Bob Bowen Interview, Part II
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Local 849 Union Hall
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Transcribed by Daniel Clark

Begin Tape III, Side A

[Banter about tape recorder]

DC: Anyway, I'm just trying to capture on tape what you were just saying about your Grandpa, so why don't you tell me about that again.

BB: Yeah. My Grandfather was a very large devotee of Eugene Debs. And Debs had done very well in the Arkansas River Valley elections. There was a large number of Socialists in Arkansas and Oklahoma, and Debs had impressed my Grandfather [Byron??] so strongly that he named my Father after Eugene Debs. So we have a Eugene Bowen in our family. But I didn't know that for many, many years. I knew the name, but I never associated it because, until I really got involved in the labor movement, I never noticed much of Debs except a little footnote in the history books. Then as I started putting things together . . .

DC: So how involved was your grandfather with Eugene Debs . . .

BB: I don't really know how much. I know that he and his brother Al [?] were really considered sort of radicals in that part of Arkansas, where there was Socialism. But my Grandfather had a stroke during WWII, and he could communicate, but it altered his personality and his desire to talk much, so I really didn't have a good relationship with him after that time. If he was anything like Uncle Al, my other cousins told me that they were really hoping during the Depression that there would be a revolution. Uncle Al refused to pay his property taxes. He said, 'Why should we pay this when we're going to take it all over anyway.' But when Franklin Roosevelt was elected president, and the economy gradually improved, Uncle Al lost it all because somebody paid the property tax on his property. So he had a chunk of that thousand acres we had on top of the mountain, which he lost then.

DC: Oh, he had land on top of the mountain.

BB: Oh, he and his brother and a few other Bowens and a handful of [Weirs?], we had a little—about a thousand-acre enclave up there. All farms. There was no mining or anything up there. It was sort of a high plateau that even in dry years had water. Hardwood. And you could put orchards in—apples—pick grapes, tomatoes, because the elevation made it about ten degrees cooler than the valley. So you had a bigger variety of plants and vegetables that you could grow. So they did well.

DC: But they lost it all?

BB: Well he did. The other hung on, but Al was sort of a stubborn type, and he was insistent. I guess he was thinking the day was going to come, he told me, "I'm going to ride my horse to the courthouse here when we take over." So he was really fed up with the system.

DC: As far as you know, had he always been a farmer?

BB: Al was a stonemason. My Grandfather had been a coal miner. Now the other one was a farmer was on my Mother's side—the Parkers. The Bowens were all from Illinois, except those that had been born there on the mountain. So we had quite a contrast there in the families. But it wasn't an explosive mix. It turned out pretty good. It's almost like they had to hide that, because when the Korean War came, a couple of the cousins, at first they refused to accept them in the Army. When they got drafted they had a pretty big investigation because they were on the list. They were being investigated by the FBI. They suspected the loyalty of our family.

DC: Had they been members of the Socialist party?

BB: I've never seen any documentation, but evidently they attended the meetings or were members. A lot of people had a membership there. Either that or they had just been observed. Anyway, they were on the list. It's funny, because one of the people on the list was a Bowen, and the other was a Weir. And the Weir—I guess it's possible that maybe he was a radical like a Bowen, but most of the Weirs were conservative Republicans. If anyone would go to Korea, they'd have [???] the wrong guys. There was nothing to it. They were as loyal as anyone. It shows you how fanatical the Red Scare was. It would still continue over like that, just as the Cold War was getting going good, checking our people out.

DC: Did you know these cousins of yours very well?

BB: They were older than me, so I really didn't get to find out much until after I retired and I got a chance to talk to some of the older cousins who really knew the history well. And they told me all about it. They said they laugh, because at the family reunion we usually have these ultra-leftists and then these fanatical Republicans. They all get together and break bread, tell lies, you know, so it's good.

DC: It's an American story.

BB: Yeah, it is.

DC: Where do you have those reunions?

BB: Usually in Arkansas. Yeah, it's a good mix. We had one guy there, one of the Weir's, I think he pretty well went broke during the Depression, but he was proud of his

Republican heritage and he was the president of a bank or something there, in the town just outside of Fort Smith, Arkansas. I don't know if Uncle Al cheered when he went broke or not. I doubt it. It was strange. I don't know if we could find any of the old lists to see how he got there or not. Maybe we could even—I don't know if anybody kept records that well from back in those days, to see who had subscription lists to the different magazines, papers, things like that.

DC: It could have come from any one of those directions, or even just knowing that a parent was a member of the party or . . .

BB: You know when you get out there in the country like that, there are no secrets. And anyone who thought that—anyone who had a slight left lean to them in that day and age would have been considered a blooming red, you know, or a Communist even.

DC: You'd probably have to figure out who controlled the draft board in that county. If you found out who that person was, it might unlock some of the mysteries.

BB: That would be fun, yeah. That would be a good idea.

DC: You might never see a list, but you might be able to make some inferences.

BB: We could start making some inferences. Unfortunately, all of the people who would really know most of them are dead now, to know their philosophies, and who [inaudible] in and out. Most of the people probably are trying to keep their kids out, which surprised me, that—if you didn't like the Bowens or the Weirs, you'd probably be happy to send them off. So, I don't know.

DC: I guess, unless they're truly concerned about security risks.

BB: Well, there were people like that. It was crazy.

DC: Well, the Cold War stories from places like Arkansas need to be told. Most of that is done on a national level as well.

BB: It surprised me, because some of the others had no trouble at all, you know. They didn't exactly jump up to volunteer, but they got drafted, and just sailed right in. But these two, they had their problems. Wrong Dads, I guess.

DC: Were they disappointed that they couldn't serve?

BB: You know I think it upset them. I don't think they were really gung-ho to go, but I think it upset them to think that the government that they had always served, traditionally through all the generations, would suspect their loyalty. Just like going back to the great-grandfather in the Union Army, he was very proud of what he had done, and I could see it rubbed off on my Grandfather [Myron?]. I know everyone joined the Army for different reasons, and I wouldn't say that he wasn't racist—he probably was—but he would never

allow any of the Bowens to call a black man a nigger. Because my Uncle J.R., who went in the Korean War, told me when he was younger, they were all working this cotton patch, and there were some black people there, and he called one of them a nigger. He said when he got home that night, Grandpa took him to the cleaners, said "You don't ever call a man that." I don't want to ever hear that from any of you. And the only way that could have come about, I think had to be through his Dad. He knew what the war was about. I know a lot of people did it for money and everything else, but I sincerely believe that he was one of them that really wanted to see the end of slavery, whether it was for economic reasons or what. But he thought people had dignity. And I was really proud to hear that. The same Uncle J.R., when he came back from Korea on leave one time, he bumped into a fellow that he knew, a black man there in town, who had been in the service too, who he had met, invited him to the restaurant down in Clarksville, and forgetting the times, went in, and sat down. They wouldn't serve them. So he left after he had tipped his coffee upside down and a few things, and gave them a lecture: "Good enough for us to go fight for you, and my friend go fight for you, but we can't sit here and eat together.

DC: That could have put him at some risk as well. Do you remember any repercussions?

BB: Nah. The town was small and he was tough. So they weren't going to mess with him. He liked to bounce people around if they messed with him. He liked to fight. But that really insulted him, made him feel bad really. He said, "What are you fighting for if you can't do things like this?" I didn't find that out but two years ago.

DC: Really. At a reunion?

BB: Well, I just went up to visit with him, and he told me about it. I was asking him about some of these things that our cousin [Earl Weirs?] up on the mountain was talked about, and he started talking about different things. And we drove by this one place, and he pointed out that's where he had been picking cotton when he was a kid. One thing led to another. It was funny.

DC: This is an amazingly interesting family past.

BB: It is. What a convergence. The Weirs were just as interesting. The first Weir about—getting killed as a soldier was a British soldier. But he got killed before the Revolutionary War by an Indian in Virginia. It was strange. It would seem like the Weirs and the Bowens were always into something, like everybody in those guys.

DC: It's almost Forrest Gump-like.

BB: It is. It's almost like it. Sad to see him get it, but I guess in hindsight, they say, 'Well you got to go some day.' But they were a strange group.

DC: Anytime one of those stories pops into your mind, let me know. I was thinking maybe we could continue that theme of you know, race relations and civil rights, because that's

something we didn't talk about much concerning the '60s, especially in the Ford Plant here. I was wondering if you could remember at all . . .

BB: Oh yeah, I can remember it, because I can remember, like I told you, I thought that race relations were bad, but I really was probably in the conservative vein, where I thought we gotta go one person at a time and change hearts. I remember here back in the '60s, when Mrs. Liuzzo was killed.

DC: Right, in Selma.

BB: Prior to that, either then or after, some of the people were objecting to the UAW participating, using local union dues to send people to those type of things. As a matter of fact, I had even signed a petition. I thought it was wrong to use the dues money. I thought it was good the people could participate, but I thought it was like taking someone who was philosophically opposed and using the money. In hindsight I was wrong, but it had hundreds of signatures on this petition and people come over, the hall was jammed, all the way from the auditorium out to the outside. And brother Bill White, who was a southerner, who was the plant chairman at the time, he just—I can't remember the words he used, but he answered a complaint and said, "No, this is a good use of the money. What does this country stand for? There are people being denied their rights. What's the purpose of the union? It's not just us. It's all of us, and our rights." Now here's this ex-Marine from down South, and people had tremendous respect for him. Everybody went away happy, and said, "You know, we never thought of that." Heard very little grumbling about it. For a long time I had petitions over here, and I saw the names on it. A few years ago I was looking for it and I couldn't find it. I don't know if somebody maybe found their name on it and thought it was too embarrassing, but you couldn't publish the names anyway, probably. But I just thought I'd let you know it did exist. And the people that was awakening—I guess it was just one of those little epiphanies, or whatever you call it, where some day somebody turned the lights on and said, "You know, we haven't thought of this yet." We can sit here, but it would be just like us going out here and saying, "[How about if we turn this??] right to work." Guys who don't believe in the union, don't have to pay their dues but they get their benefits. I hear a [chairman making a plan??] We're all citizens. We all deserve rights. If the union can't stand up for people's rights, we might as well go out of business. And everybody says, "Yeah, let's do it." No more gripes, at least not publicly.

DC: Interesting.

BB: That Bill White, he's still around.

DC: Is he really?

BB: Oh great, great man. He went on international staff sometime later, but that guy was just the most courageous guy I know.

DC: I wonder if there's anyway I can get hold of him.

BB: Oh yeah, Bill would love talking with you.

DC: That would be great.

BB: He's a fantastic man.

DC: It would be a really interesting story to hear that from his vantage point. It sounds like it's a case where an individual act of courage made a huge difference.

BB: It did. You know everybody loved him and had tremendous respect, because when he was elected chairman, we had a number—I don't want to mention names—but we had a number of people I would call porkchoppers.

DC: How do you define porkchopper?

BB: A guy that's on the payroll, he wants all the goodies, but don't want to do the work. And they were abusing their jobs. Instead of taking care of the people's business, they were maybe playing cards in the union office. Instead of being in the plant where they could take care of issues, they were goofing off and stuff. When Bill got elected chairman, the first thing he'd do, he was the first guy in the office every day. He's got his thermos of coffee on his desk, and people aren't on the job as they're supposed to be, he'd replace them with alternates. Told them when they came in, "Your job's covered." And if they continued to screw up, he'd flat-out just knock them on their ass.

DC: That's the way things were handled back then.

