Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Terri Patterson
Ironworker

Interviewed on March 6, 2006

Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs
Walter P. Reuther Library
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Metro Detroit Skilled Tradeswomen Oral History Project

Interview with Terri Patterson

MARGARET RAUCHER: The Metro Detroit Tradeswomen Oral History Project is here at the Reuther Library on March 6, 2006 interviewing Terri Patterson who is a structural ironworker with Ironworkers Local 25. I guess I will start off the questioning, Terri, asking you about your life before you entered the trades, where you were born, when you were born, your family life and that sort of thing.

TERRI PATTERSON: Well, I'm Terri Lee Patterson, born January 13, 1971 to Barbara and Lee Patterson. I have three older brothers and no sisters. And growing up with my brothers, I was basically a tomboy, and I'm still kind of that way. I think you have to be somewhat that way in a "man's trade."

I'm a North American Indian, of the Iroquois tribe, Mohawk and Tuscarora from the Six Nations — that's over in Canada.

RAUCHER: Did you say where you were born?

PATTERSON: Garden City, Michigan. I've been an ironworker just a little over ten years.

RAUCHER: When you were growing up, though, you lived in a neighborhood with not many Native Americans, I assume. Did you have much contact with other Native Americans?

PATTERSON: When we were younger, we used to go to Indian School, learn how to bead and stuff like that, learn some language, but it wasn't actually my dialect, maybe Ojibway.

RAUCHER: And where was the school?

PATTERSON: It was at a little school in Westland, just mainly on a Saturday. Once in a while we'd make the trip back to Six Nations and see some members of my family.

RAUCHER: And did you mention what your dad did for a living?

PATTERSON: Oh, my dad is actually an ironworker, too. We're actually a third generation ironworker family on both sides — both my grandfathers, my father, my uncles and all my brothers are all ironworkers too.

RAUCHER: Here in Michigan?

PATTERSON: On my father's side, yes, here in Michigan. My mother's live over in Buffalo, New York. They're in Local 6, my grandfather and my uncle are from there.

MICHELLE FECTEAU: Are you the first woman?

PATTERSON: First woman? In my family, yes.

RAUCHER: So you say you were a tomboy when you were growing up, your brothers are all older.

PATTERSON: Yeah. And I don't know, I guess still to this day, being around women and girl things, I feel like I'm out of my environment. I'm more comfortable with men and things like that. And that's one of the things I'm trying to get comfortable with, you know, being around more women and seeing purses and things like that, because I don't carry one. [laughter]

RAUCHER: Well, on the job you wouldn't need one, would you? But in school, too, you mostly just hung around with the boys?

PATTERSON: Well, I had a few girlfriends, you know. One girl, we're like, six days apart and she was like a sister to me, actually. They used to say we looked a lot alike. But we've lost touch now.

FECTEAU: How much older are your brothers than you? How does it space out?

PATTERSON: My oldest brother, Ken — actually I was born right before his birthday; his is January 14th, mine is the 13th — he's nine years older than I am. I've got a brother, Joe, he's six years, and the other one is four years older.

FECTEAU: So you were the baby sister.

PATTERSON: Yes, I'm the baby sister and I'm their only sister. And I'm about as big as they are, if not bigger than they are. [laughter]

RAUCHER: Did your mom work?

PATTERSON: Yeah. Actually, she used to work at Ford's, she used to work in the cafeteria. Unfortunately she hurt her knee and stuff and she went back to, basically, vocational school, in the printing field. She was an associate for Xerox, but unfortunately she had knee replacement and she's on disability right now.

RAUCHER: Did you play sports at all when you were growing up?

PATTERSON: Yeah, I played volleyball and basketball. Volleyball was a better sport for me than basketball. That was about it, as far as sports or anything like that. I graduated from John Glenn out in Westland in '89.

FECTEAU: So were you on the varsity teams when you competed?

PATTERSON: Yeah, yeah. I enjoyed that. I was never a person that actually received the ball from the other team's server, but I was a good server and I played front row and stuff.

RAUCHER: How tall are you? Because you're tall, so you'd be good for volleyball.

PATTERSON: Yeah, 5' 10" and a half.

RAUCHER: Okay. When you were growing up, outside of sports did you have any kind of hobbies? You said you were a tomboy. So did you have any idea what you wanted to be when you grew up, or that sort of thing?

PATTERSON: Actually, when I was about five years old, my mom had taken me on a plane and I wanted to be a stewardess. That's actually what I wanted to be, a stewardess. But things went on through the years and it was just kind of a thing that I liked working with my hands. And I tried factory work and things like that. I tried to go to college, but that's one thing I didn't do for myself.

I asked my mom to give me a year out of high school to actually think about what I wanted to do. You know, she tried to get me to go in the Navy and that, but I didn't really see myself as going in the military or anything like that.

RAUCHER: And this would have been '89, you said?

PATTERSON: Yeah, '89. And I did little odds and ends jobs and things like that. Pressed shirts, worked at Highland Super Stores for a little while. Taco Bell was actually my first job. Being sixteen years old, I wanted a sense of having my own money. I walked to work. I was very proud to have a job.

But hobbies — I enjoyed going to our powwows and things like that. Our biggest one out here is actually in Ann Arbor and it's coming up later on this month. So I enjoy doing that kind of stuff. When I was younger, when we were going to Indian school, we got to learn how to make our own regalia and that.

I started out as a fancy dancer, but I didn't stick with it. My brothers didn't want to go to school anymore, so I didn't want my parents to get up on a Saturday and drive me to school, so I kind of quit. When they have the inter-tribals and things like that at the powwow, I do like to go out and dance. When you hear the drums, your heart beats with them. And I do like to show children that kind of thing. And I've got nieces and nephews and a girlfriend's granddaughter that I'll try to get to go out and show them how to dance.

RAUCHER: How often are the powwows held?

PATTERSON: Well, there'll be more this summer. They're in different places. Mine, Six Nations, is actually coming up at the end of July. I mainly only go to the ones that are around here. I might go to a couple powwows a year. I enjoy hearing the drums and the music and things like that, enjoy seeing the people dancing, enjoy seeing some of the people that I kind of grew up with since I was a teenager, seeing them still dancing and that.

RAUCHER: Did you experience any kind of prejudice against you or Native Americans when you were going or anything like that? Or were you able to dance or use your heritage in school?

PATTERSON: No, not really. They would do the mocking sometimes, but I just kind of overlooked that. We were all kids. Come to think about it, I really didn't get

a lot of — when I was a teenager, I was teased a little because of my height. I'm a big woman. But when I got into high school where I would see the disabled people in school, I would stand up for them. But no, I didn't get much teasing or anything like that. And plus, like I said, I've got older brothers and they truly did look out for their little sister.

FECTEAU: You told me you stood up for people? Do you know why that was in you? Was it something in the way you were raised?

PATTERSON: Oh, when you see a person, you know, you see that look on their face and see nobody doing anything about it and you remember what you went through, too.

FECTEAU: I just was wondering why you would do it and maybe others didn't. A lot of people would just kind of hide and try to avoid being picked on themselves by going away.

PATTERSON: When I worked out at Ford Field — I was a boss out there — I was in an elevator at one time and the people were joking about something. It was a male and he wore women's makeup and things like that and even his physique was actually like a female.

Anyways, you know, I was guilty of that at first, you know, I chuckled along and stuff, until I see this person hang their head. And I looked and I said, "No." And I went over to that person and I told him, "Be proud of who and what you are. Don't ever let me see you hang your head like that again." I don't know what ever happened to that person.

RAUCHER: And that was where?

PATTERSON: This was at Ford Field.

FECTEAU: On a construction crew?

PATTERSON: Yeah.

FECTEAU: That took a lot of guts, because some people might start teasing you like they picked on you at school because of your height.

PATTERSON: Yeah, because I'm not a tiny, petite girl, you know, or anything like that. And I used to be very shy. And I'm still like that, to a point. But then I know there's a time to speak up and things like that. Like, when I was a third year apprentice, a pre-apprentice person that hadn't even been in school yet comes down to get bolts while I'm down there making up the bolts, and I asked the guy, "What six months are you in?" And he says, "I'm not even in school yet." And I go, "What? Oh, no." I know you've got to start on the ground and things like that, but I figured they would see how I worked and say, "Well, hey, Terri, you go up with so-and-so today." Well, a lot of times that didn't happen and then, yeah, I had to be, if you want to say it, a bitch. But hey, I'm not going to be an apprentice for the rest of my life. That's my work up there, too. I want to get up there and do it. I said, "That boy ain't got no business being up in there. I don't care if he's in a man basket. That's my job, too."

