THE TWENTIETH CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

CHARLOTTE GRAHAM

International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union

by

Glenn Scott

Program on Women and Work

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The University of Michigan - Wayne State University

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VITAE

CHARLOTTE GRAHAM

Charlotte Graham grew up in Dallas, Texas, one of two daughters of a homemaker and a carpenter. Her first job was at Justin McCarty's textile factory in Dallas. Graham took the job immediately after graduating from high school. She describes vividly the working conditions at McCarty's, where wages were held to five dollars a week. Graham explains how she began to fight for workers' rights in the early Thirties:

> ...no ice water, no fans, thirty minutes for lunch, they had bathroom facilities for about five.... You were told you couldn't go to the restroom, only at lunch hour and during a fifteen minute break. It was utterly impossible for that many people to get in a restroom in that time. I remember one lady who couldn't wait and had an accident in her seat. And that really riled people, particularly me, who put the boss to a test about going in the restroom and wanting to see if I would be fired for it.

Graham wasn't fired and went on to play a key role in organizing at McCarty's and other Dallas textile plants. After the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union lost a general strike in Dallas in 1935, ILGWU Vice-President Meyer Perlstein offered Graham and other strikers jobs in Los Angeles. Graham refused to take a staff job without experience in an organized plant. After a stint at L and M, a textile factory in Los Angeles, she did join the staff. Subsequently, she served as an organizer and business representative for the ILGWU in the Dallas and Los Angeles areas.

In 1948, Graham left the ILGWU to take a job with the Washington, D.C., Central Labor Council. She eventually returned to Dallas and continued her involvement with the labor movement.

Graham discusses her conservative Southern upbringing with regard to race relations, but when she talks about her own involvement in the civil rights' movement it is clear that she has struggled with those beliefs. She also mentions her involvement in the fight for women's rights, and her support work for strikes called by other unions.

Graham, like many who have lead active and useful lives, feels good about what she has accomplished. She says: "I did everything I could do. I would do it all over again."

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August, 1978
Houston, Texas

by

Glenn Scott

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about growing up in Dallas, your family background. Did your mother or father influence you in your later involvement with the union movement?

GRAHAM: My grandfather was a Methodist minister, and at the time I was going to school, just prior to my going to work, I had the idea I would like to be a foreign missionary, and then this sort of became my missionary work at home. People have asked me that, and the only thing I could ever come up with was this--that this did take the place of that missionary work that at that time I had wanted to do. My daddy was a carpenter and a builder and my mother had passed the teacher's exam to teach school, but of course she got married and never did teach. So we just lived an ordinary life. I went to school there in Dallas--Sunset High School, Winetka Elementary School--and then I went to work at Justin McCarty's.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to go to work, did you drop out of school?

GRAHAM: You mean why didn't I go to college? In those days

GRAHAM: not many workers sent their kids to college, and I guess I really didn't want to go, I just wanted to work, and I guess I just never thought about college. I guess it was on Sunday I read an ad where Justin McCarty was hiring people, and I just announced to the family that I was going to go down and see if I could go to work, and I did.

INTERVIEWER: What did they say about that?

GRAHAM: Nothing. No, it was alright with them. We had never talked about college, and I don't suppose at that point I could have gone to college if I had wanted to. There was just something I guess people in our circumstances--we were no different from all the other people in Dallas--I guess in those days you either were rich to go to college or you just didn't think about it. Well I guess even prior to that I had had a little taste of earning my own money. My aunt worked at Silberman & Becker Fur Company and they hired extra help when I was out of school. I went down there and worked in the mailing department, and I guess I just liked the idea of having my own money even though it didn't amount to that much. It sort of was an ego thing, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me something about what it was like when you first went to work at Justin McCarty's?

GRAHAM: Well, they ran an ad and there was about a hundred of us showed up that morning because jobs were not that plentiful. So out of the hundred or so people that were standing around waiting, the floor lady did the hiring and she went through the crowd, and I wasn't aware of it at the time, but what she did was to go through and pick out all the younger people. She hired about fifty and the others were sent away. So we all went to work right that day. We didn't wait til the next day or anything. She just went through and with her finger pointed out "you, and you, and you," then I would say a couple of days later out of the fifty that she took on, maybe thirty-five stayed.

INTERVIEWER: Were they all white women, or were any blacks hired at that time?

GRAHAM: No blacks at that time. Now possibly there could have been a black hired as a presser. I don't remember any blacks being there. I mean it was people for machine work and in the shop itself, and I have no recollection of any black people being there at all.

INTERVIEWER: When was this, do you remember?

GRAHAM: I think it was about 1929.

INTERVIEWER: So this was before the Depression really started coming in.

GRAHAM: Before the Depression, before the NRA [National Recovery Act], or any of the legislation.

INTERVIEWER: If you were working in the shop when the Depression hit, how did you see the effects it had in the shop and in Dallas and in general?

GRAHAM: Well, the Depression was in 1930, and that was 1929, so it was actually just prior to the Depression. I mean, I didn't really see that much of a difference. Maybe there was less work, but it didn't affect me because I stayed on. If it had any effect at all -- because wages was so low then -- that they couldn't go any lower. So if it had any effect on anybody, it would be that people had less money to buy clothes and there was less garments made, but I don't remember too much about that because once I got in I worked straight through. I never lost a day due to lack of work other than any off seasons, and I didn't lose much time then because they'd switch me on the special machines and in the cutting room, all over the shop. So I lost no time at all.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe how the garment industry worked in the plant? How did different races work on different jobs, and how the material was cut, how was it all arranged when you first went to work there?

GRAHAM: Well, the first thing when we all went in was the rows of machines, sometimes on another floor, sometimes on the same floor. Now when I went to work at McCarty's, the cutting room was upstairs, and men ran the cutting machines. I did the bundling, in other words, separated them and wrapped them into bundles. The pressers were usually in the back of the shop on the same floor where the machines were. In some shops there were more than one floor of machines. They were dirty; there was no fans; there was no ice water; the lint and dust just hung from the ceilings. It was really a sight to see.

