INTERVIEW WITH

GUS PETRAKIS

August 20, 1974
Racine, Wisconsin

Interviewer: Greg Giebel

INTRODUCTION

Born in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1911, Gus Petrakis quit school to go to work for Western Printing during the depression. He worked his way up to apprentice pressman. After a short period of membership in a federal union, Petrakis became affiliated with the Milwaukee local of the Amalgamated Lithographers of America. When the Racine group became an independent local and received a charter, Petrakis became the first recording secretary and tells how he learned the mechanics of contract negotiations and how he became aware of the International Union that he was a part of. He talks about how the Second Warld War affected the printing industry, especially Western Printing, and his own local in particular.

In 1944 Petrakis became president of his local and in 1947 took on the job of International Representative of the ALA. He describes in detail how he came to be selected for the job. His first assignment was to organize the Banta Publishing Company in Neena-Menasha, Wisconsin, which required four elections to win. He traces the origins and factors leading up to the ALA nationwide strike over fringe benefits in 1949. He recalls the first post-war ALA convention in 1946 in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Gus Petrakis was deeply involved in the 1951 strike at the Michigan Lithograph Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and describes what it is like to take a local out on strike. He recalls the help that he received from the Chicago local which traditionally took a brotherly approach toward other locals in the Midwest.

Petrakis expresses his views on the International presidency controversy in the ALA that he became aware of in 1946, the schism between New York and Chicago, the issues involved, and the position he felt he had to take on the side of George Canary and Chicago. He compares Canary and Ken Brown and accounts for the success of Ken Brown in putting down the controversy, especially where merger with the Photoengravers Union was concerned.

Petrakis had become vice-president by the time merger with the Photoengravers took place and was on the subcommittee that brought about the merger. He describes the discussions that took place and evaluates the effect of the merger, both for Photoengravers and Lithographers. Specifically he recalls the problems that arose with efforts to merge the Lithographers' Inter Local Pension Fund and the Photoengravers' Pension. He reviews the nature of his responsibilities as vice-president and tells how he was able to work closely in the Racine-Chicago area with the officers of the Photoengravers in the newly-merged organization. Using his own firm, Western Publishing, as an example, Petrakis reflects on changes that have occurred over time in union-employer relationships.

Gus Petrakis has been retired for two years and is able to reflect on the kind of personal experience his involvement in the labor movement has been. He can also assess the future of the Graphic Arts International Union and of the labor movement in general.

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PETRAKIS: The date is August 20, and we are in my home.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born, Gus, and when?

PETRAKIS: I was born in Racine on December 30, 1911.

INTERVIEWER: I think it's always interesting to start these interviews with just asking how many brothers and sisters did you have?

PETRAKIS: I had two sisters and no brothers.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, and were they older or younger?

PETRAKIS: They were both younger than me.

INTERVIEWER: So you were the big brother.

PETRAKIS: I was the big brother, right.

INTERVIEWER: And were your parents, either of them, involved in the labor movement?

PETRAKIS: Neither of my parents were ever involved in a labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: So you were first generation?

PETRAKIS: First generation, as far as the labor movement is concerned.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And what was your educational experience?

PETRAKIS: I went to high school, Racine Park High, and I went to Whitewater State College, what used to be known as Teachers' College. Today it's known as the University of Wisconsin in Whitewater. . . . But I never finished school.

INTERVIEWER: This was in the late twenties?

PETRAKIS: This was in 1932 that I went to Whitewater.

INTERVIEWER: Right at the beginning of the depression.

PETRAKIS: Beginning of the depression. What I'm trying to do is collect my thoughts for proper dates. All right, I think that's about as well as I can do.

INTERVIEWER: So you decide in the depression here in 1932 that you're going to get a job. Is that what. . . ?

PETRAKIS: The reason that I quit school--I could have got an easy education if I could have stayed there because it did not hardly cost anything--but there was nobody working at the time at home. My father had died; I was the oldest, and I came home, and I happened to be fortunate enough to get a job in the Western Printing and Lithographing Company at that time.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do for them?

PETRAKIS: At that time I started working in the shipping room. I got my job. . . when I first went to work for Western was just about the time when President Roosevelt was inaugurated. That was in March of 1933, and I went to work in the shipping room. First I worked on jig-saw puzzles. It was very interesting at that time because everybody was working jig-saw puzzles. Then I went to work in the shipping room, and soon after that I was fortunate to go to work in the lithographic department. It was an odd thing because at that time I started, when I first went to work at Western, I started working for them on a Sunday from six to six at 28¢ an hour straight time. I had worked my way up to 40¢ an hour over a period of time.

INTERVIEWER: This was while you were still in the shipping department?

PETRAKIS: Still while I was in the shipping department. And then in 1935 I got married and secured a job in the meantime in the offset department, which meant that, if I wanted to go up there, I had to take a cut in wages. So I went backwards again, and then I had to work my way back up again, and I started as a flunky really. I mixed acid and gum; that's arabic gum for the presses. Very shortly after that I became a helper on a press.

INTERVIEWER: Well, let me ask a question. How were you able to move from the shipping room to the lithography section? Did you get to know someone or. . .

PETRAKIS: I didn't really know anybody; but when I first got a job at Western, I knew an individual by the name of "Buddy" Wadawitz, and he helped me get a job. He was a young fellow at that time. Then after I secured the job, over a period of time I happened to get acquainted with Mr. Voight [Elmer] who was the superintendent of the company; and I kept after him for an opportunity to get into the lithographic department.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you then, if it wasn't through a direct friendship in the lithographic department, why was your decision to move from the shipping department to the lithographic department?

PETRAKIS: Well, the reason for the move was my desire to learn a trade. Working in the shipping department did not give me that opportunity. So when I understood there was a chance to learn a trade in the lithographic department, or the offset department, I wanted to get in there; and I took advantage of it.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a union there at that time?

PETRAKIS: There was a union; our people in the offset department at that time were affiliated with the Milwaukee local, Amalgamated Lithographers [of America] Local #7, Milwaukee.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go upstairs as an apprentice then?

PETRAKIS: At that point I went upstairs as an apprentice, very fast. I was fortunate to absorb everything that the journeymen pressmen were doing. The union wasn't very strong in those days, but the pressmen watched their trade very closely; and if there was any changes to be made, those changes were made when the helper was sent on an errand. (Laughter) But that had changed quite a bit in a very few years after that.

INTERVIEWER: So your first job was mixing acids. . .

PETRAKIS: Acids and gums, and sewing dampeners for the presses. Now, what that meant was. . . I don't know how acquainted you are with the dampener unit on a press, but lithography used acid and water, a mixture of acid and water, and those dampeners dampened up the press, or dampened up the plate, rather, and we printed from that plate to an offset blanket and from the blanket to the sheet. But that was my job as a flunky, and not only that, I also went out and got lunches for the journeymen. (Laughter)

INTERVIEWER: That was a full-time job.

PETRAKIS: Full-time job. So when I became an apprentice, I eliminated a lot of that. But the opportunities in those days were far greater once you became a helper. Your opportunity of becoming an apprentice pressman was far greater than it is today. Of course, it depends on what company you're working for. Western was a very progressive company in those days. We had a lot of good teachers as well because the journeymen, most of them, came from the outside, like Milwaukee and Chicago and other cities. This conglomeration of various journeymen helped the apprentices considerably. Once you became an apprentice to a journeyman in those days, he watched you very closely so that you could operate the press. Because you assumed the job of a journeyman really because you operated your own press. I remember, when I first went on a press, I went on a two-color press to learn my trade. Usually they used to put you on a single color, a small single-color press so you could learn easier. My job at that time was difficult because I also had a green helper. But we struggled through it, and I like to believe that I was a pretty good journeyman when I once made the grade.

INTERVIEWER: So your affiliation with the ALA was through the Milwaukee Local at this time?

PETRAKIS: Well, not immediately. I belong to a union. I belonged to a Federal Union, which I also helped, when I first went to work, initiate with others. I wasn't a key guy, but I was a helper in organizing that local; and I remained a member of that local until I became a member of the Milwaukee Local.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe you would care to describe a little bit what a Federal Local was and how it could be distinguished from. . .

PETRAKIS: A Federal Local was more like a catch-all local; it had all types of people in it from various departments. It even had carpenters and electricians at that time. It had fellows who were just general workers in those various departments. So it was not made up of a craft unit at all. But we realized that we needed a union.

