when?

R. I was born on January 1, 1893 in Homersville, Mississippi;
that's in Pike County, Mississippi.

I. What did your father do?

R. My father was a farmer and I started to work when I was
about fourteen years old, working on the Liberty White
Railroad.

I. Have you been at railroad work ever since?

R. Railroad and saw mill together.

I. When did you first join the union?

R. I joined the union about when Roosevelt became president,
I think the second year after he was elected president
in about 1933.

I. What union was it?

R. The Fireman and Oilers. It was APL at that time.
They

- I. I see. And how much did it cost to join?
- R. Well, at that time we just kept up. It didn't cost anything, we just paid our union dues.
- I. How much were the dues?
- R. Union dues I think was a dollar a month.
- I. Had you been working for the railroad before you joined the union?
- R. Yes. I worked for the railroad. I started working for the railroad when I was about fourteen years old, but there wasn't any union. We didn't have any union then at the railroads.
- I. You told me you worked for the I.C. When did you first start working for the I.C.? That's when you first joined the union, right?
- R. Well, I started working for the I.C. in 1924, here in Chicago. I worked for a railroad in Mississippi before I came to Chicago. I came to Chicago in 1924.
- I. I see, you had already been working for the I.C. in Mississippi?
- R. I worked for the I.C. in Macomb, Mississippi, but there wasn't any union there. They didn't have a union there.

I. I see, and you had been working for the I.C. how long?
R. Well, I didn't work very long down there, but I worked for a railroad, I worked for the Liberty White Railroad, and I worked for another railroad, but there still wasn't any union. A short time, not very long.

I. So you'd been working for the I.C. for 9 or 10 years before you joined the union?
R. Yes Maybe longer than that. '24 to: '33 -- how long is that. That's nine years, yes.

I. How did the I.C. look at unions? What did they do about people who joined them?

R. Well, when I first started there the general foreman down there didn't want no union. But after he found out it was strong enough he couldn't do anything about it, and they accepted it there in the yards. The general foreman was -- well when I started to work I started to work under Caldwell. About 1930, I guess it was, when Halaban became the general foreman, and he was there when the union came in. I liked him and Brown was-the assistant general foreman. At first they didn't seem to care a thing about the union, but they found out that they couldn't do a thing about it, and then they recognized it.

- I. Did they ever fire anyone who joined the union before 1934?
- R. Well, I told you they fired lots of people, laid them off, one thing or another. The main thing the Union did was a great help to them when they laid off people. They had to lay-off somebody. Well, a lot of times they laid off a man who had more service. There was younger men there than the ones they laid-off. Well, you see when they lay-off, they're supposed to lay-off the youngest men, up to the oldest, but they'd lay-off who they wanted to lay-off. There's a man been there five, six, years, I know a man laid-off who had been there nineteen years. They laid him off and kept men who hadn't been there for a year. That was before the union, you see. And when they called back, they called, back the ones they wanted, whether they called back according to age or not if they called them back. Sometimes they just hired somebody else, didn't call them back at all.
- I. Now you told me--that even before 1934 there had been company unions. What were they like?
- R. I never belonged to a company union. Well, there is nothing wrong with them for the machinists and electricians, men like them. They had positions. See, I didn't have a

position. I was working then as a car cleaner. Then after I left the car cleaner, I was tractor driver. After the union was in, then we could all belong to the union at that time; but, see I didn't join the car cleaners. I was a fireman and oiler at that time.. See, I fired part of the time.. In the winter time I fired the stationary boilers over there. He asked for a fireman. I wanted to fire because I was outside, and firing, I was inside, you see. In the summer time they didn't need very many firemen and I went back on the other job down in the yard. So I went to work as a fireman, and I was a fireman and oiler. That was the union I belonged to, but I joined it as a helper, a fireman's helper.

- I. That was in 1934 or 1933 when you joined the union?
- R. About 1933, I guess, because Roosevelt was president. That was when he made it a law, that it was a violation of the law to fire a person for union activities, you see. That's when the union came in there then after they made that a law. You see before then they were scared to go in there. Everybody would be afraid to come in there trying to organize. Actually, they'd get fired. They didn't have no law to protect them or nothing.