FECTEAU: So you're saying that they were taking somebody with less apprenticeship time and having him bypass you and do more things than you were doing?

PATTERSON: Yeah, yeah. He wasn't even in school yet.

CATHY DAWSON: Were you the only woman in your apprenticeship program?

PATTERSON: No. Actually, I started out with another female and then I think she had dropped out. And then when the classes got smaller, they combined the two

classes together and there was another female in my class. And like I said, I was a tomboy and I didn't take to her very well. She was the hugging type of person and things like that, which I'm not.

I look at it, you know, you go out there and you earn your name. Like I said, I have family in the trade and that, but I would go on the job and I would say, "My name is Terri." I would not say my last name. I wanted to be known as Terri, not, "Well, she's related to that person." I didn't want to live on shirttails. That's one of the biggest things I didn't want to do. So I shied away from my family as an apprentice in things like that.

RAUCHER: Excuse me. Could we back up a little bit, before you got into the trade, because you mentioned that you were thinking about going to college or you tried college?

PATTERSON: Yeah, I tried to go to college.

RAUCHER: Which college?

PATTERSON: Oh, I had gone to Henry Ford [Community College]. And I probably made it maybe about a semester. But it wasn't something that I wanted to do at that point in time. I knew you had go to school for your basics and things like that, but I was just unsure exactly what I wanted to do. I went back to odds-and-ends jobs and things like that.

And one day my brother made a comment to me about how they were taking sign-ups for the apprenticeship. And I said, "Oh, okay." And coming from a family of ironworkers, I had some knowledge of what that was, but I really didn't until I got out there and started doing it myself.

RAUCHER: When your brother made the comment, this would have been about, what, 1990?

PATTERSON: About 1993, 1994. And I went down and signed up. I mean, they showed you a film and asked you in the middle of if this is something that you want to do and if not, well then, you can hand your paperwork back in. Well, like I said, I liked working with my hands. I couldn't stand not being outside. Working in factories and things like that, you didn't have a window to look outside, so it kind of felt like you were caged. And I figured, "Well, you know what, I'll try it. I'll see if I can do it, whatever."

I went in on the last class for the sign-up for the apprenticeship and I made the first class. And I started working in November.

RAUCHER: Were there any requirements, particularly, for getting into the apprentice program?

PATTERSON: Well, you had to have a high school diploma and a driver's license, and basically, that was about it.

RAUCHER: Physically, did you have to be able to do anything, or no?

PATTERSON: No, because nowadays, you know, you don't climb columns and things like that now. It's all in man baskets now (even though you're still walking the iron a lot of times), so it's almost like anybody could do it nowadays. It's not like when my father, my grandfather and my brothers went in. A lot of it has changed now.

Myself, I haven't really seen a whole lot of that, because I got in when you had to be safe, you had to have your harness, have your safety glasses, your hard hat, things like that. You have to be tied off.

RAUCHER: I interrupted. You said you got into the class, so if you want to go back and talk about the apprenticeship class and what that was like.

PATTERSON: Well, of course, it was mainly all men in there. I pretty much stuck with all the men. I didn't really make an attempt to get to know the first woman that there was in there, or anything like that. And as far as the other girls, I mean, I think that you have to have the desire to try something. I'm not going to say that I'm not afraid of height itself — I think that if you don't have a fear of heights, something is wrong with you — but I just think that you have to have respect for the height and you got to at least try it.

RAUCHER: What did you have to do, exactly, in the classes?

PATTERSON: Well, your first six months it was basically all book work and learning how to tie knots, things like that. And then they'd let you out in the shop and you started burning, learning how to set up torches and learning how to burn and things like that. I think I got in the welding booths probably about two years after I was in the school, and I started to learn how to weld and things like that.

DAWSON: Did you like welding?

PATTERSON: Did I like welding?

DAWSON: Yes. Because I found, well, in my field, it seems like women weld better than men.

PATTERSON: I actually haven't found that knack yet.

DAWSON: Okay.

PATTERSON: I guess maybe my thing is I haven't gotten comfortable with getting burned. Because once I got burned and I jumped. People would tell you, "Well,

you're going too fast" or "You're going to slow," and I'm like, chipping away, chip, chip. So my welding, I'm still trying to work on that.

DAWSON: Can you explain to us exactly what an ironworker does?

PATTERSON: Well, you've got different aspects of ironwork, now. Basically, I've mainly stuck with structural, and that's with the big iron, bolting up, running the impact, burning (cutting the iron), welding, decking. Then you've got, you know, the rod busting — that's tensile strength for the concrete. I've had my taste of that and, believe me, that's one thing I really don't want to do again.

RAUCHER: Why is it you wouldn't want to do that again?

PATTERSON: You know, being bent over all day, humping them rods and things like that. You're not getting a good night's sleep, because you'd get cramps in your muscles in the middle of the night and things wouldn't go away no matter how much water you drank or even potassium you put in your body. Humping the rods on your shoulder, shoot, I felt like bringing in a pillow and putting it on my shoulder just to carry them rods around.

I've tied rods a couple times, but the guy didn't teach me that you're supposed to be stepping on the upper rod. Well, I'm stepping on the lower rod and I'm breaking all the ties as I'm walking.

DAWSON: They forgot to tell you that little bit.

PATTERSON: Then you also have rigging — that's moving around big machinery, rigging with chains and shackles and things like that. I've done a little bit with that, but I've mainly stuck with structural.

RAUCHER: But structural, you say, is physically not as difficult as rod busting.

PATTERSON: Structural, you got to wear your belt. I mean, you got a belt with all your tools on there. It weighs maybe fifteen, twenty pounds, depending on what you have on your belt. When I went out on a job and was working with my brother, one thing he said, "I don't want that belt on your ass." And I'm an apprentice and the only thing I'm doing is conveyer, basically sweeping the floors. But I had that belt. I wore that belt eight hours that day. And then I learned from my other brother, "Well, Terri, if you don't need them tools, don't take them tools on your belt." Okay, if I'm not using the beater, take that beater off my belt. If you're not using your bull pin or whatever, take it out of your belt. Put it in a bucket or something like that. My thing was always that I was afraid to lose my tools.

RAUCHER: So you would carry the whole twenty pounds around.

PATTERSON: Yeah, yeah. And that puts a lot of weight on your waist and hips and lower back and on your legs.

Being a third-year apprentice, working with my uncle, he would make me stay in the man lift and he would go out and pack all the bolts. Well, finally one day he looked at me and said, "Get out there and walk that iron." I looked at him, I was all excited, "You want me to?" Not knowing what to do, you know. I got out there and he said, "What's the first thing you do when you get out there on that iron?" "I don't know, I don't know. Don't look down." He said, "No. You look across that beam to see if there's anything for you to trip on." And I said, "Oh, okay."

So I went out there and I didn't know how to walk or anything, either. And I kind of scooted along sideways and stuff. My uncle is trying to tell me to point my toes in where I'm going and cross over my feet. And I was like, "No." And that's when he

showed me, he says, “Look, you can jump from one beam to the next.” I said, “Oh, no.” [laughter] And it took a little while, but he ended up dragging up on me.

And then he quit that job and they partnered me up with another guy I actually went to school with. And the way I look at it, if they send me to go work with somebody and that person has been doing it, well, I follow under you. I was up to suggestions and things like that, but I told him, “My uncle and I found a fast, efficient way to get these points impacted.” And we were up on top and we weren’t tied off or anything like that, running that impact. And I would watch that guy and he would watch me. And I finally spoke. I said to him, “What are you going to do? Are you going to walk to your next point so all I have to do is meet you halfway and then boom, boom, boom? And by the time you’re done with yours, I’m to my next point and all you got to do is meet me halfway.”

So my uncle taught me how to walk the iron and he would have been real proud of me, because I walked it and I didn’t have to stop or catch my balance or anything like that. And I didn’t see what he was talking about for the longest time, until I worked out at the Chrysler Jefferson [Assembly plant]. I lead with my right foot. I’m not comfortable leading with my left. And me and another apprentice, we were taking up some welding leads and I was off balance because I had more welding lead than the kid did and I had it on my right shoulder. So when I got to this one point where there was a clip for the sheet girds, where I had to actually pick up my foot and bring it over, I’m talking out loud, “Oh, my God, I’m going in the hole.” I ain’t got no harness on, I’m not tied off or anything like that. I tried to pick up my foot and I said, “Nope, nope, nope. I’m going in the hole.”