GRAHAM: Very hot and dirty. And the girls, we'd all have to go in and change into these old ragged smocks. Well, I say ragged--some of them were--but just something very old because you'd perspire so much during the day. We'd wear ragged shoes and things in there. We'd wear just as little as we could get by with in order to stay as comfortable as we could. You see, some of the shops would have the cutting room on the same floor as the machines. It depended on the shop and the size of it. But it all consisted of the same thing: machines, the cutting rooms, the thread room, the section for the girls to bundle the garments to go to the machines. And then they'd bring them out and place them in big boxes and as you got out of work, you'd bring the bundles on the floor.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do with your first paycheck?

GRAHAM: I bought a shirt and tie for my boyfriend.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember what you made on that first paycheck?

GRAHAM: $1.89 for 54 hours. And at that time if you made more than $5.00, they'd take you off of piecework. They'd put you on straight salary of $5.00. They wouldn't let you make over $5.00. And that was 54 hours. We had one woman named Ruth Jones. She quit and moved somewhere else, away from Dallas, because she was very fast and she was very good. I think she had probably learned the trade in Chicago or somewhere. Anyway, they would not pay her over $5.00. They put her on a straight salary of $5.00 and she quit and would not work for that. We had one manager that told us point blank that $5.00 was enough to make in the shop and we could make the rest of it on the outside.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe some of the things you felt were really indignities to the workers that people eventually started organizing around?

GRAHAM: Yes, sure I can. As I mentioned before: no ice water, no fans, thirty minutes for lunch, they had bathroom facilities for about five--depending on the size of the shop--five or six people at a time for four hundred employees. You were told you couldn't go to the restroom, only at lunch hour and during a fifteen minute break. It was utterly impossible for that many people to get in a restroom in that time. I remember one lady who couldn't wait and had an accident in her seat. And that really riled people, particularly me, who put the boss to a test about going in the restroom and wanting to see if I would be fired for it.

GRAHAM: I went in when the floor lady told me I couldn't go and said, "I am. And you tell Mr. Adelsberg if he doesn't like it,he can come and get me." And she said, "Well, he'll fire you," and I said, "Well,that's what I want to see." And she said, "Then you really want me to tell him then," and I said, "Yes I do." And she said, "Alright," and she started to leave. And I said, "Bessie, tell him that if he sticks his head in the door,I'm going to hit him with this chair." So I went in and stayed for a good twenty or thirty minutes and when I walked out,he was waiting for me. And he wanted to know if I was trying to make a fool out of him. I said, "No. You made a fool out of yourself when you passed a note around that said that no one could go to the restroom." And I said, "Go and look under Mrs. Sutton's chair and you'll know why I'm doing this." And he said, "Well I could fire you." I said, "That's your privilege, that's what I want to see." But he didn't. So, those were some of the things that existed.

And then, some of the other things, there was always pets that got the good work and the big bundles. And if you don't know what the advantage of a big bundle is, it means you can make them a lot faster and on piecework it means that your average can go up a little. You don't have to change thread as often, you don't have to change bobbins. And when you got a big bundle you'd only have that waiting period between finishing your garments and waiting for another bundle, until somebody decides to bring you one. And some of the other things that existed was we would punch out--you know, after the Wage and Hour Law came in--they would make us punch out at five o'clock. We'd go out the back door, which was our normal entrance and leaving door, then they'd bring us back in the front door and we'd work until eleven o'clock without punching the clock. In other words, if we made a few extra cents on our work that night, as far as there was any record to show, we made it all in the 54 hours that we showed on our clock. So we would work until eleven o'clock with no pay. There was no time-and-a-half or anything. It didn't even show that we were working.

INTERVIEWER: Did anybody ever complain about that?

GRAHAM: Yeah. We had one girl.... Now this of course was a little later, after NRA [National Recovery Act], when we were originally talking it was before the NRA went in. We had a girl named, her last name was Dudley. I can't remember her first name now, but she was going

GRAHAM: to leave the city altogether and go to Oklahoma. So she decided she had nothing to lose and she would report it. And we were all working and waiting for the "raid," as we called it, and about 9:30 the phone rang and the boss was warned that they had been reported and that they were going to have to come in and clear the shop. So we were thrown out on the street to go home on the streetcars in the old rags that we worked in. The man who was working for the NRA office was a brother-in-law to the man who owned the shop. So he called and said, "We're coming in, clear the shop." And in ten minutes it was in total darkness. And then there was another thing the management had a big habit of doing, they would take dresses for different stores which were called sale dresses and these would be a favor to the store. But the workers suffered for it because the same collars, the same sleeves, the same belts, the same identical dress, which took the same number of stitches and the same amount of work, because the store wanted to sell it for twenty-five cents or fifty cents less, then the workers had to make it for less. And yet it was the same amount of work they got on the original dress at the original price.

INTERVIEWER: You mean the workers had to take the cut in pay?

GRAHAM: The working people would so that the store could have a sale and the management still made their profit. It was taken off of the workers. We were told that this was to be sold on sale so you'll have to do it for less. Another thing, you'd ask for thread and you'd have to wait ten to fifteen minutes. Well that doesn't sound like much time today. You say well maybe you should enjoy a fifteen minute break, but when you are working for two or three dollars a week, fifteen minutes meant a loaf of bread to you. They'd have to wait on work. If the machine broke down they'd have to wait for the mechanic to come, so all this time you're sitting, stopping and staring and not making carfare. And one of the worse things I guess that happened during those days was the company would know the night before there wasn't going to be any work the next day, but they would let you come on in, and you had to pay your carfare, and maybe you'd have a fifteen minute bundle or maybe you'd have to re-cut [a re-cut is for a damaged garment] to sew in or something which you got no pay for, but they'd make you come in regardless and you had to pay carfare and you got no pay at all or maybe you made twenty cents, maybe you made a dime, not even enough to pay your carfare. But they would not tell

GRAHAM: you the day before that there was going to be no work. And two carfares was two carfares in those days. It meant a lot of money to people who were starving.

INTERVIEWER: This being the Depression, was it pretty clear to you that people were putting up with this because they had no other choice?

GRAHAM: They had no choice. They had no place to go. If they made a dollar a week, it gave them three loaves of bread.... I mean, it was more than that, I think bread was eight cents, but it meant a difference in not having a loaf of bread and having a loaf of bread. Many people would walk four or five miles to save that five cents carfare. So it amounted to not having bread in your mouth.