I. How were you recruited for the union? Who came up to you?

R. They had a man from the AFL there. I forget his name now. He came in and recruited us.

I. Did they call you all together and ask or what?

R. They just went around and talked with the men. They would have a meeting. Had a meeting out west on 43rd street, somewhere back out on the west side here and we all joined. A lot of us joined. All of us didn't join, a lot of them joined, and then after we got our lodge set up, organized, then we could bring them in, talk to them ourselves and bring them into the union. The members of the union could be around, them that didn't want it, and talk and bring-them in. A lot of them came in that way. See this man came there to set the union up. After it was set up then we had our own grievance committee and everything.

I. I see. Was it a Jim Crow union?

R. No, the Firemen and Oilers ain't never been Jim Crow. We always met together. Some of our officers are colored, white officers in the meeting and everything. Now the car cleaners, and the oilers, and the mechanics, they had a Jim-Crow union because they had two lodges

a separate lodge they met at, for a long time. But I think they all went together after a certain time. They tried to get it, but most of the colored didn't want to go in with the whites, because they had more members. There were more colored down there than there was whites so they had their own union. It was Jim Crow right on. Although they met separate, I don't know how it was but their grievors, they had some colored and some white in the yard. They worked together in the yard, but they met separately. The colored had their own president and the whites, had their own. That was when we were first started, but after so long of a time, they started meeting together, they came in together.

I. Who was the first president of your union? Who was the first local president down there?

R. The engineer there, the name was Patterson. He was an engineer there at the 14th Street powerhouse.

I. What kind of man was he?

R. He was a very fine fellow, Patterson. I worked there where he was engineer. I was a fireman there. When I first went there I was a fireman's helper, and then I got to be a fireman and he was an engineer. As a matter of fact, Patterson was president of that union, when I left down there.

I. When did you leave the I.C.?

R. In 1954.

I He had been president for twenty -years?

R . Yes. He was president until I left there. We kept him.
He was a very fine fellow, so we kept him.

I. Did he keep his job as an engineer?

R . Yes, he kept his job as an engineer.

I. Who ran against him that first time, do you remember?

R. I don't think nobody ran against him down there. See,
there weren't too many down there who belonged to it
that were in the firemen. Most of the union down there,
was the machinists, car cleaners, and things So they
had a different local altogether. We had a different
local from them.

I. Were there young people down at your place to have a
local of their own or did you meet --

R. No, we met with all of them down at the railroad, there
at 63rd Street and Randolph Street and Burnside, all
of them down the road in the city. We all met together. ..
You see, those who were in our local, we all met together.
Now Patterson was our president. A boy on 27th Street --
I think it was Randolph Street -- that boy was our secretary

And then we had our grievance committee at every plant. You see, we had a grievance committee down there and we had a grievance committee on 63rd Street, and at the yard in that place. They would carry it to the foreman there, and if they couldn't settle it with the foreman; then they bring it to the Lodge. Like if you had something you didn't like, you'll take it to the grievance committee. The grievance committee would talk to the foreman about it, and if you then couldn't settle it then they'd bring it to the Lodge.

- I. In those first years were there any Negroes on the grievance committee?
- R. Yeah, when I first came there was. When we first organized, if they'd of run for the office we could put a man in because there was more of us coloreds than whites.
- I. Even in the Firemans Union, too?
- R. Yes, the Firemans Union. You see most whites there were engineers or something like that, but we had some whites who were firemen down at 14th Street. Them on 63rd Street mostly we colored and also 27th Street they was mostly colored too, and Randolph Street.
- I. Was Patterson white?
- R. Yeah, Patterson was white.

- I. Now, what was an engineer doing in the Firemans Union?
- R. Well, it's called the Engineers and Firemans Union. There were stationary firemen and engineers. It wasn't real-- these are those who worked-at that time in the stationary boiler rooms.
- I . Did you ever go out on a strike?'
- R. No, we never did go out on a strike. We have voted on a strike. You see, they have the whole entire railroad all up and down the railroad they votes on this strike. They have a general chairman. The general chairman, he don't work. That's his job, he just goes up and down. The president, see, we have a president over our local, but the main president, he's president over the whole organization of the Firemen and Oilers. Now he goes all up and down the road. From one strike they struck all up and down the road. For all the locals in The Firemen and Oilers they strike. They take a strike vote all up and down the road and then if they don't come to no agreement, then they set the time to strike. But all the time they came to an agreement with the railroad before we ever walked out, and alot of times we didn't ever take a strike vote. The engineers got a union -- Engineers, Firemen and Brakemen, I think. They have a union. The conductors have a union, a local,