And one guy actually heard me. He says, "Terri, pick up your foot. Bring it over that clip. Reach over that that sheeting gird. Now, bring your other foot over and then pull yourself up." For probably a good five or ten minutes, I talked myself through it until I did it. And I was very proud of myself, because I really thought that my footing and the weight, you know, being off balance, that I was going to fall off the iron.

RAUCHER: Because you lead with your right foot, you should have had it on your left shoulder.

PATTERSON: Yeah.

FECTEAU: So how high up were you?

PATTERSON: Oh, I don't know, probably twenty-five, thirty feet.

RAUCHER: And you don't wear harnesses all the time, obviously.

PATTERSON: Yes. Sometimes yes, sometimes you do.

RAUCHER: Because of what, they get in the way and you can't do the work with that on, or what?

PATTERSON: Sometimes maybe it's by choice, maybe it's a smaller contractor who doesn't have the tools. I didn't even think about it, actually, putting on one.

RAUCHER: How high up do you work?

PATTERSON: Oh, I couldn't actually tell you how high I've been.

RAUCHER: But more than thirty feet?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah, I've been more than thirty feet. I don't have a tape measure, I can't actually tell you how high I've gone.

FECTEAU: How many stories, like building stories, you know.

PATTERSON: I'm trying to think what my biggest building, where you're actually walking on an iron, was. I don't know, maybe twenty stories.

RAUCHER: That's in Detroit?

PATTERSON: Yeah. I haven't boomed out yet [i.e., able to move between different locals' jurisdictions].

RAUCHER: Okay. And there aren't requirements or regulations for you to wear a harness or any kind of safety thing like that.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah, there is. But at that time, I didn't have one on.

RAUCHER: Okay. Now, when you walk out — because I've seen the way these guys work, at least for the skyscrapers and stuff — then you're hanging on a beam and banging on something.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah, you're standing or sitting on the beam, whatever you got to do.

DAWSON: How wide are the beams? Because you were saying you had to walk a certain way.

PATTERSON: Well, it varies. You could go out on a four-inch beam; others look like a sidewalk, even though it doesn't look that way from the ground.

DAWSON: Four-inch. Whaaa?

PATTERSON: Yeah.

DAWSON: That does take skill.

PATTERSON: Well, it's not only that, but I've also found that when you've got the longer beams . . . Actually I was out at one job and I thought we were going to get rained out, but we didn't and the iron was wet and stuff. It wasn't that high, only probably

ten, fifteen feet up, just the first level. And I went out there to start bolting up and I was walking on top of the beams. And they tell you when the beam starts to shake, don't stop, because that beam starts to shake even more. And I had two buckets of bolts with me. And I got almost to the middle of that beam and that beam started to shake. And I looked down below and I didn't see nobody. I dropped my bucket of bolts. And I guess that's one reason why I'm glad I'm not a man, because I think I would have hurt myself, you know, because I dropped down to that beam. I cooned it back off and my hand was just shaking.

And I went out and smoked a cigarette and one guy goes, "Why, I was wondering what you were going to do." I seen that start to shake." But it didn't stop me. I went back out there and did it again. But this time I didn't walk on top, I cooned it out there, which means your feet are in the bottom of the flanges of that beam.

RAUCHER: And what did you call that? Cooned?

PATTERSON: Cooning it, yeah.

RAUCHER: It's like a raccoon.

PATTERSON: Yeah, something like a raccoon.

PAT NUZNOV: That's the only way I'd go out on the steel, myself. [laughter]

RAUCHER: But you have to be very strong in order to do this work.

PATTERSON: Well, I can hold my weight. You do have to have some strength.

RAUCHER: Was it that way from the beginning? Because it doesn't sound like your dad or brothers really showed you anything before you actually got on the job, in terms of what it was going to be like.

PATTERSON: No.

RAUCHER: So how was it when you first got out there and started doing that?

PATTERSON: When I first started going out there, like I said, it was my uncle that actually showed me how to walk it, showed me how to use that impact, and things like that. I'm not going to say I wasn't frightened or anything like that. And it's not only that, it's watching other people, how they do things and stuff. I remember doing the bar joist, and I didn't honestly think I'd be out there hanging off there like a monkey, but I was. And actually, I was pretty proud of myself, because I really didn't think that I would be able to do it. But I proved to myself that I can.

RAUCHER: Were you exhausted in the beginning? I mean, did your body ache?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. My knees, kneeling on the iron and getting up and down that stuff. I even made a comment to my mother, "Maybe I better start working out." And any time when you haven't worked for a while, if you haven't done it on a day-to-day basis, you're going to be sore.

You got over that hump of your body being sore, but I looked at it that if I went out there and I come off the job tired, sore, whatever, I figure I earned my day. And I really haven't had much problem with men or anything like that. Some of their attitude I've gotten, but I really haven't had a whole lot of problems with doing ironwork. I have actually seen a lot of people that have wanted to help.

RAUCHER: You mean men on the job.

PATTERSON: Yeah. And my thing was always never being able to stand around. I'm just never standing around. I didn't care if I was picking up trash or anything like that. Even my first job, you know, I was working at Chrysler Tech and one

day my boss told me I had to go over there and take some caulk off the window and stuff. I didn't want to be too close to the windows, but I was leaning over the side and taking a razor and taking that caulk off the window. And I would always ask questions — "How come you're doing this or how come you're doing that?" But that's one of the things — not talking back to the journeymen or anything like that. I'm an apprentice. I looked at it as I'm the gopher, I go for whatever that journeyman needs.

RAUCHER: Were you the only woman on these jobs?

PATTERSON: On a lot of jobs, yeah, I was the only woman on the job. And like I said, I think even if there was another woman, you know, I didn't make it a point to actually go and talk to them or anything like that. I think that when people start getting bad names, you don't want to hang out with that person. Even though you earned a good name, you don't want your name tarnished or anything.

FECTEAU: So you're saying that some of the other women might have had bad names?

PATTERSON: Uh-huh, started getting bad names by maybe not wanting to do the work. I've come across a couple women — one woman, she wouldn't go up a ladder. She wouldn't walk on the grating. I mean, you're not going to go through it or anything. She wouldn't walk on it. It wasn't the type of field that she should have been in. The other one, I think her mouth opened too much. I think there's a time to be quiet and listen and learn instead of opening up your mouth to the point where these people aren't going to like you. And I didn't open up my mouth for the good part of my first three years, not even in school. I didn't open up my mouth, like I said, until I seen that person

going above me. And then it was like, "Oh, no. Oh, no. I feel like I've paid my dues. That's my job up there."

FECTEAU: How did they respond when you said this wasn't fair?

PATTERSON: The next day, I got partnered up with somebody else, but I still wasn't learning a whole lot on that job. I was basically a ground person. And I had told my brother that I wasn't learning anything out there. I didn't want to be a journeyman topping out of the apprenticeship and not know a whole heck of a lot still. I still have a lot of learning to do.

But my uncle was working inside, doing the conveyer and that and he must have talked to my uncle, where I drug up from that job and went inside. And they actually hired two women that replaced me and they got to ride around in the company truck all day. I never got to ride in the company truck all day, loading the bolts on there for moving them from one end of the building to the other. You know, I humped all that stuff, I carried all that stuff.

FECTEAU: Why do you think that was, the difference between you and the two other women?

PATTERSON: I don't know. Maybe because they couldn't do it. I have no idea why they did that. Yeah, I got a little bit upset with it, and stuff. But it's like, I'm working inside. I'm not going to get rained out. I'm working with my uncle. He was a steward out there. I'm learning a different aspect of ironwork, doing conveyor — it's not just about the structural now. And it was a little bit better work, too.

RAUCHER: It sounds like your uncle was a real mentor for you, somebody who kind of was there to show you the ropes. You have a close relationship with your uncle?

PATTERSON: Well, no, no.

FECTEAU: No? You mentioned him a lot.

PATTERSON: Well, I've got a couple different ones. This is actually another uncle who took me inside and stuff. My other uncle, the one who taught me stuff, we've got a very good rapport.

RAUCHER: When you were on the job with your uncle, do you think it made a difference in terms of how you were treated by the other guys on the job?

PATTERSON: Yeah, it could have been. It could have been. Like I said, when I went on a job, if you didn't know who I was, I would tell you, "My name is Terri." I wouldn't say my last name was Patterson until it got around on the job site, "Well, you know, that's a Patterson." And they'd come up to me later on and go, "Who's Joe" or "who's Bruce, who's Lee?" And it's like, "Well, my dad and my uncle or my brother." But like I said, I just didn't want to ride on shirttails.

