

B O O K 3 9

ADDIE WYATT

Interview with Addie Wyatt
by Elizabeth Balanoff
Time - 3 hours

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I. To begin we'd like to know as much about your family background as possible. Many of the questions we'd like to ask have to do with your childhood, your parents, so why don't you just begin by telling me what you can recall about your parents, who they were, where you lived, your early childhood memories.

R. Alright, but you'll have to raise questions as I'll probably leave out some information. I was born in Brookhaven, Mississippi, March 8, 1924. I was one of eight children born to my parents, Ambrose and Maggie Cameron. I lived there until I was about six years old when my family moved to Chicago. It was in Chicago that I was reared and still live. I received my education in the public and private schools in Chicago.

I. Let's go back to Mississippi. How much of it do you remember? And how big was the city or town?

R. I'm not sure how big Brookhaven, Mississippi is. As a matter of fact I haven't been back since I was six. I have longed to go back to Brookhaven because I feel canrecapture so much. I remember many things that took place there. My grandmother was a midwife, and I used to travel with her to her various patients' homes. We started attending church there.

I can recall the house we lived in, some of our friends, the school house across the street where I started school. I also can remember the church, our pastor's house, and many of the friends who are still there. It surprises many of my friends with whom I talk now, (and a few of them who knew my parents in Brookhaven), when I tell them about people that I remember.

I can remember myself when I was two years old. I didn't know exactly that I was two, but I recall that a very special incident had happened in our home and I was very unhappy. My mother always fixed my hair in little bangs and a little page boy style. That day the neighbors were helping her because she was ill for some reason. They braided my hair in French rows and this hurt badly. Also something else had me upset. I went out and stood on the hill across from our house. The neighbors called out and ordered me to get back across the street. Then I remember I made my first little protest. They tell me I pulled my dress tail up, patted myself at them and said things like this, "If dese people would mind dey's business and dey's business be dese business den dey's business would be dese business." Later on in life when I told this to my mother, my mother said, "You don't remember that do you?" "Of course I do," I said, "you were in the bed sick and the neighbors treated me so badly." My mother said, "That's the day your sister Edna was born." And Edna is two years younger than myself.

I. That's amazing. Who took care of your mother? Did

your grandmother take care of her in childbirth?

R. That's right. As a matter of fact, her name appears on my birth certificate. She also delivered me, she was the midwife.

I. What did your father do?

R. My father was a tailor in the South. My mother taught school in the South. Of course when we moved North she could not teach school because she did not qualify then. But she was a very excellent seamstress. Father was a tailor and mother was a seamstress, and they made our little clothing for us and sewed for other people. Of course in Chicago business was not as good and my mother did domestic work. After we moved we were very poverty stricken. Then neither my father nor my mother could find work. So we were on -- at that time they called it charity.

I. You must have moved right at the time of the depression.

R. We did, we moved here in 1930.

I. Did you have many relatives in the South? Did your parents have lots of brothers and sisters?

R. My mother only had a brother and a sister in Vicksburg, Mississippi. My father had other brothers and sisters, but most of them were here in the North. It was because of their appeal that we moved to Chicago. Many people in the South then thought that the North, especially Chicago, was the land of promise. We thought surely that our

lives would be much better if we moved North, and God only knows how we suffered. There were no gardens, no fields, no chickens, no hogs of your own, no fruit trees such as we had in the South. It was very difficult here.

I. What kind of neighborhood did you live in down South and what kind of neighborhood did you move to?

R. In the South it was a little residential neighborhood. We had fairly decent homes in the community where we lived. Everyone either rented or owned their own homes. When we moved here we lived wherever we could. We moved first with my father's sister who owned her own home. Of course that was very difficult because there were five of us, five children, my mother, my father and my grandmother, moving in with my aunt and her husband and my cousin, who was her nephew whom she was rearing. That was not to be a permanent situation but only until we could get settled. That was difficult and my parents couldn't find work. They couldn't qualify for a decent place to live, so we had to take places wherever we could and moved from one place to another.

I. What was the first kind of work your father was able to find?

R. My father did a little tailoring, a little pressing, a little work here and there, wherever he could find something to do, and finally worked for the WPA.

I. And there were five children already when you moved North. Now tell me a little bit about your parents. Just

describe them as people.

R. My father was a very aggressive person. I think he just barely finished elementary school, but he was a very brilliant man, a great mathematician, a great spokesperson. He was aggressive but very frustrated. This we did not understand until we were older. We thought that my father was a very cruel, very mean man. I later found out, as I began to involve myself in the struggle to improve the lives of people, why he was so angry. Here was a man who I would hear people say, "That man certainly works!" My father would work 50 and 60 hours a week when he could get it, and he still could not make enough money to take care of his family. It was always embarrassing to him when he came home and there was my mother and his children and he didn't have the rent or he didn't have food money or money needed for other things. He started drinking and this became a serious habit. He found this a means of escape. When I matured and grew up myself I began to understand that more than ever, and it was one of the things that made me very, very determined to do what I could to help poverty stricken people and to help wage earners to earn a decent and livable wage. I don't like to say minimum wage. I like to talk in terms of a livable wage, because my father was a worker and I used to hear him talk about walking from 43rd Street to 109th Street looking for work. As a child the distance seemed to be maybe a few blocks, but since I've grown older I can't imagine him walking that far and coming back

home saying he couldn't find anything. So he was a very aggressive person, always on the go, trying to work out ways and means and hardly ever really being able to do it.

My mother was a very, very beautiful but strong willed woman, and yet she had such a mild personality. It was a perfect combination. I was also impressed by the strength of my grandmother, who was a very determined woman. She could go after things and achieve them and was a woman with great faith in God. I spent quite a bit of time with my grandmother and mother. If one could have favorites among children I might have been considered one of my grandmother's favorites. I was named after my maternal and my paternal grandmothers.

I. Both named Addie?

R. One Adeline, my father's mother, and my mother's mother was Addie May.

I. Which grandmother lived with you?

R. That was my father's mother, my mother's mother in law. They lived together for twenty years in the same house and my mother's testimony and my grandmother's testimony was that they never, never had a falling out.

I. That's amazing.

R. It always impressed me. They were loving women, they prayed together and they shared together and they raised us together. We had very little economic security. There were times when there was no money in the house. At the age of

eight I started making little paper flowers and fiber glass flowers and sold them. I also made candy and wrapped it in little papers and sold it. I sometimes brought fifty cents or a dollar into the house. I know now this was like ten, twenty, or twenty five dollars, but I didn't realize it then. I started taking music lessons when I was six years old, and I played for our choir at church. They would pay me at the end of the week, a dollar a week. Of course I'd have to rehearse Monday and Wednesday and be at church Saturday and all day on Sunday.

I. How old were you when you did this?

R. I was twelve years old.

I. What church did your family belong to?

R. The Church of God. I would bring that money home and give that money to my mother. I never realized how much that money meant. Money was not very much in circulation then. People had very little of it, but here was a dollar or a dollar and a quarter that I would give her. Then sometimes it would be a dollar fifty cents or seventy five if I also had a good week with flowers and candy.

I. And you did this after school?

R. That's right and during the time that I was in school. Of course in the evenings I always had great responsibility because I was the oldest girl. From the time I can remember every child that was born, I had to hip and lap and watch over them. My mother always told them that I was their second

mother. From the time I was a little girl they obeyed me, and I would have to attend to them because my mother had to work outside the home. When I was twelve I went to high school, and I would have to come home in the evenings and take care of the children. I started cooking at that age. I would cook for a family of ten and have the children prepared and clean and ready for dinner and have the table set and dinner ready when my mother returned home from work. Then I'd go off to choir rehearsal. The choir rehearsals lasted much longer then than they do now. The young people's choir would start at six and end about 7:30, and I'd go right into the adult choir and it would last from 7:30 to 11.

I. What kind of neighbors did you have? Were most of them working people?

R. In Chicago?

I. Yes.

R. Most were unemployed until the mid forties, and a few were working.

I. And what about the school you attended? Was it a mixed school racially or an all black school?

R. It was an all black school.

I. Were there any teachers you can recall who particularly appealed to you?

R. I suppose all of them. I was always fond of teachers, and especially teachers who wore glasses, as I thought they were very intelligent. I can remember Mrs.

Dirkson and Mrs. Wilson. I liked teachers with authority.