and the railroad shops like the car cleaners, mechanics, and one thing and another, they have a local. Well, a lot of time, like the firemen might come out on a strike. The firemen went on strike here not long ago. With some of it the railroad is on strike now. Some of it is threatening to walk out. I think it's the firemen on account of they're taking alot of firemen off because the Diesel came out. Diesel engines, they don't need no firemen on that because they ain't got no fire. They want to keep the firemen on there to help the engineer, to help look out for the engineer. Something might happen to the engineer or something like that and then they have the fireman on there. Well, like it is, the railroad says it's just paying a person to have him do nothing. They don't want that, they laid them off. And the union's trying to get them back. They called a strike now, a grievance now, to try to get them back. But, we never did have no strike. We took a strike vote once, but we never did go out on no strike.

- I. Did you work on the I.C. all during the depression?
- R. Yes, well I started work down here in 1924 and never was laid-off the whole while I was down there. There were some few who got laid-off. I never was laid-off.
- I. What happened during the depression? Were things hard?

Did you work longer? Did you take a cut in salary or anything?

R. Yeah, they cut salaries down, and I think they cut off some of the trains. I know they cut salaries down.

I. Was your salary cut?

R. Yeah, my salary was cut.

I. How bad was it cut?

R. I don't know just exactly. At that time, it was a long time ago, it was in 1929, but I think it was the car cleaners were 38 cents an hour, but it was cut down to 34 cents an hour. It was cut to 33 cents an hour, a nickel an hour. It was about 40 cents a day cut. We were working ten hours a day then. I was working eleven hours a day, but I got time and a half for that extra hour. You make time and a half for it, but all over ten hours you got time and a half. I was making eleven hours a day. In fact I made eleven and a half hours a day.

I. Every day?

R. Yes, I used to go to work at 6 o'clock and I'd get off at 5:30 and I'd take a half an hour for lunch.

I. What were things like on the railroads in Mississippi before the union?

R. Well, you just go out there and work, you had a foreman standing over you, and you just did what he said.

I. What did you do on the F___ and Gulf Railroad?

R. I was working on the railroad then. I wasn't working in no shop, I was out. Well, we laid rail, we did everything, fixed bad places in the track, anything that was needed.

I. Now how many hours a day did you work on this?

R. Well, I only worked ten hours a day then, too, but we got time and a half if we worked out ten hours a day.

I. How much did you get paid?

R. Down in Mississippi I got paid 12½¢ an hour, \$1.25 a day. That was before World War I. When you get around 15¢ an hour down there, you were making big wages, before World War I.

I. How many days a week?

R. Six days. I worked seven days a week here. I had a seven day week job here, and I didn't get no time and a half on Sundays.

I. Did you have to show up on Sundays?

R. If your job was scheduled for Sunday, sure. It was your job.

I. Did everyone work seven days a week?

R. No, not all of them, only those who had seven day week jobs. You see, down there we weren't on trains. They go out every day. That was in Chicago.

I. When did you work seven days a week?

R. From the time I started work here until 1949. They cut down to a five day week in September, 1949. A lot worked seven days after they cut it down, but they paid time and a half for them extra days, when they didn't have enough men. You see we didn't have any union. We'd accept that for a long time, about a year or maybe a year and a half before they settled it with us for time and a half after a five day week. And, see, we worked on until we got it settled. But we had two off days and a lot of people turned it down. I took Sunday and Saturday, for my off days and I had Saturday and Sunday until I left there. Then we got down to eight hours a day. The union had got it from a ten hour to an eight hour day that was long before they got their five day week.

When did they start working your eight hours a day?

R. After the union got in there. I don't know just when

it was. Well, let's see, during the war we worked ten hours a day but we got time and a half, for it over eight hours. I worked sixteen hours a day, but I got time and a half for the other eight hours.

I. When did you work sixteen hours a day?

R. Mostly all during the war, World War II, but we were getting the time and a half for that, we didn't mind. We didn't have to, we just did it because we wanted to make the money. I bought that place up there in Michigan, working time and a half, working overtime.