INTERVIEWER: How many women that you worked with had children, or you said most of them were young. Were most of them single?

GRAHAM: No, I said most of the 35 they hired the morning I was hired [were]. No, the majority of the people were middle aged, some of them very old. The one who had the accident because she couldn't go to the restroom must have been 60 or 65. But she couldn't afford to quit her job because she was raising two grandchildren. She was very old and she was very ill. And rather than challenge the boss which I did because I could, she suffered the indignities of the accidents that happened.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe when you and the others began organizing and some of that whole process and what happened?

GRAHAM: Well it was 1934 I guess, because our strike was in 1935, January 1935. I guess one of the big things that brought it on, when NRA went in and you were supposed to work X number of weeks--and I still haven't looked up that and I forgot--for $9.00 a week and then you were supposed to get $12.00 a week. Well, management would work you eight weeks, lay you off, and hire you as a new worker. You never got past that nine week period to get the $12.00 a week. Justin McCarty had his nephew working in the sales department I believe, he was not in the facotry as such, the bookkeeping department I guess, and he was so provoked at Justin McCarty that he lost his job with a remark he made to him. He said, "Why don't you just go ahead and pay these people the $]2.00 and stand down at the foot of the stairs and take it from them as they go out. It'll save a lot of bookkeeping." And he lost his job over that. So I presume that this would be one

GRAHAM: of the big things that really brought things to a final showdown--that we decided something had to be done.

Now my daddy was a union man, but I'm not sure I knew there was a union for the garment workers, as such. I think we went to the Labor Temple to ask what could be done. I just don't remember that I was aware there was an ILGWU (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union) or maybe I did; I just don't remember. But we decided something should be done. So we wrote a letter and they sent someone in. But I presume that NRA thing and the nine weeks and the fact that you never got the $12.00. And then after a certain amount of time there was an $18.00 thing there somewhere and I think that may have had to do with the price of the garments that you worked on. I believe the silk dress or something... I believe there was some line of...there where your top would be twelve or your top would be eighteen and it could have been the cotton dress and the silk dress industry separation. But nobody ever got that $12.00 or $18.00. You stuck with the nine. I say nobody; there was a few pets, as I mentioned before. There was always a few pets in the shop that stayed and got it.

INTERVIEWER: When you wrote this letter and these people came in, did you all suffer harassment for your activity? How did the management respond?

GRAHAM: Well, I didn't. However, several people were fired and this brought about the general strike in 1935. I don't remember the number fired from each shop, but there was six from Donovan Manufacturing, where I was working at this time. Other shops who fired people were Aaronson-Rose, Justin McCarty, and Lorch. We were also threatened--called aside and told these outside organizers were just trying to put the shops out of business so there would be more work for the shops in the North. We were told if the shops ceased, our children and families would starve as there would be no work in Dallas. The ones who were organizing would get all the small bundles, be laid off first, have to wait longer for thread, needles, or for the mechanic. They would even be switched to making belts or finishing, where the pay was even less than they could make on the machine. There was plenty of harassment.

One year, I'm sure the other factories did the same thing, but Justin McCarty called us all together and told us that he had bought a poll tax for every one of us, but that we weren't going to get to use it--that they were going to vote for us. And I happened to know that that was illegal and I challenged him on it and told him that he was not going to buy my poll tax, nor vote for me either--that I

had my own poll tax and that I would vote my own poll tax. But some of the other people were afraid to speak up and say anything. Now I had no way of knowing whether he did do that, but one thing I know, he didn't vote for me and he didn't use my poll tax.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned some of the insults people suffered, do you want to go into any more of that?

GRAHAM: Well, just the general tone of their voice and their inferences that these people were not people; they were just nothing. They didn't care as much about the people that worked for them as they did for the machines, because when the machine broke down they had to have it fixed. When you broke down they just put somebody else in your place. There was no loyalty, no care. It just didn't matter if you got hurt in the shop. I ran a needle in my finger and it broke off and thread hanging from the top side and the bottom side and it took me about an hour and a half to see a doctor and get the needle out. But they didn't care about it. You lost it all on your own time. They really thought you were less than human and cared much more about the machines than they did people. Maybe once a year some of them would give a picnic, but that was just playing their idea of being a good boss.

INTERVIEWER: Did the union start because people were tired and weren't going to take any more?

GRAHAM: Well, there was just a few who had the courage to do this and we would meet in secret. And then of course we began, those of us who had the courage, would talk in the shops and we had at least twelve people who were fired.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you have to talk to people or how was it that you talked to people?

GRAHAM: Well, we would talk. We would sit side-by-side or you'd stand side-by-side. You had a thirty minute lunch; you had time before work. We would go in before eight o'clock to turn collars and turn belts. We'd take belts home with us, and collars, to turn at night, so we could use the machine and get more tickets cut for the next day, and you had time to talk when you were working. We had all these people fired and a lot of us were called on the carpet. Now I was not fired, but I was told that I could not talk union in the shop. And I used religion. I said, "People talk religion," and I said, "I understand I can't stop my work and go talk to somebody, but if I want to talk to somebody sitting by me and not slow up on my work,I don't see any difference in talking union and talking religion or anything else you want to talk about." I said, "People talk about their kids; they talk about religion ; they talk about school." I said,

"They talk about vacations and you don't permit them to stop work and talk about any of those things, but when they're working you don't try to stop them." And I said, "As long as I'm working then I'm going to say what I want to say." But now, some of the others were fired and we'd make house calls. We'd go to see people and talk to them at night in their homes. Now actually I think that's really when the companies got worried, because it was after we started making night calls on people that I think the company thought that maybe we were getting somewhere. I don't think they worried that much when we were just talking in the shop, but once we started going out in pairs or threes or fours at night and asking people to sign cards, then they got worried. And that's when the firing started.

INTERVIEWER: So by that time there was an ILGWU organizer working with you?

GRAHAM: Yes. We had a man come in from St. Louis. Well, first I think a man came in from Tennessee, but he didn't stay long and then we had a fellow come in from St. Louis, and of course, Meyer Perlstein came in then and stayed until his death; he was the vice-president in that district.