INTERVIEWER: So you went out and established your own local and applied for a Federal charter. . .

PETRAKIS: Charter to the AF of L. At that time it was the AF of L. There was no CIO at that point.

INTERVIEWER: And you had meetings?

PETRAKIS: We had meetings, held at the Union Hall in Racine. Those meetings were held once a month, regularly, and there were also Board meetings with the officers and those who were on the Board.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And how did you get in touch with the ALA in Milwaukee? Did they come up and visit you or did someone approach them?

PETRAKIS: At that time we had members who belonged to the Milwaukee Local who were from Milwaukee. Some of the members who worked in that department belonged to the Milwaukee Local; not all of them,

but some of them. Also in the art department and the plate department there were members of the Milwaukee Local. And that rubbed off on me, and I was asked at a later date if I would join the Milwaukee Local, which I did, and then got a withdrawal card from the Federal Union.

INTERVIEWER: Then the Federal Union stayed in Western?

PETRAKIS: They stayed and later became the UAW. [United Auto Workers]. They're the only local there, which is a UAW Local.

INTERVIEWER: How did you become affiliated with the Milwaukee Local at this time? Did the unit as a whole become affiliated and you signed a contract?

PETRAKIS: No, not at all, not at all. We never had a contract for quite a while after. Oh, quite a while after. I'd say like 1938. We did some organizing of our own which more fellows joined the Milwaukee Local. And then we wanted a charter of our own. Instead of traveling and communicating to Milwaukee back and forth to a meeting, we thought we could have our own local.

INTERVIEWER: How many of you were there then?

PETRAKIS: I'd say approximately seventy-two or seventy-five people at that time. That was made up of lithographic artists, strippers, cameramen, platemakers, pressmen, and feeder operators.

INTERVIEWER: So seventy-five of you actually held cards in the Milwaukee Local?

PETRAKIS: Not all at that time, but when we received our charter, everyone of the members joined; and it wasn't long after that we had a contract with Western.

INTERVIEWER: So, you received your card from the ALA, you dropped out of the Federal Local. Who negotiated for you then?

PETRAKIS: We did our own negotiations with a warm feeling in the pit of our stomachs. (Laughter)

INTERVIEWER: What were things like then? Did you rely on your productivity of your trade?

PETRAKIS: Well, negotiating was really easy because it wasn't too much of a negotiation. We didn't have the real know-how to negotiate. We didn't have the statistical figures and comparison sheets of what they were doing in other areas of the country. We learned the hard way, and I don't think we would have broken away from Milwaukee because they themselves didn't do any better than we did. Their president worked in Racine. He was a two-color pressman, and his name was Walter Strassburger. He couldn't do an adequate job for the Milwaukee Local or our Racine group, so we thought we could do equally well under those conditions. Of course, if we had the foresight and look ahead, the Milwaukee Local is a very progressive local today. From the day that they put on a full-time officer, they progressed tremendously. We have a full-time officer today in Racine. But really we're a one-shop local, not a healthy local under those conditions. We have a couple of little shops now, but they don't compare with a company like Western, but there aren't too many around the country that do. Although Western has more competition today than they ever had. So they're not the prima donna of the lithographic industry anymore.

INTERVIEWER: But in the early days they were? They were one of the first to go on to the new process on a large scale?

PETRAKIS: They were one of the very first to go to the new process of off-set lithography. I think that goes back to the middle 1920's or prior to that. And most of the people who were hired, those people in those days came from out of town. There was no one who knew anything about lithography. But the men who ran that company had enough foresight to see that this was a progressive process, so they went into offset lithography. Not only that, it was soon after that they were one of the first companies to have a four-color press, which most companies in those days had single-color presses. I might say, too, that when we became our own Local and were chartered in June of 1938, I became the first recording secretary.

INTERVIEWER: On what basis did you become the first recording secretary? Were you interested in being more involved with the local or were you just seen as someone that they could put some responsibility in to do a good job with the job?

PETRAKIS: Well, Walter Timler and I were really instrumental in breaking away from Milwaukee. We thought we could do a better job for ourselves. Because I became that first recording secretary, I think, was because nobody wanted the job! But I was really interested in the job, and I was interested to see that Walter Timler was the president because we worked together. And there were some fine old gentlemen who came from other parts of the country who had some very good ideas. One of them, who's not here anymore, a fellow by the name of Joe [Joseph] Ruilman, come from Cincinnati.

INTERVIEWER: RU. . .

PETRAKIS: Ruilman, R-U-I-L-M-A-N.

INTERVIEWER: So it was really a journeymen group that you had? Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati.

PETRAKIS: That's correct. Who had the know-how as far as unionism is concerned. These gentlemen were on our Council Board. We instituted, and still have today, the only percentage system in our local. And we never had to increase our dues. We pay 2% of our total earnings, and what more the man earns the local earns.

INTERVIEWER: Many locals would like to be free of that responsibility of having to go back and continually ask for more dues. It builds up such a poor taste in some members' mouths. They think that's all the local does.

PETRAKIS: That's correct. Because the local finds itself that it needs finance, and in order to keep up with the times their financial obligations increase. So it happens, though, with our percentage system we never had to do this. Of course, we were working for a healthy company, and the company still is healthy today, and kept their people working. So especially in those days, overtime was a common thing. So you paid two percent of your total earnings. If you earned $100, you paid two percent on a $100. If you earned

$200, you paid two percent of $200. And many of our people earned $200, and better, in those days, which was very, very good money.

INTERVIEWER: Premium was a big aspect of. . . everybody's wages.

PETRAKIS: Premium was a big aspect, that's right.

INTERVIEWER: And this was something that was negotiated independently of the union; it was between the member and the employer.

PETRAKIS: That's correct, that's correct. Even in those days, premium pay was on Saturdays; the first four hours were time-and-a-half, thereafter was double time. But if you came in at twelve o'clock or later, you got paid double time. And it was all double time on Sundays if you worked on Sundays. There was a lot of Sunday work. Also premium pay during the week. The first three hours in those days was time-and-a-half, and thereafter double time. And a lot of the men, 'specially on second shift, where there wasn't a full shift, they could stay and work as long as they wanted to. So they went in from three hours of time-and-a-half to double time.

INTERVIEWER: I guess the whole question of premium as an area of contract between an industrial union and a craft union is most in evidence to me. Because here's a situation where an individual is negotiating independently of his union for a premium which is paid on the basis of the employer's assessment of the man's contribution to the production. And that's really a craft consciousness.

PETRAKIS: Yes, it is. And the craftsmen brought that with them. It was something that was already established before the union did its negotiations. The craftsmen, in those days before we had a contract, worked under those conditions because where they come from, other areas of this country, the journeymen brought those conditions with them. They said, "This is the conditions that we're working under." And if Western wanted those people enough at that time, this is the conditions that they were going to hire them under or they wouldn't come.

INTERVIEWER: So the premium tended to be relatively fixed. You built up a certain premium, and you tried to transfer that from job to job if you did move.

PETRAKIS: That's correct.

INTERVIEWER: Now, was the premium ever used in those days as the vehicle through which the employer could maintain pressure on the individual? Could a premium be removed? Or could it be lowered? Or was that just simply. . .

PETRAKIS: I never heard of it. Because at that time all the journeymen were from out of town, and they were well-organized in their own minds what they wanted; and they would hold their own meetings, even though we didn't have a contract. We'd hold our own meetings, and the journeymen would say, "These are the conditions that we're working under, and we're going to stick with them." And that was true with even vacations, although two weeks of vacation with pay in those days was unheard of; we did have a week. But the journeymen established that; they brought that in from the outside. It wasn't under a contract condition. But they established that when they came in.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other printing unions at Western or had there been other printing unions?

PETRAKIS: Yes, there was. I think today there are as many as nine unions. In those days I remember there was the Photoengravers, the Typographical, the Stereotypers & Electrotypers, the Bookbinders. . .

INTERVIEWER: And these locals were all created in the same fashion that the ALA was created, carved out of the old Federal. . .

PETRAKIS: I imagine that's the way they were all created, under the same conditions. I don't know whether they all had contracts. I believe that the Photoengravers did have a contract. They were quite a good sized unit in those days. I would say there were as many as forty to fifty photoengravers worked there at one time. Of course there isn't any that work there today.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Was there ever a problem with the Printing Pressmen in terms of running presses? Lithographers historically have had some problem with the Printing Pressmen in terms of jurisdiction of new presses. But it seems to me what your saying is that lithography was already in Western at the time the unions began to become a real factor at Western.