I. What were you doing during the war?

R. I was driving a tractor. My title was just helper but my occupation was tractor driver. You see I got a helper's pay. When it comes to raising wages, well you see they froze the wages during the war. I don't know what we were making then, 40 cents an hour or something all during the war, but then after the war the union kept on getting us raises. But you see the government froze us during the war and they couldn't give us raises.

I. Did anyone ever talk about a strike during the war to get the wages up higher?

R. We couldn't, you see, the government had control of the

I.C. for a long time.

- I During the war or after?
- R. During the war, well see, the strike were settled. I remember the last strike. The government had taken over the railroad during the war. You see, they were over the railroads, and they never tried railroad during World War II at all. But right after the war everybody was getting raises.
- I. Did you ever become a full fireman or were you always a fireman's helper?
- R. I was a fireman, at the boiler. I never did get no license to fire. The chief clerk tried to get me a license to fire but I didn't want one. You see I only fired in the winter time, because driving a tractor was much easier then firing. You see we had to handle our own coal. We didn't have to handle coal, but we had to pull the fire out. We had had self feeders to feed the coal in there, but we had to pull the clinkers. and things out about twice a day and that's pretty hot-- pulling them clinkers. It was hot in them boiler rooms and you had to see that your water was alright, and keep your cool from getting to much coal and slag. Then you had to see that you had enough coal to keep up the steam.

You had to furnish steam to keep them cars in the yard warm and all the I.C. buildings down there, even the 12th Street building. They had depots and things. You had to furnish steam to keep them things hot. And all them cold cars in the yard, they had to be warm, so you had to furnish steam for them. That came from the boiler room. You see, when a passenger gets on the car they got to be warm. When the engine hooks to them, then the engine furnishes steam to them. We have steam pipes all through the yard where we keep them warm. Well, I would never accept no license even if they asked me if I wanted to get my license. I said no, because I didn't want to be a fireman as a regular fireman.

I. Would you have gotten paid more as a fireman?

R. No, I got the same thing. That's the reason I wouldn't accept it.

I. Why did you leave Mississippi on the railroad to come up here and work for the railroad?

R . Because you make more.

I . Well, when you left were you still making about --

R. Well, I wasn't working on that railroad then. I left out of New Orleans. I worked for the I.C. in New Orleans, at their Canal Street, where they were loading their stuff

on the boats. I wasn't no longshore man or nothing like that, but I was a freight handler, I worked down there and that's where I came out of. I came out of New Orleans on pass, I didn't come to Chicago, I went to Freeport first and then I come up here to Amboy, to work on the railroad. We come up on a pass, and I didn't stay in Amboy but I think one night. We got there on Saturday night and we left on Sunday morning. Three of us left and went on to Freeport. We wasn't but about 12, 15 miles from Freeport. So we got on a freight train and went to Freeport.

I. Why didn't you want to work in Amboy?

R. I don't know. We just wanted to go to Freeport, and I worked at Freeport. I went to work at a manufacturing company. That was a factory over there where they manufactured different things.

I. And how long did you stay there?

R. I didn't stay over there long. I went there in August in 1923 and I came over here in April of 1924. So I stayed over there about six, seven months.

I. What did you least like about the union? Was there anything you didn't like about the union?

R. Well, I liked the union. If it hadn't been for the union

I don't know what the wages would have been now if you didn't have no unions. Unions are what get better wages shorter hours and everything. Everything we ever got now we got it through the union, everything. Everybody had 33 cents an hour when the union came in there. Let me think, the first raise we got just before the war, just before the government froze the wages. I think we got an 8 cent raise. Then right after the war, we kept getting raises. You see, when I left there I was making about \$2.00 and some cents an hour. I went from about 33 cents an hour to about \$2.72 an hour when I left there. I left there in 1954, I was making \$2.72 or \$1.72. It must have been \$1.72 an hour because I was making something better than \$13.00 a day. And then after I left there they got another raise.

I. How did you happen to leave the railroad?

R. I got hurt down there. I was driving a tractor down between the cars. You see, the tracks was this wide. Therefore you had to go down through there with a tractor, between the trains, and I was hauling some ice down there. They put about 3000 lbs. of ice on the truck.