INTERVIEWER: So how long was it from when the twelve of you started organizing until you had an election?

GRAHAM: Gosh. I can't remember the day of the election. It's probably in some of those notes. I'd say two or three months. And then we held the election and called the general strike --voted for the general strike.

INTERVIEWER: So did you just have the one election in one shop?

GRAHAM: No, it was general. All the shops...

INTERVIEWER: How many workers?

GRAHAM: Oh Lord, I don't know. I would imagine Justin McCarty and Donovan had at that point a couple of hundred each. Marcy Lee must have had a couple of hundred; Lorch must have had a couple of hundred; Higganbothams, I imagine, must have had more.

INTERVIEWER: Well, over a thousand?

GRAHAM: I think so.

INTERVIEWER: How many of them were for the union?

GRAHAM: I don't remember the exact vote, but only 175 walked out and

150 stayed with the picket line every day. A lot of people went in and voted for the strike and yet did not walk out. I'm not sure whether they did it deliberately. Some of them may have voted deliberately thinking they'd get a better job if somebody else walked out, but I think they just got scared after they voted. When the time came for them to walk out they just were afraid, because a lot of pressure--a lot of threats...

INTERVIEWER: Can you give me an example?

GRAHAM: Yes. Speeches were made: "Haven't I always looked after you?" "We're one big happy family." "These foreigners," (and that was a big word) "come in here and all they're interested in is collecting your dues." And no dues were being collected and weren't collected until we had some union shops, but they were told that the shops would close down. They would never reopen...they'd be blackballed and never be able to work at anything--that their kids would starve. They'd even single out some people who they knew had a sick child or something and had to have extra medical care and they'd say, "You won't even be able to buy medicine for your child," or if someone's husband was ill they would single those people out and say, "You can't exist without this and if you go on this strike you're never going to come back." The pressure was terrific. So I'd say most of those people who voted to strike at the time really meant to strike. Now I'm sure there were some cases where someone wanted to be the head inspector or somebody wanted to be the head cutter or they might see a little advantage. If so-and-so walked out, and they stayed in they'd get a promotion. You always have a little of that, too. But I would imagine that most of them that voted to strike really meant to strike, because they really wanted the union. But a lot of pressure, and I'm sure a lot of them had pressure from home, too, that they really didn't know how they could lose a day's work.

INTERVIEWER: Why was the general strike called? And, can you describe how it first started happening? Was the management fighting you tooth and nail?

GRAHAM: Oh yeah. It really was bad inside when the strike was called. The boss with all this pressure and, of course, needless to say, we were saying, "We've got to do this," and we were putting our pressure on them too. "Now that we got a chance to do something, let's do it. So we'll lose a few weeks' work, but we'll make it up in the long run." But when people are hungry--people are hungry--and they were hungry. But you mean how did we call the strike that morning. Well, those of us who were real active went down at 6:30

that morning with our handbills with the general strike call. And I think a good many people, even, didn't know. They stood around in groups outside. They really didn't know whether to go in or stay out. They wanted to be with the union and they were afraid, because they'd been told they'd never spend another day in another shop in Dallas, and that was their home, and they were just frightened and hungry. Some of them went in. We had one fellow from Donovan's who every time he went through,he'd say, "I'm a skunk and I know it." He was one of our people who had voted with us. And I think after he said that each time when he walked by the pickets--I think that cleared his conscience a little, 'cause he happened to be one that could have stayed out. He didn't have a family or anything, but he just decided to go on in and work. He didn't want to do it, but it still hurt his conscience that some of his friends were outside. And I think by him saying, "I'm a skunk and I know it," it sort of cleared his conscience or something. But he was the only one who was sort of nasty that way. The others were somewhat ashamed and somewhat fearful and sorry they had to go in and felt they had to go in.

INTERVIEWER: So what happened after you threw up the picket lines? You had them lined up in front of five or six different shops?

GRAHAM: Yes, all of them.

INTERVIEWER: How did the management respond to this?

GRAHAM: Call the cops. We had more cops around the shops than we had pickets. And,of course,the cops were given liquor and we know this for a fact; we saw it. They were, I'm sure, given extra checks to come out. They too cursed the people and said ugly things and even used their billy clubs on people -- hauled us to jail. I guess the fight was bigger with the cops than it was with the management, because they were having a good time. They didn't want to get off the picket line either. And then the company would hire cabs. The same companies that wouldn't pay a decent salary would drive the scabs to work in cabs. And I'm positive that a good many of those people had never been in a cab before in their life. It was a big deal. But they'd bring them in cabs; then the cops would line up shoulder-to-shoulder or hold hands and make an aisle for the cabs. They'd be lined up for blocks and they'd run them through like cattle to get them into the shop. And then cabs would pick them up to take them all the way home. They'd take them far enough away...and then dump them.

INTERVIEWER: How did you deal with this situation? Did you try to stop the scabs from going in?

GRAHAM: Oh, we stopped some of them for the moment. Course then a lot of bitterness built up, so it became a battle, then, between the people. But, of course, if you stopped them for one day, they'd come back the next day. And there were fights on both sides and the people inside the shops would stand up in the windows and dump wave set out on us. The girls used to set their hair in the shops at noon and that flax, Slicks Flax stuff they used, they'd stand up and throw it out on the pickets. And they'd dump boxes of pins out on the pickets and they'd throw--empty the trash cans out on the pickets. And the pickets, in turn, would try to get even with them when they would be passing through.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe when you said the police would take you around the corner?

GRAHAM: Well, that was the morning of the famous stripping party. That was much later than when the strike was called. Market Week, Lester Lorch, who was the spokesman for the Manufacturers Association, called and said that if we would call off the pickets during Market Week that they would meet with us and try to come to an agreement. Well, we knew he was not sincere; we knew he was lying the way he'd always done, but we couldn't afford not to say that we'd cooperate. So we called off the pickets for the week and when Mr. Perlstein called for an appointment he [Lorch] told him to go to hell. So we had a mass picket line around his shop that morning. In other words, instead of distributing the pickets around the five or six shops, we concentrated on Lester Lorch's shop. And quite by accident--the police actually caused it--but all of a sudden, one of the scabs left without any clothes on. And the police were having a ball, but we got international publicity on the so-called stripping party, because once things got started on both sides there was a lot of people left without clothes on that morning. And the police were having so much fun that when they'd grab us they'd take us around the corner and say, "Go back and get another one, but I'll take you to jail when it's over."