PETRAKIS: Well, the offset department in those days was about two blocks long, and we were a small unit compared to the letterpress people, or the printing pressmen. We were never bothered by them, and I think the reason for that is they thought that we would never grow. There isn't a letterpress in that department today. It's all offset lithography. The little letterpress that they have, there might be some small equipment doing some small commercial work and doing some playing cards, putting the faces on playing cards. And I think that's out of existence, too.

INTERVIEWER: So in 1938 you get your charter and you become an officer in the Local. How do you begin to think about more of a union kind of career? Do you stay with Western for a period now? After 1938, do you find out about the International more? At what point do you start to progress along your career?

PETRAKIS: Well, I never thought there was too much of an International until I became an officer. The little bit that I knew about the International Union in those days was finally when we came into direct contact with a former International vice president whose offices were in the Chicago area, by the name of Robert Bruck. And this way we started to learn.

INTERVIEWER: Is it B-R. . .

PETRAKIS: B-R-O-C-K*. There has to be a history on Mr. Bruck. A fine gentleman, and he taught us all the know-how that he could possibly teach us to run our local, but again when it came to contract time, it was more like a. . . . in those days before we actually got our own charter, it was done by agreement with the officers and a handshake. There was nothing written until after we became. . . there was nothing in writing as far as a contract was concerned until after we became a chartered local.

*Correct spelling is BRUCK, Vice-President of ALA, and Chicago Local 4 President.

INTERVIEWER: Did that handshake pretty well hold up in those days?

PETRAKIS: Yes it did. It seemed to keep everybody satisfied. And another thing, too, was we were going through a depression era, and the men at that time were earning I would say some pretty good salaries. When a man earns $50 a week, like in 1932-1933, that was great money. And everybody was quite satisfied.

INTERVIEWER: So you start to become more aware of the International as you obtain office at the local. What were your impressions of the International at that point?

PETRAKIS: As far as respect was concerned, it was great. As far as advice was concerned, we had very little. I still say we had to run our own local the best we knew how. Our membership was very, very small on the International level, even in those days. It isn't like it is today, although I think the International progressed; and as the International progressed our local progressed, all locals progressed.

INTERVIEWER: Did people leave Racine in those days to go elsewhere as journeymen, or this was a good employer?

PETRAKIS: There was very little movement in those days. It was just a good employer. I didn't realize it so much as I do now. It was a great employer because some of the people who commuted from Milwaukee did it for a period of thirty or forty years, commuted back and forth every day.

INTERVIEWER: Why did Western choose to locate here? Were they originally from here, the founders?

PETRAKIS: They were originally from Racine. They started in a little print shop of their own, a couple of gentlemen. E. H. Wadewitz, Roy Spencer, William Wadewitz, these are the men who started the company in the early 1900's. It was in a little store on State Street. And from that point on they expanded and became what it is today, a large organization and a very good organization.

INTERVIEWER: So the war comes, and all during the war printing goes on. The employment picture didn't change very much during the war, did it?

PETRAKIS: Hardly at all. If I may, I have to go back to World War I. It was during this period that Western published a lot of books for various dime stores. What had happened, my understanding was that these companies like Woolworth and Neisners and some of the other dime store companies came. . .

(END OF TAPE I, SIDE I)

INTERVIEWER: (mid-sentence). . . said they would take care of Western after the war.

PETRAKIS: And they kept their promise, which helped this company very much.

INTERVIEWER: So when the second World War comes along, it's the same kind of general treatment. . .

PETRAKIS: The same kind of general treatment still existed. I don't know just how it is today, but it certainly went on in those days, especially with Big-Little Books. [They] ran thousands and thousands, millions rather, of Big-Little Books--kept a lot of presses going.

INTERVIEWER: Very familiar with them.

PETRAKIS: Are you?

INTERVIEWER: I have two small children.

PETRAKIS: Uh-huh. Jig-saw puzzles, thousands of jig-saw. . . I should say millions of jig-saw puzzles.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how did your infant local begin to take hold? You had seventy-five members; you're in

the war now; your company is continuing to grow, and lithography as a trade is continuing to grow. . .

PETRAKIS: Some of our young people had to go to war. There's no doubt about that. Some of us were journeymen, and the company did everything in their power to keep us on. We ran a lot of government work. The local increased in size; and while I was a recording officer for a period of time, there for a time I just was a local councillor and later became a local president. It was from that point on that I got involved with the International.

INTERVIEWER: When did you become president?

PETRAKIS: It must have been. . . I'm guessing now it was around 1944 I became local president. In January of 1947 I became an International Representative of the Amalgamated Lithographers of America.

INTERVIEWER: Well, was there much movement in elected office in those days, in 1944, when you became president? Did you run against someone or at that point in a small local. . .

PETRAKIS: I ran against a very good friend of mine, who was the president in those days. I was nominated at a local meeting one evening when I wasn't even there; I was working. Then I was asked if I would accept the nomination, and I said I would. Then I became the local president.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's a nice honor. What was the office like? Were you in charge of negotiations?

PETRAKIS: I was in charge of virtually everything--negotiations--and had to do with the members and seeing to it. . . . at that time we had a contract, one of our first few contracts, and I was in charge to see that the contract was upheld to the letter.

INTERVIEWER: You must have done something in those three years that got you recognized by the International be-

cause in 1947 you become a rep. What exactly led to your selection?

PETRAKIS: I have no idea. I was in contact with Robert Bruck, who was our vice-president at that time. When I became local president, I went to Chicago and met with him a few times. His office is located in Evanston, which is north of Chicago, and it was the first stop for the North Shore. We had an electric line called the North Shore in those days, and it was very convenient because it ran every hour on the hour from Chicago and from Milwaukee. And it only took about an hour to get to Evanston, and I would visit with him.

INTERVIEWER: So in 1944 you became aware of the International much more, and by 1947 you were part of the International. What did you know about the International in those days?

PETRAKIS: Really very little. The president at that time was William Reihl. . .

INTERVIEWER: And he was still in the shadow of [Andrew] Kennedy?

PETRAKIS: No. Kennedy had passed away. Let me go back a little bit. I was asked, prior to becoming International Representative, if I would take the job as International Representative by Robert Bruck. He asked me to think it over, and I said I would. He said, "Take your time." I did. It took about three months before I made up my mind. And this was on a Friday evening that he called me, and now we're in the fall of the year, we're in December about, and he says. "Gus, are you interested in the job as International Representative?" I says, "I am." He says, "Will you put it in writing?" I says, "Yes, I will." He says, "Will you send it to me in Atlantic City?" He told me the hotel, but I don't remember it at this point. I did that; I sat down that night and put it in writing, sent it to him, but he never got it. On Saturday morning he was taking a train to Atlantic City. At the station he must have got a heart attack, and he passed away. So I had the feeling of relief to a certain degree. I felt that taking the job was more obligated to Robert Bruck who I thought was a great man. He not only was the vice-president at that time, he was also the Secretary-Treasurer of the International Union as well and was one of the leaders. He and Kennedy made a great team. So I had the feeling of relief, and I said to my wife that I supposed now we don't have to worry about taking the job as International Representative. But it wasn't long

I was called to visit his office, and William Reihl was there and John Blackburn was there, who was the local president at that time. . . of the New York Local. I met for the first time Ollie [Oliver] Mertz who became International vice-president.

INTERVIEWER: Of the region? Midwest Region?

PETRAKIS: Of the Midwest Region, yes, correct.

INTERVIEWER: And in those days, the regional vice-presidents were important positions?

PETRAKIS: Yes, they were more important positions than they are today, it would seem. Really, that's not true, neither. I think they hold a better position today than they did in those days, although they were responsible for their region. I didn't think it was a healthy condition at all.

INTERVIEWER: They had a responsibility for hiring reps, and. . .

PETRAKIS: Yes, they did--recommending them anyway.

INTERVIEWER: And this together with other things contributed to their having a base of power that was separate from, in some cases, the International.

PETRAKIS: Uh-hm, that's right. And they felt they were miffed if somebody would cross the regional lines that didn't belong there.

INTERVIEWER: So there were really several separate organizations. Four regions and Canada.

PETRAKIS: Four regions, and Canada was a region in itself.

INTERVIEWER: So you feel that wasn't as healthy as the newer form of organization in which the International itself is the more dominant organization.