RAUCHER: Do ironworkers talk on the job? You said you didn't talk on the job, but what do these guys talk about on the job? Or do they not talk?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. They talked a lot. I mean it's funny, because they talk about women. Yeah, they talk about women. And actually, myself, I would chuckle about it. You know, I would listen to these men's point of view about their girlfriends or wives or whatever. And it was okay.

But they had their nudie books. Well, you know what, I got to where I started bringing my own nudie books in, too. I said, "Hey, what's good for the goose is good for the gander. I'm not telling you men that you guys have to take down these pictures or anything like that. If I don't like it, I don't look." I said, "If I want to look at that, I'll go

home and look at my own self." You know? And I got to where I started bringing my books up and putting my centerfolds up. And the men, they didn't appreciate it. And they took them back down and put them back in my magazines, back in my brown paper bag. [laughter]

RAUCHER: And you're talking men centerfolds, I assume.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah.

RAUCHER: And the guys did not think that was too cool, huh?

PATTERSON: No, no. But they didn't rip them, They didn't rip them down. And I'm not going to touch their stuff — I know that they had made a comment about one of the females complaining. I had seen a lot of that, going into different trailers and you'd look and, "Okay, well, whatever," you know. And it didn't bother me to see the nude women. It had come to the point where it was almost a second nature sort of thing of just not even looking around or anything like that. I got focused on something else.

But I think I earned the respect from the men by bringing my own nudie magazines in and showing them that I'm not going to be a woman that's going to bitch about taking these centerfolds down. Because I don't want them looking at me any differently or anything like that. Like I said, I look at men as being my friends. I don't look at going any further or anything like that. When I meet these guys on a job or anything like that, I don't get hit on. Yeah, maybe that's got to be because of my family.

RAUCHER: Do they ever play practical jokes or anything like that on you?

PATTERSON: No, no.

RAUCHER: Okay. So they didn't do anything that really would have been sort of over the top in terms of maybe being even dangerous or something like that.

PATTERSON: Oh, no.

FECTEAU: Targeting you specifically by maybe putting your name on the pictures or something like that.

PATTERSON: No, no, no. Of course, I know that there has been a couple women that have been targeted. You know, they've said things about this and that person and stuff. And it's just like, wow, I don't even know how that would actually be. Like I said, I've gotten some of the attitudes from the men, but I've gotten a lot of support.

FECTEAU: Mostly support, you say?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. I've gotten a lot of support out of my brother ironworkers. One guy had made a comment about a retired ironworker. He said, "He just really adored you." Because, you know, I was a good worker. And I was like, "Wow." Just to think a retiree would think that way about me, instead of, say, somebody who knew me fifteen, twenty years. And I joke with the guys, too. I mean, it's all fun and games and stuff. I don't take a whole lot of things to heart.

FECTEAU: But you have a thick skin or you don't let things get to you? Is that part of your nature or do you think it was just that there really wasn't a lot of, like you said, attitude in the first place?

PATTERSON: I think it's where they got to know me. They got to know what kind of a person I am. Like with the language and stuff, I would look at them and say, "Well, you don't have to apologize for your language. I've probably got a worse mouth than you." I said, "That don't bother me."

FECTEAU: So you felt comfortable around them.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. I felt . . .

RAUCHER: I remember that Judy and Linda, the rod busters, said that they felt that that's the way you had to be, that you were not going to make it in that environment if you had an attitude different than the one you're describing.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah, though I do like to get my nails done nowadays and stuff like that. That's one thing I do like about being a female, is I can go get my nails done. I like to go do my hair now. I like to change the color of my eyes now, because I can. Before I wasn't into that kind of stuff. One girl had made a comment to me, "Terri, you don't have to be that G. I. Joe ironworker." Because I wanted to get up there with the guys and work hand-in-hand with them and not have them look at me any differently or anything like that. That was the biggest thing.

I remember working with one guy twelve hours, ten hours a day. He comes up and apologizes to me. I said, "What are you apologizing for?" He said, "I didn't know you were a female." I looked at him and I said, "You didn't know I was female?" I burst out laughing. I said, "Well, you know what? I can take that and I can turn that into a positive. If you thought I was a male, you're going to teach me a little bit more than if you thought I was female." But still to this day, when I see that person, I will not let him live that down. But yeah, I think you have to have thicker skin in order to be in that kind of a trade.

I think that it's the way you look, too. You know, I remember seeing one girl coming in there with the ripped pants and she had laces sewn in there, and stuff like that. I'd go in there and dress like one of the guys, hair tied back and stuff, no makeup on or anything like that — though I do like to wear lotion, which does smell so you'd know I was a female anyways. But yeah, I just think you have to have a tougher skin. And I

think there's a time to speak up and also a time to be quiet. And like I said about the pre-apprentice, if you don't think things are right, well then, speak up about it.

CARRIE WELLS: Do you think it's appropriate, then, for trailers on the job to have naked women in them?

PATTERSON: No, I don't really think it's appropriate. But I think there's some things that a female is going to have to go through. A lot of things aren't going to change.

RAUCHER: Were there any women that you know of who tried to see if they couldn't get that stuff taken down?

PATTERSON: Yes.

RAUCHER: And what happened with that?

PATTERSON: I think they actually did take it down. Because I remember there was one little shanty where the door was actually open and as soon as you looked in, there was a picture right there. And I guess the lady had asked if they would close the door and I do believe after that the pictures were taken down.

RAUCHER: Who do you think was responsible for that? Was it the union or was it just the guys on the job who did it on their own without having to be told?

WELLS: Did she go to the super?

PATTERSON: She probably did. I mean, I just looked at it as, well, you know, that's not me. And if there was women on the job and I would bring out my Playgirl magazines and they wouldn't even look at it, I'd say, "Oh, come on. You got all these men around here, you got all these nudie pictures." They wouldn't do it. So I said, "Well, to each their own." As long as they're not bothering me and I'm not bothering

them. I'm there to do a job. And if I don't know how, show me. That's the way I look at it.

FECTEAU: How was your apprenticeship — I know we're going back a little bit. You said that sometimes, even though it was mostly positive and supportive, you ran into attitudes. I'm just wondering about what attitudes you might have run into as an apprentice, when you first were getting a taste for what it was like to be in the trade, and then attitudes on the job.

PATTERSON: I really couldn't tell back then, because I was real quiet. I was real quiet. I didn't speak to anybody. I even remember the second day on my job. I was sitting there, I don't know nobody, I'm greener than green. And a guy looked at me and says, "Where were you last night?" And I looked up and I says, "What? Excuse me?" He says, "I got a phone call from a panicked brother. Where the hell were you at last night?" And I'm looking at him, going, "I had to change a tire." And he just looked at me and he goes, "Well, next time call your brother." You know, my brother thought maybe I was out drinking with all the guys and stuff. I mean, I was very quiet. And if somebody didn't talk to me, then I didn't think twice about it. But later on I could see some of the attitudes and stuff.

I even had a boss not too long ago that told me to go find some canvas bags for the bolts — with the piping being in the way, the regular buckets might tip over and the bolts fall out. so I said, "Okay, no problem." I figured we're working as a team. When I got the bag back over there, he just snatched it right out of my hand. I guess maybe sometimes it doesn't take much at all to get me really upset and then my mouth goes off.

And sometimes it's good and there's been times that it's been bad, you know, me speaking up, just not knowing where this person is actually coming from.

FECTEAU: But he was just really rude to you?

PATTERSON: Yeah, but then, it was just a thing. I guess he's not a people person. And I guess he did that with everybody. I gave the guy a look and stuff like that.

I remember one boss didn't have me working with a partner every day — he had me switching off. And I would go to him every day, "Well, what do you want me to do?" He said, "Well, you don't have to come to me every day." I was like, "Excuse me, you're my boss. You should be telling me what to do. I don't have a regular partner. You've been bouncing me off over here and there and stuff. So what do you want me to do?"

And him and I had words and I finally had enough of it. And being a journeyman now, it was like, "Well, you know what? I don't have to be on this job. I'm getting my money, then."

He had made a comment to me about, "Where you going?" I just told him the truth, I told him, "I'm going to take a shit. Why? Are you going to come wipe my ass?" [laughter] He looked at me and he says, "I'm going wherever you're going." And then I was going to get my money.