INTERVIEWER: So what happened? Did you jump the scabs, before they got a chance to get in, and tear their clothes off?

GRAHAM: Well, it's kind of hard to tell whether the police grabbed them first or you did, because the police were having a good time. And Lester Lorch went upstairs--he made a line of uniforms; I think they were nurses' uniforms or

they were white. They could have been restaurant uniforms, but anyway they were uniforms--and he brought down stacks and stacks of them and he'd stand inside the door and wrap them up in a uniform and they'd finally get in the door. And then I understand, I can't swear this to my own knowledge, but I understand he made them pay for those uniforms after they'd lost their own clothes trying to get into his shop. But we'd tell Mr. Lorch, if he'd come out and face us, we'd leave his people alone, but he never would come out the door. He later told one of our manufacturers in St. Louis that he'd rather fifty men would get hold of him than four women.

INTERVIEWER: Was there something about, after a Manufacturers Association meeting in the Chamber of Commerce Building, one of them was walking down the street and you all took out after him?

GRAHAM: Yeah. That was Donovan. He'd been to a Chamber of Commerce meeting and one of their topics--and the headlines in the papers and all would be what they were going to do to get us off of the streets and break up this GD strike. So we were actually waiting for Lorch, but I guess he must have known or something, because he was really a coward. If he saw one of us two blocks away he'd run--literally! He'd run! But we got Donovan, and he had on a seersucker suit, but his pants got ripped up to the waist, and he was on the ground, so he got ruffled a little.

INTERVIEWER: Was this around the time of the story when Myrle switched coats with you?

GRAHAM: Well, I would imagine around that time, because I think it was after this, all this publicity, that Perlstein brought these people up from San Antonio just to see. They were getting ready for a strike, so he brought Myrle and three or four others up just to see what a picket line was. You see, when we went out, we'd never seen anything like that. So he brought them up just to see what they had to look forward to--the police, the cabs, and the walking, the carrying signs and just in general just what a picket line would be. They were supposed to go back that night, but Myrle got to stay on, because she went to jail. She wanted to stay over and she had on a fur coat, and I had about nineteen cases against me in court and I'd been told to lay low for a while until some of them were done away with. So Myrle asked me to change coats with her and she walked up and down the police and they thought she was kidding, because she picked out two that didn't look so rough and she said, "In a minute I'm going to get a scab

right in between you two." And she said, "You can take me to jail," but she said, "don't you use that billy club on me, because my husband'll kill you if you do." And they were laughing with her, and I think they thought she might have been kidding, but when she broke through them they grabbed her, but they didn't club her. And she went to jail.

We had one manufacturer, L&M, that actually wanted to sign with the union, because they had a shop in Phoenix and one in New York and one in Los Angeles that was already working under union agreements. And Lorch, Donovan's, and McCarty's told him they'd run him out of business if he signed. And he was very much opposed to the strike. He even--when a cold spell hit and the girls were out on the picket line without coats-- he even came out and offered to let them have coats out of the shop that were not manufactured in Dallas, but were sold in Dallas in the showroom. And he was not trying to bribe anyone or cause any trouble, [he] just didn't want to see us walking in the cold with no coats on. Of course we didn't take coats from him; the reason we were there without coats being that the cold spell hit during the day and we had no carfare to go home and get coats. We did not want to leave the shops without pickets even for a day. When the strike was called off and we had to leave town to go to work I went to Los Angeles and worked nine months in the L&M shop there. I wanted the experience of working in a union shop before going on the ILGWU staff in the Los Angeles area.

One of the things that the management tried to do to break up the strike was they'd throw us all in jail; they'd throw in everybody on the picket lines and we were told to appear in court and show cause. And we were real surprised. There were about 125 of us--we'd been in jail--and when we got in Judge Tom Young's court,the first thing he did, before there was any hearings or anything, was to say that he had some paper on a desk in front of his bench and that anyone who would sign that paper--not to go on the picket line anymore--they could go home and they wouldn't be tried. Well, we had no way to be prepared for this, because nobody had ever heard of such a thing before. And, of course, immediately we [hoped] that he would call one of us who were not afraid. We knew that there would be some few who would do what the first person did, because they hadn't had time to discuss such a move or anything and they wouldn't know whether anybody else was going to follow suit or not. And if you didn't sign this paper you had to go to jail for three days and nights. Well, the first person they called was the little

lady that... Nobody would have even been hurt if she had signed it. She had three little children at home and a sick husband, and if anyone needed to sign that paper and go home she did. She also was a woman who had never participated in any of the activities on the picket line other than to do her picket duty. She was a quiet person who sort of stayed to herself; we didn't know that much about her. She was faithful. And when they called Rachel's name some of us--I know my heart just hit the floor. I thought, well, that will cause several others to sign because she did, and there was no doubt in my mind but that she would sign, because she needed to sign it and go home. But what she did--she walked up and stood in front of that paper and said, "Huh!" And if you were going home you were to walk out the door. If you wouldn't sign you were to go in the judge's chambers behind the court. And she looked and she said, "Huh!" and walked right on in the judge's chambers all by herself. And, as a result,not one single person signed that paper.

But that was just one of the tactics they used, and there was a lot of surprises. I think that was the biggest surprise we had, because there was no way our lawyer or Mr. Perlstein or any of us could have foreseen that move. Perlstein and those who had been in for years and years had never seen anything like that happen before, but that was the Dallas Manufacturers'Open Shop Association and the judge. And then, of course, the blacklist that existed just caused all of us who had been active to have to leave town to get any kind of work. There just wasn't anything there for us. This was after one year and one day on the picket line.

INTERVIEWER: So how was it that the strike was finally lost?