BB: I mean, some guys you can't reason with. I mean that's the way they were. It's not that the guys were stupid, but that they grew up—they respected authority, and manliness. Those were the days. And Bill knew that you could be nice to these guys, and talk, but it wasn't going to get anywhere. So he'd just give them a knuckle sandwich, hit them upside the head. And he would not hesitate to do it. I mean, he'd been in the Marines for a long time. He said, hey, he'd talk to people first; if they didn't respond, he said, "Well, I guess that's what you want, that's what you're going to get."

DC: And what was his title again?

BB: He was the plant chairman. He worked for Walter Reuther some at the international level. He worshipped Walter Reuther, as most of the guys did who worked for him. Also, well he just retired probably fifteen years ago. But he worked for all but the most recent—I can get you Bill's number. He loves to share stories too. The guy's got a memory, and he could tell you what the issues were in each contract, everything—expert on the grievance procedure. And I can tell you based on reading the introduction to your book, what you observed is like to be the same as what I observed. It was like those textile workers. The heart of the union in these shops is the grievance procedure. And people look upon the job of the grievance handler, or a committeeman, or a steward, to

know the shots. For the union. And they had tremendous influence. If there's no respect for that grievance procedure, the people who work in that union suffers terribly. They can call it business unionism or whatever they like, but when we didn't have that we didn't have the support of the public. The public's not going to take the wildcat strikes and in fairness to us, and to the company's that you work for, they need to understand what your philosophy is so that every time they hire a new group, you don't come in and have some fanatic stewards like they had in the English system for years that shut everything down. We'd be out of business. There'd be no security or any benefits for us or the corporations. Bill can give you tremendous feedback. Another good person is Don Waters, another great chairman. We've had some really good chairmen.

DC: Is he still around too?

BB: Yeah. He was just here Saturday, but he's back and forth between Las Vegas and here. Don't get me wrong—he's not a wheeler-dealer, but he lives out there. And he comes by here a lot.

DC: Maybe you can hook us up sometime when he does . . .

BB: Yeah, Don was a national negotiator. He trained—between White and Waters, they probably trained almost everyone who came through as chairman later. And been tremendous role models—very intelligent, dedicated people. Different styles, to a certain extent, but some of the sharpest guys you ever saw, and loyal-est. Dyed-in-the-wool union guys.

DC: Let's get back into the plant a bit, in the '60s. What was your sense of the relative access to jobs? How many blacks were working in the plant, do you suppose, and what kind of access to jobs did they have?

BB: There was a pretty sizable number of black people working when I came in. It grew later, percentage-wise, but I'd say, in fairness to Henry Ford, he did not discriminate too much in hiring black people. But it seemed as though, primarily, they went in to the less desirable jobs, especially at the Rouge. At these parts plants like Ypsi, it might have been a little better, but it was quite awhile before I saw, I think it was probably the '60s, before you really saw black people as a whole getting opportunity for promotion just like everyone else. The union was the only reason they got it. The union would insist strictly upon going by seniority, and the company, you know, by contract, had the right to choose on merit and ability. So you always had to go through the grievance procedure to—if you had a fellow out there who wanted to discriminate, I mean, it gets to be pretty arbitrary. It's easy to see who's got the merit, by the record, but who has the ability? Always battling over that. So our union helped to get a lot of those people a position, but you know, like any organization, you can't monitor all those committee people who get elected by people on the floor. So you don't know who pushes hard, or even if you push hard, the company can always say no. So it really didn't start changing, except we continually pushed, and the laws changed. And the women, the women, I think, had a more serious problem. Still had the old macho attitude that, "Hey, the war's over. We

don't need the women here. The women should be back taking care of kids. We got men out here who need jobs. They should be the ones who have them." There was that discrimination up, probably until the '70s. I think the company had to settle a suit, because a lot of them had been denied promotion.

DC: Were there specific departments that seemed to have more women?

BB: Oh yeah, there were some. There was a particular—like the voltage regulator job. And a number of other departments where the work was fast, small parts—they seemed to gravitate to that. And in that sense the discrimination wasn't bad. It was like what you described in the textiles setting. They had pretty much determined, well, this is more suited for someone of this type. By the same token, if a guy came in, and he could do it, he had it. But say they wanted to get a good inspection job, it was more difficult. Or try to get into skilled trades. That was a long time coming. That was hard. And I think there was some problems with black people getting into the trades. But nothing that you can actually document. You might want to talk to Jim Hampton [sp?]. He might want to tell you something. He's the Vice President still. He could tell you something—what I have would be hearsay. You'd have to talk to him.

DC: He's the Vice President of the Local here now?

BB: Mm hmm. He wanted to get in the trades, and I think, I don't think he was led astray accidentally. I think a particular official—it wasn't any of our elected people—said that we had enough minorities already in the trades. And he had just come up from Mississippi, a young guy didn't want to rock the boat. And it could be, it's possible that a guy meant, hey, we've got a quota—which I don't think we did.

DC: It was pretty minimal, it sounds like.

BB: So, knowing Jim, I trust Jim. I think there was something there. He never mentioned nothing until about a year ago to me. And the guy that said that to him is still alive, so we'd have to be careful the way we did it. You know what I'm saying. But I wouldn't deny it was possible, because until the Civil Rights Act was passed, and the federal government took scrutiny over it, I think it was possible to discriminate. But that—from your studies you'll see—creates a lot of, a lot of back-and-forth problems, because then a lot of the white brothers who had been waiting to get on the apprentice list, now are displaced. Because you've gone to a lottery system. I knew guys who had waited for years and years, who scored high on tests, but they couldn't get placed. And then they blamed the black guys. Affirmative action, this and that.

DC: Did that really start in the '60s, do you think?

BB: I think that came in the '70s. And I really don't know where the truth lies there. You've got to do something to make up for the lack of opportunity people had. I really believe in affirmative action, and I think some of the politicians have misled some of the white brothers about how they've been getting discriminated on. They did, but I haven't seen

it. I think it's just politicians playing games. The race issue is probably always there, but it's much better than it was when I hired in. But with each new generation coming in—I was listening to some of the officers I talked to—it becomes a new battle, because there were so many years when we didn't hire. They don't know the history. New people come in, and they want their rights, which is good. I'm glad people want their rights. But they sometimes tend to blame the wrong people. Things aren't going right, some of them blame the union. I'm not saying the company's even wrong, but for this, you could probably talk to our current chairmen, or the Civil Rights Committee chair. They could probably give you an update on that, on how it is today. The way it was, for years, when Roy Wilson was our Civil Rights chair—he's African American, but he's passed away now—we rarely ever had a bona fide civil rights complaint.

DC: When did you have your first Civil Rights chair?

BB: Back in the '50s or '60s.

DC: Would that be a local chair, or a regional chair?

BB: Yeah, local chair, for each location. And he was responsible for working with plant chairmen inside the plant. And also working with the president. And he would have a committee of different races, men and women. They would investigate, upon request of the chairman, these cases. So they could take it away from the committee person.

DC: So they'd give him a layer of insulation there . . .

BB: And Roy was good. Roy had been a committee person and he knew the grievance procedure and the contract very well. And he commanded respect of African Americans, because he had been a very militant man himself. So what Roy said, you could bet on. He could take the flim-flam out, because people'd play games to get what they want. He'd get the issues taken care of. I'm not trying to paint the management here as super-duper, but people do what they have to do, no matter what they feel like they want to do. They're going to do what they need to do to stay out of trouble. So the union being militant to a certain extent, I think, and the fact the Company wanted to be responsible, at least legally, cut down a lot of the discrimination they had had in the past. But without the change in the law, it wouldn't have happened. Because I know, as a fact, one of my good friends, Joe Rodriguez, he applied for supervision time after time after time. I thought he'd never get that salary job. They'd always find some Mickey-Mouse way to disqualify him, because he was a Hispanic. He was from San Antonio. And he was just as sharp as the other guys they was putting on. Didn't want him. The good ol' boys. That was terrible.

DC: Did he ever get that job?

BB: He got him a job, but it wasn't, I think—I don't know what particular job he wound up in, but he wound up doing a lot of work with computers and different things and he did a good job for him. First: well you don't have mechanical aptitude. Well he grew up—he

ran a bar in San Antonio. Man, he didn't know a screwdriver from a sledgehammer. But he learns quick, and he did a good job. [telephone ringing obscures]. He's as smart as anyone, but sometimes you have to give people a chance, especially people a little different from them.

DC: He kept knocking on the door.

BB: He kept knocking, wouldn't quit. He kept knocking. Once he got his bachelor's degree, what could they say? "Not qualified" now, huh? So he kept at it. So that's good. Knowing Joe, you'd have to see, Joe would not quit. Because I remember when Joe was in the Army, they would pick on him some, and he got sent to Alaska. And so he had a polar bear patch he was really proud of. And they put him up on top of this mountain, this radar base, and what not. And he said he had a sergeant who gave him a rough way to go, if he'd call roll, say, "Corporal Smith, Corporal Rod-ri-cuse." He's say," Sergeant, it's Rodriguez, not Rod-ri-cuse." And he'd say, "What would you rather have, Corporal Rod-ri-cuse, or Private first-class Rodriguez?" He laughed that he didn't have any stripes on his sleeve, but he said they couldn't take his Polar Bear patch away. [Laughter] He would insist they treat him right. He was stubborn.

DC: I'm looking for ways to tease out this issue, if there are any. For instance, at that meeting you were talking about, when Bill White laid down the law there, were there both blacks and whites there?

BB: Oh yeah. Sure. So it could have been potentially really divisive. Maybe even a physical confrontation. Because, black people knew what was going on. A lot of the white people, you know, face it, you know, I guess they grew up down South, like a lot of [telephone ringing] racism, different shades. Maybe we did, and I don't like [telephone ringing], but I guess it looked like they were sending a troop of invaders down to shake their hometown out, see? We had a lot of guys from Alabama, even some of my good friends, and they—they didn't mind working with black people. They liked it, but they didn't think it was right for us to send the people help. And so Bill had his hands full. The black people, he could see where they were coming from. Most of them had come from the South, or their parents had. And they knew that things weren't going to change unless there was some sort of confrontation, because talk wasn't getting the job done. I just had to tip my hat to Bill. Those that wanted to stay racists, I guess he wasn't going to sway them, but anyone that had—I think he cut right to the heart, where you could see people of good will, who may have made a difference on how things should be done. He could separate those from those that really, you couldn't get through without hitting them upside the head. And he wasn't in a position where he could do that there.

DC: Yeah. Right.

BB: Could have really started something! He was just cool, you know.

DC: Do you remember any black speakers?

BB: No. It was so full I'm not even sure I could get inside. In that respect, I really wasn't active in the union then. I was just a kid, curious about what was going on, and I'd sided up with the wrong bunch, and I realized it.

DC: When did you realize it?

BB: Well, when I heard him talk. Hey, you know, it was a valuable lesson to me because I have to continually reinforce this: don't jump to conclusions. Get all the facts first. From what these guys had told you—I told you I was mixed up with these conservatives at that time, anyway—and what they said sounded great, until you heard the other side. So those kind of things make you start thinking, hey, you know I understand what you guys are saying, I understand how you feel, but there's another side to this issue. And Bill laid it out good.

DC: Did he or anyone else ever talk about the international union policy regarding race and civil rights.

BB: Yeah, I'm sure he did. But I can't remember exact. But Bill probably—he's got a fantastic memory—probably could tell you where all the commas went.

DC: Because it sounds like at that meeting you were concerned about the use of your local union funds for sending people down.

BB: Mm hm.

DC: I wonder if anyone was ever asking, or if they were concerned, about what the international union was doing.