I. Why, do you suppose?

R. I don't know.

I. Did you think they were better teachers?

R. I thought they were. As a matter of fact when we came into a classroom the children would pass the word down, "You don't mess with Miss Dirkson. She won't tolerate foolishness." We would go in and size her up, and something about her appearance and expressions were authoritative. We just knew we had to attend to our business. I liked teachers like that.

I. What about people in your church. Were there any special people that meant something more than others to you? Ministers or Sunday School teaches or anyone like that?

R. Yes, in our church women played roles equal to men.

I. Describe that a little bit.

R. We were always encouraged to accept leadership roles. The women were ministers. The women were directors of our choir. They were ushers, they were musicians, secretaries and trustees. They filled all of the roles in the church. I never thought it was unusual until I was older and found out that this was not true in all churches or in other institutions and organizations. We were trained to do it. I was impressed by my teachers. I had a music choir director by the name of Laura Pitts. We always thought that she was mean. She would bang on the table with her baton. I

had mixed emotions about her behavior. There was something that I liked about it and something that I protested. She used to shake my shoulders because I was aggressive, too. I exerted leadership among the young people and they would follow me. As I got older she and I would laugh and talk about it. I said, "I think that rather than disliking you I really liked you," but I was trying to resist the authority that I admired about her. She would do little things to me though that were very mean and I would retaliate.

I. Give me some examples.

R. Sometimes she would not let me play or sing, and I was one of the musicians and one of the lead singers. I started singing in the church when I was six years old. They would put me on little stools and I would sing before big audiences, and I would speak, too. Sometimes she would deliberately not let me sing and I resented this. When she tried to discipline me occasionally and I thought it was unfair I would protest. I would tell her that I didn't think it was right. At that time a child who did that was considered sassy by some of the older people and I would get a whipping. But later on I knew that I really admired her.

There was another young, single woman by the name of Elizabeth Brooks who befriended me. She would take me out and expose me to some cultural events I never would have been exposed to otherwise, being a member of a big family and poverty stricken. My mother would always make us wear

beautiful little clothing, even if she took scraps from clothing of white people she worked for. She'd make us lovely little things, so we always had nice clothes to wear. But then, too, in order to be able to share good meals and events that I normally couldn't have because of the need to share with so many other brothers and sisters, Elizabeth would take me to concerts and other places. She was a member of a big singing chorus. I don't remember the name of it now, but when I was about eight years old I became the baby of that chorus. She, spoke at our church one Sunday when they had a birthday celebration for me. She told the congregation whenever I came to her choral group I would steal the show because I learned the songs beforehand and would sing them right along with the group. Naturally when we appeared before the audience I was the tiny one with all the adults behind me. I enjoyed singing! Elizabeth took me on a few trips out of town and other excursions like that which were very eventful tome. I admired her very much because rather than living a bored single life, here was a young woman giving life to a young person who probably would have been denied many of these adventures. Although our own family life was poverty stricken we were a very warm family. We were taught to love and respect each other and my mother expressed that in her very being. We were taught to be avery prayerful family, and I suppose one of the greatest things that we inherited from our family relationship was a deep abiding and

sustaining faith in God. My parents had no money to give us, they had no property to leave us, but they left us something that I could not have bought with all the money in the world. I thank God over and over again for it, because it has meant so much to me through my struggles, which were even greater as I began to mature and take hold of the reins.

I. How many boys and how many girls were there in the family?

R. There were four boys and four girls. I had one brother older.

I. Then you were the second child, the oldest girl but the second child.

R. I was the second child and all the others were younger than me. Three of them now have preceded us in death, my oldest brother, my sister who was my mate, just two years younger than myself, and my youngest brother who passed away last week.

I. They've all died young.

R. I'm the only one to really reach fifty years of age.

I. Is that in any way related to your early poverty?

R. I really don't know. My mother died at age 39. She had just turned 39 when she died and she left the five younger children. Three of us were grown.

I. In your family did the children develop special friendships? In a family that size very, often you'll find people pairing off, usually two who are sort of buddies. Did

this happen in your family?

R. Yes.

I. Were you anybody's special buddy or were you, as your mother said, just a second mother to all of them?

R. Really a second mother to all, but I suppose Edna, my sister two years younger than myself, and I were closer together than the others. We shared together quite a bit. Most of them paired. I have one brother who was very close to my mother. Some of them were loners, just on their own.

I. Did you feel closer to your mother than your father?

R. Very, very close. As a matter of fact we shared together just like sisters and they would call me "old little one."

I. What school did you go to in Chicago?

R. I went to Forestville and then to Fesenthal and Wendell Phillips, DuSable and Central Y.

I. That's a high school and a college. Did you go to the college part?

R. To the high school and then extended adult education.

I. I should ask you, if this question is not inappropriate, what you played. I'm not sure you had time to play. Did you have time to play games or just relax when, you were little?

R. I had very little time to play. I used to love to jump rope, but usually if I jumped rope, when I played I had to watch children. I had very little time.

- I. And very little time for playing with friends, I suppose.
- R. That's right and yet I had many friends.
- I. From school? Or church?
- R. School, church and the community.
- I. At what point did you leave high school and go to work? You graduated from high school?
- R. Yes, I graduated after I married.
- I. Oh, alright, tell me about this.
- R. My parents were very poor, and I would hear them arguing about me. I was to finish high school at the age of sixteen and they argued about where I would go to college. I would hear them often. My father would say, "She's not going to 90, I'm not going to send her." My mother desperately wanted me to go, and it made her life very difficult. The decision would have to be made. Well I would be the first child to go to college and I was very young. I was sixteen and coming out. Life was very difficult. I had met my husband when he was fourteen years old, and we were very much in love. He was a member of a very poverty stricken family, too, and we thought we could better our own lives by getting married and going on our own. I felt that this would not create difficulty for my parents. They were not going to send me to college anyway. I later went back and finished high school. Then, although I was working, I went to private schools to take additional business courses. In high school I took a

business course; when I came out I could type seventy words a minute, but I couldn't find a job anyplace. That's why I ended up at the stockyards. They hired me as a typist, but they never gave me the typing job.

I. Did your husband have a job when you got married?

R. When, we got married my husband was working in a dry cleaning store. He worked all during high school in the cleaners and was working there making eight dollars a week when we got married.

I. Which wasn't bad, considering some people weren't making anything then.

R. That's right. He quit that job and started working at Armour and Co., and earned twenty-six dollars a week.

Quite a change! Can you tell me a little bit about how you met him and how your courship developed?

R. I was a member of our high schoolband. I was playing first clarinet in the concert band, and I would walk home carrying my 'clarinet case. Of course Claude was a very attractive young man, and he was one of the persons in school that all the young girls liked. I was walking home one day and one of his friends walked up behind me and said, "My friend would like to meet you." I was not interested, I didn't have boy friends at that time. Then one day he came uninvited to visit me at my home. I opened the door and there he stood. I was shocked, I didn't know whether to welcome him in or excuse myself, so I welcomed him in. I introduced him to my mother

who liked him because he was very attractive in manners as well as appearance. That's how I met him. After that he would carry my clarinet case when we walked home from school.

I. So, it was a school romance then.

R. Yes. Of course he was a junior then and I was a sophomore. Most people thought I was older.

I. Did both your families approve of the marriage?

R. Yes. As a matter of fact, when my mother in law passed away, a very beautiful mother in law, she and I had the same kind of relationship that my mother and her mother in law had, we shared so beautifully together. We loved each other. Even though I had a very difficult time in the beginning of a young marriage, she was very comforting to me and my own mother, which helped me to stabilize our marriage, and we recently celebrated thirty seven years of marriage.

I. Now your husband was employed and you dropped out of school a little before you finished. Then what happened?

R. Then our first child was born. I went back to school, my husband had graduated, and we were preparing to go to college.

I. Both of you?

R. Yes, we were getting ready to go to college, but circumstances prevented it. It was difficult trying to survive. About ten months after my first child was born I was working. About ten months after that I was pregnant with my second child. They're eighteen months apart, and I thought

I'd be pregnant the rest of my life.

I. How did you feel about that?

R. I love children, I love them very much. I came from a big family. I loved them and I wanted children of my own. I wanted to be a full time house wife. I wanted to rear children and be a youth leader. I wanted to work with other young people. I kept feeling that I wanted to go back to school, but I had to take care of the pots that were boiling the most. Before and after the birth of my second child I worked at Armours.