PETRAKIS: Yes, that's correct. I think it retarded organizing; I think it retarded negotiations. I don't think we were up the way we should be on negotiations. We had a good example of that one time [when] we were meeting in the Chicago area for coordination and negotiation, and somebody was asked, (from a large city, by the way) "How do you arrive at $10-a-week increase?" The fellow's answer was, "We don't really know. We just thought it was a nice round figure." So nobody was really up on negotiations the way they should be. And it was a couple of locals that set the pace, New York and Chicago. And everybody followed what they did. (Pause) There were no figures; there were no comparison rates. They didn't understand, really, the working conditions, except from mouth to mouth. So there wasn't the preparatory work that there is today.

INTERVIEWER: So you decide when you're called to New York to the president's office. . .

PETRAKIS: I was called into the Chicago office.

INTERVIEWER: Into Chicago, but at that point Blackburn. . .

PETRAKIS: Blackburn was there. . .

INTERVIEWER: . . . was the New York Local president?

PETRAKIS: . . . he was there. Ben Robinson, Benjamin Robinson, our attorney, was there. Oliver Mertz, was there and William Reihl was there, then the International president. I was asked if I would take the job, and I said I would. Then they asked me temporarily if I would go up and organize the Banta Publishing Company, up in Neena-Menasha [Wisconsin].

INTERVIEWER: This was all in the same breath!!!

PETRAKIS: This was all in the same breath. Which I turned down. I says, "If I'm taking the job as International Rep, I'd go up there and work on that; but if I wasn't. . ." At that point I really didn't know whether I was going to get the job as International rep. It wasn't confirmed really until a week later. But I wouldn't go on a temporary basis and go up and organize the Banta Publishing Company people. Of course that came later.

INTERVIEWER: So a week later you take the job?

PETRAKIS: Well, a week later I was summoned to Bruck's office. Oliver Mertz was there who became the, by appointment, International vice-president of the Midwest Region.

INTERVIEWER: And at that point you take the job?

PETRAKIS: At that point I took the job.

INTERVIEWER: Did that mean a loss in some salary, wages to you in overtime and premium?

PETRAKIS: Yeah, it was about the same. . . it was a loss in wages; no doubt about it. I think the job paid about $80 a week at that time, and it entailed a lot of hard traveling. You didn't have any car expenses; you used your own car. The only thing you had was a per diem, and that was a very small per diem, and that also included hotel. There was no such thing that you got gas and oil at that time for the car, nor repairs for the car. That didn't come 'til later.

INTERVIEWER: They were toughening you up a little bit!

PETRAKIS: That's right. Not only that, it's a cold way of sending people out to organize. You don't have any feel of how to go at it although I did make a lot of friends. I don't know whether I had the personality for it or not, but I met people and I talked to them in their homes and some wanted to become members and some were afraid to become members, even though they wanted to. And others, while they sat there and talked to you, they said, no, they wouldn't become members.

So the first election we had at Banta Publishing Company was a tie vote, 28-28.

INTERVIEWER: Who breaks the tie, the president?

PETRAKIS: Nobody breaks the tie. We lost, in other words. This was an organizing project and we lost. And one of the reasons we lost, one of our staunch members didn't even show up to vote. He said,

"I didn't think we had to. Because I thought we had it in the bag." But we didn't have it in the bag. And it took another four elections before we won it. In fact, one of the four, though, was called off after we had it started. Some of the members got scared off, and that's the way it went. But finally it was organized with the help of other representatives, and today it's one of our largest memberships.

INTERVIEWER: Where is this plant?

PETRAKIS: This is up in Neena-Menasha area. Neena-Menasha are twin cities.

INTERVIEWER: In those days is that what you were primarily doing is trying to keep up with the tremendous growth in lithography?

PETRAKIS: That's right, that's right, but we weren't growing too fast. People were scared to join a union. Even in those days, when you had a right to organize, we still could not organize them very fast.

INTERVIEWER: Taft-Hartley was coming out. . .

PETRAKIS: Well, Taft-Harley came in about that point, that's right, and that didn't help us. I remember an employer saying, and he was the president of the Earl Lithographic Company, he said, "Now that Taft-Hartley is in here, your union is going to go the other way." Well, it never was true. He'd of liked to seen it go the other way because his shop was one of those that was organized as well in the process.

INTERVIEWER: In those days what was crucial to a lithographer to convince him that he might join the union? When you went to somebody's house, what did you talk about?

PETRAKIS: I didn't think we had a tremendous contract in Racine. But I certainly knew the Racine contract, and I heard what and seen what these people had and what their conditions were. They had nothing; their wages were very low. They didn't have anything as far as vacations are concerned, no holidays. While in those days we didn't have a health and welfare program, Western had a

hospitalization program, which spoke for the company, as far as I'm concerned; it did that out of the goodness of their heart, really. I say that with a little bit of tongue-in-cheek because one of the reasons why Western did it, they did it on a selfish reasoning. They had a health and welfare program to keep their people there. Better conditions to keep them there. But these companies didn't have anything. So if you spoke to an area like Banta Publishing Company, these people didn't have too many areas to go to as far as work was concerned; so they stuck to these jobs. Oh, there was Earl Litho, and the Badger Printing Company was in Appleton, which is not too far from Neena-Menasha. [Wisc.]

INTERVIEWER: In 1959 the ALA has a strike over fringe benefits. It was a nation-wide strike, I believe. Do you recall anything about that strike? It was just two years after you became a rep.

PETRAKIS: If we go back a little bit, like late 1946, I think that Local #1 established the shorter work-week, which was a 36-1/4 hour workweek. And our first convention after the 1938 convention--there was a lull; because of the war we didn't hold any convention--that convention was held at Colorado Springs at the Antler Hotel. It was from that period on that we drove for the fringe benefits. I think 1949 was the time we broke the hours in the Midwest. Toledo was the key. I may have forgot the name of the company. It was a large trade shop, [which] set the pace. Ben Robinson, who was our attorney at that time, and Oliver Mertz, our International vice-president, went from city to city. Toledo was the kick-off, I think. I'm trying to recall the time. They went from Toledo to Detroit to Cleveland to break the hours. Some of the areas still had a 40-hour workweek. That was the reason for the strikes in some of the areas.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to these. . .

PETRAKIS: I'm trying to recall now. . . in 1947 I was involved in Louisville [Kentucky] with the Courier-Journal Lithographing Company. When we got there in that summer, the strike was already on. It was planned by Oliver Mertz and a negotiating committee that they were to go out on strike. I happened to be at the meeting that evening; it was the following day we struck the Courier-Journal Lithographing Company. I don't know if you have any other notes on that.

INTERVIEWER: Well, not on the Courier-Lithograph, but you did bring up the question of the initial impetus

for what was known as the 1949 strike over fringes. You're saying that it grew out of a 1946 post-war first convention out in Colorado Springs, at which time you were on the Resolutions Committee?

PETRAKIS: I was on the Resolutions Committee.

INTERVIEWER: Your first convention. . .

PETRAKIS: Yes, that's right.

INTERVIEWER: . . . a young officer. . .

PETRAKIS: And I didn't have any know-how at all.

INTERVIEWER: But, Gus, it seems to me at an early experience in this union, you get discovered very rapidly; and this is a nice aspect about this organization, I think, that they had a certain feel for finding young talent and developing it. You are already being considered for a rep after a few years as the president of your local, and out at the convention at Colorado Springs you get on the Resolutions Committee. Now, that, in the ALA, is a very important committee, is it not?

PETRAKIS: Now I can roll back a little bit and tell you the reasons for a lot of these things. When I went to school and went to work at Western, I discovered why the workingmen needed a representative, someone to represent them at the bargaining table. (I said when I went to school; [I mean] when I came home from school). Prior to that, when I was just a boy, my father used to go to work when it was dark and come home when it was dark. He worked for the J. I. Case Company. I couldn't understand why that had to be. A lot of long hours, and I never seen my father, only for a short period of time in the evening, because he had to go to bed early to get up early to go to work, come home--that was the routine. And the only time he had any time was on a Sunday. And Sunday evening comes along, and he gotta go to bed early again! So that was his life, and I didn't think that was a very good life.