BB: Oh, I'm sure they was, because people—most of us liked Walter Reuther, but some people didn't. A lot of them thought, "Well, he's a Communist, or a Socialist, or the whole thing about Victor and Roy, and all the Reuther brothers, you know, conservatives tried to make them out like they were Communists. And J. Edgar Hoover did that, and the John Birchers, they were naturally setting them up. So there was a mix of who was telling the truth. But with Reuther we could say, "Hey, judge a man by the fruit of his labor. What has he done? He's tried to help everybody, and if he was doing it to help these people out, you know he was probably doing it for the right reason. Because, look at his track record. He stood up for all of us. And if we discriminated against our black brothers, don't help them lift up, then we're going to be like the Nazis. They're going to come for us, and there'll be no one there to help us out. The international, to me, did a tremendous service for civil rights. But when it got down to the local level, it was a lot harder. It's easy for these guys. They're insulated politically because of the conventions. The convention system makes it difficult to overturn the leadership, but it gives you stability. But when you get down to the guys like the president, your plant chairman, your executive board, and committee people that have to face the people every day, they're not insulated. So some of them are more prone to react to biases, or go along with the majority in wrongdoing. And so you take a guy like Bill White, he has

tremendous courage to just say, "Hey, let the chips lay where they are, guys. We'll stand up for what's right. If you don't like it, you know you can change it, but this is what we're going to do as long as I'm here." He's just the sort of guy that had courage and common sense, and he didn't care. If he believed in something, you could take him out. It didn't matter. He was going to do what he thought was right. And I had to admire him for that. [hard to decipher] I've always been sort of an idealistic type, and Bill and I have not always agreed on every issue, but most. But I always admired his idealism, and he would really—he would put his personal reputation or his body at risk to do what the union should be standing for.

DC: Was the chairman an elected position at the local level?

BB: Oh yeah.

DC: Did he stand for re-election?

BB: He could have run for anything and got elected.

DC: OK.

BB: I'm not sure after that, it was maybe another two or three years he went on staff.

DC: It surely didn't hurt him at the local level then.

BB: No. No! People still respected him. I think even the guys who were real bigots, they still respected Bill, because they'd say, "Look, Bill's going to stand up for these black brothers. He's going to stand up for me for sure." This guy's going to stick his neck out. I'd say, "Hey, I may not like everything you do, but I know you'll fight for me." And you know, if nothing else, it's a beginning. Then you can start working on the other things—a lot of the white guys may not even have liked the black guys, but they realized they had to stick together, the old solidarity thing. Because if we don't help each other out, who's going to help us? I think that cut a lot. Like my Dad. I didn't notice if my Dad's name was on that, but my Dad was a strong Wallace guy, I know he was. I'm not sure if he voted for him, but you know when Wallace would say, "Well, any demonstrators lay down in front of my car, I'll just run over them," "Man, that's the way it should be!" I'm surprised you know, because of who he was named after, but he never had the influence of his Dad for a long time, you see, and all he ever heard was these other people. And I guess people sometimes get more conservative as they get older, but I had some big disagreements with my Dad. Because I said, "Man, you can't vote for that guy." I said—I'd changed by that time—I said, "You know, you look at Senator Humphrey (or Vice President Humphrey at the time)," I said, "this guy would make a tremendous President. Look what he stands for. And you guys are going to do is put Nixon in. Wallace is just going to pull enough votes here and there to keep the Democrat from being elected." And that's what happened. I don't know which way he voted, because my Dad would have a hard time not voting for a Democrat, but I think he might

have even voted for Nixon over McGovern. And I liked McGovern too. So that tells you how far I [creaking noise].

DC: So you made quite a transition, from Goldwater to McGovern.

BB: Well, I guess it was. I think things—people like Bill White and others who encouraged me to challenge the way I thought, to open my mind up, and some of the teachers I had at Eastern Michigan University—because if all you're ever exposed to is one thing, it seems right. And my wife helped me. Church taught me a lot too. Us kids, we'd never read. They listened to preachers, but you read it and you start saying, "Hey, that's not the things Christ taught either." These are not the things the prophets taught.

DC: Has religion always been a strong part of your life?

BB: Not really. I think when I was young, it was, then late teens and early twenties, I became an agnostic. Even though I was removed from religion, I always thought the teachings of Christ and the teachings of Moses, and most of the others, were—had a lot of good moral value. And when I became a believer, it was a little better, but those people—not all of the ministers were good, because some of the ministers I had encountered when I was with those conservatives, they were pitiful. I remember going to some meetings in some Baptist Church—and this sort of got me thinking too—looking back at the material from the States-Rights Party, there was the old thunderbolt stuff, which was nothing but the American Nazi Party. And some of these guys I got to know, they had—I mean, it was like the present-day militia. These guys had machine guns, mortars, and when the riots came, they were hoping to block off streets and trap blacks and shoot them. I told them, "I'm out of here." I said, "You guys are a bunch of nuts. You guys are crazy." There was a Mayor in Livonia, I believe—or I want to say, it was around there—who they considered liberal, who I would probably consider conservative today, but they didn't like his view on some issues, and they wanted to invite him up someplace and beat him up. I mean, these guys were like J. Edgar Hoover and the right-wing whacko. Anybody disagreed with them, take them on.

DC: Were they working in the plant?

BB: One guy.

DC: One guy was, OK.

BB: I don't think he was as violent as them, but this guy, I told you, I said, "Man, you guys can't believe all this stuff. If you guys even believe that Dwight Eisenhower was a Red," I said, "you guys are nuts!" I said, "This is pitiful, man. You guys see a Red under every bed." And that's what they were saying, you know. And you start studying in school what's going on with these McCarthyites and others. I mean, these guys are just making up whipping dogs for political reasons. And that's what's funny, you know, like until you find out then about your own relatives. "I think there's something." I sure am glad I got away from those nutty guys. That was the time my Mom and Dad got divorced, see,

so I didn't have my Dad's good head for awhile to help me out in some things, so I kind of got in with these guys, I guess—it was late teens, early twenties—and I read this stuff, "Hey it sounds good." All I heard was one side of the case. And the more I read, the more I found they were wrong.

DC: Did your Mom and Dad stay in the area?

BB: Yeah. They stayed in the area until my Dad retired. My Mother retired—they both retired in the '70s. My Mother had married this ex-sailor, a real nice guy, and they moved to Arkansas. So did my Dad. He remarried and moved to Arkansas. They're both dead now. They moved back. They both loved Arkansas. They moved back down there.

DC: It sounds like it was a rocky time for you.

BB: Oh, it was a rocky time. It affected the way—at the time I needed real good guidance—didn't have any.

DC: Did you feel like you had that guidance before?

BB: Not as much as I should have, because of the work. Mother worked in the afternoons, Dad working days, and me being a teenager, I got my car, you know—bzzt! Kind of like traditional breakdown of the American family and the dinner-table talk. But he did influence me quite a bit, and I respected his view on a lot of things. I think he was thinking my view—when I started getting into him about Wallace—because he started thinking, I think then, about some of the things that he had forgotten. Because it was hard for him to tell me [hard to decipher] but it was the best thing that happened when they passed the Civil Rights Act. Because he didn't think that immediately. But when he moved back to Arkansas, he said, "I'm really glad that law passed." So he had been examining his mind. So his conscience was getting him. So that was good. And I wish more men would do that. They don't have to stay locked in a view as they get older. I guess there's that pressure on you to back everything you've ever said, and to be right all the time.

DC: Oh, not admit one could be wrong.

BB: So my Dad was not like that. If he was wrong, he'd tell you. That's another thing I admired about him. When he owned the mine in Arkansas—see he had been in a coal mine—he'd been in the coal miners' union, the Mineworkers—but when he owned the mine, he naturally couldn't be in the union. But he told his men, "Look guys, you guys should join the United Mineworkers or you should start an independent union. It's up to you. Or if you guys like, you can do whatever you want, I'm going to pay you either union scale or by the ton, whatever you like." The guy that didn't join the union, actually he was disappointed, because he said they trusted him, but he said, "You know, I would go crazy." He said, "It's better for me if they've got a union. That way they know they can—they're going to get a fair shake. And that they have enough strength that I have to

listen to them, so I can't abuse them." Because my Dad's a strong-willed guy, and he said, "I'm going to treat them right," but, he said, "If I owned a company, I would want a union, because my people would have more faith in me, and I wouldn't be having such a turnover all the time, because people would be there for the long haul." And he never could understand why so many others didn't think that way. A guy could do that with a third-grade education, what some guys with PhDs can't. It's crazy. Crazy. But I admire the fact that he would make these statements. Like my Grandfather Parker on the other side, I admired his view on his racial stance. The only disappointment I had with him was, he was a man who used the "N" word. And I don't think you know he meant it in a bad way, but for sure, if you were a black man, you'd take it that way because—but it's the way he was raised. And he said, he'd say it, because his Dad—the only Mother he ever knew was a black woman, because when he was a boy his Mom died, and he had been raised in his early years by a slave. That was common story down South. He told me a story—it was simple, but—when we were down there in '54 listening, going to listen to Faubus, one of my Uncles [inaudible]]we were sitting down there by the courthouse square, and I started asking questions about race relations, and how to treat blacks—this was after I had come back from Wyoming, and he said, "Well, I'm going to tell you a story," he said, "one day, down here at the courthouse, there was something going on," and he said, "there was an old black man and a white man sitting there." Of course he said "N," and he says, the white man asked the other one, "do you think a black man has a soul?" And the black man says, "Yeah, I reckon so. A white man does." Say no more. I thought it was pretty good. But you could see things were changing. But it was taking a while to sink in. The bitterness, all the losses they'd had. And I think my Grandfather Bowen, I think a lot of his problems was a stroke, and I think a lot of it was disillusionment, because I really think he bought into the Socialist dream.

DC: He thought the revolution was coming.

BB: Yeah, and I think he was saying, I'm an old man now, and things [hard to make out] except kids have got jobs. And he sat there looking up over the mountain where he used to live, and I think he could visualize what he had heard from his Dad, and things they had fought for, and he was looking for a continuation of it. He felt that—he really felt that what he fought for, to help end slavery, that he was sort of continuing out the Socialist dream for all people to be free. I don't think any of them really wanted to totally eliminate capitalism like Marx, but they just didn't think working people got a fair shake in this country, that the moneyed interests pretty much controlled things, and the old rich boys down South kept the union out of that place. Kind of like in your book highlights—pretty good introduction—because I always felt that, my Dad said, "gotta get out of here," he says, "there's not enough strength in the union anymore, and these guys down here are not going to allow it."

End of Tape III, Side A

Begin Tape III, Side B

BB: . . . It would be like driving a new Porsche and look like an old Pinto! You wouldn't like that.

DC: I used to have a Pinto. It was a nice car. Great mileage.

BB: They got a bad rap, I guess.

DC: Well just that one model, I guess.

BB: The one that had the exploding gas tanks. Maybe you had a Pinto with Firestones, huh?

DC: [Laughter—given the controversy over Firestone/Bridgestone tires and Ford Explorers this past year] I don't think you can put a fifteen-inch tire on a Pinto.

BB: You can do it, but you'll have to do some work!

DC: Do you remember much, or any discussions, about Wallace in the plant?