GRAHAM: Well, one year and one day....There was just no money to carry it on and there was no purpose. We knew it was lost. We knew it was lost from the time that Lester Lorch said he would meet with us after Market Week and didn't. We knew that it was lost, but we continued for a year and a day. And, then, Mr. Perlstein said there just isn't anything else to do and he gave us all a chance to go to Los Angeles, New York, St. Louis, or Kansas City and he would help them with their fare to get there and there would be shops to work in. And those that had families and homes and just couldn't leave, just had to go home. Now, a few years later, several of them did go back to work in the shop. I did. They called me when they heard I was back in town, after being away for seven years. I went back to work for Justin McCarty and held an election

there. We won the election, but we didn't get an agreement. There was no enforcement body to... After the war, you see, there was no enforcement body to... All they had to do was meet with us and say they--we--couldn't come to an agreement. We had the Conciliation Board, who heard the case, but they had no enforcement body to force an agreement after winning an NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] election.

INTERVIEWER: They didn't have the NLRB?

GRAHAM: They held the election and then they'd bring in the Conciliation Service, the mediation service, and--but there was no way to force McCarty to sign any kind of agreement. We would've even taken just a union recognition agreement, just to get our foot in the door. But they would sign no kind of agreement, and there was no enforcement body to force it. See, the mediation service says you have to meet in good faith, and you can't prove good faith or bad faith. The thing is they met with us and that was it.

INTERVIEWER: What changes did you see? Was there any improvement that came out of this?

GRAHAM: Oh, sure! They made more money, the scabs made more money. The Mexican people were allowed to come in on a bigger scale and establish themselves in the trade. Even after we got a union agreement in Dallas, which was not with Lorch--we never did get one with Lorch. But every time something would go wrong in the Lorch shop,they would call our office and say, "Such and such happened in the shop today. We got our prices cut." Whatever the beef was they knew we would immediately respond with a leaflet and they knew immediately that Lorch would straighten out whatever the complaint was and they still would not join the union. They used us; they're still using people. After we got a union shop, if the union shops got an increase,Lorch, McCarty, and Donovan would give the same increase. Sometimes they would give a couple of cents more. But you would get so angry because you'd get a call and you'd know when you went you were going to get them the benefit they wanted, and they still were not going to come in and join the union. But you still had to keep trying. And, as far as I know, Lorch employees are still using the union to get what they want. But you can't say you're not going to come, because then they'll say, "We gave you a chance, and you didn't take it." So you go down there knowing you're going to get what they want for them, and they're not going to carry any of the load. (changed tapes)

INTERVIEWER: What about the incident of the riot that Olivia led in the

black local?

GRAHAM: Mr. Perlstein was in the Dallas office when I received a call from Olivia saying I had better come to the shop at once or someone might be hurt. We rushed to the shop. It seemed Mr. James and one of the girls had gotten into a dispute. I can't remember if it was a price rate or just some condition in the shop. Mr. James, in his usual insulting manner, had gotten very ugly with the girl who in turn held her own with him. He went to Olivia [local chairwoman] and was threatening a lot of things he was going to do. She kept right on working and said, "Mr. James, go away! That's all secondary to me." But his interpretation of it was that she told him that he was secondary. And when we went in there it was quite a commotion and we had to go straighten it out, but no one got fired or anything.

INTERVIWER: Can you describe a little bit about what it was like when you went in?

GRAHAM: Well, it was sort of like walking into a mob scene or something. Everybody was up on their feet; some people were crying; some people were upset with Mr. James' language; some of our people were using language; and it was, I guess, right close to being a riot in the shop. And I know I told Mr. Perlstein--some of the girls had never seen him--and I told him that I thought he had better stay in the office and let me go down there and tell them that he was there, because you really didn't know what was going to happen, because Mr. James had intimidated them so much that I think it would have been dangerous for him to come out the door.

INTERVIEWER: So the manager was hiding?

GRAHAM: He was behind locked doors and he had brought it all on himself, because Olivia had not even told him he was secondary. She had just told him to go away and quit fussing,that it was all secondary to her. But Mr. Perlstein did not stay in the office; he went right out with me, but Mr. James stayed in the office. But he was one of those people that practically every word he said was an insult anyway. So we always had to have a cuss fight with him. And as a matter of fact, in order to even carry on negotiations and settle the disputes during the day I finally had to come up with the idea that no matter how much we fought that we sit and have a cup of coffee when the fight is over or otherwise we could get nowhere. And it seemed to work out, because we'd have our fights over the piece rates or over the time workers,or over whatever the adjustment had to be, but we would then sit and have that cup of coffee--not he and I alone. We always had the committee with us, but we would have

a cup of coffee then in order to even tolerate each other--to get along, and it seemed to work in that case.

INTERVIEWER: I was wanting to get some more general impressions. Were there instances you remember of racial discrimination against black women or the Mexican-American women in the shop, by managment or even by certain union members, that were dealt with by the union?

GRAHAM: Well, not really, because there were a few Mexicans in there in the shop then, but they were so few. You see, that was where when a strike was called in Texas, the Mexican people, then, were brought in and used as strikebreakers. And you couldn't blame them too much, because they needed to establish themselves in a trade where they had not been permitted to do that before. Now,we had an instance in Oklahoma where they used Indians, who had never been permitted to work in the shop, to come in and be used as strikebreakers. To me, that's the worst kind of discrimination--to use them as strikebreakers and then knowing that when everything is over they're going to take the white people back. To me,that's the worst kind of discrimination. But there was never any, too much,in the shops because they weren't allowed in there. They just wouldn't hire them.

INTERVIEWER: Will you describe how you dealt with that situation in Oklahoma? It was interesting that you said that the person up there was organizing the thing in a bad way.

GRAHAM: One of our people went in there. Who--I don't remember what happened to her; she just didn't use good judgement. The strike was called and of course that shop came out almost one hundred percent, in Ponca City, Oklahoma. And the management, then, in order to just make the people outside more fearful than anything--he really had no intention of keeping them--but he brought in a whole tribe of Indians and, of course, he told them he was going to let them learn the trade and work. And also, he went to Mc Alester [prison] and had four or five men who were life servers parolled to him to work in the cutting room. And this was to scare the people outside.