When I went to work at Western, we were treated like yo-yos, too. While it was a good company, you never knew whether you had a job. If there was work for you, fine. If there wasn't any work for you, why, when you came to work, they sent

you home. And the following day when you came to work, you might stay for a couple hours; and then they'd send you home. But I will say this much for the company: this is now, after a period of years, it just didn't happen. It didn't happen in 1933; it did happen somewhere in the forties. The company said at one point, Elmer Voight, which I thought was a great gentleman, said, "I'm getting tired of seeing our people coming to work and an hour or two hours later sent home." And he suggested the idea that, when a man comes to work in the morning, that he gets in at least a half a day's work. So I thought that was a pretty good start, which led to your coming to work in the morning and you had a full days work and that's the way our contracts read today.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, so your kind of interest, the seeds of your interest are planted early. When you have these opportunities, for instance, out in Colorado Springs to be on the Resolutions Committee, you go in that direction. Can you remember your impressions? This was the first convention in a long time for the ALA. Apparently at that time every local had seven or eight resolutions that they were interested in. There was a flood of resolutions, must have been; and the way I know ALA and now GAIU [Graphic Arts International Union] conventions, they're working conventions. You must have been rather shocked by the. . .

PETRAKIS: I was awed! I was awed because the local that presented the most at the convention was New York #1, and of course San Francisco was another. I can remember them very distinctly, and I remember some of the fellows I rubbed elbows with from the New York Local; not too much from San Francisco. But my relationship was very close with Chicago, and the growth of our local and the know-how of our local was because of Chicago. We were in contact with some very fine people. The president at that time was Fred Zeitz, who was the secretary of the Resolutions Committee at the Colorado Springs Convention. He was also the president of the Chicago Local. He also had a very close relationship with George Canary, who was later the president of the Chicago Local, and, of course, with Harry Spohnholtz and George Gundersen.

INTERVIEWER: So you were meeting all of these people during this period.

PETRAKIS: That's when I started learning a little bit about unionism. Everything else was done with my heart. I felt my way around. And I think that was true with most of the people in Racine, with the ex-

ception of a few gentlemen like Joe Ruilman who had some know-how about unionism.

INTERVIEWER: And then you become a rep in '49, and I see that by the time the 1951 convention comes around you don't even get to attend any more. You're out monitoring strikes. You come to the Convention late in '51, which is down in Texas, and you were out at the strike at Grand Rapids, the Michigan Lithography Company, which is. . .

PETRAKIS: Michigan Lithograph Company.

INTERVIEWER: . . . which at that time was a one-year strike. And apparently there was some movement on that strike at convention time, and you spent your time covering that.

PETRAKIS: That strike, I think that was the first strike of my own making. People were treated very poorly by that company. People who were working for that company, their wages and working conditions were very low. There are records where a two-color pressman running a 52-inch press was getting something like 35¢ an hour. But at that point, which was really right after. . . 1947 we had our convention in Biloxi [Mississippi] . . .we had had a lull as far as conventions were concerned, so we had one right after the war in '46. Then we had a convention that following year in the fall in '47. By that time the local in Grand Rapids, wages and working conditions had increased for the better, but they were very, very low compared with other locals in the surrounding area, like Detroit and Chicago. You say why do you compare them with large cities like Chicago and Detroit. They were national competitors; they had larger equipment and later went into four-color and five-color equipment; so we had to do everything in our power to organize and organize hard. The Michigan Lithograph Company, while they were organized and belonged to our Union and had a contract, they had a very, very poor contract. So out of that outgrowth of negotiations came a strike, and we struck for a shorter workweek as well and better working conditions. It was a summer-long strike, and the convention was in the fall of that year in Texas. I didn't get down there until amost the last day.

INTERVIEWER: And do you feel that strike was successful?

PETRAKIS: Yes, I feel very much so that that strike was successful. I think the wages and working conditions of that company today are far better than they were years ago.

INTERVIEWER: What was the strike like in 1951? Was that a rough time to have a strike or was it pretty much like all strikes? You got to get your picket line up, you've got to keep it manned, and you've got to keep the spirits of the members together. Can you describe a little bit what it's like taking a local out on strike.

PETRAKIS: Well, it gave me an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach, I'll tell you that. While I was keyed up to have the strike, I really didn't want it. My way of thinking, as far as strikes was concerned, if we're progressing, if the area is progressing, sometimes it's better to take a little bit less because there's always another time to negotiate. But this just didn't happen at Grand Rapids. While other times, there was other times to negotiate, we just weren't making much progress; so the strike did happen in '51. But the people were very close-knit and it was a serious thing with us and it was serious with them. And we kept our picket lines manned; everybody took their turn, and we had help from other unions. We went to these other unions, and I must say the Teamsters Union was a great help at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Chicago had a reputation among many smaller locals, particularly throughout the Midwest, of being very brotherly during these. . .

PETRAKIS: Especially in those days.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about this kind of a relationship. Was it because Chicago were just good strong unionists? Or were they interested in the growth of the surrounding area, that lithography become a. . . .

(END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE 2)

INTERVIEWER: (mid-sentence) . . . explain a little bit the nature of their relationship with surrounding locals.

PETRAKIS: Well, I like to believe that the Chicago Local officers were good union people. Not only that, but they showed a feeling of brotherly love for other lithographers. So they did help locals in the surrounding areas. They had that feeling that they would like to help them out, and they showed. . . Chicago actually showed the way for other locals. In other words, [they] were good examples where other unions were concerned. When it came to wages and working conditions, Chicago was helpful. We used that very, very much, even in Milwaukee. Milwaukee in those days was a very weak local. So were many of the rest of us; but with the help of Chicago, we progressed, and we used Chicago as an example.

INTERVIEWER: Did you want to go back and finish up anything more about this strike in Grand Rapids?

PETRAKIS: The strike in Grand Rapids, the way it broke, we were meeting at the Morton House Hotel after a summer-long strike, and, of course, the company and the union was represented. The company had its lawyer, a fellow by the name of Steve Dunn, who was anti-union, and he treated the people very rough and with very little respect. His feeling was that they didn't know anything, and that had to be corrected, which I told him across the bargaining table. I said, "Mr. Dunn, you see this committee sitting with me? They know something you don't know. While you're an attorney, they're lithographers. And you don't know the first thing about lithography. And you don't know the working conditions and wages of lithographers." Well, I think this roiled Mr. Steve Dunn considerably because he packed everything that he had, his belongings, and ran out of that negotiating room and slammed the door. The employer sat there all by himself. He said, "What do we do now?" I said, "Let's negotiate!" He said, "All right." And that wound up that strike that very day. I wanted to make that point because I don't care who you are, whether you're a workingman of some sort, or the very lowest-paid workingman, he may know something that some of the rest of us don't know. That broke the strike in Grand Rapids, and I got to Texas. 'Twas my first time in my lifetime--for one day anyway.

INTERVIEWER: Good news to bring to the convention, though!

PETRAKIS: Yes, it was good news.

INTERVIEWER: It was entered into the minutes where I found the speech that Vice-President Mertz delivered in which he thanked you, recognized that the strike had been settled. So following these

conventions of '51 and '53, '55, and so forth, the union continues to progress. The International presidency controversy starts to become more at least open in terms of the changing of the guard, of Canary's replacement of Blackburn. You knew Blackburn; you had met him, but Canary, of course, was someone you knew much more about? Being from Chicago.

PETRAKIS: Yes. Well, I knew Blackburn quite well. But I certainly knew George Canary much better.

INTERVIEWER: What does a rep think about these kinds of things? Did you feel that the organization was strong and stable even though there was political changes or was the organization in some respects weakened by the changes in officers in the manner in which they were changing in those days?

PETRAKIS: To some degree there might have been a certain amount of weakness, but it proved to be that it got stronger as the time progressed. I think the union is above any man and it comes first. I went through a little political upheaval as well, but I think that was for the best, as far as I'm concerned, too. I might have just retired now instead of retired two years earlier; and when I look back and see the enjoyment I've gotten out of these two years, I think it's been great. But the union has got to go on, and those who assume the leadership have to see to it that it goes on. That's far more important than any individual. So if that's the way they want it, that's the way it's got to be. And so it happened in those days.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, then you saw the thing very much as a kind of democratic question that the membership would, in their wisdom, pick who was going to be the president. But oftentimes histories are written about factions and geographic concerns. I guess one book that's widely recognized as telling a fair picture about the Lithography Union was written by a fellow by the name of Fred Munson*, and he describes the conflict between New York and Chicago, the Midwest. Was that something, since you were a Midwest rep, was that something that you were aware of? I mean, were you having to play an important role of keeping the locals in touch with. . .