I. Who took care of your children? Did you live with either family?

R. I lived with my mother in law and then with my mother. They assisted us in the very early stage. But then I lost my mother, and my children were still small. I could not find baby sitters. Every morning was a child care crisis, trying to hold my job. What was in our minds then, and we can review our feelings in retrospect, was that the reason we could not go onto college at that time after we got jobs was because we were trying to escape that vicious poverty circle that most families are trapped in with every generation poverty stricken. We were trying to escape it. We thought this would be our way out. We would have to work, and this is what we were attempting to do at that time and now we can see it. I wanted to give some kind of leadership and images to my children and to my brothers and sisters, (not knowing then

that we were going to rear them). But in '44 my mother died leaving these young children. I didn't know what to do with them. My father went to pieces and could not handle the situation.

I. How many small ones were there?

R. Five.

I. What ages were they?

R. The youngest was six or seven years old. She was the baby, she hardly remembers. So you see I had been with them all the time since they were born and at my mother's bedside when she died. We were really surprised. We didn't know that Mother was going to pass away, and when we got there the doctor told us that there was no hope for her. She asked me then if I would take the five children. She said, "I know I'm asking you something very difficult, but God will help you if you and Claude will take them." And she said, "If it's impossible to take all five just take my two little girls," because they were the babies, "and keep them together. Try to keep the children together." Well I promised her that I would at our last meeting together in March. I was trying to make provisions to keep them together. We didn't have a decent place to live.

I. That's a lot to support. I guess you could do it but it must have been hard.

R. I knew then that I'd have to keep working for a long time. I was trying to hold on to my job. I was being laid off

every month because I didn't then have seniority, but I did have the wonderful protection of my union. When I took my leave of absence in 1942 to have my last child I was able to go back after that year with my same seniority and benefits because of my union, and this was valuable to me.

After Mother died I was trying to get things situated so I could find some place to live with the children. At the same time we lived in a terrible rat infested apartment, rats as big as cats. Sometimes we'd have to fight them off the children. I was trying to get out of that place, not knowing where to go. I tried to rent various places, but I was young and my husband was young and they would not rent to us because of our youth. So we kept praying and trying. Then in July my husband was drafted into the Navy. I had just lost my mother. My husband and I had never been in a war before and we didn't know what to think or do. It seemed as if our world had come to an end, and I felt that everything had come down on me. I prayed and trusted God that some way would be made. I applied for an apartment in a housing project, because I felt this would be a means of getting some place decent to live. I was told there was a waiting list, and at first I didn't qualify because I was working at Armour's, and a requirement was to have a 100% defense job to qualify for Altgeld Gardens. I applied for and was hired on about five defense jobs in two or three weeks, trying to qualify, and quit the mall because they turned out not to be 100% defense. Finally I went to Harvey,

Illinois and was hired at Ammunition Container Co., cutting big shells for the army. That was 100% defense and qualified me, but it was way out in Harvey, Illinois. I was living in Robbins, Illinois at the time. My mother in law would take my children each day because there was no one else to care for them while I worked. I had to commute from Harvey to Robbins to my children and from Robbins to my mother's children because they were alone now. My father was not at home half the time.

I. And your grandmother, was she dead now?

R. Yes, my grandmother died in '38. So I was commuting, I'd go to my father's and cook up sufficient batches of food to last until I could get back. Then my mother in law was helping me with my children. My husband was in service, and I was trying to comfort him by traveling back and forth to Great Lakes to see him. At the same time I was directing the choir in Robbins, Illinois at our church. One night my husband came home on leave and we went to be interviewed at the Chicago Housing Authority. When the woman representative interviewed me I told her my plight. She asked me if I could be ready to move next week. It was, I believe, on a Thursday and I said, "I've been ready for years."

Within a week or so we moved into our new home in the Chicago Housing Authority Project. I've owned two homes since then, but I've never experienced the pride and excitement I felt when I walked into my Altgeld Gardens

apartment consisting of a living room, kitchen, utility room, three bedrooms and a bath. I put the key in the lock, opened the door and walked through the rooms to the back door and out and around again to the front, just thanking God.

Then I had a very difficult time trying to get my sisters and brothers. My father, who had by then gone to pieces, didn't want to give them up, and he couldn't keep them. My elderly aunt interceded and took them with her so that we could make the transition more harmoniously. I then wanted to cease working outside of the home in order to care for and rear the children, because it was almost impossible to find a baby sitter in those days during the war. As it happened I was then laid off. I tried to get aid for my brothers and sisters so that the load wouldn't be so great on my young husband, but I was told that as long as my father wanted to keep the children I could not get aid, and the case workers told me that the best thing I could do was to find a job or put them in a home. So I went back to work and tried to train them to take care of themselves.

I. Did you move them to your place?

R. Yes.

I. And your husband was still in the Navy?

R. I moved my brothers first and transferred my sisters by way of my aunt. Later I brought them all together.

I. That's just an inhuman kind of schedule. I don't know how you survived.

R. Our church sings a song, "My Soul Look Back and Wonder." I look back and wonder how I got over it.

I. Now We sort of skipped over your early work experience. Do you want to go back and pick up on your beginning jobs and give me a little bit of information. You said you started first at Armour's and you were hired as a typist but you didn't type?

R. That's right. I went to Armour's to get a job because I heard they were hiring butchers, and I thought anyone who could sharpen a knife on the end of a stove at home could do it anywhere. I sat in the room and when a big husky man came up and started calling for butchers, I lined up with the other people. He tested them and accepted some and rejected others.

I. Did they hire any women as butchers?

R. Yes they did. When I walked up and started trying to sharpen the knife on the steel, he said, "Get out of here, you're not a butcher." I was somewhat dismayed until I looked across the room and saw six young white women. I went over and sat with them because I figured something else was coming up. By this time a charming young woman interviewer, (I think her name was Mrs. McCann.), came out and asked for typists. Well my goodness, that was the only marketable skill I had, but I was too naive to realize that they didn't hire black typists in their front office, so I went up and qualified. The interviewer remarked to me, "You look mighty

young." Then she noticed my rings and said, "Are you married"? I said yes and she replied, "I guess you're old enough to work," so she hired me. She told me to come back Monday morning. When I mentioned to a number of people that I was hired at Armour and Co. as a typist some of them sniggled and I couldn't understand why, because I knew I was hired. I appeared at work Monday morning and they gave me a nurses uniform and a nurses cap and sent me straight to the canning department.

Naturally I was somewhat disgusted and embarrassed and curious as to what had happened to the typing job. Then I suggested to some of the women that I wouldn't be there very long because I was hired as a typist. I asked them, however, how much they made and they told me sixty two cents an hour. Well I knew that the women in the office didn't make sixty two cents an hour, and as you can guess I stayed on the stew line in that department because it was more money than I had ever seen in my life, and after all I went to work because I needed the money. Of course in later years after I became involved in the union I joined in its fight to break down discrimination in the front offices of Armour and Co., not only in Chicago but all over the nation.

I. Did you join the union this time or did you stay that long?

R. I stayed. I began to inquire about the benefits which the union members had. I had a grievance which was won

by the union and this impressed me. I was told that we had the benefits and the grievance protection because of the union, and when I received further information about the union I joined it right away.

I. The big organizing drive was already over?

R. It was over, the union was already in. The first person to approach me was a young black woman named Van Johnson, who was the steward in my department, and she was working on one of the lines. I'll never forget her, she was my first steward.

I. Did you get involved in the union activity at this point or does that come later?

R. That comes later.

I. How long did you stay at Armour before you started looking for these defense jobs?

R. I was at Armour about three years.

I. And then you tried several other jobs looking for a job that would qualify you for the housing project and you ended up in Harvey.

R. That's right.

I. How long did you stay there?

R. Just a few months and then I went back to the Yards. During that time I worked at Gaylord's Hairpin Plant. This is the first place where I participated in an organizing campaign. I was one of the so called "accepted workers" and an excellent piece worker in that department and was a very

favorable person with the supervisors. They were shocked on the day of the union election when they discovered that I was one of the persons who was working from within. As a coincidence, just this morning (March 16, 1977) for the first time since that campaign years ago I saw the union organizer that I was working under. He was at one of our union meetings, and I looked across the room and said, "Stop! Do I recall meeting you?" And we just threw our arms around each other -- the first organizer. And he said, "What are you doing now?"