FECTEAU: What do you mean, "get your money"? You were just going to leave?

PATTERSON: I was going to go quit. And I left a note that I'm quitting and I want my money. Mail my check or if you can, write me out a check right now.

FECTEAU: And they would know that you were pissed off about something and it would kind of look bad for him.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah.

RAUCHER: Why was he bouncing you off? Why didn't he give you a partner?

PATTERSON: I was just working with different people. One day I was needed over here, one day I was needed over there. And it might have been just because the regular people that were working there, they're steadies, you know. I wasn't a steady with that company. I didn't mind, because if I didn't care for who I worked with yesterday, well then, I got a new partner today.

FECTEAU: So has there ever been a time when you felt you were treated differently because you're a woman? I mean, what I think is interesting is that you see unfairness, but it doesn't seem like you take it that they're doing this to you because you're a woman. And it seems like that might have helped you to survive.

PATTERSON: No. But I've never actually put myself in, say, that category, you know. Like I said, I come walking in here and I see all the ladies got purses and things like that. It's like, wow, do I ever feel out of place in here, everybody talking about lunch dates and whatever. I really felt out of place. So I never really put myself in, say, the woman's category. I didn't want to be on a job because I'm a female. I wanted to be on a job because I can do the work, not because of who and what I am. I'm a person and I want to work and I want to learn. And this is what I chose to do for my career.

FECTEAU: And you think other people accepted that and treated you the same way because of that?

PATTERSON: I have never actually had a man come up to my face and tell me, "You're taking a man's job." I have not had that, though I know a few women who have had. People might have said things behind my back, but personally, nothing really that negative has come back to me.

RAUCHER: Do you talk at all to the other women in the trade about difficulties on the job or anything like that?

PATTERSON: Not a whole lot. I mean, the few friends that I have made — one was a laborer. She's become an operator now and she's had trouble through the whole time she's been a laborer and an operator, and an apprentice operator too, for that matter. She's a tiny, petite woman, a real pretty lady and I know a lot of guys have hit on her and stuff. When I first looked at her, I didn't give her a chance. There's a lot of people that I really hadn't given a chance to.

But there was one girl — actually she's an ironworker, too — I had heard some bad things about her.

RAUCHER: In terms of her work ethic?

PATTERSON: Her work ethic and name-dropping and things like that.

FECTEAU: What do you mean, "name-dropping"?

PATTERSON: Well, I guess the boss would tell her, "Go over there and stack that wood," or whatever. And if she didn't want to do it, she would say, "Well, do you know so-and-so?" And I basically just told her, "You're using my name now and I don't appreciate it." I said, "You can go out there and earn your own name."

And we kind of got over that, because this went on for about a year. And when we did finally talk, I told her, "Well, I look at it as a clean slate. Hey, whatever you need,

if I can help you out, I will." But I didn't really give her a chance, because she'd started getting a bad name for herself.

So one day, at Ford Field actually, there was some problems going on down there. And she went over to talk to three guys and they literally turned their back on her.

FECTEAU: Shunned her, you mean?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. And I was like, "Oh, my goodness." The feeling I had then was what I felt when I seen that person hang their head at Ford Field. And I tried to get her to come work with me. I told her, "Well, you're going to have to work and stuff." But unfortunately, I couldn't get her to come work with me or anything like that.

I got sick down there at Ford Field, too. I had pneumonia. A guy had actually taken my gang over and when I came back, I thought I was just going to work in the gang. That's fine, whatever. Actually, I'm a worker, you know. I don't really want to be a boss or anything. But when they gave me back my gang and they introduced me to that guy — and he had dark glasses on — I could feel him look me up and down. So I started to have a problem with this guy early on that day.

And I finally went over to my general foreman and told him, "Well, I think I may have a problem here." And he went over there and talked to the guy and stuff. And later on, he came up to me and asked me who Joe was to me. And I could have said, "You know, there's a lot of Joes out there. Joe who?," but I looked at him and said, "Joe's my brother." And he looked at me and he goes, "Oh." Well, I guess I better leave you alone then." And there I really had to laugh. And instead of giving me problems, he began to work with me then.

But I didn't want that pushing job. I didn't want to be a foreman. I didn't know if I could handle it. I mean, I would show up to work — we'd start at 7 o'clock — I would show up to work at 6:00 and just try to get my thoughts together and stuff. I did the perimeter cable out there in the warehouse building [at Ford Field]. And you had to have a permit in order to take these cables down. I had all apprentices at that point in time and I would draw them little maps. I'd tell them where they had to go in order to put this or that cable up. And I'd go over there and it's not done, so I'd say, "What's going on? What's going on with this?" And finally, one day, I had to say, "You know what, we're all going up to the top, up on the roof. I'm going up there to have a meeting with you guys." I told them, "If you guys don't understand what I'm telling you to do, you need to let me know. I think it's clear in my mind, but I may not be using the right words." And we got down to the bottom of it and jobs were getting done there.

And I actually got a plaque that was recognition for the good job I did out there, where all the stewards had picked a person for that month and they gave them a plaque. And when I went in there and got my plaque and all the stewards were in there, I said, "Well, you know, my name shouldn't be on there. I wasn't the one that did the work, it was all my men that did the work. And you know, I do thank you for it, but I want them to be recognized, too." I know that they were being recognized through me, but . . . (I guess there's still a lot of times when I don't know how to take a compliment, either.)

One time a journeyman had yelled at one of my apprentices. I told him, "You don't have to yell at that kid. You told him to go down and set up the torches. Well, he set up the wrong ones, but he doesn't goof off. He's not that type of kid." And actually, you know, a lot of people got upset with me, because I took my apprentice's side instead

of that journeyman's side. Because I told the guy, "I don't need you in my gang if you're going to talk to that kid like that." Because the way I look at it, if you're going to talk down to somebody, what kind of work are you going to get out of that person?

FECTEAU: But isn't it common that journeymen talk down to their apprentices?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. But I spoke up for this kid, because I'd gotten to work with this kid and everything that I had asked, this kid had done. He was a good worker. And to me, there was no reason for the guy to yell at him or anything like that. There was no need for it.

RAUCHER: Do you think you're different than most journeymen in that respect, in the way you treat apprentices? Do you think you're a little kinder and gentler maybe?

PATTERSON: Well, that apprentice there, yeah, because I got to work with him. I got to know him and he didn't show any sign that he was going to drag his feet whenever I asked him to do something or anything like that. He was a good worker. And I didn't know the journeyman. I'd seen him on jobs, but I didn't know him, not like I knew this kid's work.

RAUCHER: But have you seen other journeymen — men specifically — treat apprentices the way you treated this guy? I mean, if the apprentice is doing a good job, do the journeymen usually praise them?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah.

RAUCHER: So that's not so unusual.

FECTEAU: But to take the apprentice's side over the journeyman's side is unusual.

PATTERSON: Yeah, yeah it is. Like I said, I liked the way this kid worked.

FECTEAU: And you just felt it was really unfair?

PATTERSON: Yeah, I did.

FECTEAU: So this is when you were a foreman.

PATTERSON: Yeah.

FECTEAU: So do you think you have a reputation of having a particular style as a foreman? How long have you been doing this and after that incident, did you continue to be a foreman?

PATTERSON: Well, yeah. I was a foreman out there for about a year and a half, I think. I think you have to be rough, too, in order for people not to step all over you. I try to be the rough type, but I also try to be the type . . . I don't know, it was Valentine's Day or something like that and I brought in suckers for all the guys. It was a bouquet of suckers. I said, "Here, Happy Valentine's Day. Now, don't forget your women." And every other day I would bring in candy. And if people made me mad, I wouldn't talk to anybody, because I might blow up at you, even though you didn't have anything to do with what was going on. I don't want to ruin that person's day. But I guess there's a mixture in me. Some people might say, "She's got an attitude" or "Don't piss her off." But I really didn't want that responsibility, because I didn't know how they would react to me.

RAUCHER: You mean, of being foreman?

PATTERSON: Yeah.

RAUCHER: How do you get jobs, exactly? I mean, what's the process for getting sent out on jobs?

PATTERSON: Myself, I started early on being an apprentice. I wouldn't rely on the school to get me work. I'd go down to the union hall, put my name on that out-of-work list, sit down there, just like the rest of the guys, and wait for a job. And other times, it's word of mouth — if you know something is going on, if you can get a hold of so-and-so, you can get work. And actually, work is still real slow. I mean, I could go down there and tie rods, but I don't have the tools for that.