PETRAKIS: Something I was aware of early. . . in fact, my first contact in the convention of 1946 in Colorado

*History of the Lithographers Union by Fred Munson, 1963 (Cambridge, Mass.

Springs, I felt it; nobody told me, but I felt it. I got the message as the week progressed. So. . .

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the resolutions that Local One brought to that convention, but you mean that it was more than just a whole lot of resolutions? There was a real. . .

PETRAKIS: Really, when Local One negotiated a shorter workweek, it was good. But they did it without International say-so. They did it on their own; they went ahead without the International. So I think that shows disrespect as far as the International was concerned because I believe that the International is the key to the whole thing, and it is today, more so than it was in those days.

INTERVIEWER: So you're out in the field aware of this schism between Local One and Chicago. . .

PETRAKIS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And, of course, the Midwest was a strong supporter of Chicago; it was a good friend to the smaller locals. Was it necessary for you to become involved as a partisan, as a rep, simply because the issues were so clear to you, or were you taking what some call the "high road" of indifference? How did the rep handle this issue?

PETRAKIS: As far as I was concerned, I put myself out on the limb. I did it during George Canary's era, at the Educational Meeting that we had in. . . it was supposed to be an Educational Meeting in Cleveland, Ohio. I know that soon after that George Canary quit at this meeting; it was a week-long meeting. And I took sides. I took sides because of what I believed in.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what was the issue and what side did you wind up on?

PETRAKIS: I wound up on George Canary's side. Some people thought George Canary wasn't doing the job. Well, that isn't the way I felt. But these same people, which was New York, who thought that Blackburn

wasn't doing the job, then they encountered George Canary and prevailed upon him to accept the nomination against Blackburn, which they did. They succeeded in getting George Canary to run against Blackburn. It was stated at that time that Canary didn't want the job. He was the president of the Chicago Local. Sincerely, I'm sure that George Canary did not want the job. He did not want to move from Chicago for one thing. He was promised that he would have an office in Chicago, that the office would be moved to Chicago sometime. Buildings were looked at; we were going to buy a building in Chicago. Well, that didn't happen. And the feelings got worse and worse. It was all political, and it wasn't because the man wasn't doing the job.

INTERVIEWER: It was political on what level? Was it political because some people wanted to become president or wanted to be more powerful? Or was it political because New York essentially had different problems to deal with in terms of issues than did. . . well, in those days New York was the real printing center. . . so, did they feel they had a different set of issues that the International should concern themselves with? What was political about it?

PETRAKIS: I don't think that had anything to do with it. I think it was because of power at the leadership to lead the International Union, sit on the Council Board, although you're not the president, but to tell the International what to do. I don't think New York was really the center of the printing industry, even in those days. It might have been a few years prior to that, but the Midwest has really grown; and it has outgrown the East and the West, as far as I'm concerned. I think the Midwest is the heart of the printing industry. Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, those cities are the leaders, Twin Cities. So I think everything was political; it was power, and that's what broke New York away from the International Union, because they could no longer do the leading. They had officers that wanted to do the leading. When Ken Brown came into existence, we got some good leadership.

INTERVIEWER: So Canary resigns, and Brown comes in in much the same way as Canary came in. He comes in with the support of Local One, but the same thing happens right away. . .

PETRAKIS: The same thing happens immediately.

INTERVIEWER: . . . the script reads the same. What's different this time between Brown and Canary? How come Brown at this point in 1961. . .

PETRAKIS: Well, see, at that time Brown was in with the group of people, with Local One, the group of councillors that sided in with Local One. And I must say Ed Donahue from Twin-City was in that group; and when it came to. . . . what's the word I should use?. . . crucifying George Canary in the 1958 Educational Conference in Cleveland, they were all on that same side. And they were virtually sleeping in the same bed, you might say. So when Brown became an officer, International president, things changed. He wanted to do the leading, and he was a capable leader. Ed Swayduck didn't want that; neither did Ben Robinson. Leading was all right if he was doing what they wanted him to do. So that's what happened, and the breach got larger and larger; the subjects were many that they didn't agree on. "If you don't go down our road, you're in trouble." But the officers stuck together, which was a healthy thing.

It was about that period of time, just prior to that, there was no longer regions. The vice presidents worked directly under the International president. And that changed the picture tremendously. In Canary's days, there were v.p.'s that were against Canary. That wasn't good; it wasn't a healthy thing. But they didn't know that their hide was on the line, too. You know, you live that way, you live by the sword, you die by the sword. It was strictly politics, as far as I'm concerned. Because in spite of those things, the political problems that we had, we still moved ahead on a union basis. The International Council Board did come up with many good things, such as pension programs, such as the hours, and so forth, and discussed the working conditions of the lithographer in those days because we were known as the Amalgamated Lithographers of America.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, you continued to move ahead, oftentimes independently, independent of the AFL when you dropped out and join the CIO. One of the key questions with issues involved with Canary was that he wasn't as firmly convinced that dropping out of the AFL-CIO was the best route to go in terms of solution of jurisdictional problems.

PETRAKIS: George was easygoing in a lot of things like that--maybe too easygoing--but I could see his thinking. Breaking away from a parent body-- I didn't think that was healthy, either, but if it had to be done, it had to be done. Organizing, a good example: George would say, "Oh, there's plenty of unorganized lithographers to organize. Why do you have to go into a shop and take lithographers away from the Printing Pressmen or from any other organization?" Well, there were some of us who believed that a lithographer belonged with the Lithographer's Union. I was one,

even though I was a good friend of George, but I still believed that you organized lithographers wherever you could.

INTERVIEWER: So Brown's leadership, though, you feel was different in some respects in that he seemed to be able to put together a kind of response that allowed him to retain his power?

PETRAKIS: Brown was more aggressive, and he fought the opposition; but he couldn't have done it without the help of his officers and the help of some certain people like the Chicago Local. The Chicago Local, which was bitter--and I don't blame them--because of the George Canary episode, became very friendly with Ken Brown for the purpose of defeating the New York Local, the New York Local's attitude.

INTERVIEWER: I don't know whether you can ever do this to history, but was the merger with the Photoengravers an important question that Brown seized upon, knowing that this would help diminish the role that Local One would play in a new merged organization? Was that an important aspect of the merger? Or was the merger simply the overwhelming question, and that was simply a nice pay-out, by-product of the merger? I can't help but think that the merger, coming as quickly as it does, can't help but think that it is viewed probably both ways.

PETRAKIS: The merger was the break-away of the New York Local, but on the other hand, prior to merger, the thought was merger with any other graphic arts union at any cost, prior to actual merger with the Photoengravers. And that was the cry of New York Local One and Swayduck; it was the cry of Ben Robinson, who was the attorney, our attorney, and sat at every Council Board meeting. We used him as an advisor, and also he would come up with his opinions. That was their cry at one point but switched around considerably when the merger actually became a fact, and they broke away. Ben Robinson had the choice of staying with Local One or going with us, and he chose to stay with Local One. And Local One of course broke away from the International Union.

INTERVIEWER: So the issue was not one that was drawn immediately between Local One and supporters of Local One and the rest of the International? All locals seem to be in one voice, that merger was necessary for the printing industry.

PETRAKIS: That's right. Including Local One at one point. And it's proven itself today that merger was correct.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that merger with the Photoengravers was a wise first merger for the Lithographers?

PETRAKIS: I think so. I think so. And then the next step would have been possibly the merger with the Printing Pressmen's Union, but that didn't happen. And I think the merger with the Bookbinders was a correct move. It probably created some problems, but that couldn't be helped; those problems will all wash out in the long run.

INTERVIEWER: The merger with the Photoengravers in 1963. . . what were you doing in 1963? How did it affect you?

PETRAKIS: Well, I was a vice president at that point. And I was on a subcommittee of the merger with the Photoengravers. There were three of us on that subcommittee from each side--Ken Brown, Don Stone, and myself, and at that time was Bill Hall, Streeter [Daniel], and--my gosh!--a gentleman from St. Louis that passed away; I can't think of his name.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that subcommittee by itself is somewhat interesting. Stone was never seen as a Local One person although he moved to New York when he became the editor of the Journal and then ran for Secretary. He was always an independent voice, I guess.

PETRAKIS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And then Brown. . .