I. You mean he didn't know?

R. He didn't know I was the same person he knew so long ago.

I. That's amazing. But you helped organize that place.

R. No, we lost the election and I got fired. The UAW was holding that election.

I. How badly did you lose?

R. I don't remember but it wasn't too bad.

I. It was close but you lost and you got fired. I wanted to ask you one question. You had to work on defense to get into Altgeld Gardens. Once you got in you didn't have to stay in defense work?

R. No.

I. That was just a requirement for getting in?

R. That's right, I was laid off. After a period of time -- remember we were in a war and then the end of the war was in

sight.

I. That's right. So what did you do after you got fired?

R. After I got fired I went back to Armour's. In '47 I went to Illinois Meat from Armour's. All during this period I was laid off and taken back to work endlessly.

I. But you managed to keep all the children together?

R. That's right.

I. From that point all the way through you kept the mall? And at what point did your husband return from the war?

R. My husband came back in '45. He was only away one year and then he returned.

I. And where did he go to work then?

R. He went to work at the U.S. Post Office, and he worked there for twenty years.

I. Is he not a minister?

R. Yes, he's a full time minister now. At that time he was not full time.

I. So in '47 you're at Illinois Meat.

R. I decided if I got along at Illinois Meat I would not go back to Armour's because I was continuously getting laid off. I was successful in getting a job at Illinois Meat.

I. In what department?

R. I got hired in the potato canning Department, peeling potatoes.

- I. By machine or what?
- R. With a knife.
- I. Just like at home.
- R. That's right.
- I. Did it pay as well as Armour's?
- R. It paid better, it was piece work. I always like piecework.
- I. Because you're fast.
- R. Yes. And then I worked in the Sliced Bacon Department.
- I. That was supposed to be a good one wasn't it?
- R. Yes.
- I. And they had a union there?
- R. Yes they had a union.
- I. Can you recall any of your experiences there, any complaints you had? How did you happen to get involved with the union when you did finally?
- R. From the experience I had at Armour's I was convinced that it was good to have a union. When I worked there it was just a matter of being asked if I wanted to be a member of the union, and of course my answer was yes. Then I was beginning to listen to some of the union conversations, and I attended a conference for women of our union. I was a member of the United Packinghouse Workers Union at that time. Later in 1968 we merged with the Amalgamated Meat Cutters. At this women's conference we were challenged to accept leadership

and to become more fully involved in the union. Of course, like most people, I appreciated the union, but I was not willing to lend my time and my talent. I was involved in the church. I was very involved in the community working with youth, and I just didn't see that this was the place where I wanted to contribute. At this conference we were told that our talents and skills were needed, and the leaders urged women and blacks and Spanish speaking people to become involved. Well this was a good sign to me because nowhere had I seen the picture that I saw at the union meeting, at the union conference -- blacks, whites, Spanish speaking people, men and women, young and old meeting together, talking about their common problems. This was a very impressive sight. So I went back after that conference, recommending to the women that we ought to find a woman to run for vice president of our local union. That was difficult. None of the women wanted to run, and because I was pushing it so, I guess out of guilt as well as commitment, they challenged me -- why don't you run. And I said, "Oh no, not me. I've got a house full of children. My husband and I in our lives are very close together and wherever one goes we usually go together and, too, I would not be interested." They challenged me but good! One of the elder women by the name of Hattie Gardner, who was so encouraging to me then and until she died years later, said to me, "Honey, if you'll run we'll help you, but we can't back up now. If we don't get a woman these men will

never give us another chance." Then I said okay but I thought I wouldn't win. I said okay I'll run so we'd have a woman running, but I never went to vote. I came back the next day and they were congratulating me and it scared me to death. How am I going to tell my husband now that I'm a leader of the union with all these fellows and not him. I've got to go to the union meeting, you know. How do you do this? It took me three months to tell him.

I. You're kidding! He didn't know for three months?

R. It took me three months to tell him. But I was elected vice president. A few months later the president quit for personal reasons, not because of his relationship with the union. When he quit then I became the first woman president of a UPWA local.

I. What number was that local?

R. Local 56.

I. I never knew that you'd been a local president. Your first job was vice president and your second job was president of a local union. What was this youth work that you were doing in the community?

R. For eleven years my husband and I worked in the Altgeld community with the young people, the teen agers. We were in an isolated community with very little constructive youth activities, and most people like ourselves were apt to be critical but were doing nothing. We felt condemned by that. We decided what we could do and started a youth chorus

where we'd come together to sing and have Bible study. We would visit institutions and sing for mentally ill people. We'd sing in hospitals and jails. We'd go to various places singing, and at a given time we'd have a hundred or more in our group. We would meet at our house, and we would just stretch and spread out whatever we had to eat. We would move our furniture out of the living room into the kitchen and set chairs up in the living room, and the young people would spread around outside the window and up the stairs. When night was over at two or three in the morning we'd put the furniture back and take the chairs out. Those young people, many of them off dope, many of them in the most devastating circumstances, were finding hope and strength just by our sharing. We'd sing and pray together. Now some of them never realized, they've told me since they're grown, that we had jobs, because they would come to our house anytime of the night with their problems. If they got in trouble the bell would be ringing at three in the morning, and we'd get up and spend time with them. Some nights we never went to bed. We'd take our baths, put on our clothes and go straight to the plant and my husband would go straight to the post office. This would go on and on.

Some of the letters I receive from them now are so rewarding. Some have written to say, "Thank you so much. I heard about you and anyone who could take no-singers like me and tolerate them in the chorus deserves an award, " signed

Mary so and so, the principal of such and such a school. Some have gone into various fields and are doing marvelous work. On Sunday many of them came to my church for my birthday celebration, and in tears we laughed about some of the things that took place, but with great joy as some of them said, "Had it not been for this channel, this citadel, this stop gap, we don't know what would have happened to many of our young people." And we replied that, "Had it not been for them we don't know what would have happened to us, because they were drawing from us but we were also drawing from them."

I. Was this church related at all?

R. They belonged to various churches and most of them belonged to no church.

I. You and your husband ran it? Were there any other adults involved?

R. Just my husband and me. As a matter of fact many of the parents were critical because they couldn't understand it. And we couldn't tell them what the young people were involved in, but they tell it now, they tell it publicly. Alvin Lewis, who got his Ph.D. two years ago, will be preaching for us Sunday morning as he does two or three times a year. And he tells it like this: when we found him he was lying on the corner looking up saying, "God, is there anything else?" Wine bottle and dope! He was an elementary school dropout, and it was in our living room that he started going back to high school, taking a correspondence course. He is

one of the few specialists in our country today on family life. He started and it took him twenty years. His wife just received her doctorate this year. But to hear him tell the story of what happened and how his life was turned around is so rewarding to us. Even now, in a much broader way, he can talk about what it means to rescue lives. Here he was a cast-out. As a matter of fact when Alvin Lewis joined the chorus many of the parents pulled their children out, and we prevailed upon them to keep them in so that we could continue to influence them. Very few, if any, of the many young people who came through that chorus during those eleven years are lost. Most of them went on to do very meaningful and very beautiful things. Some of them sing in our church choir and attend our church. Some of them attend other churches, but all of them who are still in the city, or when they visit the city from time to time, come to visit us. When we moved away from Altgeld Gardens in 1955 we soon disbanded the chorus, but our relationship with many of the members continues today.

I. I can see why you'd hate to give that up. Did you have to give that up when you became active in the union?

R. No, I would never give it up, and it was one of the conditions. I told my union leaders that I would never renege in my responsibility to my union but I would never give up my church work. My family and my church work are very, very basic, and they are the foundation on which I am able to survive, so I would never give them up. Nevertheless, I

? refer to the song, "My Soul Look Back and Wonder," and I wonder how I managed to attend to my home, my church, my union, my community and myself without failing any of them.

I. Did you ever suffer any physical effects from overwork?

R. Yes, as a matter of fact I've had two serious bouts with hypertension. The first time was several years ago and then again last year. I just about hit it-- just missed it. I really had a very serious bout. My doctor blames me and told me that my real problem was that I was negligent in taking my medication. I learned my lesson, though I'm a real hater of medication. It's not a very harsh prescription, but I will have to adhere to the regimen.

I. But in those early years you must have been exhausted most of the time.

R. Never ill, always feeling very fine and possessing an over abundance of energy. I require very little sleep even now. The reason I had the attack is that I don't have a way of knowing that I'm really exhausted.