I. You were hauling ice?

That's right. I was on a tractor. Well, it comes to a

curve, it curves around, it made a curve to the right, and I was just through the curve. But the truck that I was pulling was right in the curve, and as I was loading the engine hooks into these cars on one side of the track and starts to pull them out. But the car, being in that curve, you see, the car goes straight. Well, you see the car goes straight until that truck hits on the curve. If you're in that curve, by being on a wide truck, that makes that car hit the back of the truck, and that's where I got hurt at. That truck hit the back of the car. I had, I'd say, about 2000 lbs. of ice on the truck when it hit it and knocked it all to pieces, knocked the tractor up on the other car on my other side over there. I don't know how it happened after that. I know it hit it, but after that I don't know what happened.' When it was all over I was lying there between the track and there was something lying there right across my stomach.

I. Were you the only one in the accident?

R. No, there was another boy who was on the back end of the ice truck. He got his leg cut off. At least they had to cut it off, right below the knee there.

I. Just you two?

R. Yes, but you see he was icing the car, and he got out

of the car on to the ice truck. At least he was getting on the ice truck. He was getting on the back end of it, and one of the cars hit his leg against the ice truck, just about cut it off. At least they had to take it off at the hospital.

I. What did the union do after this accident?

R. The union men, they came in, the ones I worked with. They got me to the hospital. It was at 15th and Indiana.. We were close to it. We were about a block from the hospital. We went right across the yard and over to the hospital. So they got a stretcher and took me over to St. Luke.

I. You were still conscious?

R . Yeah, I was conscious. When the first fellow came up to me, he was a mechanic there, I told him-to take this thing off of me. I don't know what it was, a piece of timber, laying across my stomach. He called out for a stretcher. "When we get it we'll take it off of you." So he let me lay there. He never did take it off. He could have taken it off but he never did. When they got back there they took it off. They took me over there on a stretcher over to St. Luke's Hospital . That other boy, he was there. He was on the other side. Some of them went down and notified the office and the office called the ambulance. Well, when the ambulance got there I was going to the hospital -- St. Luke's

hospital. They didn't bring him to St. Luke's, they carried him to the Illinois Central. Over at the St. Luke's Hospital is where I went, because I told them to carry me over to St. Luke's, and they carried me over there. You see, the boys that was working there, they ran right down and got me a stretcher and just took me right over there across the yard.

I. How long were you in the hospital?

R. I stayed in St. Luke's Hospital about two months, and I stayed at the I.C. hospital another two months. I got hurt the first day of September in 1954 and I came out of the hospital on Christmas eve day. That was the 24th day of December when I came home. That's about less than a week of being 4 months. I came out a week before January. If I'd stayed in 'til January that would have been four months.

I. Did you think of going back to work at the railroad?

R. No, I knew I wasn't going back when I was in the hospital. After I got out of the hospital I went down and put in for my pay check.

I . Did you ever think of suing the railroad?

R. No, the railroad settled with me. They gave me close to \$20,000.

Did the union take a part in the settlement?

No, the union didn't have anything to do with it.

I. This was negotiated between the company and your lawyer?

R. I didn't get no lawyer, there was no lawyer. I just negotiated with the company. I would have gotten a lawyer, if the company hadn't -- if I hadn't thought they'd give me a pretty good settlement. You see, I got my pension, before I got the settlement. I wasn't old enough at the time to get full pension. I could have gotten a disability pension, but I done got my pension already.

I. And you got a full pension?

R. No, you don't get a full pension. You see, the company is supposed to pay you for the accident. But you get your pension -- that's from what you make -- you get that from the government. The railroad handles it, but if you gets the railroad retirement, see, that's with the government, too.

I. How old were you, when you --

R. I was about 62, at least I was 62 that January.

I. How much longer would you have to stay to get full pension?

R. Three more years, til 65.

I . Are you still on disability pension, or did you get the full pension finally?

R . I don't know. My pension has gone up about 3 times since I've been getting it. I don't know if it's full pension or disability. I don't know whether I get the full pension or not, but my pension has gone up. When I first come out, I was, getting \$113 a month, and then they raised it to \$126. Then the next time they raised it to \$140 something. The third time they raised it I was getting \$158. Now this raise, I haven't gotten yet. I've got a notice from it and they said I would get it and it would be retroactive from the first of January, but I haven't got it. It will be about \$175, and we're supposed to get another the-first of the year, about 5%.

