

THOMAS YEAGER
INTERVIEW JANUARY, 1984

R: As he and the _____ secretary that we had here, were the people who went to the convention back in 1966 and were able to establish a retiree's chapter in all the UAWs and you see over there we have our Plack there, and it tells you there the inception of the chapter there..

I: I'm really most interested in Local 600 during the 40s and 50s. That's the focus of my study. And you were involved with, during the 40s, you were in miscellaneous is that right?

R: That's right.

I: I want to ask you a little bit about your experiences back in those days when the union was first organized. First of all how you yourself got involved with the union. Were your parents involved with unions?

R: No. My parents died when I was very young. In fact, my mother died when I was about 7 years old. And then after the World War was over my father went back to Yugoslavia. Of course, at that time it wasn't Yugoslavia, it was Austria-Hungary. And then it was split up after the war and became Yugoslavia and all that. So I remained here and had no inclination as young as I was that he was going to take me back to Europe. And he went back to Europe and he died over there. And so practically from the time I was oh, say 9-10 years old I was practically already trying to make a living for myself. And I was dividing my time between my half brothers and half sisters, they called them stepbrothers and stepsisters. There was children from the

father's side and children from the mother's side and I was the only child of that marriage. But in the early days I went back to Pennsylvania. And I got over there after the war was over and I got a job. And I stayed with these people right outside of Washington, Pennsylvania. The farm was what they called, there was a village right close within a mile of that they called it Buffalo, Pennsylvania. It's still on the map. And from there I stayed with those folks until the boys came back from the _____. Some of the boys that were in the army occupation after the First World War. When the boys all came back and things well the man told me he said well you have been a good boy and you've worked hard but I think we have found a home for you if you would like to stay. So they took me to these old people that didn't have any children and they had a big farm and I went to school there and their name was Maxwell and I went to school and went three years to high school there and I stayed with them for oh, about 7 or 8 years and finally I decided oh well what happened then was that these folks decided they wanted to take a vacation. They found another place for me if I wanted to stay. So I stayed with these folks for one year, I think it was, it was about a year. I finished high school and then pretty soon I decided hey I'm going to get out on my own. And I went back to Ohio, Akron, Ohio and got a job in the B.F. Goodrich Company inner tube department. So from there I just stayed here awhile and pretty soon I'd get a longing I don't want to stay here anymore and I want to go here you know. So I went back to Pennsylvania, and back in the coal mines and I had a brother and sister and had relatives that worked in what they called Crucibal, Pennsylvania and there was a big steel outfit and they had

their own coal mine. So I had a half brother there that took me in the mine with him. And I got my first taste of it and I was scared to death.

I: Were the mine workers organized there?

R: Not at the time when I was there. They had been organized years before then. And my wife's father and a number of people who worked for the Oliver Snyder Steel Corporation had three big mines outside of Uniontown, Pennsylvania and they all belonged to this they had numerous mines? Where was I back in Washington, Pennsylvania now I'm in Crucibil. So after I was there for awhile, I met my wife. She was staying with an aunt there in the coal mines. Her uncle worked in the coal mine there. And after about six weeks of the clings we got married. This marriage has lasted it will be 59 years coming this April. We have had five children. And the oldest son was born in Crucibil, Pennsylvania. In fact we got married in a little town along the river by the name of Fredericktown, Pennsylvania. And then we stayed there about three years and I started learning how to cut coal (?). But there was no union. And we worked all hours. You go in some night and you had a bad night you could be in there all night, come out the next morning you would meet those guys going, the coal loaders would go in the morning and they you would meet them going down to the mine. About three years and I got scared. They had a big mine explosion down about maybe seven or eight miles from where I worked in the mine. I worked where they had a big explosion what they called the Mother mine. It was about 289 miners got killed. I went down there for rescue work and I saw all that down there, women and children. I came home and I told my wife, I said "hey, I'm going to

get out of here. Where are you going. I said I'm going to Detroit. The reason we picked that out is because we had my wife's uncle was already here. My wife's uncle the neighbor next door, he's dead now. Those miners you see when they were trying to get the unions in these miners were fired by the company and when they got things straightened out these people were on the list and never got called back, and never got hired back and that's why so many people, miners were migrating into Michigan. They came here to get jobs and you got jobs at Ford's. So that's what happened to me.

I: What year did you come here.

R: I came here in 1928. I started working for Ford in September of 1928. Just before this I left one part out. I had my toes broke in the mine. I went in one afternoon to cut coal and the place was bad. We put up some props thought we would hold a slate up. The cement slate came down and you had to wear rubber boots there was no such thing as toes or anything like that you know, rubber boots and that rock come down there and that slate come down there and caught my toes. They had to haul me out of there with a motor that night. When I came here to Dearborn and I got a job imagine with one shoe on and one bedroom slipper and they still hired me.

I: Why do you think they hired you? It sounds like it was very hard.