I. Well I think I'd better let you rest now today. You've been going pretty well and it's over our time.

March 31, 1977

I. Last time we had really just begun your union career. We had gone through your early life and all your struggles, your early jobs and your life at Altgeld Gardens, and you'd just started on your union career. Do you want to pick it up where we left off?

R. Well you'll probably have to help me by raising the questions that you're interested in.

I. I remember that you talked about being hired as a typist and not getting to type. I can't recall when you went into your first union job.

R. I was assigned to work in the canning department.

I. Yes, then how did you get from there into a union position? How long did you work in the canning department?

R. I worked in the packing industry about thirteen years altogether and started working in the union in about 1953 after a two day conference with union women and a civil rights conference, (which at that time was called an anti-discrimination conference). That was the year I was inspired to become active in the union.

I. So what was your first union position?

R. I was elected vice president of my local union, which was Local 56 of the United Packing House, Food and Allied Workers union.

I. Was that a full time position or did you work in the

plant?

R. I worked in the plant and handled grievances and problems and helped to negotiate contracts for my union.

I. You did all that and worked in the plant at the same time?

R. That's right.

I. Were you a griever? Did they have a griever-steward election, or did you do that as vice president?

R. As vice president I was a member of the plant grievance committee. When grievances reached the point where the union would have to talk with top management, then the officers of the grievance committee would take on that responsibility. Other than that the stewards in the plant, along with the aggrieved person, would handle it.

I. Had you ever been a griever steward?

R. No.

I. In the grievance procedure you started at the upper levels.

R. That's right.

I. One of the things that I'm particularly interested in is the nature of grievances and also the nature of discrimination, and you're in a good position to comment on this. How much did you find in the nature of sex discrimination and racial discrimination on the part of the company or the union?

R. I suppose I was much more fortunate than a lot of

workers. As I told you when I started at Armour there was quite a bit of discrimination, but at Illinois Meat, where I was working when I was elected vice president of my union, there wasn't very much visible discrimination because the union was pretty strong there. The union had an anti discrimination policy in the contract. The responsibility of the union officers was to police those provisions and to make reasonably sure that they were implemented and not violated by the company or by the workers. We had black and white workers, but of course the majority of the people in that plant were white males, but we did have a reasonable number of black men and women workers. It was a pretty well integrated plant. With the exception of the mechanical and some of the technical departments, blacks and Spanish speaking people, male and female, worked in all areas. It is true that some of the jobs were specifically female jobs or specifically male jobs as had been the custom down through the years. There were some jobs, for instance on our kill floor, where cattle and hogs were killed. In those departments there would be a male and a female working together.

I. Was there a wage differential or did they receive the same pay?

R. There was a wage differential. It was one of the main projects of our union to eliminate the wage differential that existed between male and female. And also there was a wage differential between workers in the North and workers in

the South. So it was a key program.

I. And were they successful in eliminating all the differentials?

R. Yes.

I. About what year, can you remember?

R. By the early 50s we had pretty well eliminated the wage differential that existed between male and female in our major contracts. This was not true in some of the independent plants that we represented, and this was not altogether true in some of the southern areas, but at least it was the objective and the goal. We were at least moving toward that goal. Even now there may be isolated cases where there is subtle discrimination in the wage rates between male and female.

I. Have you now eliminated all except these sort of hidden discriminatory rates?

R. I would think basically so in most instances. However it is the objective of the union to continue to seek out these subtle discriminations. Sometimes a woman's job may not be evaluated as highly as a man's job. The skill that she employs may be more valuable, but the mere fact that because of historical and traditional discrimination against women's work and the attitude that women's work, no matter how valuable it is, is not as valuable as men's work sometimes causes these situations. Where they are discovered the union attempts to eradicate them.

- I. One of the things I'm curious about is the attitude of union members toward programs to end discrimination. I was told that your union once did a study of its own members with John Hope from Atlanta, one of the southern colleges.
- R. I don't know, I don't remember it.
- I. What about the attitude of union members toward the struggle to upgrade women? Did the ordinary members support it, or did you ever get any flak from them?
- R. Some members did and some resisted it, just as some members supported anti discrimination programs that we had in our union and some did not, but nevertheless the union continued to educate the white workers to the truth that they had a mutual interest with blacks in eradicating all vestiges of discrimination. Over a period of years some men and women began to see this as of great value to their own well being. Also we've endeavored to get the members to understand that the only way any of them can be strong enough to protect and defend themselves is to band together with other workers who have common interests and common goals.
- I. One of the male leaders of your union once told me that he felt the leadership, at least, clearly understood the dangers of not being fair and square with all different ethnic groups and that their hearts were really behind a totally democratic union, but looking back on it he felt that, although they were perfectly sincere about their efforts to help women, that they really didn't quite understand the

nature of their problems in the same way that they did the nature of racial problems. How do you feel about that? Do you feel that the union leadership in general really understood what the women's problems were?

R. No because that's so difficult to understand if you're not a woman. We needed their willingness to learn and to share in the concerns of our women. I don't think all of them understand, but I think that enough of our men leaders are sincere about making an attempt to at least hear women's problems and to adequately deal with them and recognize that not enough has been done to resolve the problems that working women have. This is also true of all women. And this attitude has existed for some time even before the current Women's Movement. I never could have gotten the opportunity that I have had these many years had there not been some men who were willing to share with me. There were a limited number of women who had begun to organize themselves in the trade unions and use their power to advance themselves to accomplish their own specific goals, so we had to rely on some men to encourage us, to work with us and to share with us in some of the leadership positions.

I. Would you feel that the men in your union were exceptional in the extent to which they did that? Or would this be rather typical of the trade unions?

R. No, I think perhaps it was the philosophy of the union and its commitment to make life better for working people,

with special emphasis on the wage earner, working class people. It was a union made up of the average rank and file working class industrial people, so we had some of the very poorest people as members of that union and on up the line. In order to at least meet their needs we had to know what their problems were and make some commitment to deal with them. Of course our union also advocated leadership from within the ranks. In order to get that leadership members had to be trained. In our union, the Packinghouse Workers union, you could be the president of the local union no matter who you were if you could get a majority of the votes. This had its advantages and its disadvantages. It created problems if a person didn't know how to successfully move and motivate people, to coordinate and to plan a program. So the union set up leadership conferences and schools to train leaders; they trained rank and filers right out of the shops.

I. Was it originally because of a lack of leaders, or is this something they continued to do? Did they continue to welcome rank and file members into leadership?

R. They continued to do this.

I. Up to this day?

R. That's true. They thought the people who were the victims could learn to be the best leaders. After all, many books were written about us, but we happened to be the living books.

I. You are the primary sources.

- R. That's right and because of that many of our people have gone onto be very effective, not only in the union but in the community, churches, in various institutions, in the political areas. We've been very, very effective.
- I. I know people in other unions who have leaned on your union for help. Just from interviewing other rank and file workers I've heard where they've turned to your union rather than their own for help. How long did you remain vice president before you moved into some new capacity?
- R. I was vice president for about six months. Then the president of the local union resigned and I was elected president of the local union. I was the first woman president of a UPWA local.
- I. How long did you serve as president then?
- R. I was president for about a year and a half, but during that time I was appointed to serve as an international representative for the union to organize and service it.
- I. What was your job, as international rep.?
- R. To organize the unorganized, to service the local unions, to negotiate contracts.
- I. And how long did you keep that position?
- R. I kept that position for about twenty years, except that two years later I was also assigned to serve as a coordinator for the former District 1 of the United Packinghouse Workers. I had a five state area to cover and I would coordinate the programs, set up stewards and officers

classes and set up and direct the conventions. Also I would negotiate, service the local unions, handle their grievances, represent the union in community affairs and political action and plan their fund raising.

I. What a horrendous job!

R. It was an experience.

I. When did you become especially involved in women's affairs in the union? Didn't you hold a particular position?

R. From the very beginning. I started and became inspired at a women's conference. From that time on our union had several programs designed to develop the interest of the union around definite issues. We had anti discrimination committees, Spanish speaking committees, women's activities committees and farm-labor committees. We had various people who were responsible for those programs and I was responsible for the Women's Activities Committee.

I. For the whole union?

R. For the district, for the five state area until I became Program Coordinator. Then I had the responsibility of coordinating the activities of all of these committees.