BB: Oh yes, a lot. There was a lot. Wallace was a magician at stirring up crap. He knew all of the buzzwords. The population of Michigan—remember when Michigan, in the primary, went for him—and a lot of us people right here, and down in Taylor—there was a large southern population. I don't think all of the people were racists, but I think he played a little bit of that, and he played the other, the patriotic themes: "Well we can't let these intellectual panty-heads control foreign policy. We got to stand up for Americanism, blah, blah, blah. A little here, a little there, plus the race card that's put in. You don't talk about the black vote—the "block" vote. Things like this. And the guys in the plant even thought the same thing—they thought that black people would vote in a block. Never do in elections here in the local, but—yeah, there was a lot of talk. Coffee breaks were just full of these talks. Some of the guys were thinking that civil rights legislation for blacks was good, but a lot of the rights had been taken away from us, as whites, is what they were saying. And from men. And there were stories going around like phantom seniority. You ever hear that?

DC: No.

BB: There was a plan underway, allegedly—it wasn't true, but it didn't matter—a plan underway to restore seniority to black brothers and sisters in the plant from the date that they were discriminated against and not hired. So they could leapfrog over some of the white people who were hired before them. Them guys: "I didn't discriminate against them! Ford might have, but I didn't!" But every man—it was about to be a war, you could see. So there were rumors going like that, and there was a lady here in the office circling green [?]—do you remember Lou Gordon?

DC: I do. Channel 50.

BB: Well, the same issues—I don't know if she was on Lou Gordon or one of the other shows, but somebody asked about the phantom seniority, and she answered perfectly right. But she came back in that Monday, and some of her old southern buddies, they was calling up, man, and ripping her to shreds. And me and her were no big fans, but I remember—I rarely ever cuss anyone out, but this one guy, named Shorty Adkins, called over, and me and him, I said, "Man, look I heard it myself. I know what she said." But they were trying to place that she was trying to restore phantom seniority.

DC: What did she say about phantom seniority on the show?

BB: Well, I think that she just mentioned that—you could probably even get a tape, or maybe she could tell you about it. It seemed to me she was saying, well, that this is what phantom seniority would be if it was. That it would try to balance for—the seniority date for an individual from the date that they were denied the job through discrimination. But she never once said that she thought it would be a good policy. But if I'm not mistaken, I can't remember if she said it might be fair to compensate the people in some way, which is what a lawyer would do. But anyway, it got turned into a big problem. It didn't hurt her none in the long run, but some of the guys maybe the buzzwords hit them, or maybe they hadn't seen the show and somebody told them, or maybe they saw it and misunderstood it, but that was going on.

DC: Did they think she was supporting it?

BB: Sure! So here she is, she was one of the Rosie the Riveters, and she was the Financial Secretary here at a later date.

DC: Is she still around?

BB: Oh yeah. Still working in the plant.

DC: Oh really.

BB: Yeah. A really interesting person.

DC: What's her name?

BB: Earthaline Greene. Yeah, she'd be a good interview. She probably—there's even videos down at the Reuther Center on her, I think. She could probably fill you in a little better. I'm trying to think of some of the others who could, because she would—I know the videos are still there, so you could get right to the primary source—but naturally it caused friction. But all of these things—Wallace was just a little bit before this incident here, but the phantom seniority was coming up before she ever said this. All of these things were stewing for a number of years, from back in the early '60s, who knows, up until the '70s. And you had DRUM going on in Detroit. And when I was elected President, we even had one or two black leaders in the plant—they were rank-and-file leaders, they weren't elected-but they wanted a black caucus. And they wanted to send out mail from

over here, to use the copy machine and stuff. And man, I tell you, I was trying to figure out a way to handle this, and I said, "If you guys want to start a black caucus, that's your business, but I really, as President of the Local, I don't want to support any caucus. You guys do what you want within your rights, but I don't think the Union, as a Local, should take an official position, one caucus vs. another. We're united. This is United Auto Workers Local 849. [Hard to deciper: We could take up their business item at the membership meeting?] And they bought that. They said, "OK." They understood. But I had a history of dealing fair with people. And I think if we had really taken a real strong [a bit garbled] at that position, me and some of the other leaders, they would have thought differently, but we said we wanted them to get a fair shake. If you want to come to the meeting, you're going to get your voice. If you think things aren't right, you got your civil rights committee, and you got things that you ought to get involved in training. You want to make sure you get all the training and opportunity. But let's don't start these factions of this caucus and that caucus, because that will be too divisive, and we can't afford to be that way.

DC: When were you Local President?

BB: It was about '77. I served until '89.

DC: That's a long term.

BB: Yeah.

DC: We'll talk about that in a second here, but I did want to follow up on something you mentioned about the riots in Detroit and all. What kind of repercussions did you see in the plant here during those times?

BB: It was tense. I told you before about my friend Roland Tooson I worked with in the old building. I mean it was sort of shameful, because the way we were acting. The white guys—maybe the black guys could even see it in us. Because it was strange. It was almost—you start to wonder, where is it going to end? We didn't like the riots, but we knew the black people had a grievance, but we didn't think that was the way to handle it. We could understand the frustration. When you come here to the plant, you could feel the tension. You could see people break off in groups. White guys go one way, black guys going another.

DC: Had there been more mixing of the groups before then?

BB: Uh huh. I was sitting with Roland, and I tell you I said, "Man, this is scary, Roland." And he and I, we had always good talks, you know. We had played ball and everything. The guy's a real devout religious man, just as nice as could be. And I can't remember the exact words, but he said, "You know, these things pass." He said, "Just continue."

DC: You mentioned some "shameful" things that people did?

BB: Well, it was not so much physical deeds; it was more like the way we sort of started giving the cold shoulder to people of the other races that we normally associated with. It was like we were afraid to be around them, afraid they'd do something to us. And it was more little, subtle things. It wasn't like guys burning cars or retaliating or anything like that. It was more like, "Can I trust you? You're black. Can I trust you?" "You're white."

DC: Did the plant run right through?

BB: Oh, it ran. I don't remember us ever getting shut down, but you could just feel it. People look at each other, like I would look at you, "Can I trust Dan now?" Is he looking at me, because I'm black. Is he looking at me like he's afraid to turn, afraid I'll choke him or hit him?

DC: But you say you don't really remember any acts of physical . . .

BB: No. I don't remember—there were some little riots here in town. Stuff like I guess was everywhere. My brother got in a couple of them. No choice. An here my brother—my brother is probably one of the easiest getting-along guys ever with anybody. Black friends. They'd drink together, fight together, and everything. I remember he was coming through the town with Joe Rodriguez's brother, and they got stopped by a mob of young black guys. But they liked to fight, so they just stepped out of their car and started fighting. They were crazy. But I mean those things were happening all over. It was no rhyme nor reason. That's what I'm talking was shameful. It was more of a person-to-person relationship. It's just like you build trust and now it's gone. And even though personally you didn't do anything to me, I don't trust you now because I [need to?] see where you go and how you identify with all this to see if I can get your trust back. It was going both ways, because what most of us didn't realize, what was fueling all of the unrest. It may have started at a blind pig, but that alone didn't cause it. There was more to it than that.

DC: What was your sense of what caused it?

BB: My sense of what caused it, initially, was the police overreacting to a situation that was getting out of control. And once it started snowballing—things had been whipped up—all of the friction over the war, the Civil Rights Movement, and I guess assassinations. People felt like anytime we tried to lift ourself up a little bit, somebody pushes us back down. Even the white people were getting upset at it. Students were—some workers. But I think the black community had finally had it. You know, like I said, you get tired of talking. It's like the analogy of Bill White. After awhile, you talk and you don't get anywhere, the tendency is you're going to take something in your hands. And if something started out where somebody is doing something illegal, the police crack down, well, hey, would they have done that to a group of whites? Probably not. I don't know. I don't even know if there were white cops who were there or black cops. Probably white. Weren't too many blacks in those days. At the time, it's like I had friends that were in the National Guard, you know. And they don't want to go down there. They're

going down there and they have to shoot at guys and get shot at. [???] come back and he was happy, and I said, "What's going on?" And he says, "Some guys were down there in this building and they were shooting at us, and one of the guys just run a tank right through the building." "What happened to the guys in there?" "Well, they got crushed." You know what I'm saying?

DC: He was proud of that, huh?

BB: Oh yeah. It was kind of like, you may like a guy today, but things change when bullets start flying. Now it's survival time. But I don't know. It's like the guy shooting at you—the day before he wasn't shooting at you. Now why is he shooting at you? Don't know. Something changed. It wasn't just mob mentality; there was more to it than that. But I never could figure the answers; I guess I never will. Because eventually it settled back down, you know, and people have a hard time identifying with it. The only guys I really got along with that particular time, say of the opposite race, during that riot time, were the guys I played ball with. And I really was close with them. We could talk and say whatever we wanted and we wouldn't get mad. But if you didn't know someone, then you'd be very careful. But even there you could feel the wedge. If you had a brother who was black, a blood brother, at that time you'd have been wondering if he was going to turn on you. People were arming themselves up, making sure they had their guns loaded in their homes.

DC: Were there guns in the plant?

BB: I didn't see any, but I wouldn't deny there wasn't, because there usually was. The plant was, I think, probably more alert than we thought to that stuff. I didn't see guns at the plant. But things were strangely eerie, sort of a silent way there that expected things to break loose but they never did. It just made sense they wouldn't. People at that place wanted to make a living. Of course you wouldn't think that people would tear up their own neighborhood either. But I have not been there, so I can't judge them. There's been places I've lived I'd have probably done it too.

DC: Let's go to another issue that you briefly mentioned, then we'll get to your term as president. You mentioned the convention system as kind of insulating some of the national reps from folks at the local level. Can you describe that convention system a bit?

BB: Oh sure. Each location, or each local, based on its population, is allowed a number of delegates. People in the plant vote for the delegates, but we don't vote directly, say, for the president of the international union or regional director. Members can give instructions to the delegates, but they are not obligated to heed them. They vote their own conscience.

DC: Like an electoral college here.

BB: It's kind of like that. Say I can't direct you to vote. We can pass resolutions if we want to adopt it, and they'll usually support them, but we can't say you have to vote for so and so. We may wish you would, but it's your choice. And that's where the insulation comes in. I'm not saying it's bad, or good, because I can give you the pro. But the negative side, in the eyes of our people—if we had leadership we did not like, we're not going to be able to change it easy unless we know that we can get a large enough delegation from these locations that want to change. Because the international union can't promise a lot of jobs. People are retiring, and the new staff needs to be coming on board. You as a delegate, Bob, if you support me, I'll take care of you. We just always joked that after every convention, they're going to have to add an extra story or two down at the regional office. And Solidarity House would have to go on an expansion program. But see if you can do this—but that's in political parties of any kind. And that's the bad side—it makes it hard to change. The good thing about it, it allows them the freedom, I think, to be more daring. Because the Civil Rights Movement, as an example—I wonder what would have happened if we had had all of those people out there signing petitions, splitting our union, and you didn't have any guys like Bill White to stand at these locations and settle them down. What kind of delegates would we have sent to a convention? Or if we had had a direct vote, would the Reuthers and the people who really had a good, progressive philosophy, would they have maintained power? Or would we have had some rednecks take over? Or Jimmy Hoffa types take over? They were ripe for exploitation. So that's another side. Another good thing about the convention system, then we had conventions every three, now it's four, which is the maximum allowed by federal law. You'd spend all of your time campaigning; you'd never have time to do your job. Where was the money going to come from to campaign? There were a lot of locals, and they were spread all over the country. I can see Steve Yokich riding or flying all over—[hard to decipher], next week he's in California, Puerto Rico. When's the work going to get done? So that's a bad thing. It comes down to the integrity of the people, and who you're voting for? But it gives them an insulation, for good or bad. It's almost like a bureaucracy, the bad thing about it. So they in turn, the international staff—the President and the people chosen as Directors and Vice Presidents—they appoint their own staff. They usually pick good people that's proven themselves at the local level, like Bill Whites, and Don Waters, and people like that. But sometimes people get picked because of loyalty instead of ability. It can happen in any organization. That's the bad part too. But I don't know of any perfect way out. My own personal view is I'd rather have direct elections, but I understand it would be—I think it might open us up too much to corruption. And I don't think you would be able to get as good a staff. You don't want to write a treatise on political science. The convention system serves fairly well, but I don't really, I'm not gung-ho for or against it. I just feel like it insulates our people too much. They don't have to stay in touch with the people. The good thing about it, it forces us to stay in touch with the people. We're the ones really—the local level's the union. The people in the plant need to feel like, hey, I'm the union. It's not the people here in the office [hard to decipher] about personal contact. So if the people at the local level stay in contact, and they get honest feedback, instead of looking for stroking people, then the union will do well, and continue to do well. But it hasn't always done that. Because you'd sometimes get good people, just like you do in public office, or you get bad people. You get people with their own agendas. That's the dangers of democracy.