RAUCHER: You mean work is slow now.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. It's been slow. It's been slow, but it's actually picked up for rod busters. But like I said, I don't really care to do that, actually. I would really rather do structural or something of that sort.

NUZNOV: So the union does have jobs available? People call them with jobs to refer people?

PATTERSON: Yeah.

NUZNOV: But you can also get your own.

PATTERSON: Yeah, you can go out there and get your own jobs.

RAUCHER: Are there any jobs that might be federally-funded or something, that would require women or minorities on the job?

PATTERSON: Oh yeah.

RAUCHER: And have you gotten jobs because of that?

PATTERSON: Well, that's basically how I got down to Ford Field. I mean, any time I work in Detroit, that's basically why. But like I said, I don't want to be hired just because I'm a female or I'm North American Indian or anything like that. I want to be on the job because I can do the work. I'm not going to be just, I want to say, a totem pole.

No, I'm not going to stand around there and collect a paycheck. I've worked on many jobs with different tradespeople where it's like, "Wow, nobody gets on this person about doing this or that." But I'm not that type of person. I'm a worker, you know. I'm not that type of person who will go hide or anything like that.

RAUCHER: How long have you been out of work now, or not on a job?

PATTERSON: A couple days, actually.

RAUCHER: Oh, okay. [laughter] I thought maybe it had been a long time. And you do collect some sort of unemployment?

PATTERSON: Actually, this is the first two years I've collected unemployment. Otherwise for the past, say, seven, eight years, I hadn't collected unemployment.

NUZNOV: Because whenever a job ended, you went out and found another one.

PATTERSON: Yeah, I went out and found another one. Early on, that's what a lot of people would ask me, "Why do you want to work all this overtime?" I used to tell them, "I ain't going to want to do it when I get older." I'm thirty-five now, but I mean, it wears anybody's body down. A couple days ago I worked and my knees are still sore. I still feel like I'm an old woman, and I'm not. My back is sore, but that's . . .

NUZNOV: Kind of the way these trades work, unfortunately. They're tough on the body.

RAUCHER: So, do you think you will be retiring from ironwork relatively soon?

PATTERSON: Hmm, who knows what tomorrow is going to bring? I don't like to look at how long I'm going to be in. I mean, I didn't think I'd be in ten years. You know, I've still got a long way to go, but at least it's not thirty years anymore. At least

I've got ten years invested now. I mean, who knows? Yeah, I might want to change jobs or something like that, try to do something else, save my body. And my brother is really trying to show me about using my mind instead of my body, because I'm so used to using my body as far as doing the grunt work and stuff like that, which I don't have a problem doing, but days later, yeah, I'm still affected by it. So getting better with my blueprints or getting better with my welding and some of the things that I'm not sure about . . .

I just find that I enjoy the work now. I enjoy that sense of freedom when you're out and you're able to look over and see how beautiful nature is. I mean, over in Ypsilanti I was building a library and it being autumn time and seeing the different colors of the leaves, I decided I didn't feel like coming down off the iron that day. So I ended up sitting up there on a bundle of decking.

Well, what does it start to do? It starts to rain. And you know, I'm all the way up on top. And I heard the operator say, "Ask her if she wants a ride down." Well, my father is no longer here, but I still look to him for guidance in what I do, as far as my trade is concerned. I would still ask him for guidance. And that day, before I could say no, the operator had the ball sitting right there.

And I said, "No, no. I'll walk down. I got some things down on this level here." He goes, "No, I'll get them. Just go ahead and get up there." And I stood there for a little bit, and the guy just yelled up to me and said, "Jump up there, wrap your leg around, hold on tight, don't let go." And like I said, I was hesitant at first, because I'd never ridden a ball before. It was the first and only time that I've ever done it. And I got up there — I had my work belt on and everything — and he took me high in the sky and

brought me gently back down and everything. And to me, that's been the ultimate, riding that ball.

NUZNOV: So it was wonderful?

PATTERSON: Oh yes it was.

RAUCHER: It was like on a crane? Is that what it is?

PATTERSON: Yeah. It was like the wrecking ball. They call it the headache ball.

RAUCHER: Oh, okay. And so that's why you guys work with operating engineers, because they're moving the steel around.

PATTERSON: Yes.

RAUCHER: But you say the world looks really beautiful or the landscape looks really beautiful when you're up on . . .

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. And the way I looked at it, that was my father giving me the courage in order to do that, because I honestly didn't think I could. And my grandfather, too, you know — I look at them as helping me, guiding me down that line. And besides walking the iron, riding the ball has been the ultimate for me. So I mean, it's a sense of freedom up there and knowing there's a lot of people that can't do that kind of work. So that's what it's been for me. It's, you know, having a lot of pride, after seeing a building up and done, like Ford Field, where I was a pusher, because people all over the world see that stadium.

RAUCHER: What's a pusher?

PATTERSON: A foreman.

RAUCHER: Okay, thank you.

DAWSON: Good name for them.

RAUCHER: And you take a pride in the fact that you helped build that stadium.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. And it's not only that, it's what my dad did. I used to go down to the hall with him on weekends and he would show me all over where he worked, and you know, I can do that today. I even took my niece to Ford Field when it was under construction and took a couple pictures with her, because I wanted her to see what her father and what all her family does for a living.

RAUCHER: How old is she?

PATTERSON: I think she was like, thirteen at that time. And I wanted her to have more respect for her family, because when you work a hard job, a dangerous job, you know that money doesn't grow on trees. I wanted her to see what we go through.

DAWSON: How did she like the experience?

PATTERSON: She looked around and she was a little bit fearful. She was up high. I took her up on the roof, and stuff. And they had the cable off and they were bolting up the iron down on the ground before they actually set it.

RAUCHER: Is she thinking about becoming an ironworker?

PATTERSON: No. She wants to be a mechanic.

RAUCHER: You mentioned the danger of the job. Have you ever seen anybody injured on the job or have you been injured on the job?

PATTERSON: Yeah, there was an apprentice that had to ride a column down and he got the wind knocked out of him. He had ridden the ball up, but he didn't ride it up high enough. And because there's nothing to support it up on top, when you start climbing that column, the weight starts to tip over. So he rode it down, bounced off of

that and got the wind knocked out of him and stuff. Actually, I was just out there to pick up my check, because I didn't work that day. But I stayed around and helped out, telling the truck drivers that they couldn't go through, because we had an accident. And I actually knew who this person was that got hurt and it did affect me, even more because he was a young kid. But he was fine — bumps and bruises and stuff like that — but he was fine.

DAWSON: Sometimes your best lessons are your mistakes.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. Either that or you get suggestions from some people that later on you see make sense. My buddy would ask me questions, like why this wouldn't be tied iron, and I looked at him and said, "Well, I don't know. You put impact on it and suck it right up." And he looked at me and he goes, "No." And he showed me then that it's got to be coped out. And it was kind of neat, because I didn't see that until a few years later, until my boss had sent me over to bolt up this one connection. And I looked up there and I said, "Well, I need a torch." And it was kind of neat, because I seen that and these two other guys working over there hadn't seen that, you know, what needed to be done on that, and they didn't finish it, they didn't do it.

FECTEAU: You had a way to get that knowledge from your family.

PATTERSON: Well, from my family and my friends. But basically, like I said, I shied away from my family at that time, because I wanted to earn on my own. But I did hurt myself by doing that, because I know my family would have showed me a lot more than what I actually do know. But from these friends that I had made — and I used to run with these two guys all the time . . .

RAUCHER: Who were in the trades?

PATTERSON: Yeah.

RAUCHER: Is that mostly who you socialize with, other ironworkers, when you're off the job, I mean? Is that who you would spend time with?

PATTERSON: Some, some, not all. I mean, there's some people that I do socialize with. A lot of them are, I want to say, people that I've known since kindergarten or I've known since I was a teenager — not too many from the trade or anything like that. But if there are functions and stuff, you know, it's nice to go, because if you haven't seen somebody for a real long time or these retirees or whatever, it's really nice to see them kind of people. And there's days that I maybe don't want to go to a union meeting and that, but I know if I do go, I'm going to have a good time just by seeing some people who I haven't seen.

RAUCHER: You haven't talked much about the union. Can you talk about your relationship with the local? I mean, are you active in the union?

PATTERSON: Well, I'm not married and I have no children, so you know, in finding where I belong in this world, I can't exactly go borrow a kid for Christmas.