And our ILGWU person who went in there handled it so badly; I suppose she didn't know any better, but she should have before she did such a thing. She let the people outside put on a mock Indian war dance and mimic the Indians inside. Had she gone to the Indian's chief--and even though these people don't live in tribes anymore, as such, they still have their chief and their clan or whatever you want to call it; they still belong to their tribes. Had she gone to their chief and explained to him that they were not being taught a trade, that they were being used as strikebreakers, he would not

GRAHAM: have let them go in. But when she let them put on an Indian war dance, they painted up their faces and came outside and did this Indian war dance. Of course, that killed any chance you had then of keeping those people out. It was very badly handled. When I went in, of course, this was what existed, but I went to the Chief and talked to him and he said--of course by this time he had become aware of what was happening--but it was too late; too much had happened to get those people out. There were no more Indian war dances, fun making. Those people finally became good union members, but not until after we won the strike. But it was a badly handled thing. He [the boss] would never had let them [the Indians] come in had there not been the strike, just like he had the life servers paroled to work in the shop, and those life servers had to do his bidding or they would go back to McAlester. They'd come out on the picket line and draw knives and threaten people. I know, I'd gone into (changed tape) Oklahoma City on some negotiation and heard that these convicts had pulled knives on some picketers and hurt a couple of them. I told the people in Ponca City--the ILGWU strikers--to get every union member around together for a mass picket line. I would be there in four hours--as long as it took me to drive. When I drove in all the stores, shops, even the local mine had closed down. Hundreds of people were massed together at the plant. They'd all come from work with their work clothes on, and the scabs spent the night in the shop that night. They were afraid to come out and go home. Course nothing happened, but when all the stores and everything closed down tight to show our rebellion at what had happened... life went on just the same: the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers went back to work. I guess the shop must have closed down that day or something, but they just stayed on, I mean, there was no fights or anything. But we had the mass picket line to show our rebellion at what they had done, but we could not get these convicts sent back to McAlester. [prison]

INTERVIEWER: Did you win the contract?

GRAHAM: Not right then. We did win that and, of course, the Indians were turned out, just like we knew they would be. They had positively been used and they would not have done that, oh, I don't say two or three might not have gone in there on their own, but they would not have gone in as a group had our ILGWU person handled it right. And the strike would have been over much sooner.

INTERVIEWER: And what about the Mexican people that were brought in? Were they local people?

GRAHAM: They were local people.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any attempts to get them into the union?

GRAHAM: Well, not at the time of the organizing, because they weren't in the shops. Now, at Donovan, we had a couple of girls who we all liked. Now they stayed in. One was... she cried. She wanted to come out, but her daddy wouldn't let her. And I don't remember anything pertaining to the other one. But they [Mexicans] were just not in the shops. I don't know whether there had been any attempt on their part to come into the shops earlier and [they] were not hired; there was never any discussion or anything, but I know we did have two at Donovan.

And they [the company] tried to use one of them, incidentally, against me. I guess we had approached her one night after work and we asked her--she was scared. She thought we were going to jump her, which we didn't and had no intention of doing, but we were asking her to come on out with us, and she told us her father would not let her and she had to stay in the shop. And the next day I was served with a warrant and I guess the other girls were too. But anyway, when I got it,I just pitched it over on the table, because I had so many already, and it wasn't important looking at it until I had to go to court. [I picked up] the thing [to] see what charges they had against me and the charge of....They said we molested her which was not true and,of course,she knew that; the company had made these charges up. But reading on down, it said we stole her pocketbook. So immediately,I went to her, right in front of the shop, and I said, "Look, I don't care what you say,except that we stole your purse." She did not even know the company had put this in the complaint. He had made her sign the warrant without telling her what was in it. She testified to this in court. Of course,those charges were dropped.

December 26, 1978

INTERVIEWER: December 26, Kerrville, Texas. I'm going to try not repeat too much of what we've already talked about: Dallas, in the shops and all that kind of thing.

GRAHAM: We covered that. You know, this is not easy going back that many years. The last ten years of my life has wiped a lot of memory out.

INTERVIEWER: I know. I'm amazed at what all you can remember.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't say much about your mother in the first session. Did she have some kind of impact on you? Is there anything you can remember--from how she raised you or whatever, your relationship with her--that may have been important in your development as an organizer?

GRAHAM: She was a religious person and she just didn't permit us to be against anything. We were not allowed to, say, not play with people or have ugly thoughts. I know there was a saying in Dallas: if you were a Catholic that meant you didn't have red blood. I mean literally.

INTERVIEWER: Oh? Real anti-...

GRAHAM: Yes, you were supposed to have some kind of other blood, and we were never permitted to entertain any of those thoughts. She [my mother] didn't want us to become Catholic because she didn't believe in priests and confessions and all that, but we were never permitted to have thoughts about them. That and....

INTERVIEWER: Was she active in the community or did she have some kind of...

GRAHAM: Well, back many years ago there wasn't--outside of the church--there wasn't that much activity. She did more than her share of sewing for kids who had no mothers to sew for them. Plus, we took in a girl whose mother died. We took a girl who was pregnant, and her family threw her out.

INTERVIEWER: What about your dad?

GRAHAM: He was a character. He was a union carpenter. He was a rebel; he was like me. He was born a rebel. He was not even a liberal in some things. He was a typical Southerner concerning black people. He had many black people that worked for him and he didn't mistreat them, but he could never have reached the point of thinking that he could sit down to the table with them. Now they'd sit down on the job and eat and drink together, but this was not the same. [He would not have been for school integration, et cetera.] I think that was the [only] thing he ever was narrow on, but I remember when I was about twelve we were coming from my grandmother's house and they had interurbans in Dallas then.

INTERVIEWER: They had what?

GRAHAM: Interurban. It was more than a streetcar and not quite a train, that went from Waco to Dallas. It was a line of communication. You remember those, don't you? And an interurban had hit a truck or a truck had hit an interurban, and this black man was driving and he had been knocked out of the truck and

GRAHAM: was--I don't know how badly he was cut, but there was a lot of blood. And of course the traffic was stopped, and we stopped and got out like everybody else did. And some man that looked like a banker or something--he was not a working man--was standing right beside me and he said, "Oh, he's not hurt. He's just a damn nigger." And I guess that was the first thing that started me to asking a lot of questions. Why did they say he wasn't hurt? He was bleeding and to me bleeding meant hurt. I didn't get any satisfactory answers, you know, I guess the parents then didn't really give answers. They'd say, "Go to sleep and forget about it."