But the local level, I think, of the union, comes about as close to a really good Jeffersonian-style democracy as you'll find. Any person can get elected if they really want to [???]; if they've got their heart in the right place.

DC: When did you first run for local office? I think you told me . . .

BB: I believe 1975. I served a little over a year as Recording Secretary. I ran to fill a vacancy.

DC: What possessed you to run for Recording Secretary?

BB: Well, at the time, I graduated in 1974 from Eastern.

DC: Congratulations.

BB: And I thought I would try to get a job teaching. But if I'm not mistaken that was the same time they had Crestwood [?] here. And that really influenced my way of thinking, because the people who was striking, I would replace them. [?] And my Mother and my Stepdad had been trying to find vacancies in the school system down south for me, but the pay was so pitiful, I couldn't support me and my wife and three kids on it. So I said, "I'm going to stay here for awhile until something better comes up. Maybe I'll start to grad school, or maybe pursue a different job here with the company." And that came up, and by that time I had become really left-wing, and firmly believed in being active and making things better. So I said, "I'm going to try this." Because I'd been the bylaws chairman of the local the last year or two, when I was going to school, and served on some different things. And my brother was on the committee. So I beat a number of people out for that position. And then the next election, I decided to run for president. And I got elected. And I got elected every time after that.

DC: That's a meteoric rise, for somebody who wasn't really involved.

BB: Well, see, I was always an introverted-type person, but if I really feel strong on something, I push for it. And I really didn't care about making it to the top of the international union; I liked what I was doing here. I'm not going to knock the people I ran against—I think they were honorable people—but I just thought more things could be done than were being done, and I thought that some of them lacked the vision as to what the union should represent.

DC: So what was your platform when you ran for president?

BB: It sounds crazy. My platform—basically I talked to everybody—my whole platform was, "Things can be better." And I just identified little things, nothing major, things that were within the scope of a local union.

DC: What were some of those?

BB: Get more people involved in the union. Getting the people to feel like they did not have to belong to a caucus or a clique in order to have importance in the union. [coughing] The grievance procedure—I didn't knock the guys doing the grievance procedure while I was running for president. So I said things can be better. There's things we need to do here in the plant—for the health and safety in this plant—even though we had a health and safety rep who probably did as good as he could. I didn't think things were good. I didn't make any friends by pointing these out, but I said, "These things are bad." And the guys in the plant knew it too. You'd go in some departments, you couldn't see from one end to the other for the smoke. You go down by the chrome plater, it was so caustic that the roof was rusting. And here we've got people out working, breathing these fumes. And people were trying to get it done, but we were—they were not able to do it. But I was frustrated. I was a shop-floor guy. I was frustrated like these people, because I was fortunate—I had a good job, I told you, that I got around and I saw everybody two or three times. And I knew their frustrations. Everybody didn't have a job like I had, and why should we expect people to work like that when you had a company that obviously could make those conditions better? The committee was trying, but I'd say, "We've got to do something more than what we're doing." And I couldn't always come up with things concrete, but I could say, "I'll be there when you come to see me, and we'll do the best we can for you. And even though I'm not negotiating—the chairmen of the committees handle this—you can be sure I'll be a champion for you, and do the best I can. And it bought [?]. And people would say, "Yeah, I believe you." And so it worked.

DC: How many people worked in the plant at that time?

BB: 3400. Three shifts. It was going. This place was big, I mean, you didn't see grass growing in the parking lot. It was—my first term as president, I was actually talking to Mayor Goodman [?] at the time, and we didn't want to wait to talk to the chairman first: "You know it would be nice if we'd come to negotiations and we could tell—the company has room to expand." I was talking to the Mayor, and I said, "The only land available now is back east of the plant. Would you be willing to use the right of eminent domain to take over a couple of these little streets if we could get the company to add something." Boy we were optimistic at that point! (Laughs) But we didn't want to go into negotiations and say [??] We wanted to say, don't worry, we've already got that figured out. Of course they'd have done the same thing too, you know, but we wanted to know if we were going to cooperate, but yeah, we were on the edge of collapse. We were on the edge of collapse, and we knew it. But not maybe the first year, we knew it. I always—I shouldn't say always—but I gained a lot of respect for Ford Motor Company, actually Henry Ford II, because all of this time we're blasting him, the competition's coming out with front-wheel-drive cars, more fuel efficient, and this and that, and they're still making the big old tanks. And Chrysler was doing the same, but at least they were coming out with their little front-wheel drives, and GM already had them out at Willow Run. And Henry called us all together at a national Ford Council meeting, and he said, "Hey boys, we screwed up." He said, "And I'll take the blame for it." He said, "We were making so much money on those big cars, I just hated to change. We waited a few years too long. And unfortunately some of your guys are going to lose their jobs. It's going to be a while before we bounce back." I think that was about '78 or '9. He said

that. And it wasn't long after that, man, we did. We dropped down to about 1200 people. In one year, we'd lost that many people. Part of them because of the company's slow response to change, and the other was we had a poor quality reputation, well-earned. And foreign competition. The Japanese, I don't know if there was all good design or good timing. But you know, the first energy crunch, and the collapse of our market in '79 and '80, they were right in place. And we never got it all back. But our plant really dropped—I mean I never thought—2000 people gone just like that. And then all of their—I talked to [hard to decipher] looking down, you say 2000 people, and I'd say, "That's not it. "I'd say, "That's probably 2000 families you're talking about, plus the people in the community who depend on their purchasing power." So you're talking about a multitude of people. And this was not the only plant affected. The Rawsonville plant, the same way. And others—you've got independent parts plants that's producing, they're affected. So you're going to be in bad times here for awhile. It sure came out.

DC: So you ran on a platform that things could be better, but the larger economy kind of . . .

BB: Hurt us. But things did get better.

DC: Talk about your first term.

BB: The first term, the people, the rank and file—at that time, say, there were 3400 people—say, you know we've got to do something, even if it's not strictly unionism, we've got to do some things, to show the people that we really care for them. So we expanded the recreation program, we tried to get classes, tried to organize classes on unionism and different things. Some things worked and some didn't.

DC: Do you remember which ones worked?

BB: Yeah. Recreation. I mean it's an expensive thing, but the people, it really brought good will. We had three or four hockey teams. We had basketball teams, softball teams, archery, and we even had guys out with skeet and trap. In hindsight, we should have not done it.

DC: Why?

BB: Because the collapse was coming, and we could use the money. But the good thing about it, it really did bring a sense of solidarity to people. Because a lot of people—I mean they knew they'd know they get good pay and benefits. They know that's negotiated. But they tend to think that all of the money is absorbed by officers, and it's not. They don't read bylaws. Most of them don't attend meetings. That's what they elected you to do. So that part was good, getting people involved, trying to get people to fill these committees that had never been active in the local before. Young people, some of the people going to college, and different ones. And it was just a spirit of liveliness around here. And we wanted it cleaned up. We wanted it where it wasn't just an old macho ground here. You're not going to keep the guys from drinking. That was no big deal. But we wanted it where the women could feel like they could come over, or people could

bring their families over. And that they could have camaraderie here. We were going to feel like this was just like a shrine, like going to church. Say, "Hey, we've got something good here. Come on over and talk with people. Come participate in things. We can argue and discuss things, but we're going to be friends."

DC: It sounds a little bit like what you were describing briefly regarding the 1967 strike. You said that you felt greater solidarity then. Was that in your mind at all when you were establishing these . . .

BB: Sure it was. That, also got the Executive Board to agree to set me up a budget so that I could get certain people maybe four hours a month—it was not much—because we have all these people on these rank-and-file committees, but they've got jobs and families and need some time to plan activities with them. We even got some of them off where they could work with community agencies—say, what was it?—there used to be one over at the county office, I forget what it is—but anyway they'd help out with consumer complaints. Get a person over there for training, and they'd get them off for maybe four hours, or eight hours, a month and help them answer complaints and answer phones, help them out. Just little things like that make the difference in people. So you try to make something different. Or have someone go out and investigate, like get discounts on things. Who's doing a good job on things and who wasn't? That's what we got going, but it just didn't get a chance to really mature, because we had to cut back.

DC: What was the initial response to those plans?

BB: Really good. People felt [hard to decipher]. There's a multi-facet to this union. Collective bargaining is a big part of it, but we're looking at rounding the person's whole life. I had even discussed with Hy and Joyce Kornbluh about having study circles and different things were people'd come together and discuss different ideas, and I'd been studying and working, and I really thought that we should work on workplace democracy. That was a big thing I believed in.

DC: What would you have wanted to accomplish with workplace democracy?

BB: Crazy as it sounds, I really wanted to move into work teams. Which we did. But at the company's prodding. Most of the unionists didn't trust it, but I really wanted something along the Scandinavian model, where the workplace was the place to go that wasn't hostile to you, where you had control over your environment. Yeah, efficiency would be good, but the cleanliness would be there, and the environment would be nice and clean and quiet, and you would enjoy coming to work. That's what my goals were, and eventually you would even have some ownership of it. Sort of a mix of the socialist goal where my ideal would be eventually—of course the local level's not going to accomplish this—but somewhere down the road I was thinking that we'd be on the Board of Directors. Even if Lee and them did kick off our man, I thought someday, we really don't have much control over our destiny unless we even have input over design and planning. And statement about quality levels and [??] levels—we've got to be involved in the whole range of the business, not just assembling it. Which means then there has to

be a tremendous education effort in the plant so people understand the business and that our people can understand the financial matters, the engineering matters, and all. So that was one of the impetus, I should say, the impetus for me pushing education so much in the plant. I did a lot in that. But I thought this was just the beginning, because I thought once we get into work teams, and they see the ability of the people, that gradually they're going to see the advantage of promoting people from within and training instead of bringing all from the outside. And that we can't just trust the people with the business degrees who hired in as mercenaries. This is our life! But we can't bury our heads either. We've got to know what's going on in the real world. Make a good quality product, and satisfy the stockholders or we're not going to be in business either. So call it business unionism—I don't call it that, but I felt we had to start somewhere and you might start with small steps and move to it. And we did negotiate a lot of things. In the beginning we worked to clean the plant up. I think I had something to do with it. But initially, when I was first elected, I think for the most part I had pretty bad relationships with some of the guys in the plant.

DC: Some of the management guys?