PETRAKIS: He [meaning Stone] was a member of the Milwaukee Local.

INTERVIEWER: Never gave up his membership.

PETRAKIS: Then when he went into New York as an editor, he became a member of Local One.

INTERVIEWER: But you were a midwestern fellow. And Brown, at that point, really hadn't identified himself as being anti-Local One; but as that committee worked out, it did have a flavor to it that didn't allow Swayduck or Robinson to dominate the conditions of merger. How do you feel the merger agreement took shape: Was it a good document? Was it one that gave equity to both sides? Did Streeter and Hall and whoever the third member--did they come and participate in the full way that you three did?

PETRAKIS: I think they did participate quite a bit. They even had their attorney. It wasn't our attorney. And everything that was written out was written out for the betterment of the new organization-to-be. While there was, after merger, some political problems, it was still the best thing that could have happened to our organization. They were small; we weren't too large. We were only about 38,000 at that point, and they were something like 13,000, if they were that many. And their International Union was diminishing in size because of the change in the industry, so it was the best thing to happen for them, and it was a great thing for us. My understanding, too, is that our relationship in merger with the Photoengravers was greater than it was with the Bookbinders because of greater problems possibly with the Bookbinders, but I think all those will wash out. I have always said it would. I said it would when we merged with the Photoengravers. I said, "Let's merge, and we'll work out our problems later." Because you can't work out your problems prior to merger. Can't work them all out, that is.

INTERVIEWER: Well, Gus, let's just recreate that situation where you're sitting down with the Photoengravers the first time and someone has to say something first, and you have to decide whose constitution you're going to model the new organization after. I guess always the important thing is who is going to be the president. I guess that was a foregone conclusion; that's why the two committees got together. But what were your meetings about? Was it hard bargaining or was it all just creative thinking about the new organization?

PETRAKIS: There was no hard bargaining at all, really, at any point. There was nobody got their back up and said, "This is the way it's gotta be or we won't have a merger." That didn't happen. To

start with, there was the gentleman who was International president of the Photoengravers [William J. Hall] came to the meeting with two vice presidents. We, of course, sat around in our Board room in New York. Our offices were located in New York at that time, as you know. It was a friendly meeting; both sides realized that there had to be merger. It just didn't happen overnight, and it just didn't happen. It had to take some doing and some understanding for it to happen. Those of us who had the attitude of "well, let's merge and work out our problems later"--although you had to draw up a merger document, all your problems aren't going to be solved in a merger document. But merger was the thing that had to be done. And I think both sides realized this; both sides agreed to merger.

And, like I said, when the subcommittees met, they met with the attorney from the Photoengravers, who was Sam Edes, who did an excellent job. And when he participated, he participated on the basis of fairness, and it worked out great for us. So, while we lost, when merger became almost a reality, we lost New York Local, which was approximately 7,000-8,000 members, we still gained about 13,000 and grew from that point on. And our membership kept growing. Now today we're something like 120,000.

INTERVIEWER: So the Photoengravers brought to the organization a kind of an interesting history, too, didn't they? They were real craftsmen.

PETRAKIS: Not only were they real craftsmen, but they had good leadership as well. And while they never had the coordinating meetings like we did, one thing that they did understand is to stick together and they did that. They negotiated great contracts for themselves in spite of little coordination and little International leadership. And I don't mean to say that the leadership of the International wasn't good. What I'm saying is that the International Union of the Photoengravers was so small that they didn't have enough men to go around to help the small areas.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it wasn't that the talent wasn't there. . .

PETRAKIS: The talent was there very much.

INTERVIEWER: The structure of the organization, the constitution, and the way it was set up didn't allow for the talent to be applied to the situations the way the ALA's old structure existed. Was that

one of the reasons that Hall and Streeter adopted or were willing to go the route of a strong presidency the way the ALA structure?

PETRAKIS: That's correct.

INTERVIEWER: Could they see the need for that?

PETRAKIS: They saw the need for that. They saw the need for a tremendous, strong International Union. And I believe that leadership is there today.

INTERVIEWER: I guess the Inter Local Pension Fund, which was a pension fund that New York did not participate in, but most of the other locals in the ALA wanted to get into, and many of them did. That was an interesting pension in that it was separate from the International. And that wasn't part of the merger.

PETRAKIS: No, that wasn't part of the merger. The Inter Local Pension came into being approximately in 1950--I don't remember the dates. But I remember when I went to this convention in Dallas in 1951, I got there on the last day. The International representatives and officers voted to participate in the Inter Local Pension, and the money would be taken out of our paychecks every week at $2.50 per week.

INTERVIEWER: So you're an early participant. . .

PETRAKIS: Yes, I'm an early participant in the Inter Local Pension program, and it certainly grew from that point on. It was separate from the International, and Local One was not a participant. They had their own pension program. So merger had nothing to do with it, although after we became merged, there was a controversial problem as far as the two pension programs were concerned. It created a lot of problems politically for a lot of us.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe that. . .

(END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE III)

PETRAKIS: (mid-sentence). . . Inter Local Pension and the Photoengravers Pension after we became merged created a lot of problems for us on the International level. We felt that it should be merged, that is, the Photoengravers pension program should be merged with our program, the Inter Local Pension. Now we're talking about after merger. There was a point at one time where the Photoengravers program had to be restructured because it was inadequate and it wasn't really doing a job and if it stayed on that level we wouldn't be able to pay off those who were pensioned. Something had to be done. The structure was re-done and at a later date became healthy. Then the problem was merging the two programs, and that's when our problems really started. Some of us felt that merger of the two programs probably wasn't healthy. But my understanding now is that it's virtually done. I don't know too much of what happened, but it created a tremendous problem on the International Council Board. It took up a lot of hours and discussion and to a certain degree became very boring, as far as I was concerned, ridiculous arguments, bitterness, which goes on, as far as I'm concerned, with any union. But I think it turned out to be healthy in the long run. That's about as much as I can elaborate on. I certainly believe in the Inter Local Pension because I'm getting it today. Of course I think we've got a program now that's on the International level that's known as Early Retirement. I think it's going to exceed Inter Local; this is on an International level which I think is going to be, by far, a greater program as the years go by.

INTERVIEWER: So after merger you are a vice president, and your job is to go around and solidify the merger. What other kinds of things were you doing following the merger and the creation of the LPIU?

PETRAKIS: Well, I did everything possible that I could when I had the time to solidify merger, that's true. But we had a merger commission that did that which was created; two vice presidents were on that: Jack Wallace and. . .

INTERVIEWER: Henry Dillon?

PETRAKIS: Henry Dillon.

INTERVIEWER: That's a local. . . solidify local mergers?

PETRAKIS: That's right, solidify local mergers. But whenever we could talk up merger in local areas and outlying districts, we did. I dealt mostly with smaller locals than larger locals. We always felt it was a waste of time for International officers to go into the larger areas where they've got fulltime paid officers, when they could do the job. They were equally as well, especially those that sat on the Council Board, were equally as well in know-how as we were. So it was a waste of time for us to go and do the same thing when we could help some local which did not have full-time officers, help them negotiate, as an example. Our International Union had the policy of setting policy for our organization; and if that policy included wages and working conditions that people did not have, locals did not have, we were to help see to it that they got these wages and working conditions. That was our job. Besides when you became a vice president, you weren't above the fact to go out and organize if you were able to do it in some areas.

INTERVIEWER: Were you still living in Racine?

PETRAKIS: I lived in Racine all the time, yes. We had an office in Chicago as well, a sub-office, for a period of time. And I was in the Kemper Insurance Building. That was right after merger, while Bill Hall became Executive vice president. And he had had an office in Chicago, so he established a new office and took in two more vice presidents with him. One was Henry Dillon, who was a Photoengraver, and I was the only Lithographer; and we got along very well.

INTERVIEWER: So you worked with Henry Dillon?

PETRAKIS: With Henry Dillon and William Hall.

INTERVIEWER: Out of Chicago?

PETRAKIS: Out of Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: And you had reps in the field, and you would go around to locals as crises would arise. That's kind of a difficult way to win election every two years if the time you most often see people is at times of difficulty when the International is oftentimes taking positions. . .

PETRAKIS: Well, that's changed now. It's at least three years now. And since merger with the Bookbinders, it's been a lull of four years really. But that never entered my mind, and I don't know whether I really cared or not. I still was young enough. I thought I could still run a press if I had to. I haven't gotten over that feeling yet. . .