FECTEAU: I'll give you some. [laughter]

PATTERSON: But I would go down for the union functions, for the Christmas wrappings or for our picnic or whatever. Anytime they need volunteers, I would always volunteer. And it was just being a part of Local 25. And actually, for our 100-year anniversary, I got involved in doing that, and that was the same time as Ford Field, too. I got in there for the decorating and the entertainment. And the ladies there, our secretaries down at the hall, they had asked me if I could come up with a design for a centerpiece. They said, "Could you come up with it in about a week?" And I said, "Well, okay."

So I went down to the apprenticeship school and designed our centerpiece and brought it back the next time and we had our meeting and they all agreed they liked it and everything. And I stood up in front — I didn't ever think I could stand up in front of my whole union meeting and say that for the 100-year anniversary, we need spud wrenches, because that was in my design of the centerpiece.

Actually, the two spud wrenches were crossed like that. I had to weld it on a piece of rebar. And I didn't really know what to do for the rigging at the base of my centerpiece, so one guy says, "Well why don't you drill two holes and put chains and shackles." I was like, "Hmm." I thought about that, but you know what, you won't be able to see it down on the base. So I ended up welding the two shackles up on the ends of the spuds and then I put on the chain. So that all represented Iron Workers Local 25. Though I didn't get any recognition for it, and that really did upset me. They thanked the apprentices for making it, but they didn't say who designed it.

RAUCHER: You mean, as part of the 100th anniversary celebration, they didn't?

PATTERSON: Yeah. And it kind of put a damper on my doing stuff in the union. They know who I am. They know I'm a good worker and that I try to do my best, as far as representing Local 25.

RAUCHER: Do you go to union meetings?

PATTERSON: Yeah.

PATTERSON: Are you involved in any committees or offices?

PATTERSON: I'm still thinking about maybe running one day for sergeant at arms — that's basically checking your dues at the union hall and if anybody gets out of

control. I've seriously thought about running for that. So who knows? I don't know, yet.

But I've been really thinking about my sisters and not really getting to know them. So I talked to Judy [Ellul] about maybe once a month or once every two months getting the women together to talk about issues, talk about anything going on on the job, anything that maybe they don't know. And when they have our sign-up for the apprenticeship, to have a female down there to give them my insight or some person's insight about what you may have to go through, so that females won't be deterred from coming into the trade. And to find out if this is something that they may truly want do.

Because even though I've come up with a family of ironworkers, I didn't really know what it meant to be an ironworker. I think there's a lot of women out there whose fathers have been welders and they think that they're going to go out there and just be welding all the time. Well, that's not the case. And maybe bring your workbelt and say, "You're going to have to do this type of job. Are you going to be able to do it?"

RAUCHER: And this is something that Local 25 has never had.

PATTERSON: No.

FECTEAU: How many women are in the local?

PATTERSON: How many women? As far as I can calculate, it's sixteen to seventeen women that are active and then there are three who are honorary members.

RAUCHER: And how big is the membership of Local 25, the total membership?

WELLS: Active.

PATTERSON: Active? I couldn't actually tell you. I mean, we're supposed to be the biggest local out of North America.

RAUCHER: Be hundreds?

PATTERSON: Thousands of members.

NUZNOV: And how big is this jurisdiction? The whole state of Michigan?

PATTERSON: I think it's just about and I think they've got another local on the west side of Michigan.

DAWSON: Any of them officers?

PATTERSON: No, no. So those are my thoughts about trying to get our sisters closer together, to get to know one another.

DAWSON: It's a good plan. It's a good start.

PATTERSON: So I figure after this, I'll see where things go. I've gotten the names and the numbers — and that was interesting. I went to my fringe office and asked if I could get that information and they didn't have anything like that. And that's the same thing with over at the hall, they don't having anything like that. So me and the secretaries down there, we're trying to think of who we know — if they're still active or if they're honorary or if they're suspended — so they could type up the names and numbers.

RAUCHER: Is there a women's group at all that's part of the Iron Workers international union? I mean, would you have an opportunity to meet any other women ironworkers in the country, not necessarily in Michigan, at regional meetings?

PATTERSON: Not as far as I know. I guess they do have one thing that — I didn't know this was around, actually — International Association of Women in Construction. And there's a lady named Kelly Taylor and she's located in Westland. And I guess they have some kind of meetings, I have no idea. My one girlfriend said she

thought it was going to be more or less like a mentor sort of thing. And she told me the women were there just bitching about everything.

RAUCHER: And these are skilled tradeswomen, not businesswomen or contractors or stuff like that?

PATTERSON: Yeah, I guess so. And for myself, basically, I would rather have different trades, because there's going to be a lot of difference between an ironworker and an electrician. I've seen electricians and it looks like a small belt, nothing like what I have to wear.

RAUCHER: How many pounds is it, Pat? How many pounds does your belt weigh?

NUZNOV: I put my stuff in my pocket. I don't wear a belt. And that's not necessarily a good habit, especially if you have to work in the steel. Then you've got to be able to have a belt.

FECTEAU: How heavy is your belt?

PATTERSON: Fifteen to twenty pounds.

NUZNOV: And when they walk, they jingle.

PATTERSON: Yeah, I try to hold my spud wrenches so they don't jingle.

RAUCHER: Do you think there's more of an opportunity for women in ironwork today, because the job has changed and it's not as difficult physically as it was back when your grandfather and your father were doing it?

PATTERSON: Yeah. I wanted to learn how to slide down a column. And he looked at me and said, "You got to go on the other side." And I slid down and I almost fell. And then I seen the operator looking at me and I put my arms up, "Yea, I did it,

finally." [laughter] And then the guy looked at me and he goes, "Now you got to climb it." I said, "Oh, no." The guys used to tell me at school, "Terri, you got to swing your hips more." I said, "No." I got my feet into the flanges and that, but I couldn't keep them gripped in there. So I can't climb a column, although I've tried. One guy was actually going to teach me how to slide down and he said, "Your hands are your stoppers." And myself, I got nervous. Even when I was a little girl, when my cat would get stuck up in the tree, I'd go up there and try to save my cat. Well, then I got stuck up there and my dad had to come and get me. [laughter] But when I seen that guy was going to go down and get the manlift to get me down, it's like, "Oh, no. He ain't coming up here to come get me." I did whatever I had to do to get back down.

But you have to have thick skin to deal with some of the issues on the job. I know one of the biggest ones has been the port-a-johns on the jobs. And I don't look at it as being intentional necessarily, where somebody had peed on a toilet seat and then they peed . . . But I was very upset with it, because now I can't wash my hands. So it got to be where I was waiting until lunchtime or whatever and I'd go out to the bar just to go to the bathroom.

I would ask plant people, when I'm working inside, where the ladies' bathroom was "Oh, up over here." "Oh, jeez. I ain't going all the way over there" with all my stuff on, you know. So I've gone in the men's bathroom, you know. I don't care. One guy watches the door for me. The next time I ask, "Is anybody in there?" "No." "Okay." I go in there, I'm in the stall, and I hear all the men coming in, and I'll be like, "Can I come out yet?" "I don't know, can you?" I said, "I promise I won't look." I mean, none of us took offense to any of that, you know.

FECTEAU: No graffiti in the port-a-johns?

PATTERSON: I don't think I was in there long enough to look at the graffiti or anything like that. [laughter] I mean, yeah, there's graffiti.

RAUCHER: You said you're trying to get together a group of women that would meet monthly and discuss issues. What are some of those issues that you would discuss?

PATTERSON: Maybe it's not issues, maybe it's what these older women have gone through. You know, I'd like to hear their story and what they went through being on a job. I'd like to hear if there's an apprentice that needs to learn to do her knots and things like that, to maybe take time out to show her. I know I did tell one girl that I would walk with her hand-in-hand to teach her how to walk that iron. But she didn't have it in her. So I think it would be a little bit better coming from a woman than, say, a man. So if I could help, well I think my mind is more open than what it was before — because I have had a closed mind about some of the women in the trades.

WELLS: Why would your mind not be closed anymore? What brought about the change?

PATTERSON: Like I said, seeing the men turn their back on the one girl. I haven't had the men turn their back on me and literally not see me. I haven't had that happen to me. And just knowing what she went through then, and just to be more supportive. Because I'm not an outgoing person, I pretty much stay to myself. I don't go out of my way to really introduce myself to anybody. And I feel I'm okay with that. I don't think there's anything wrong about, I guess I want to say, being a closed person.