R: They needed men. You can just imagine this big Rouge plant at one time 80,000. Now I don't know, its 14 or something. But anyway, I got a job right away and I worked in production. And--

I: What building did you come into at first. Which building did you work at--?

R: The B building

I: The B building?

R: The B building. And I worked in there off and on, we worked in those days you know there was no union, and you had a job and you didn't have a job. There have been model changes right now. The old model goes off and the new one follows it. Sometimes you are off three months, five months out of a job. There was no unemployment compensation. There were no benefits of any kind. You never knew where your next dollar was coming from. In the meantime though I stayed hired in '28. But in 1932 that's when the Depression came, remember. The depression came along and I got layed off. By that time I think we had three or Four children. And so what I was going to do, oh _____. My brother-in-law, my wife's brother and I we decided, we both had cars, we decided we were going to go into the trucking business. What are you going to buy a truck with? Okay so I went to Ohio and thought I would get some money from my brother-in-law and he said to me, what are you crazy? He said now the trucking business going down like this and things, he said you think I'm going to give you money to buy a truck. He says what are you going to do with it? You ain't got nothing to haul. Well I still insisted I want to own a truck, wanted to go into trucking business. My brother-in-law could do the driving. So I went to Pennsylvania. I went back to Pennsylvania and I knew a fellow I worked with on a cutting machine. I said I need \$3,000. He said, for what? I said to buy a hauling truck. I said that's the down payment, I've got to have. He said I haven't got \$3,000 for you to buy a truck. So I came back and you know what we did? We turned our cars in and we got a dump truck. We were doing all right, my brother-in-law was working up at Fords you

know where they were making those stout airplanes. And I was working with the truck. What happened was winter set in, see in the fall they were making new roads and new streets and all these subdivisions you know, and things and so it was cement, just cement, that was all we hauled, cement, cement. When they folded up, there I was. So I said to my brother-in-law I said well I'm going back to the coal mines. Its the only thing left for me to do. I have to leave my family here and go back and I got to make a dollar somewhere. So I went back and I was never so glad in my life when I got back out of there.

I: How long did you have to stay for the second time?

R: I stayed about six months and then I came back home. But the reason I came back I finally got a notice from the Ford Motor Company to report to work. I went back to work and I stayed there until 1941 when the union come in. When the union came in here, there I was working midnights and I was operating the electrical turbines. In order to get there you have to go down the elevator down the shaft and you go under the river. So when all this was happening you know they struck the plant and the Ford Motor Company brought in all those colored ones, truckloads and truckloads was in there and I was over in that big building all by myself and I saw those guys up there you know and I wanted to go home but there was nobody to relieve me. And there I sat. Finally, I then barricaded the door. So these guys walking around and the first thing you know they had steel clubs, steel outfits just like knives you know and you are all out there and I was all by myself.

I: Who were those guys that you are talking about with the steel clubs?

R: They were the guys that the Ford Motor Company brought in to guard the plant inside. So it was nothing but the guys that were picketing outside in the gates. I was there about 11 days. But after the second day you see the service would come in with their cars and they would bring me stuff to eat. I had to make my own bed over there. About 11 days of that and they finally got straightened around so I could get out. So that's it, then after the union got in it wasn't long he had more generals running around there in the union even when ^{v/} he had rank and files. Everybody was a committeeman. But eventually everything got straightened around. By 1943 and 44 I ran for committeeman. They held a committee and district committee and then I was on the bargaining committee, and then I was chairman for four years of that unit, four years, and that was when we had to run every year for election. Four years of that. So that's just the way my life was.

I: Did you have any involvement with any of the unions before the earlier unions?

R: No, never.

I: What about when the union came in in '41 when there was a kind of struggle between the AFL and the CIO unions, what union did you support at that time?

R: I supported the UAW. (CIO)

I: So at the time that the union was organized you were working all alone by yourself and then later on what kind of jobs did you get so that you had more contact with workers?

R: Well, yeah and then I became the representative. Naturally, you had a certain amount for people in the area that you cover like I had the

coke ovens and the highline, the bowls and the blast furnace and electric furnace. So we had all those people to represent.

I: So how long did you stay under this job where you had to go under the river and all over by yourself?

R: I would say I was probably operator over there for about at least three years. I was there when they first started it up. When they were installing the boosters the Allis-Chalmers people. And I was there I was learning from the Allis-Chalmers' men, the operation of those boosters. What they did, you see, they pulled the gas in from the ovens. And there was gas made from the ovens and from there they would push it through these boosters which would pick it up because it's a long way from the coak ovens at the rolling mill, the places where they used gas. And these boosters _____ (generated?) booster pressure. And that's what I was doing over there, yeah.

I: So how did you get to know so many people to run for office and as the chairman of the unit?