I. Your pension will be worth about \$185 then?

R . About \$180. 5% won't be -but about \$7 or \$7.50, something like that -- about \$182. We haven't got that yet. You see we haven't got the 5% yet. People that are working now on the job I had -- their pension will be way up there and then their pension pays more. Like when I was working there we only paid for \$300 a month. Although we made over \$300, we didn't pay for it. They didn't take it out, but now they pay for \$400 or \$500. And then that time we wasn't making over \$300, a month.

- I. Were there any outsiders that really helped during your organization of the union down at the I.C. I mean did any politicians or any ministers, any community leaders, anybody come in to help?
- R. No, not in the union. Why sure they helped in getting the people in Congress that would. pass, laws that were favorable to the union. They do that right now. I got a letter here not long ago. They try to get men that will work for the laws that will help the union, get men in there that will stand up for the union. You see, you get some men in there that anything that will. help the union they're against it, but get men that are favorable to the union in Congress and get the laws passed that will help the unions. That's where the politicians help. But after it gets away from the law and comes down to the strikes and things; that's when you need the union.
- I. Who was the first politician that you remember the union supporting?
- R. Roosevelt, everyone wanted Roosevelt; all of labor was for Roosevelt.
- I. Was there anyone else that they suggested you vote for?

A lot of people in Congress. I can't remember their names now, but there was a lot of them that they favored and helped. You see, every President that came up, the union is for one or the other. They were for Kennedy.

I. Were they for Eisenhower?

R. Let me see, some of them might have been for Eisenhower. Some of the locals might have been for Eisenhower. You see, the President that the union comes out for, to --support, that doesn't mean that all the members of the union are going to support him. They might support somebody else. You see, they recommend a person to you, but whether you support him or not, that's up to you. I don't know whether they were for Eisenhower or not. Who ran against Eisenhower?

I. Adlai Stevenson.

R. Well, Adlai was a fine labor man, I know. I always supported Adlai and our union supported him. I'm quite sure, because I voted for him myself.

I. Were there ever any tensions between the blacks and whites in your union or between any groups?

R. I don't know. The union was always supposed to pull together. We were all supposed to be brothers in a union, whether you're white, black, blue or green, you're supposed

to be brothers, and you're supposed to always pull together.

I. Did it work that way?

R. It worked pretty well that way. You don't have to vote by secret ballots, so you don't have to let no one know who you vote for unless you just wants to.

I. Did the union ever take a stand on the Communist Party?

R . I don't remember.

I. Were you an active union man during your thirty years?

R. I was pretty active. I went to most of the union meetings.

I. Did you ever run for office?

R. No. I was on a committee there once.

I. The Grievance Committee? For how long?

R. Yes. I stayed on for two years. They come on every two years. I wasn't on the Grievance Committee. I was on the Safety Committee.

I. What did you do on the Safety Committee?

R. Anything that you saw that wasn't safe, you carried-it in. We meet about once a month, and we'd go in and

talk on safety and the things that. should be done about the things that you saw that weren't safe. You write it up, you carry it in, and we make rules to abolish that unsafety. Anything that was unsafe, you had to make it safe.

I. Do you remember any of the things that you thought were unsafe?

R. At that time I was at the boiler rooms.

I. When was it, in the '30's or '40's?

R. Oh, that was a long time ago, I guess, it musk have been in the '40's, it might have been in the '50's. I was only on it two years. It must have been in the '40's, I guess. It was awhile, before I left from down there. There was a hole in the cinder pit in the back of the boilers where they pulled the cinders out when they go to clean the boilers out. I guess, it was about four feet deep. And the boys go around behind the boilers at night . It'd be dark behind the boilers unless they had lanterns. They likely to step in that hole and get hurt. That's one of the grievances I carried in. I don't know if I carried in any more or not. I guess I did.