BB: The union. My brother supported me, and he helped me. Almost all of the in-plant—there's always been sort of a feud between the Executive Board and the grievance handlers, because there's a dual administration. The Plant Chairman is in charge of the grievance procedure. You're in charge of administration. But the membership don't recognize that. You're the President, you know what's going on. So you campaign on making things better, but your promising things that's in their control, or responsibility. So they were actually—I can understand it. I probably could have done it better—but when I offered to participate in the slate, and they wouldn't endorse me anyway—how am I going to get them to agree with me that things could be better? It's like me telling the guy, "Things could be better because you're not doing your job right." That's the way they saw it.

DC: That makes sense.

BB: So it took awhile for me and these guys to get a little dialogue going, where they understood, look, I'm not pointing the finger at anyone, but let's look here at what we've got. And we did a lot in the first contract. Don Waters was a tremendous chairman of the bargaining committee, and the whole negotiating committee—I was part of it, I was glad to say—but we really cleaned the place up. Environmental conditions really improved.

DC: Did you get much resistance from the company?

BB: Yeah. A lot. They didn't want to spend the money on the facility. This was when they could see the downturn coming. These guys are sharp. They knew what was coming up. And it was going to be time they'd need to spend on re-tooling. And each plant—and we bid on everything worldwide—Ford doesn't have to contract with us. If somebody else

can deliver the quality and the price better than we can, they didn't have to buy it from us.

DC: That was true back in the '70s?

BB: Oh yeah, even the '60s. So every penny they spent on these things could be affecting the bottom line somewhere else. So you had to be reasonable on what you're drawing it to. But it was an interesting time, because we actually convinced the company to agree to some things that I never would have thought they would agree to.

DC: Such as?

BB: We wanted an emergency pool of cleaners and pipe fitters and millwrights to handle, say, chemical spills, oil leaks, things like that. And we had little [hard to decipher] because they recognized this stuff was bad, and the environment wasn't all that hot. I mean they were there. Their eyes were open too, but they didn't know how to answer it. And we came to negotiations, and we put up how many cleaners we wanted, how many different trades we wanted. Man, that's a lot. So they did their homework. They went out and they surveyed how many were currently assigned, and looked at the history of what was going on, how frequently these things happened, and they come back and said, "Yeah, we agree there's a problem, but we're not sure about the numbers that you've got down there. Let's talk about the numbers." So they went out and they did another survey, come back the next day, and said, "Well, you guys ready?" We said, "OK. Yeah, we're ready." But the Plant chairman's—the President keeps his mouth shut—and this Chairman's big. You just sit there and observe and participate where your assignment is, but Don Waters, man, he about got floored, because they come back and said, "Well, we did a survey last night." I figured how many cleaners we wanted. "We went up to such and such rest room about two or three in the morning, there was five cleaners up there sleeping, blah, blah." Well, he says, "Put that on the back burner for awhile." So these guys hurt us bad. We wound up getting something, but it wasn't that emergency pool. Management had—I'm going to blame this on management—it was poor management. They weren't making these guys do their job right. And it was to there advantage not to. They'd save money by not making them work. They could let them screw off, because if they did their job right, they still couldn't keep it up, and they would have needed to hire more, which would cost more money. And these guys, some of the supervisors actually really didn't care. In some certain trades, certain cleaner did a good job, because they had a little leverage over them. They could do favors for them, different things. It was bad management. But some of our guys have to take credit too. The chairman told them, he said, I come over to the meeting, said, "Well, what happened to the resolution [hard to decipher]?" "Well, why don't you see so and so and so and so sleeping on the job and ask them what happened." But a lot of things got better. We didn't get that emergency pool, but we made them clean up the air system, the vacuum system, and the [bumper shock?] for pulling smoke. They agreed with our proposal to clean these parts before they came in, instead of—they were running through welder's parts [hard to decipher]. You basically run like a little—I forget what you call these [hard to decipher]—different temperatures, you get different chemicals and elements. You run—you weld petroleum,

and what all you get off that baby? Who knows? You get all that plus you just—however, like I said, you walk those departments, you can wipe film off your glasses. And people were breathing that stuff. And they cleaned up. They got on the suppliers to make sure what came in from the plant form outside was clean. It really improved. And they set up a good schedule for cleaning the ventilation system, and made a lot of changes I thought were for the better. But there were times—I remember when I was rank and file, before I ran, one of the things that really got me going thinking about that, we had a break area where we'd play cards at lunchtime, and take a coffee, or whatnot. There was a water fountain in that air conditioned room—I've got pictures someplace of that—that thing was scummy, like it had been plugged for a month or two, and nobody would clean it. So finally I just took a picture of it, my own—took it home, I may still have it, I don't know—I showed it to my brother on the committee, said, "Look." I asked the Health and Safety guy if he could get this cleaned, it's still there. And he tried to get it cleaned, nobody would respond. I mean it's one thing after another. I said, "The people shouldn't have to do this, come in here and can't even find a clean water fountain." But you go in there now, you can't believe it. Make you ashamed to go in your basement, or your garage, because it's clean. But that was all the beginning. We can't attribute it all to us, because it was also about the time the company started to realize the benefit to cooperating with employees, and a clean workplace, and good quality. So it was an awakening all the way around.

DC: But you were putting some pressure on as well.

BB: We put a lot of pressure on. A lot of pressure. And we did it while the times were still good. We didn't wait for the bottom. Yeah, we had high hopes.

DC: How long was your term? Was it a two-year term?

BB: Three-year term. I served out almost four, and then I resigned with a few months to go to take a different job.

DC: What job was that?

BB: That would have been working in the Employee Involvement office. Me and Roy Wilson, who was also an employee involvement facilitator, and a company rep, doing that work. We were to help design a new process, so the employee involvement process could evolve into work teams. And I worked that until I retired in '94. It was just getting started good. The plant is now in work teams. So I'd say we were the pioneers in it. But we had a really good E.I. process here then. We had pushed hard. That was another thing that came out of the '79 negotiations.

DC: So tell me about that?

BB: The national parties approached us. Don Waters, who was the Plant Chairman, was also a national negotiator, and he came back and said, "Boys, you got a great chance here, to get you something, because the company wants to come up with work teams eventually,

but they want to start with what they call quality circles. And they're looking for some pilots." He said, "It will be to your advantage, you know, here you can get a good plum in trade. So we went in there—I was firmly believing in this stuff. I was a little skeptical of local management, that they were serious. And I think everybody in the group was, but we had put a proposal in on overtime that back in those days, a person who was on the afternoon shift, and let's say they worked over Friday night into Saturday, three or four hours, they could still force them to come in the next morning on day shift. We wanted that changed, and that was our lever. We said, "If nothing else, we'll get this." So we agreed to be a pilot, along with the Indianapolis plant. It all started with two teams, quality circle teams, and it just blossomed. It made a big difference. You could attribute part of the success to the lower volume, because sales were dropping. But a lot of it was, I think, you really raised the spirit of the people. Now the management asked the people for input on the productivity, the quality, and the work environment. And we insisted it not just be strictly productivity. You'd take it all. And it worked much better than we thought, and I think much better than the company thought. One department that I had worked in went from probably the worst quality record in the company to the best. We were getting so many rejects, you couldn't believe it. I think we only got like seven returns in the next year. That's not bad.

DC: And what was a comparable number from the year before.

BB: You'd probably get that much every week. It was bad. And they were listening to people. But the company people, they were skeptical too. One of my good friends was a supervisor in that department—he had heard that stuff before: "Quality Job 1 (sarcastically) you know." So he had been up with the Plant Manager, and all of them talked with people—they were one of the pilot departments in our plant—he said, "OK folks, we're really serious. We want a good quality job." "Well what about the practice we always had to, from these parts, to tear the reject tags off from them anyway?" "That will not happen." Said, "We want your input on how to make these things better." So they come up with a good problem-solving approach, making things better. It wasn't but a few days, push came to shove, my buddy's "Pull the reject tag off. Come on boys!" One of the guys on the line, he walks up to the Plant Manager's office: "Can I come in?" "Yeah." Next thing he knows, [the supervisor's name ???] is up there on the carpet. Says, "I wasn't just moving my jaws. I meant this. If you do this again, you're out of here." He said, "Well, OK, I didn't know what to believe. I've heard this stuff before, you know, but it was just lip service for the people, and when push come to shove . . .

End of Tape III, Side B

Begin Tape IV, Side A

DC: I guess you were talking about the '79 negotiations, and that's, I'm assuming, right about the time when things really started to go . . .

BB: Oh yeah. That negotiations, we had got P.P.H. days, and all kinds of good things.

DC: PPH is personal . . .

BB: Paid personal holidays. We were trying to shorten the work week so they'd have to hire more people. And it worked great. But then when things went bad, you know, we lost all that, because it seemed to be the most sensible place to compromise with the company. We didn't lose as many people that way, and people didn't really lose wages, but they spent more time in the plant. We gave up PPH days and some other concessions to keep the plants open.

DC: What were some of the other concessions?

BB: I can't remember them all. Primarily just minor economic concessions. The main [??] was the paid personal holidays. We lost them.

DC: How long did you have them?

BB: I think we got them in '77 or '79.

DC: So they hadn't been around for long.

BB: I think they came out of the '79 talks, and it wasn't about a year we had to give them up. And in turn with that they started to set up training funds for laid-off workers. And kept the plants open, so you could battle later. And at the same time they were closing some plants and announcing others to be closed.

DC: Yeah, the GM closings have gotten a lot more publicity, I think, but what was it like with Ford? Did you feel like there was a good chance this plant could be closed?

BB: Oh yeah. Because, well look at that time, we had in our Sub-Council, we have the national Ford Department set up, you had the National Ford Council, which each local representing Ford employees and the UAW were represented in that, and were broken down into sub-councils. And the parts plants and assembly divisions were different, you know, drive train, they were all different, and Sub-Council 6, which represented parts at this location in Ypsi, Rawsonville, Northville at the time, which is no longer around, Sheffield, Alabama, which is no longer around, Green Island, New York, which is no longer around. Did I mention Saline?

DC: No.

BB: Saline, [Michigan], which is still with us. Nashville, Tennessee. Oklahoma City—no it would be Tulsa, Tulsa Glass. And I might have missed one. But anyway, the circle just kept getting smaller. And it was a very bitter time, because—like Bill can tell you, the battle there at Sheffield, he was intimately involved in that—because the company really wanted to lower the wages of the people there. See, so that was another thing that came

out—they'd negotiated these wage agreements, with the people's permission. And that would cut the wages, but it would have kept the plant open. And the local leadership, I guess, decided not to present that to the people.

DC: Here, you mean?

BB: In Sheffield? To have a concession. I knew those guys. They said the people wouldn't buy it, and they felt like they were breaking solidarity with the other locations. But I think Bill did the right thing—you should let the people in those plants decide. So they closed it. It would have been a big cut, but like Bill says, you cut now, but the next contract you still got something to lever with. It's hard to get the padlock off the door, once you close it, and get anything in, but you keep it alive you can do something. But Bill can tell you about both sides. But most fellows thought it was a no-win situation, because they made pistons and die-cast aluminum parts, and transmission cases and whatnot, and whether it was true or not, they said nobody can do it any cheaper or any better, because it was just so energy intense. They had to ship in aluminum in vacuum [?] cars from Arkansas and other places, from the aluminum plants. And it was just a loser. And to top it off, in the last few months when they were still open, they were re-finishing the Japanese products that had been rejected. And that Ford had started buying [hard to decipher] that got guys really upset. They had [hard to decipher] Ford was looking to reduce costs. So all of these plants were vulnerable. And ours was on the hitting block too. But our chairmen, [Paulinsky?] and later Jack Carr, did a good job. We all agreed to make some changes to improve efficiency. The company was claiming the work rules were causing problems. And we could argue back and forth, well, who created the work rules? You and us. It wasn't just one-sided.