NUZNOV: Well, there's some of that in all of us, you know. And I think it's great that you can see now that some of those women need your hand. And I'd be happy to help you hold their hands. I think we all would. It's great.

Can I ask one question? You said your father is no longer here. Was he alive during the beginning of your venture as an ironworker? And how did he feel about that? Was he as proud of you as you could imagine? I'm sorry if this is upsetting you, but I think it would be so cool to be in your father's business and him be proud of that, too. And that was the case, huh?

PATTERSON: Yes.

NUZNOV: That's great.

PATTERSON: Yeah. A lot of times you would see in the Iron Workers magazine, which you get every month, these young kids that are dressing up as ironworkers. And my brothers had dressed me up, when I was young, in my dad's work hat and hard hat and his work boots, and I had a pair of shorts on. I had no shirt on. To see me then and to see me now, today . . .

RAUCHER: You mean, there is that picture in an issue of the Iron Workers magazine?

PATTERSON: No. I did bring that when they interviewed me for the 100-year anniversary and I brought a picture in of my father working the iron.

RAUCHER: It sounds like he was a very important influence in your life.

PATTERSON: Yeah.

NUZNOV: And the thing is, we know he's still with you and that's the real neat part.

PATTERSON: Oh, he sees me every day. He sees me every day.

NUZNOV: You got the best partner you could ever have and support, you know, in your father. And I'm assuming your brothers are also proud of you? I mean your real blood brothers.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah, all of them. There are times that my one brother wants me to be better. And some days I just don't want to be better. [laughter]

RAUCHER: To be a better tradeswoman, you mean? You mean on the job?

PATTERSON: Yeah. I mean, I refer to myself as a journeyman. I don't refer to myself as a journeywoman, you know — that's a technical term. I'm not looking into changing it or anything like that. But yeah, my brothers, they're all very much behind me. You know you're going to squabble with your siblings and yearn for that respect from them. But they all know I'm a good worker.

RAUCHER: When you go to the powwows or the meetings, there must be several ironworkers in that group.

PATTERSON: Well, there are some. But then if you go over to New York, they had built the Quebec bridge and many of the men had died on that bridge and they never got any recognition in the papers of their death. And I can see that's why a lot of people don't want their loved ones to go in the trade. But I think maybe only certain people can do that type of work. And I don't want to say that I'm better or anything like that, but, I don't know, it's just that I find a sense of freedom being up there, being up on that iron.

And I have my union behind me. When I talked to my business manager about doing these things for the women, he gave me a calendar. It was from another local and it had pictures of different ironworkers each month and I really thought that was kind of

neat. And he told me, "Well, maybe we can pick twelve women and make our own calendar." He told me it was a good idea and I want to see if maybe we can make this happen. And I don't know, this here is really — I've really looked differently on a lot of things.

RAUCHER: So we were lucky to ask you to interview at this point in your career. Because if it had been a few years earlier, maybe you would have thought, "Eh, skilled tradeswomen oral history, right, who needs it?" So maybe the timing was very good for us.

PATTERSON: Well, you know what they always say, that things are meant for a reason. Before Judy [Ellul] called me and gave me your number, I wasn't feeling too good about myself. And to me it has been an honor, you know, to let you experience some of what I've gone through and what I do, being an ironworker.

RAUCHER: I think it's incredible. But then I come from a family of construction workers, too, and I've always thought the ironworkers were sort of gods, you know. [laughter] No, I think to do something like that you have every reason to be extremely proud of yourself.

PATTERSON: One of the things I did get quoted in a history book about was when my father used to come home to me when I was a little girl and he used to tell me that he was so high up in the sky that the angels were singing to him. You know, of course, being a little girl, I always believed things like that. But, I don't know, it's a challenge every day. That's the way I look at it. And who knows how long I'll be in it? I might want to get out tomorrow. Who knows? But that's tomorrow, and I don't like to

look so far ahead or really plan anything, because if you plan things, it just never seems to work out anyways. [laughter]

NUZNOV: Well, I think when we started this, we really were hoping to hit every trade. And to get rod busters and ironworkers? Wow! It's just been an honor to hear your story.

FECTEAU: Well, I just have a couple more questions. I just want to know if there's other nieces or nephews coming up that are going to go into ironwork. Is it continuing in your family?

PATTERSON: I don't know. I know my nephew had talked about it, but then, I'd rather see my nephew do something else. If my niece chose to do something like that, I don't know, that'd be really kind of neat.

RAUCHER: I know Judy [Ellul] and Linda [Bart] said they can't find enough rod busters to do the work because the work is physically so hard, and so it's getting to be a real problem. Is that happening with ironworkers, generally, do you think, that there are fewer people going into the trade, men or women?

PATTERSON: I know my brother has been really talking to me about going down there and tying rods. And I mean, he's never done it. Like I said, you wake up in the middle of the night and your legs are all stiff. I never tied the ones where you're standing up. I was always bent over. And your shoulders, humping that stuff. Personally, I'd rather walk the iron than tie rods. But I think it's all right for a person who wants to earn that kind of money. I don't think you're that high off the ground or anything.

RAUCHER: Do you earn as much as a rod buster, though?

PATTERSON: Just about, yeah.

RAUCHER: So that's one of the things that maybe attracted you to the job is the pay?

PATTERSON: Yeah. When I started out, it was half a journeyman's wage, which was $9.39. So it was like, wow, I'd never made that much before. But I didn't realize it would be so physically challenging and physically hard on your body. Like I said, when I go home and I'm tired and I'm sore, I know I earned my pay that day. You know? It's not that I stood around or anything like that.

FECTEAU: Is there anything that you like to see the union doing to help encourage more women to go into the trade?

PATTERSON: I think that maybe encouraging other women to come in would mean that the ladies can see what can be done. But if you don't have thick skin . . .

RAUCHER: And the physical strength, I would think, too.

PATTERSON: Yeah. I remember running into one girl who had just started out. She was probably only about five-foot-two and she was maybe 100 pounds soaking wet. And she was trying to hold up a piece of angle. And one guy was trying to rig something for her. And I was like, "Man, you're going to hurt her. Why can't you find something else for her to do? I mean, she's not as big as I am." I mean, I know I can handle holding up that angle for him to cut it at the shear. Well, she's no longer in — I've never seen her since. There's been at least three women that I've known of that are not in no more. That was really a hard question, though.

FECTEAU: I was thinking maybe if the union knew where to look to recruit certain women who might be strong physically and tough.

DAWSON: Or even go into high schools. All kids aren't going to go to college, and there are other jobs and, like you said, it's good money.

FECTEAU: Maybe it's not for everybody, but the more the word gets out, the more likely people who can do the job might think about doing it.

PATTERSON: I find it more family-oriented. I mean, I know of one where I think there's five generations, actually.

DAWSON: Just a question. A lot of African Americans ironworkers?

PATTERSON: Yeah, there are.

DAWSON: Any women?

PATTERSON: I want to say that I knew of one, but I've never met her or anything like that. Actually, I heard that she's got family in the trade. But I don't know if she's even still in the trade.

RAUCHER: Well, any more questions? Or did you have anything, Terri, that you would like to add?

PATTERSON: No, nothing that I can think of. I tried to go over the questions. I didn't know if I should go write them down or anything like that. And I talked to Judy [Ellul] yesterday and she said, "No. They won't go through all of them." Thank you for the opportunity of sharing my story.

ALL: Oh, thank you for coming. It was great to have you.

NUZNOV: Because we have to have our history recorded or otherwise it'll be gone.

RAUCHER: Well, and also, we just keep hearing the same themes, too. I mean, the importance of your father. There are certain things that we hear from women in all

different kinds of trades, things that made a difference for them on the job or . . . So that, to me, is always real interesting.

WELLS: There's a lot of commonality in all the trades.

FECTEAU: Like having that tough skin — that you're just not going to make it if you don't have that.

PATTERSON: And, especially when I tower over these men, I would always make a comment like, "I love that when a man has got to look up to me." [laughter] A lot of times, you know, literally, they do

RAUCHER: Well, I can attest to your strength, because I shook your hand.

PATTERSON: Well, when I do that, it's like I want you to know that I'm very glad to meet you. I mean, that's the way [a strong handshake] looks to me.

RAUCHER: Well, we are very happy to meet you, too. I thought we were very fortunate because Michelle happened to see a guy in a Local 25 jacket at Meijer's and that's how all of this came about. And we felt we were so fortunate because we had been trying to find an ironworker to interview. And everything worked out beautifully. So all right, I guess that's the end, and thank you again, Terri.