INTERVIEWER: Yes, that's a wonderful freedom to have, really.

PETRAKIS: I've been kidded many times that I'd have a terrible time wrapping a stone around a cylinder! (Laughter) Ken Brown used to use that terminology quite a bit. But that never really entered my mind, although your job was on the line every two years and I thought that was kind of crude.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you hear that all the time when people talk about the House of Representatives--problems that people in Washington have, Congressmen servicing their district and also meeting national responsibilities for leadership and direction.

PETRAKIS: Well, we had a Congressman from here, Gerald Flynn, who put his job on the line because he voted against something that he didn't believe in. It was in favor of labor, and he was told that it was going to be defeated. And his feeling was, "Well, that's the road I'm going to go." He was told to go the other way. But he wouldn't do it. So you do what you believe. So he lost his job, but he's still an attorney. So I could have been a lithographer.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Well, that's good. That's a real freedom of movement. So you go in to a local as a vice president, you get into negotiations, you don't do too much more organizing?

PETRAKIS: Well, then we were under the directorship of Ken Brown. And Ken never called too often, but every time he'd call, I said, "Now, what do you want?" because I knew he had something on his mind, some job which was not an easy job that you had to go out and do. And the rank and file didn't realize that's the way we operated. So you're gone every week--every week you're going

someplace. Nobody realizes how much you travel, whether it's snowing out there--you call up the airlines and you'll say, "Are they flying?" "Yea, we're flying on schedule." So you get to Chicago, you drive to O'Hare field, as an example, through a snowstorm, and you sit around there and they're not flying, really. The membership doesn't realize that traveling is not an easy thing. One summer I was commuting between New Orleans and Baltimore; we had two strikes going at one time. And that wasn't a healthy thing. But that's the life of a representative or an International officer.

INTERVIEWER: So while you're vice president, the company that you started with continues to grow and becomes a multi-plant operation. They have plants in Hannibal, St. Louis, had one in Detroit and Poughkeepsie and an unorganized plant at Cambridge. Over a period of years this plant continues, this firm, Western Publishing Company, continues to grow and change also. Nowadays the firm represents new ideas in the way of getting on relationships with lithographers. In the old days when it was the ALA, they had one kind of a relationship. In present days, now that it's GAIU and so forth, they seem to have adopted a different strategy of relations. Can you talk a little bit about that new kind of union-employer relationship and the changes over time. You've seen it come. What's happening today?

PETRAKIS: Yes. First of all, if you want to use Western as an example, they grew from a very small company, from a store you might say, on State Street, to a large organization. And one thing about the leadership of that company, in those days (it) was tremendous. They had men like E. H. Wadewitz, William Wadewitz, Elmer Voight, Benstead, Roy Spencer, who later became a mayor of this city. But the brain power, for one company to have so much brain power was something out of the ordinary, I would say. You didn't really realize it at that time, but it really showed up as the years went by. And I think it had a lot to do with this company's growing the way it did. To a certain extent the union had to grow as well and meet that type of an organization. But today the old gentlemen who ran that organization, with all that brain power, are not here; they're gone. And you've got new blood. And I think they are colder people. They don't try to negotiate contracts and see to it that they are negotiated. I think they are a bit more difficult to negotiate. They probably think we're more difficult to negotiate. I don't really believe that because we don't want trouble. And I don't know why this company wants trouble, but evidently they must because they've had it in certain areas, like Hannibal. Hannibal's gone out of existence now; it's not there. They put several people out of work, something like a hundred or

better. I'm speaking of lithographers. So I don't think that's healthy. The Detroit plant going out of existence has nothing to do with this. That's a different story altogether.

INTERVIEWER: Mt. Morris plant [is] now on strike.

PETRAKIS: Mt. Morris is out on strike, and they seem to be going through the same thing. I just don't understand the thinking of the company because Mt. Morris plant is a progressive plant and has been in the past. I think we are having a certain amount of unhealthy conditions with this company.

INTERVIEWER: What was the decision not to continue to expand Racine? This was the birth of the company. Why would a big firm like this choose to go to decentralization when they had. . . when they were centralized in a place that provided good labor?

PETRAKIS: Well, I think to get away from the union more than anything else. You hit the nail on the head when you said you can provide good labor. But if they go to outlying districts--like somewhere in South Carolina or North Carolina--with a few key people, you can teach a lot of people how to run equipment, how to become craftsmen. And these few key people you can easily get when you provide them with money. Today I think the trade isn't as complicated as it has been in the past. I do believe running equipment is more complicated, but I think work is getting to be a little easier in the craft. They can run away into other areas, but eventually they will get organized. So why they want to change, I don't know; I really don't know. One thing I did mention is to get away from the union and high costs of labor.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So you retire as vice president, and you've now been retired two years. You look back at your long history in the labor movement. You want to reflect just a bit as to the kind of personal experience that it's been for you--some of the joys and, I guess, the sorrows? I'm sure that one of the things you talked about is the time you had to spend away from home. What are some of the other kinds of things that, as you look back on your career, you might want to reflect on a bit?

PETRAKIS: I did say it's a cold job. When you turn a person out to organize, as an example, and turn

them in the field that they're never familiar with, is a very cold way of doing it, especially without teaching people how to organize and approaching people. Today this has changed. Some of the good things, though, I think it's expanded my way of thinking. I've met a lot of people on both sides of the fence, both labor and company people. I've met other people, such as attorneys, and became great friends with them. I miss a lot of people. I'm not in contact with them anymore. That part I miss very much.

I have missed something else, though; while I was out on the road, I missed the growing up of my family. My children grew up, and I didn't realize it. They're gone, married, have families of their own, and that was something that I missed very much. I've lost contact with my own family to a certain degree; and I think every man who travels, even if it's a salesman, if he's on the road a lot, he's going to miss contact with his family. There's no doubt about that. It's not a healthy thing, but somebody's got to do it. But I did something I really believed in. I believed in labor; I believed in helping labor. It was like a crusade, and that's why I got into the job. Because I think I would have earned more money working at Western. I don't know what it would be like today, but I don't see any of our people starving. It had to be like a crusade. I felt like something had to be done, or I wouldn't have taken the job. I really enjoyed that part of it; but when I had to be alone somewheres, I did not enjoy that at all. So what do you do under those kinds of conditions? You just bear it, that's all.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, I think a good last question would be: we've been looking, over most of this interview, backwards. I guess it might be good to draw on all your experiences and try to look a little bit forward. What do you see to be the future for the GAIU now, and also for labor in general?

PETRAKIS: I look for GAIU to make a lot of progress, be a better union than it is. But I have an ill feeling about labor in general. I think most of the people today coming up into the labor movement are people who are working as general workers in all industries, who don't have the feeling that some of us had. By that I mean I think these wages and working conditions that they are getting today, they feel that it's been there forever and ever. And they're not good union people; I'm surprised to hear this. I was among a few teachers the other day, and they are about to have a strike in Racine the way it looks, and they're not united at all. Some say, "Well, I'm going to work," and others say they're not going to work. Even if they're right or wrong, one thing they can be right about is being united, and they're not. I think that's

what prevails among these younger people today. They're not labor oriented, really. Or union oriented. And you need a lot of that. They don't understand that at all. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope I'm wrong.

Now since I'm not involved with the union like I was when I was an officer of our International Union. . . . I was so engrossed in our union that I thought everybody felt the way we did. You get that way; I did believe it. But now I see, [now] that I'm on the outside, I see it's worse. I see that a lot of people are not union oriented. They don't believe in the union. In fact I hear people talking against it. But wherever I can say a few words, I say it. I don't care who's around. I'll tell them that everybody needs a union and that without a union you can't go anywhere. So that's been my feeling for many years, and it's never changed. And I dislike it very much when I hear somebody talking against their union because they're not doing anything to help their union.

I remember one time when I was a local president, one young man came to work. He'd been there about a week, and evidently some of the members were talking to him about that he has to join a union. As I was the president at that time, he came up to me and said, "Gus, I understand I have to join the union." I says, "No." He says, "You mean I don't have to join a union?" I says, "No." And he started to walk away then. I says, "You won't be working here tomorrow, though." So that's the story. Without a union we can't go anywheres; with a union we can. Workingmen need the union. Maybe there are some people who don't believe in it and some people who don't do their share of work. But that doesn't mean everybody doesn't do their share of work.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, thank you very much.

GUS PETRAKIS

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