DC: So what were the efficiency changes?

BB: We decided we'd start progressing toward work teams, and [hard to decipher] like the new permanent maintenance starter [?], which made some ignition coils that were being designed for distributor-less ignition systems. And some others. So the plant would be viable. And we weren't saving a lot, but we still got a thousand. But the whole thing [hard to decipher] the work teams. So we just started, you know, say OK, I like the idea anyway, but—and I think some of us did, but most of the people were afraid of it. But I thought this was the road to workplace democracy. But if it was handled wrong, it could be bad. You know, you've read about [???] that goes bad. Our negotiating committee negotiated some pretty good safeguards in there so that we and the rank and file would be part of the design teams.

DC: Those safeguards would be part of the design?

BB: Yes, they would make sure that the roles and responsibilities would be explained well, that there would be adequate training for people, and that there would be a democratic way of selecting team leaders and other people, so that they wouldn't all be company flunkies. We didn't want it to turn out to be a company union. We didn't want it to be undermining the union. We wanted it to be where the people feel like they're part of the

union, just an extension of the democracy of the union right on the job. I think that's where it was headed, but it's been an up and down battle. But that's what we wanted.

DC: So what exactly are the pitfalls?

BB: The pitfalls is that—you know how the grievance procedure has been the lifeblood of the union, how it's handled—traditionally you get less grievances.

DC: With the work teams?

BB: Once they're set up, because supervisors take more of a hands-off approach, so there's less of them. So if there's any grievances, it's usually to be worked out among your own group, because you decide how things are going to be done, with the exception of the roles and responsibilities of these jobs. And you may have some input there. So when you tend to have less grievances, the people start to say, "Well what does the union really do?" And the company tends to respond to the people in these positions—just like with quality circles sometimes—instead of dealing with the elected grievance handler. They deal directly with these people, so the people say, "What do I need a committee man for?" So they can be a threat. It's not right. So we made these people part of the teams too. They all function together in our communications system. The committee people had to be actively involved, the superintendents of the people, so that everybody's in the loop. And that's been a good safeguard. Plus, the tendency is people may identify more with the company, because—we feel like there has to be still a distinct role for management in the company. We have a common interest. But the company should be primarily concerned with looking after the interests of the stockholders and profitability. We should be looking at, primarily, what's for the good of all of our rank-and-file members we're representing. The rank and file would like to [hard to decipher] too. And how far do you push to make the line go fast? How cheap is cheap? Really, you've got an interest too. And they're gonna collide somewhere. But if they don't see them—sometimes I compare it to the Stockholm Syndrome. Sometimes you identify—even though you're the captive, you identify with the captor. And you say, yeah, the company's gotta be more efficient, and this and that, and the next thing you turn around, man, you're running, to keep up. And that's been a danger. And also, you may tend to develop this straw boss-ism. And junior deputy supervisors, and we don't need those. And that's happened, but we knew that could. But it gradually works out. It's a slow process when you take an old plant and you change it instead of going to a "green" site. Because we've got tradition. We've got a history and a culture that pretty much everybody's lived by and are accustomed to, and they know how they're rewarded. [???] Now the reward system's changed. So that's a big change. They're changing also the floor production system at the same time, which gets into lean manufacturing and other things. [??? factory types] So you know there's a big amount of education going on, integrating all these systems—total predictive and productive maintenance systems. A lot to go in. So you—sometimes people just feel overwhelmed, so that can set you back too.

DC: Sure. Do you remember the beginning of the big layoffs then?

BB: Oh yeah, real well.

DC: What was that like?

BB: Man, in the beginning, say in '80, the first [jump?], people—even though we had heard it, from the leadership of the company and the international union, we though it was like it was back in the '60s: a few months off, we'd be right back. Man, we decided, this is not it. So, I remember I realized what was going on. In fact, we heard these talks—yeah, you know you've got 3400 people up here, but you get to know them, and it really becomes personal. So one of my good friends, Thomas, I said, "I know your son was one of the last people hired in here," in '77. I says, "If he wants to keep his job, right now would be a good time to get his military obligation out of the way. So he joined the Air Force. And when he got called back, that bit of extra time he put in is what saved him. Otherwise he'd have lost his recall rights.

DC: Did that count as seniority then?

BB: Yeah. It counted. One time. You can take [noise interrupts] save his job. But it was bad, because you're getting all these people, and no one will hire them, because there were no jobs available. Or you take a person, like I had a good friend who worked in the tool room. He got laid off, and he could go to places where they needed a die maker, and they wouldn't hire him. They'd say, "You're not gonna be satisfied with our wages, and as soon as Ford calls you, you're gonna leave." I mean these guys were running out of unemployment benefits, supplemental unemployment benefits, losing homes and cars, and medical benefits. Their kids were getting sick, and nobody'd take care of them. United Way agencies were overwhelmed. So you'd scramble around, trying to find doctors and dentists that'll give free treatment. I mean they can only go so far. I had one guy that, I felt so bad for the guy, he didn't know where he was going to get his next meal. I mean I told this guy, "Well, if worse comes to worse," I said, I told the guy, "If you have to, you can go uptown, in the middle of Ypsi, wait until you see a cop walking down the street, and throw a rock through a window." I said, "It will put you into jail and get you a free meal." I said, "I hate to tell you that," but we had done everything for this guy!" I mean it was just a bad time, and the Reagan administration was just totally unsympathetic. We had people who were given Trade Readjustment money—I don't know if you remember that?

DC: Yeah, sure, if your jobs were supposedly lost because of foreign competition.

BB: Um hmm. Well, he refused to release the funds. He locked all the funds. Had to sue him to get the money. It took years to get it.

DC: Was there much support for Reagan in the plant?

BB: More than there should have been. Yeah, I think Reagan got a lot of support in the plant. I don't think he ever got support than any Democrats, but he should have gotten almost

none. But a lot of people bought into his rhetoric. They bought into—a lot of the Christians bought into his stand on Right to Life, the abortion issue. I know a lot of guys held their nose and voted for him, over that issue. They voted for a lot of different reasons for him. But I lost lots of friends over that one. Because of [noise interrupts] of some of them. Because I could see what was happening. We'd battle all day long trying to get things through agencies of the government, trying to get help, call our Congressman—Pursell at the time—and he was a Republican, and he was a decent guy. But he backed out on things he promised too.

DC: Which things do you remember?

BB: Well, we had a meeting—at that time I was chairing the president's council on this area—and we had a meeting at the Hydromatic local. A number of us presidents, and we were pushing a domestic content legislation. And he had come around to our view, said he was for us, but he bailed out on us. The administration put the heat on him, and they knew corporations that knew everybody. When push came to shove, he didn't even have the choice to even give us a call and explain why he had changed his vote.

DC: Did you just read his vote in the paper?

BB: Uh huh. We knew it was going to come that way. But we always thought a man was no better than his word. And if you changed your mind, you had to go back and tell someone. That's the way we dealt here. If you get ticked off, a guy changes his mind, because I remember one or two times I did. And if you forget to go tell someone, they really get upset. So we made it a point, you know, if we changed our stand, we let them know before the vote comes. That's just honorable. But he didn't deal that way. That's the perils of party politics, I guess. I imagine he didn't feel good either way, but he should have at least called us. I wouldn't have voted for him, but I would have felt better about him as a man, anyway.

DC: Sure, sure. So you lost, what, 2000 jobs plus here within a span of how many years?

BB: A little over a year.

DC: A little over a year. Wow.

BB: It was hard, you know. Our local—the local was having a hard time just keeping up its basic functions. We were losing committee people, you know—they were going back to the floor, because based on the workers you've got . . .

DC: So how much seniority did you have to have to keep your job at that time?

BB: I think it went back to where you had to be back in the '60s, [hard to decipher], the late '60s at least. Because I can remember—yeah, it sure did. It was back there. I couldn't believe how far back it went. By the time they started hiring again here, we had not hired

anyone, except a handful of tradesmen now and then, since ’77. It was almost a twenty-year span before anyone was hired again for production work.

DC: Here?

BB: Yeah. ’77 to about ’87—I meant ’97, right around there. Or maybe ’96. It was awfully close to being a twenty-year span.

DC: Unbelievable.

BB: People were afraid to retire, because of the uncertainty of pension funds and things. A guy had thirty years, they might not even get a job posting. They may not get it. Or it may be on afternoons, so a lot of jobs were just one shift. It was scary times. There had been a lot of animosity toward us and other people in the community, that were driving foreign cars and stuff. When things were going good, we probably wouldn’t have said much, but then a guy’s out there, and he’s unemployed, and he’s looking around, and he says, “Hmmm.” And he’s not thinking logical at the time. You’re not thinking, “Well, we’re not making anything [hard to decipher]. Why would anyone buy those? There had been seven jobs for us, or whatever. And I had some of those guys, go into Ann Arbor, and shooting windows out of Japanese cars. I think about the worst I ever did was maybe put some stickers on a windshield or something. It was kind of strange, because I had owned foreign cars myself in the past. I had a used VW van, a used Dasher, I think, when I got elected. And I had done that because we made crap, and the dealers wouldn’t respond. But I found there has been no better [noise interrupts] than I had an old used Porsche, which was just a little fun car that was really, really old. That got me in the doghouse with Ken Bannon. Somebody put the word out. He thought I had [noise interrupts]. I had something—one of those little 914s, which is basically like a bug, probably no different from having a dune buggy or something. It might have been worth a thousand bucks, you know. But here he thought I was out driving around in a new Carrera or something. I could understand his view. It didn’t look good. So I started buying Fords again.

DC: Let’s see. Did a lot of these people leave Ypsilanti when they got laid off?

BB: Some did. Some had to. They had no choice. Some went South and got work. Some went South and got work temporarily, and then got laid off again. The biggest share of them came back. And a lot of them got transferred to, say, like Wayne Assembly. I remember one brother got transferred to Twin Cities in Minnesota, another guy to Kansas City. They were going everywhere. Part of those agreements, they had liberalized a lot of the moving allowances, helping people relocate to other plants. If assembly plants were opening and you could move out of what we normally had in our area, you could go anywhere there was openings before they would hire. But a lot of places were just as bad off as we were. They were consolidating parts depots, closing the small ones, going with the very large ones. They were rethinking everything that made sense to be more lean and efficient. So it was a tough time to find work. Because I know that during that same—not in the initial days, but toward the middle ‘80s, when I started—about [Bo

Pelinsky?], who was one of our plant chairmen, who had gone on staff. He knew my background and education, and I had done a lot of work here in retirement planning and other things, so he was able to get me doing some part-time work for the national training center. I was going around to the parts depots that were closing, and setting up retirement planning—which way you could do it. But there was nothing, but people were leaving. So that was bad. We hadn't realized how mammoth this problem is. Basically it was like redesigning all of industry. Went to Norfolk, Virginia, Charlotte, North Carolina, Pensauken [sp?] New Jersey, Denver, Colorado, Memphis, Tennessee, and I was supposed to go to Seattle, but I got sick or something, and a number of other places. All of these places were closing. And they put these large, regional warehouses—so all these people had to be assimilated too, or early-retired. Every plant in the country was going through the same hassle. I think the UAW-Ford dropped from about 200-some thousand to about 100,000, in one year. Maybe [noise interrupts]. Amazing. Even when—it started picking up with the Tempo and Topaz, but it really didn't get going good then until the Taurus and Sable, and then it started getting good. Getting sales, and building what people wanted.