R: Well, the first year (I kept) running into people and because you, that's where the grievances are formulated through the district committee and so on and later on you become, you step up to the bargaining committee. That's how you get acquainted with your people.

I: So you ran on, did you run on a slate when you were running for office?

R: I was on the slate.

I: Yeah. Which slate were you on?

R: I was on with him-- with Mr. McCusker's slate.

I: Can you talk a little bit about the slates and what they meant, what they stood for?

R: Well, naturally your campaign and the running on a slate in certain offices and you more or less relate to the voters what your policy is and what you stand for.

I: What were some of the things you stood for when you ran for office?

R: Well, you take for example each unit you know has its own set up operations and so on and what you do more or less, you make sure that those policies are followed by the company. If they step out of line or something happens it's your job to make sure the worker is represented in the right fashion.

I: And from your perspective, what did you think of the other slate, the left wing slate?

R: Well, there was some good and some not so good, you know what I mean?

I: Uh huh.

R: The mainstream of every representative if he has things in his heart he wants to do a job, too many times people run for an office but they don't really have a real purpose of it. Sometimes individual srun for their own gains too, you know.

I: In the late 40s and early 50s there were some things going on in the local about the administorship put over local by Walter Reuther and the trial of the fiveby Stellato. What were your feelings about that political process?

R: Really, I'm not too, right now I can't say too much about that. See sometimes some of us were involved with certain things other people weren't involved in. I mean we didn't take too much of a part in anything one way or the other.

I: So you were just in the middle somewhere?

R: Yes.

I: Can you talk a little bit more about the men in the miscellaneous unit. Was it highly skilled jobs that were in there?

R: Yes, there were some jobs over there that you had to have some learning on them and I take the engineering end of it you take a lot of the operations over there the company was involved in a lot of money that equipment like the ovens for example you know and well in fact over the years now that in order to hold some of those jobs you had to have license. If you wanted to be an engineer over there you got to have a license. That means schoolwork, you've got to study and of course there are some jobs anybody can do. But there are a lot of skilled jobs over there involved in the ^{so ke}coak ovens as same as the ^ablast furnace.

I: So you would get the higher pay than most of the other--?

R: Yes. Some of the operators over there, their wages compare with say a tool and dye ⁱmaker or a millwright, it was skilled work, maintenance was skilled work. And the wages was comparable. That is the base wages.

I: Were there any groups that were strong within ^{an}your ethnic group or religious groups or political groups that were strong within the miscellaneous unit.

R: No, not really. Mainly just a general lot of people. You couldn't single out any groups, you know. Because you had practically everybody. All nationalities, races.

I: Do you think there has been a change in the local from the time that it first started in the 40s and 50s as opposed to now?

R: Well, yes, over the years as we went along we found that there had been a lot of changes and you find that today the caliber of people

are much different than they were in the old days when we first started out. It's no more rough and tumble business, its now today, you go into negotiations, you got to have people who know what they are talking about, you got to have a certain amount of standard where at the beginning, everybody, didn't make any difference. Today, you got to use technicians. You've got to be a technician.

I: What about the workers themselves. Is there a change in the --

R: Yeah, the younger generations as they keep hiring in there they are better qualified. They go in with a better schooling probably than what we did in the old days. These younger fellows that's going in now because the job contents has changed so much. Like I say it's no more pick and shovel days. Everybody's got to know, got to have some knowledge, knowhow before they can get jobs.

I: What do you think of Carl Stellato as the president, at the time that you were president of your unit when he was president of the local?

R: Well, I never had really, I had always had pretty good cooperation when there were problems in the unit you know, I never had too much problems with Carl. We tried to run our units as much as, without any intereference. If we needed help, we could get it.

I: Okay. I have one more question. When it came to politics, was there very many campaigns going on? When presidential elections in the United States, for example in '48 when Truman and Wallace were running ~~on the Democratic vote~~, Truman for the Democrat, Wallace for the Progressive and Dewey ^o in the Republican side. Was there much campaigning for that election in the plant?

R: No. I don't recall whether there was an extreme amount of politics although we were involved in it. Even now to the extent that there

was a lot of campaigning ~~was~~ being done on the outside more than I saw inside the plant and even the little town where I lived, they got involved over there with people that I was associated with, you know, union and (?) people that lived in Melvindale.

I: Who were they backing at that time?

R: I don't know who the organization or the group of people that even had Wallace there and they took pictures of him in City Hall and well it wasn't the city hall then, it was a village hall in those days.

I: So were the workers basically campaigning for Truman or Wallace?

R: They were campaigning for Wallace out there at that time.

I: Do you think that they had a big vote for Wallace among the Ford workers?

R: I don't recall just what the results was out there but you know they had quite a few workers out there for him.

I: Was that the main sentiment inside the plant, was to go for Wallace instead of Truman?

R: I don't recall now just how that turned out.

I: There were people also in the plant working for Truman?

R: Oh, no doubt of that.

I: Okay.