I. You started with the Women's Committee and ended up coordinating all of them?

R. Right, but still responsible for the women's program. Also, since we had no women's department in the Packinghouse Workers Union, and the women's program emanated

from our anti-discrimination department, I always represented the union nationally in all women's affairs.

I. Could you describe briefly what the women's program consisted of what kind of things you did for women or tried to do with women?

R. Well yes. Number one, we tried to motivate women within the unions to become active. Naturally we tried to help them to understand the structure of the union and how to effectively deal with their problems through that structure. We also tried to inspire and encourage them to accept leadership roles and then to develop and help train them so that they were prepared to assume those roles. As a matter of fact women were inspired during that time, and we were being encouraged by our brothers to take on leadership roles. A number of women later accepted the role of president in their various unions. Some of them went on to be secretaries, treasurers, members serving on the Board and District Council leaders. Whenever we set up a program, whether it was a leadership conference, convention, etc., we would also always place special emphasis on women being selected to attend. We would send an announcement, with the approval of the director of that district, to a local advising that a school or a conference would be held on a given date. We urged them to include in their delegation Negro members (as blacks were then called), Latino members and women. We placed great emphasis on it and we highly praised local unions

that had a combination of these groups attending conventions. It served notice that this was desirable and most of the locals responded. Sometimes women would be elected to serve, but for many reasons, and some of them very valid, they would not accept. We'd have to encourage women, to prepare them in advance, so at least when the locals did select women they were available and ready. We also tried to help our union teach women how to understand the politics of getting selected as delegates and how to be supportive of each other. For instance, if a union wanted to send two women to a conference, certainly twenty couldn't demand to go because they finally would end up with no women going at all. So if they wanted to send two women the women members would meet together in committees and try to decide who ought to attend and they would support those women. I found that when the women could be gotten to agree among themselves and work together the men were pretty cooperative. I am very appreciative of the fact that they were very cooperative. A few of the men had problems, but it wasn't too difficult to win them over, especially as long as we hung in there and stood together.

I. Were blacks and Latinos encouraged to learn the same kind of political lessons?

R. Yes.

I. So they all knew not to cut each others throats but to

stick together.

R. I'm not saying we didn't have problems, but as long as the goals and the attitudes were being dealt with it was a much more promising situation.

I. Were there any particular people in your union when you first went in who appealed to you as being especially helpful or supportive or dynamic?

R. Yes, there were a number of them. There was one woman especially who really encouraged me. She was much older than I, and at that time she herself was a leader but felt she had gone as far as she could go. I was reluctant because I didn't want to overshadow her when she had been there all the time. But she continued to urge me and always told me that if I served I could depend upon her for whatever I needed of her. Her name was Hattie Gardner, she is deceased now. Then there was another woman who was very supportive. She was Bessie McCally, who is still living but retired. There were many difficult moments that I faced, but it was always encouraging to see Bessie and Hattie there sharing and encouraging me and offering their help. Then there were men. I was trained in my first year by a man named Sam Parks, who was a very, very hard hitting person, very committed and dedicated. When I first walked in the office he said to me, "In the hour of criticism your greatest defense will be your production." I never forgot that.

I. You've been a chronic over worker ever since, or you

already were.

R. I always was. I worked twenty years under Charles Hayes, who then was a newly elected director. He started in May as the first black director of this district. Then I started in June to serve as an international rep. Director Hayes was a very encouraging and very inspiring person. Together we shared many difficult moments because he was a black male with a predominant white membership and I was a black female with a predominant white male leadership, and here we were two top leaders in the district.

I. But you had support from your people, otherwise you wouldn't have been there:

R. That's right. We had support, and there were some areas where there were terrible racist attacks.

I. Can you describe some of the kinds of problems you had?

R. There were times when we would go into the down state Illinois area and negotiate all day long and not be able to find a place to sleep at night or a place to go in and have a hot meal. We'd have to buy crackers and cookies and lunch meat and have our lunch in the car after we had negotiated all day long with our membership. But in time, after we had worked and shared with them and they saw that it didn't make any difference what color we were and that we were dedicated, committed leaders and would go all the way to help them win a decent contract, we were accepted and supported by the

membership.

I. You mean the people who were there originally just had not made any provisions for you, the local people?

R. Some of them found it difficult to accept black leaders.

I. Did they realize that you were not able to use the restaurants and hotels, or had they just not even thought about it?

R. They realized that, but that was the policy and the, law in this little town. Eventually we had a talk with them, as we usually would do once we started working with our people, and they themselves broke down the prejudice. One thing that broke the ice was an eleven or twelve month strike in which I had the responsibility, under the direction of Director Hayes, of traveling around the five state area making appeals for assistance. We also put on special projects to make Christmas a meaningful one for the children of the strikers. We'd have to go in there to share with them in the soup kitchens, etc. So just as crises and struggles usually bring people together, I suppose this was one of the means that brought us together. After that they talked with the manager of one of the motels and also one of the restaurants, and we formed a very marvelous warm relationship with the children and the wives and husbands of all of our members. These were roads that we knew we had to travel over, and that was part of our responsibility, to try to break down

these barriers, and they weren't always easy to do. But with our faith in people we were willing to accept hardships in order to break through.

I. Did it ever seem to you that being a woman caused you as many problems as being black?

R. Sometimes more.

I. Really, in what way?

R. I find myself as a black woman oft times fighting on three fronts -- the worker's front, the black front and the female front -- trying to overcome all of these pressures. And I got a three fold impact of all of these discriminations "isms." Sometimes I think it's much more difficult as a black woman, because we have to carry the burden of all these problems. It isn't always easy for women, and especially for black women, because we have the white male, the white female and the black male all three looking down upon us, and we black women are on the bottom rung.

I. Can you give me any examples of this kind of problem in relation to your unionwork? Of being a woman -- or was it always that you were feeling all three at once so that you couldn't separate them?

R. Sometimes I felt all three at once and sometimes I had individual experiences with one or two of them. There've been times when I've gone into negotiate a contractor handle a grievance. On one occasion I was assigned by Mr. Hayes to go alone. When I arrived at the plant I could hear voices

from upstairs when I was mounting the stairs. "It's a woman and she's black," they said. Well sometimes the company representatives sit in awe because there were some things that they couldn't deal with while trying to handle the contract. And then some of them would be polite, saying, "Oh my, now we're going to have beauty." And then I would answer, "And brains, too, I hope," to try to break the ice. Well the first thing I've always done is to try to establish a relationship with people. There is a bottom line which indicates that we're all human, and it is important that we overcome the myths and the fears and cope with the quality and fact of our humanness. My approach and manner of dealing with people helps them to understand that I am not asking any special favors, that I came to do a job and that I'm capable and qualified to do it. I don't want to be a threat to anyone, but at the same time I am not going to cut myself short. Neither am I going to cut the workers short and so I just proceed to do what I have to do. In time I have found that there's a part of all of us that's touchable if you can get beyond the veneer.

I. What's the difference in the kind of problems you might have with black men and white men or with white women? I notice you didn't mention black women. I gather that you generally found them supportive.

R. No, not always. We have problems, too. Let's face it, all of us are really trying to break into this white male

club. White men in our society are really in control, and they don't relinquish control easily, but the rest of us are trying to break into that club and become a part of it. So there is terrible resistance on the part of white males. They don't understand the problems of their own white women. And white women, in my opinion, have not dealt honestly and fairly with their white men, and that makes it much more difficult. White men have tried to make white women feel that they are something special and better than blacks. They try to protect them, and in doing this they have destroyed too many of our white sisters. They've denied them an opportunity to fully develop themselves, to be free human beings, to help make decisions, to help really be a part of what they were created to be. And too many of our white sisters have accepted this because it is a comfortable feeling for a white woman to have somebody even below them, somebody they can feel superior to. So they have helped exploit and oppress the black men and black women. History brings it to light. I don't blame them all for it. I think that some of them have been guilty without really assessing their actions and knowing what was really happening. Black men have been oppressed and we've been used against each other. They've been told, through these many years that they ought to be equal to white men with the same old cliches like, "Pull yourself up with your bootstraps," when they don't even have any boots. Frustration comes! How do you pull

yourself up by your bootstraps when you don't even have boots, not to mention straps, and no way of getting them due to discrimination. The black male has been exploited and denied, not because he isn't capable but he's been made to feel that he is not capable. The black woman, who has had to watch her man being exploited and denied, has given much to insure the survival of her black men and black children. She has given much and yet in return she's received very little. The white male actually feels threatened; the white female feels threatened; and the black male feels threatened, but the black woman has been the one most of all willing to remain at the bottom and support whatever was on top. If it meant cleaning the white woman's house when she had no house of her own, (and some of them had homes of their own which were better than the white women's), in order to survive she subjected herself to this demeaning status and would clean the homes. She would take care of their children when she had no one to take care of her own children, and then she'd have to go home and take care of her own. This has formed, in my opinion an attitude toward black women which has been suppressive and demeaning to them. It's been a real struggle for the black woman to feel that she is just as good and that she is equal. That's why I'm a person of strong faith. Somehow, something inside gives us the strength and the courage to survive in spite of adversity. When you look at the work that black women have done for, these many years, and when you look at what

they have received in return, it takes a great deal of loyalty, courage and strength to survive. Now I know that there are a few who have escaped, and their plight has not been quite the same. But I don't care whether they're on top or on the bottom, the mere fact that the pigmentation of their skin is visible and it is black, they too, if the truth is told have been discriminated against and dehumanized.