DC: So, what, mid-'90s or so?

BB: Oh that was the middle '80s. Middle '80s. But five years is a long time. People in the auto industry are not rich, but you've got a good union job, and suddenly you're supposed to make it on two minimum wage jobs. It's a big adjustment for people. I remember people coming down, husband and wife [hard to decipher]. It's hard to believe, but back in the '70s, they could work so much overtime, but you had husbands and wives who had $1400 a month mortgage payments. That was big money. But they did it. And then they lost their jobs. Now what are you going to do? Wow! Everybody always assumed it would go on forever. Welcome to economics.

Dc: Yeah, yeah. As I talk to all of you, I can see that there are all these dips and turns along the way, these various recessions, and this is a big one.

BB: Well, when you start looking back [hard to decipher], I'll see if I can't get you copies of the minutes, and you can see, the chairman always gives the monthly man count, and you can see it go [whistling downward sound].

DC: So, when I teach labor history classes in college and all, I get a spectrum of students—some who have come in with a family labor background—but a lot who take the class, and they're probably in their core, hostile to unions, and the whole idea. And what I generally hear from them, early on, is that they would blame the job cutbacks in the '80s on workers themselves. That they had priced themselves out of the market. How do you respond to people who make that kind of claim?

BB: I look at the—I hope I can find an old article in the newspaper, if the union still has it—I did a little breakdown. I got statistics from the company on how much efficiency had increased in comparison with the wages. And if you're a capitalist, you'd have to believe that if you increased the profits for an organization, you should stand to gain some from

it. But our productivity, even during the recession, was increasing so dramatically, you could not believe it. Because it was taking a lot less man-hours to produce the products we made here than we had before. So the people were deserving of the wages. Then I turn around and look—what does it cost to live in this community? The people, if they were on a forty-hour week, they couldn't afford to buy a home in Ypsilanti or Ann Arbor, then or now. So where are you going to live? Are you going to set up a caste system in our country? And we're going to have—OK, we're going to truck our workers in from a concentration camp out here, or we're going to set a little barrio up here, and we're going to send them in. You guys have this [hard to decipher]. You guys live down on skid row, but we're entitled by God. I compare it back to the old divine rights. Some people are born with rights. Some people don't have any rights. You can't answer it strictly in economics, because it's a basic philosophy: that God ordained that you live well and I live bad. There's certain people, based on their birth or their attainment of education, deserve this much more than others. But you have to draw a balance. I'm not willing to put the extra time in, maybe, to get a Master's or a PhD—I don't deserve as much as you, but do I deserve a living wage? Do you deserve that much more than me? How much have you contributed? How much have I contributed? It gets down to philosophy. You can never win that argument strictly on economics. It'll never fly, because you'll never convince them. Because they'll always find someone else who believes in the old classic economic theories. And in an overpopulated world, you can always find someone [hard to decipher]. You can see what happened to the living wage proposal in Ann Arbor. So I don't know how you get through to them. You have to work at it for awhile. I'd work in the shop—let them go work—it's now closed, but I helped organize a place here in Ypsi, back, just about the time the downturn was starting. My daughter had a girl she went to school with come talk to me, she says—she worked at this little place down here called Superior Coating, "Would you come down at lunchtime and talk to us about the union?" I said, "I'll be there tomorrow." And I went down there, and I had never seen anything like this since I saw my Dad and his crew come out of the coal mines. Went out there at lunch—and they had been wearing these little nuisance dust masks, like you would for doing drywall around your house—they come out, and there'd be a white face or a black face, where the mask was, the rest would be [hard to decipher] in paint. I talked about the virtues of the union, this and that, and we weren't an amalgamated local, so I got an organizer from one of the amalgamateds to come out, say, these people need a union. And three quarters of them voted for the union. And they never did get a contract. Good old Reagan's boys. This guy comes—Don Waters, I think, was on the Regional staff—he went out and talked to this guy, he said, "Look," he says, "You guys will never get a contract out of me." He says, "I got some terminal disease, and I don't care anyway, but it don't matter." He says, "Whoever takes over, these people here are going to get tired of waiting. They're going to leave. Then a new group will come in and they're going to blame it all on you anyway." He said, "By the time it gets through the National Labor Relations Board, there won't be anyone left here who was here."

DC: He was probably right.

BB: It was true. I don't know what that answers, but—because you can see the hurdles are all put there for the working people. And the first time you bring it up, they say you're

trying to make it a class struggle, class war. I say, "I'm not trying to make it nothing. Just pointing up, this is the way it is." And you can make it worse, or you can do something about it. Try to make it better for everyone. That's what we tried to do, is say, "Look, I can spout my socialist rhetoric all day long, but the company is out to make money. Now if I want to help my people, I got to do something that benefits them and us. That's the way it is in our system. But if I'm unfortunate enough to get the people that can't buy into that logic—they just want to domineer and exploit—I mean, there's not much recourse left, is there? Not in this system. So in the end, this will maybe cause us some problems, but people aren't really militant now. They take more than I would. And I'm a peaceful sort, but you wonder how long you can push people around. That's what I think, the lesson I learned from the '60s, from the black people. Very gentle people, just like all of us, but you'd only go so far and you get tired of backing off. And then maybe you act irrationally, or just, out of frustration—or maybe it is rational. I'm not sure. You have to be there. Like my Uncle El, or my great uncle El, who wanted to ride his horse to the courthouse. Maybe that way. Because I can go to Arkansas, and I can see where the old homes that he built have fallen, but his chimneys are still there; all of the stone walls that he built are still there. But his philosophy's gone.

DC: Yeah.

BB: Never matured. Yeah, it's funny.

DC: So you would have been elected in '80 and '83 . . .

BB: Yeah, I was re-elected each time. The first time I ran for re-election, there was no opposition. Then the next time Earthaline and one or two others may have run against me. I tell you, though, she and I had had some political falling out, but I still respect her. I doubt she does me, but that don't matter. After a while, it was time for me to move, because I really firmly believed in that, even though I'd been in office a long time, it was beneficial to the union and the company that we needed somebody to be in there that the people had voted for and they had respect for. And you know, it's not an ego thing, but if they vote for you, they must respect you, to leave you in that long. And they needed some credibility to the program. Roy Wilson had credibility. He had been a good committee person. He was in it. And I think I brought additional credibility, because they said, "Why would you give that up to come in here for this?" It was an appointed position. You give up the prestige of the job. No one was going to run against me, as far as I knew. But no, it's time to move on, to try something different. [Knock on the door, interruption]

DC: Can you think of questions that I should have been asking you?

BB: No, man, you've been pretty thorough.

DC: I'm sure as I go back over this and transcribe it . . .

BB: Well, you have an idea what direction you're going to go in. I guess, as I reflect back over, I'd just say that, as my regrets, and things I'm happy about—I'm happy that, to see that most of the people who are in union leadership had the respect of the people in the plant.

DC: You're talking about the local level?

BB: Um hmm. And even if they didn't vote for me—you know a lot of times you were choosing, you can vote for one or two and there's a lot of good people running. But unfortunately, there are always a few dogs running. They lasted one term and usually they were gone. They didn't get in. But the sad thing to see now is that—and it's not the fault of the young people, but they don't know much about the "whys" of unions, because they're not taught in school. And I think that's by design in some school districts. I don't think they really want young people to understand anything but the bread and butter of business, the capitalist model. And they treat it like it's a sacred thing, and I mean, it's important to know, but when you start losing a sense of how your people got to where they are, and what established their principles, and their moral values, then you're losing something out of your human soul. I really don't think all of the school districts are doing a good job in that regard. Everything seems to be centered—let's train people, and prepare them for the workplace, but we don't want to have any good, serious discussion about what is the purpose of our life, and where are we going? Is it just materialistic? You see, as a socialist, they would always say, well you're too materialistic. That's all you guys want. Nah, that's not all we want. Let's share it with everyone, in a fair way. I'm not saying you give to the people who don't contribute—but, it's the same battle that's been going on for a thousand years, isn't it? But I really would like to see our young people in schools know more about unionism, so I'm glad to see the things you're doing and the books you're writing. Unfortunately, we can't get everyone to agree to standards to do these things. All these young people come in, and we haven't even taught our own children. We're not around them, just like me, and my Dad, see, we're not talking. By the time I could talk to him, he was [hard to decipher]. Not many people could take time to write. You lose your history, you lose your soul, that's for sure. But I'm happy with the questions you asked. If anything comes up, you know—I know it's going to take you awhile. I'll try to get in the back room and get you documentation that might be there.

DC: Do you think there might be some grievance records out there somewhere?

BB: Yeah. It would be nice if I could get—I know Jerry would let me look through them. If I could get hold of Don Waters—I think we've got every grievance we ever wrote at this local in the '40s.

DC: That would be just a gold mine.

BB: Thousands and thousands of them. But the trick is to find the ones that you would really—Waters and White, they can probably show you the trend of the grievances, more than do a study on that, but it would take so much time as to—take different periods of

times and see what were the primary concerns of the grievances, and what you were successful in resolving, and what you weren't.

DC: I looked through hundreds and hundreds of them for the book, and you probably have more here.

BB: They were wondering what to do with them, and I said, "Don't throw them away."

DC: Good for you.

BB: I said, "If worse comes to worse, I'll get them and go through them and give them to Wayne State."

DC: Absolutely. They'd love to have them.

BB: Because there are tons here. But some of them are probably too current to keep around. But there's a history, and I'd pull a new book or a record they didn't know what to do with. I had gotten a list of all the '30s hires here. Some people born in the 19th century even. Got their names. Yeah, I got it at home, stashed. I was afraid they'd throw it away. Because there had been people here who had thrown away important stuff. The guy who succeeded me here—the guy after him, not Jerry, they'd throw away stuff that was just a gold mine. I kept notes on stuff. I'm going to go in the back, and I hope a lot of the stuff is still there, but a lot of the stuff they just threw away, just like junk, like old financial records and stuff. Some of it may be, but keep some samples anyway. But I think we can find some stuff. And I might even have some old photos. I know me and Dave have some.

DC: Well, whatever you can come up with, I'd be very interested in looking at, because I'm not sure all of the different directions this project will take.

BB: One never knows.

DC: It could be to really burrow in on a single local and if you can have that kind of documentation—I mean, I might need some help translating . . .

BB: Well, we can get it. We've got some—like I told Bill, you're [meaning Bill is] a walking encyclopedia. Because he was [hard to decipher] in the '50s and '60s. But he knew the people who could go way back. And here he's like, [you are looking prime after WWII?]. He come in here as a young guy in the '50s. Been out of the service, or maybe [noise interrupts], I'm not sure. And Waters the same way. And they both have sharp minds, fairly young guys. And that White, man, he's a super guy. A lot of times I like to invite him to talk at places—but don't tell him this, I think he knows it—but a lot of times he has trouble controlling his vocabulary, and he says some X-rated words.

DC: Don't invite him to the church group, anyway!

BB: The thing is, this guy is a real generous guy. He'll—he goes out, and he won't even let people know it, he'll go in a church, he'll buy them Bibles and all kind of stuff. Song books. Said, "Don't let anybody know my name." Just the way he talks, you know. It's part of the culture. And the guy's from down South, in particular, they just grew up, and that's the way it was. If you didn't talk tough, brother, you got beat up. Kind of like being streetwise in the ghetto. You talk real nice, and hey, you got to look tough even if you ain't. You got to be perceived [sound cuts off] . . .

End of Interview