I. Did they do anything about it?

R. Oh, yeah, they covered it over.

I. What about the people today who say that unions are too strong. What do you think of that?

R. Well, those people probably never belonged to a union, probably people that are not working where they have unions. People like John. L. Lewis, they say he's too strong, because unions intend to work for the laboring people. That's what they work for. That's what they're for -- laboring people -- to get the people's rights who are in labor, to get their rights. They couldn't do it without a union. You see, when we first started out, unions had a hard time. If you read about them way years ago they had a hard time coming up, all the way up until Roosevelt. Roosevelt's the one that made it easy for unions. They made it a law that they couldn't fire a person for union activity. Of course, there was some unions that were pretty strong before Roosevelt, like the big four, the Engineers, the Firemans, the Brakemans, and I can't think of the other one. But when they went in together they were powerful. They were pretty strong.

I. The switchmen, did they have a union?

R. Well, the brakeman, switchman, they all the same thing.

I. And the conductors?

R . The Conductors! Firemen, conductors, brakemen and engineers.

It was called the big four. They were pretty strong even before Roosevelt come in. In Alabama and Mississippi they were pretty strong even before I left about 1922.

The shops in Macomb went out on strike and they stopped all the trains down there. Coming down to Macomb they shot out the windows.

I. Were you working on the railroad then?

R. Yeah, I was working with the railroad then, but I wasn't working on the I.C.

I Oh,. this was a strike on the I.C.?

R. Well, I guess all of the big railroads. They each have little railroads right in front of them railroads. They're going to tie them into other railroads. They just small railroads. When they strike, then it's all over.

I mean, all these big standard roads they strike, like the Illinois Central, New York Central, Pennsylvania -- they strike on all them railroads. That's why it's so strong. Now they don't have to, because they struck here on the I.C. and didn't strike on the other reads. But that strike didn't last very long. I think they came to terms. I think trains were held up for one day, not over two days, because a lot of people were tied up

the station there in Chicago.

I. When was this?

R. That was several years ago -- it didn't last but a couple days.

I. Had you retired then?

R. I wasn't down there then, but it wasn't the shop. I don't think they ever quit work down there in the shops where Bill and them are working at, and where I used to work at. They never did stop work.

I. Was railroading dangerous when you first started?

R. Do you mean riding on it?

I. No, I mean working on it.

R. No, I don't think it was very dangerous. There were some jobs that were dangerous.

I. Like what?

R. Like the job I had was dangerous, driving down between them tracks all the time, crossing them tracks all the time. That's kind of dangerous. A guy got killed there, a tractor man down on the station before I got hurt. It was baggage. He was a baggageman. He was driving a tractor, driving down there where there was

a lot of cars, and then a train come into the station, hit him, hit the car and knocked him up under the train. He was killed right off. He was dead when they got him out. Anywhere where you have to cross them tracks in that way, especially going into the station where the trains are going in and coming out and other places you see it coming in, but you don't know what track it's on, and you cross them tracks until he gets near, coming down to the shed. You see, a man up there in that house runs the switchboard to let them come in on a certain track. He can let it come in on any track he wants to let it come in on. But you come in there, you don't know what track it's coming in on. You think it's probably coming in next to the wall. The next thing you know it shoot right over to track #3 or #4.

There were about nine tracks over there and you don't know which one it's coming in on. If it got a straight shoot coming in, where it come in out over the lines, it's running. It ain't just walking along. Now, if you got a tractor going across there, you got to be careful, because you don't know what track he's going to throw it on, that switchman. There's from track 2 to track 11 down there. I think there was a track 11 or track 10. And they come. He's got orders. He's up there in the tower but you don't know what orders he got, what track this train's coming in on, not unless

you're down to the glass house. They can tell you that if you're working down there and find out what train is coming in all the time.

- I. Did they ever work out some kind of system so you could find out?
- R. You don't try to find out, because if you want to go in and ask him, he'll tell you what track it's on, you know after a certain time when the train's due in. Well now, they got to find out what track's clear for it to come in on. They clear the track off for it to come in on. Well, he informs the watchman what track to send it in on. Then that's just about ten or fifteen minutes before it's -supposed to come in. It might not be that. It might be three or four minutes before the time for the trains to come in. But you just got to be watching and stay clear of these tracks until you see what track it's coming in on.
- I. How many of the people that started with you at the railroad are still alive?
- R. I don't know, but I think more of them have passed on than are alive. I know a lot of them there have passed-- a lot, of them.
- I. Is Patterson, your old local leader, is he dead?