I. So you say that all these other people feel threatened. Is it, in a sense, because they know that here is somebody who is stronger than they are, because they doubt that they might have survived under the same circumstances?

R. I think it goes a little deeper than that. I think that discrimination in this country of ours is a very profitable business. It is economically profitable to discriminate. It's a matter of who the so called "nigger" in our society is going to be. It is regrettable, when you think in terms of the white people, there are decent white men and women. Had it not been for some of them we never would have broken through and come out of the degradation of slavery that we've come through. Some of us are still enslaved. But it's a profitable business in this country to have somebody who is enslaved, whether it's the white male's wife or the black male or the black woman or whether it's the black children.

I. Do you think we've really dealt with that part of the problem?

R. Not the way that we should, because I think we still

have some forms of slavery.

I. Political?

R. We still have political and economic slavery in this country. There are some people right now who are the "living dead." There's no hope for them. It takes money to survive, and most of us would like to dismiss it by saying they're too lazy and won't work. But I remember a woman who came to us some years ago during the sixties and said, "They say we're lazy." She came from the South. "I'm fifty five years old and I've worked all my life since I was five years old. That's fifty years." She said, "I just never got anything for my work." She is not a person to dismiss because she worked and somebody exploited her. Today we have millions of people who work for what we call the minimum wage, \$2.30 an hour, which amounts to about \$4,600 a year after working about 2,000 hours. That's enslavement to me, that's slave labor. Any time people are willing to work a job and still cannot provide at least the basic needs, for themselves and their families that's slavery.

I. So what you're saying is that color and sex have just been an excuse, but the process is the same, regardless of color or sex as long as it goes on.

R. That's right.

I. As I recall you were involved in that original conference of CLUW when it was started, and the first meeting was held in Chicago. Is that correct?

Yes.

I. Were you very much involved in putting that meeting together?

R. Yes, I was one of the nine women who originally met at the airport to decide that it was time to call trade union women together.

I. Could you go into the background of that a little bit to tell me what you remember about the other people and how it all started? What the feelings of the originators were?

R. We were called together to discuss the forming of an organization that would bring together women trade unionists. Many of us were members of other women's organizations such as NOW, the National Organization of Women.

I. Were you a member of NOW?

R. No, I was one of the persons who attended the founding conference of NOW. I was working with the President's Commission on the Status of Women on the Protective Labor Legislation Committee, and on the heels of that commission's work NOW was founded. Some of the women who had been attending the commission's sessions formed NOW. Some of us who were trade union women saw NOW as a very, very valuable organization, but we felt that trade union women could not really effectively participate in it because we needed to organize among ourselves first and then ally with other segments of the Women's Movement. There were women's

political caucuses, NOW and church women's groups that were formed, but we had no trade union women's group. We thought that it was time to form one. We could see the Women's Movement moving and surfacing as it had never done before, and we knew that we had to be part of it. No one could represent the trade union movement like we could.

I. So who took the initiative in calling the trade union women together?

R. Olga Madar, who was then the Vice President of the United Autoworkers Union, called it together, and nine of us met at the airport.

I. And from that the organization originated?

R. Well we had regional conferences to sample the interest of women trade unionists. The first regional conference was held here in Chicago where 99 women were invited and more than 200 attended. Then we had a series of regional conferences around the country culminating in our founding conference here in Chicago in March of 1974.

I. I remember that because I went to it, and it was almost like a religious experience. There was such a spirit to the thing that I have not seen before or since. And I am just curious, how has CLUW gone since then?

R. I served as the program coordinator for that conference. And CLUW, I guess, is still in its infant stage. Most of us who are very involved are full time national and international employees of our unions. We're stretched out

so thin, and there are a limited number of trade union women who are mobile and who could really do the job that we need to have done. We now have approximately 3,500 members throughout the country. We were bogged down in the early stages of our organization with some inner problems. We had serious political groups that had become a part of CLUW, and many of them wanted to steer it in a direction that we did not think was in the best interests of trade union women.

I. What did they want to make of it?

R. Well they wanted a women's union and we were advocating working through the structures of our unions, recognizing the problems. Even though the unions had not given the kind of recognition and support that women required, the union still was the best channel through which we could win our objectives, and we were content to remain within the structure. Therefore we denied those who thought we could serve our best interests by forming women's unions. Some of us had come through that already. There were those who thought that blacks ought to form black unions, and we strongly took a position that blacks had to remain within the mainstream of the labor movement and whatever problems they had would be dealt with by labor.

I. So this flies right in the face of your whole philosophy as you have just been expressing it, which is that isolation doesn't improve the situation. Have you overcome this initial problem in CLUW?

Yes we did, we had a rough year. In the first place many of our sisters who had different political views were very capable of giving the kind of leadership that we needed but were not willing to do so. This was upsetting. We had to take time to develop leaders. We needed lay leaders as well as top leaders to keep in motion and to really establish an effective network. This we have not been able to do completely. We adopted a constitution which really is difficult for us to adhere to with the type of organization that we have. It's loaded with a lot of unnecessary directives, and it takes an awful lot of time to implement it. So that bogs us down when we ought to be recruiting and building and strengthening our women. There are six million women in the organized labor movement, so we retalking about teh, fifteen or twenty thousand women members. I'm hoping that after we have our convention this year we will get back in the direction of building CLUW as we started out in 1974.

I. What do you think its major objectives should be -- primarily just to get women into the union as active people in official capacities, or do you see other things in addition to that?

R. There are other things. CLUW has atleast four major objectives and that's to bring women together so that they can collectively talk about their problems, identify them and talk about ways and means of resolving those problems. We feel that this can best be done when there's a sharing of the

experience and the knowledge and skills that some of our sisters have. Now we're committed to helping our sisters accomplish their goals in the workplace: better wages and working conditions. We must also be sure that there's someone in each workplace very sensitive to the needs of women. We feel that women benefit by all of their contract provisions because the contract covers every worker, but there are special needs that women have and they expect their unions to be concerned about those needs and to help them in finding job satisfaction.

Then the other thing is that we want to help our women to be acquainted with and to understand the affirmative action programs and to help their unions to be responsive to those affirmative action programs. Another thing is that we are committed to political action. We realize that all of the needs of trade union members cannot be achieved at the bargaining table. Some of them go through political channels. So we've got to train and involve our people in the political processes, and women can be one of the greatest political forces in this country. So we've got to inspire and develop them, teach them, show them that it is in their best interests to participate and how to do so.

The other point is that out of approximately thirty-seven million women in this country who work, only about six million are organized. Out of about ninety million people who work at all in this country only about twenty four or

twenty five million are in unions or associations. Women are good organizers. It's been proven in their homes, in their communities, in their churches, but we don't have many women organizing in the trade union movement. So number one, we're encouraging women to prevail upon their unions to organize women, to go to those industries where women are concentrated and to organize them. Many of them are in some of the lowest paid industries in this country, and some of the workers are among the most disadvantaged, so they must be organized. Then the women must be trained so that they can help organize, not only other women but men, too. Organizing the unorganized is one of our key programs, working within the structures of the union and aspiring for leadership in the unions, in the community and, yes, in the political areas of our country are goals that CLUW is committed to. Naturally that is a great responsibility helping to guide our women in that direction.