R. I don't know. When I left there he was still there. I guess he's still there yet. Patterson was a young man when I was down there he wasn't as old as I was I don't think. I don't know how old he was. He didn't look like he was near as old as I was.

I. Where did Patterson come from or do you know?

R. I don't know, somewhere in the city, I don't know. He lived back out south here. Another boy who worked out there, I used to pay him my dues all the time, because Patterson, he started to work crazy hours. He worked at night and if I didn't get out there early in the morning I couldn't catch him.

I. What did you say his name was?

R. They called him Paddy. I don't know if that was his real name or a nickname. Paddy, everybody called him that.

I. Was he white, too?

R. Yes. He'd take the dues and turn them over to Patterson.

I. Was he the vice-president of the Local?

R. No, I think he was on the Grievance Committee.

I. Did he work where you worked?

- R. He worked in the 14th Street station.
- I. Was he a fireman or what?
- R. He was an engineer.
- I. That was one local engineer and fireman?
- R. Yes. There was an engineers local. Fireman and Oilers all over Chicago, all were in that same local, all that belonged to that union here in Chicago. Other places had other locals. At least all of them here in the I.C. I don't know about the other unions.
- I. Seems like there were a lot of engineers in the Fireman and Oilers Union.
- R . Well, you see there are stationary engineers in the fireman, and oilers. I'm not talking about the railroad engineers. These are stationary engineers.
- I. Oh I see, you mean the people in charge of the boiler rooms?
- R. Yeah.
- I. Were all of the engineers white?
- R . Well, I don't know. I think they were, but I'm not sure at that time. You see, that was sixteen years ago.

I . Now in 1954 all of them were still white, as far as you know?

R . I don't know, I haven't been down there. I always mail my dues in, I don't go down there.

I . No, I meant when you were there?

R . Oh, yeah.

I . And how about the firemen? Were they all white?

R . Oh no, I was a fireman.

I . I thought you were a fireman's helper officially?

R . I signed in as a helper, but I was a fireman when I left there. I was taking care of three boilers.

I . So how was that divided about 50/50? Were there 50% black and 50% white, or 60% white and 40% black.

R . Well, down there, most of the men were Italian. There was about, let's see, one engineer, and there was four firemen, and then there was a fireman's helper.

I . Each fireman had a helper?

R . No, there was just one fireman's helper in the other boilerroom. He had to shovel the coal into the furnace. You see, we had feeders, we didn't need no helper.

I . And what did the oilers do? How many of them were there?

R. Well, see, we didn't have no oilers around there.

I. Oh, I thought it was the Fireman and Oilers union?

R. We were all in the union, and there were oilers then back in the round house and places like that. We didn't have any oilers down there. The engineer did the oiling, he oiled up.

I. Is there anything else you can think of about the union?

R. No, I don't know anything else about it.

I. You just paid your dues and you voted?

R. I used to go to the meetings all the time when I was working, but after I got on pension I didn't go to the union.

I. Were the meetings open? Was there a particular group of people that made suggestions?

R. Yeah, they allowed all union people, but nobody else.

I. No, I meant was there some group inside the union that made suggestions?

R. Anybody could suggest it, carry a grievance in or anything like that. It was an open house.

I. Were union meetings generally quiet or were there very serious disagreements between different people?

R. No, they were generally quiet. We didn't have too many disagreements.

I. Generally quiet and orderly?

R. You see, they were all working for the benefit of themselves. The union is to promote you and to take care of your grievances and everything, to try to make working conditions better. That's why the local, they can carry the grievance. And the ones they can't handle they carry then to the Grand Lodge. We're just a local, and we have a grievance and we can't handle, it in the yards. We carry it to the union and the union carries it to the General Chairman. -And the General Chairman would try to handle it.

I. Well, now you said that most of the firemen were Italian?

R. Yeah, down there at 14th Street. Now there were a lot of colored firemen down at Randolph Street, down at 63rd Street and everywhere.

I. Was there any particular tension between the Italians and the blacks working down there?

R. No. They had their own boilers to work and I had my own boilers to work. We got along fine, at least I

did. Folks think I get along with everybody.

- I. Was there anybody down there that you didn't get along with?
- R. I get along with everybody, I can always get along with people. When I meet a person I try to find the good part of him, I don't look for the bad parts of him.

Interview with Joseph Martin

by Martin Hardaman

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