I. How helpful have the men of other unions been? I know that your union and the Auto Workers and a few unions have been.

R. The Teachers Union, the I.U.E., the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers, The Communications Workers of America, the Teamsters Union, the Retail Clerks Union and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Union have all been good.

I. What about other unions? Have the women been

getting support for their CLUW activities or have they had a battle? Or do you know?

R. I think that most of the unions, once they began to notice that we were really doing something serious, gave us their support. They discovered that this was in the best interests of the total labor movement and that we wanted nothing separate or special for ourselves but were committed to work with our unions. We wanted to be full partners with our union brothers to build the union and make it strong. Since many of them began to realize that, we have been getting fair support.

I. One of the women that I talked to told me that she thought the biggest problem that they still had was to get women out and get women active. Rather than resistance the problem was still one of encouraging women. I'm sure a lot of this problem comes from the fact that many of them are wives and mothers as well as workers. How did you manage to handle the problem of raising your children? I talked to you about this when we first started, about the time when they were small. But all through the years, how did you handle that problem?

R. It wasn't easy, it was a very difficult problem. But I was more fortunate than many of my sisters because I have a very cooperative husband, one who shared in almost every area of the children's lives. I usually tell people that we reared our children together and this is true. We understood

that my working was in the best interests of our family and also that it was good for me to be able to make my contribution. We were both very fortunate that I was able to make a contribution in the union, which is a people's organization, and my husband was able to make his contribution in the church, which is also people based and people concerned. So we considered ourselves very fortunate, and we were committed to do whatever we could to encourage and to strengthen each other. We've endeavored to do this over the years. There have been times when it has been very difficult for both of us, but somehow we've survived the crises.

I. Have you had other relatives beyond the very early years that you could rely on for help or baby sitters?

R. No, except my mother in law, who was a very beautiful person. She did what she could to help, but we wanted to rear our own children so we just had to take turns. We were the children's baby sitters when we couldn't get a neighbor.

I. You could schedule your careers so that one of you was there when needed?

R. That's right, and then the older children would help out.

I. How many children do you have?

R. Well we have two sons of our own and I have five brothers and sisters whom we reared as our own children after my mother passed away.

- I. That's right, you always had a full house.
- R. In addition we worked with young people in the community, so sometimes we had anywhere from seven to a hundred extra.
- I. What about other women that you know who are working in the plants? Do you think that this is a major problem in their becoming active in the union? And do you see a solution to it? Is it strictly up to them to educate their husbands? Or do they go ahead and do it anyway? How do they handle this?
- R. No, it isn't strictly up to them. I think we have to change the attitudes and atmosphere in our society. That's why the Equal Rights Amendment becomes so important. It's not a panacea for all of the ills that women face, but it is a national committment to something that is very, very positive and very basic. Recognition of women, the fact that they work for the same reasons men work is primary. Then we must recognize that women are, confronted with certain problems. It's not just the woman's problem alone. It's the responsibility of our entire society; it's the responsibility of each of us as individuals to help resolve these problems, because we are all recipients of whatever good is derived from the freedom of women to contribute. My husband is a recipient of my freedom to develop myself. Today he's a pastor of a church, but I'm able to function very well to help not only him but other members in the church because I've been given the oportunity to grow and develop.

I'm able to help my children and I'm able to help other children. I'm able to help other people; I'm able to help those within my society. I had the opportunity to develop and grow. Think what could happen if we could motivate more women to make whatever contribution they can and encourage them to do it. We feel that it is vital for us to encourage each other and at the same time encourage women to strengthen their family life. I think that's important.

I. Alright, now this becomes a problem because some people have said that this movement for women's independence has hurt family life, so I'm really anxious to hear this explained.

R. I don't think that's so at all. I think we've confused it. I think it is important for a woman to be able to develop herself, to strengthen herself and be good to herself so that she'll be able to help strengthen and be supportive of others. I think that when a woman is able to do things for herself it's like preparing the vessel through which all the other good things that are expected can come. If there is no preparation for the vessel, then it is almost hopeless or reaches the point where there is nothing more that she can give or wants to give. Although it's not always easy, I advocate and encourage women. The poorer the family the more difficult it becomes. But I always feel that a woman owes much to her husband and to her children; she owes much to the world in which she lives and especially she owes much to

herself or else she has little to give to all others.

I could agree with that, which is probably irrelevant to this interview. But how would you propose to enable women to do that if they want to do it and if they're thwarted by either lack of money or many small children or an uncooperative husband? What would you do in that situation? Can you imagine what you would do or what you would recommend to a friend?

R. Well, basically from a layman's point of view, I would say first you must determine that it can be done. Women have to be awakened, some don't think anything can be done.

I. That's the problem? The fear that nothing can be done?

R. That's right. Some feel hopeless and helpless. It's possible for us not to be aware of where we really are and for some of us not to know what is really wrong with us. Sometimes we go to extremes trying to search out. We hear young people saying, "I'm trying to find out who I really am." Trying to find an identity, that's what I mean. Women like us must try to reach as many women as we possibly can and create awareness. I take, every opportunity I can to talk to women in churches, unions and other institutions. I try to talk about the many things that women can do, realizing that it's not easy and they can't do all of them. Many women can't travel like I travel, but they can travel from room to room and realize some accomplishments. They may not be able to travel

in terms of making your plans.

R. That's right.

I. Do you think child care facilities are essential to the further liberation of women?

R. Very, very essential. I abhor the idea that once a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby it's something she "caught" or "got" and she's stuck with it alone for the rest of her life. I think it's unfair. I think the responsibility of rearing children should be placed upon the shoulders of the man and the woman and the society in which we live, because after a few years if we are productive and successful in the rearing of our children they can go out in the world and make their own contribution to society. I think society ought to be willing to invest in its children from the time of conception, so that the mother can get good prenatal care and be taught how to carry her baby. Once the child is born some care and instruction and training should be provided. Many women don't know how to care for their children.

I. Do you feel any conflict ever about some of the things that the women's Movement says about freeing women from child care and the need for better child care?

R. I don't know. I imagine some women in their frustrations would go to extremes, and I don't like to judge what they say without knowing why they say it. I've heard women say, "I don't want another child," because of the

traumatic experience and the burden and the pressure of trying to rear children, and still when they conceive again you couldn't take that child away from them. When that child is born it's the delight of their lives. I came from a very poor family. I had a very beautiful mother, and I can always remember her saying to all eight of us, "God, thank you for my children. They're the most precious possessions I have." She could hardly feed us at times, but she made us feel that we were God's gift to her, that we were something precious and important. I'm sure that she didn't want to have eight children, not being able to care for them. I think there are a lot of women like that. But once a child is born if the parent or parents are poor or unable to take care of that child, they can look forward to fifteen or twenty years of toil and very, very heavy responsibility. That's what I think is very cruel in a society as sophisticated as ours. I think we can provide adequate child care whether a mother works or not. Usually she's assigned the responsibility of motherhood by the society in which we live. What are the reliefs that we can give her so that if she's willing to conceive and bear children she can also do some other things for herself that she enjoys? She can meet other people, share with other people who are her peers, develop her mind, develop her spirit. There are many things she can do besides rear children, as beautiful as that is. So I think that child care is essential, and this is especially true for working

mothers. Most women work because of compelling economic reasons, and it's a critical state to be in when you don't know from one day to the next where your children are going to be. It may be very damaging to have to send your children to baby sitters who are not trained and not capable of handling them. I think if we love our children as we say we do we ought to have the best child care centers in the world with the finest of trained and competent attendants and teachers to give our little children the best start possible. I think all of us can reap the great dividends from this, or we can continue to pay dearly for our neglect of our future citizens.

I. That could become a major profession, considering the amount of work that goes into good child care.

R. That's right.

Where are you going now for CLUW -- to Israel and where else?

R. We'll be going to Israel, to Stockholm, Sweden and to Paris.

I. You're meeting with trade union women?

R. About twenty trade union women from our country will be visiting these three European countries to study their child care programs.

I. Is this connected with CLUW or the AFL-CIO?

R. CLUW received the grant from the German Marshall Fund of the U.S.A. and they (CLUW) are sponsoring the trip, because

all of us who are trade union women are very concerned about children and are working for comprehensive, quality child care here in our own country.

- I. So you're beginning your study in earnest and I'll anticipate hearing from you when you get back. You can give me some good advice about what CLUW will be doing in the future, hopefully.

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