INTERVIEWER: How old was the carpenters' union or the union your father was with in Dallas? I mean, had he helped build that union or had it come before his time?

GRAHAM: That I can't answer. I just know that when I was a kid I was calling other kids' daddies rats, because my daddy said they were a rat. I wasn't sure what a rat was, but if my daddy said they were a rat, they were a rat. And I knew they didn't belong to the union; I didn't know what a union was.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have brothers or sisters?

GRAHAM: A sister.

INTERVIEWER: Did she in any way follow in your footsteps?

GRAHAM: Oh no, quite the opposite. She's a Republican and a conservative. And she married a European-type German man, very narrow and very anti-liberal in every way.

INTERVIEWER: Well, did you think. . .

GRAHAM: In fact, my sister read all this stuff, during our strike, about management calling us commies and when she got mad at me one time, the worst thing she could think of--and she didn't know where she was coming--she said, "You, you, you, you commie!" She didn't know what a commie was, just that you shouldn't be one.

INTERVIEWER: The worst word she could think of.

GRAHAM: She thought it was terrible.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a lot of responsibilities at home? When you started working did you have to come home and carry on responsibilities at home or did your mother pretty much handle that?

GRAHAM: Well, we had to keep our room--if that's what you mean--and

GRAHAM: wash the supper dishes, I remember that. But we didn't live on a farm or anything where there was . . .

INTERVIEWER: Where you would have a lot of work to do.

GRAHAM: No, we had to wash dishes and that was not like farm work!

INTERVIEWER: What did you think about school? Did you like it?

GRAHAM: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever want to go on with school?

GRAHAM: Yes, but we couldn't afford it.

INTERVIEWER: What about the community or the area you lived in? Did you all have Girl Scouts? Or, when you were growing up, did you have any kind of activites? You mentioned sports.

GRAHAM: If they existed,we couldn't afford it, so . . . I mean, I don't even remember. I think Campfire Girls was the thing I remember hearing about first, but we couldn't afford it.

INTERVIEWER: Where I grew up Campfire Girls were the richer girls, and then the Girl Scouts were the poorer ones.

GRAHAM: Well, that was the one we heard about. Now I don't even know whether there... I know I wanted to belong to the Campfire Girls, but I don't have any recollection of hearing about Girl Scouts. So . . .

INTERVIEWER: So did you get married fairly soon after you started work or was it a number of years?

GRAHAM: About four years I worked, before I married.

INTERVIEWER: Did he give you any problems about working? Like did he expect you to stay home?

GRAHAM: No way. In fact, nobody could stay home then. I think between the two of us we made fifteen dollars a week. He worked in the shop, too.

INTERVIEWER: Which shop?

GRAHAM: He was a cutter for Justin McCarty.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

GRAHAM: He went on strike with us in 1935.

INTERVIEWER: He was there?

GRAHAM: He was there.

INTERVIEWER: Were you married at that time or did you get married later?

GRAHAM: We were married. During that 1935 strike there was about six couples that were married and both of them were out.

INTERVIEWER: What proportion of the women in the shops were married as opposed to single?

GRAHAM: I don't know. You see, most of the women were on the machines and I was on the floor or [in] the cutting room. I'd say they either were or had been married, working out of . . .

INTERVIEWER: Necessity?

GRAHAM: Need, sure.

INTERVIEWER: So, it was real prevalent . . .

GRAHAM: And really, the single girls were only used like inspecting, you know, cutting threads and stuff. They were not on the machines in the shop.

INTERVIEWER: Secondary jobs?

GRAHAM: I guess I did [have a secondary job], because there wasn't any other work available.

INTERVIEWER: What happened with child care when women had to start going to work? Do you remember people complaining a lot about not being able to deal with their kids or having to go home a lot for sick kids?

GRAHAM: I don't remember specifics. I know later when they asked me to take underpriviledged children and have a scout troop, it was to get children off the streets, because their parents had to work. But then that was several years later. I had this scout troop for about four years... See, I was one of those that was used at that point on the inspecting table. So the only contact I had with the older people on the machines and things was when I'd have to carry something back to them or something. We were in a different part of the building. But they all were working out of necessity.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I know one woman has told me, in San Antonio, she thinks that today, child care is probably the biggest problem

INTERVIEWER: that she's encountered with the women, that they can't make ends meet; that child care costs so much.

GRAHAM: Well, I think part of that may be the breakdown in families, too. Because families used to help, grandmas used to take them. But grandmas today don't babysit.

INTERVIEWER: So there possibly, there was somebody at home.

GRAHAM: I may not be making a very good statement there, but thinking to the people I knew personally--not necessarily in the shops--my mother took my sister's kids. My aunt's kids, my grandma took one of my aunt's kids. I mean, families did this sort of thing. Today, families don't do this. I don't know, what do you think?

LAMBERT*: Neighbors, too.

GRAHAM: Yes!

LAMBERT: You remember what it's been for women in the work force so you could find someone who. . .

GRAHAM: Yes, my mother, she had Ruth and I. And she had part of the time my cousins next door, and then we took a girl in the neighborhood and we kept her for nine years; her mother died, and we kept her for nine years. So I mean, it is a breakdown in family and neighbors, friends. . .

INTERVIEWER: Neighbor, community. . .

GRAHAM: And I knew we also took in a girl that got pregnant in those days, for which my mother was heckled all over the neighborhood: "Aren't you afraid your girls will take after her?" My mother said, "I'd rather think she'd take after my girls." We kept her till her baby was born. And I think people did that more then. But mainly I think it's a breakdown in the family relationship, too. Well, times are changing. Grandmas work today; they don't babysit.

INTERVIEWER: When you all would have union meetings back in, when you first started building the union, would you have a lot of problems trying to get women to come to the meetings?

GRAHAM: Sure. Even the few of us who went, went as a sewing group or a slumber party or. . .

INTERVIEWER: Call it everything but ?

GRAHAM: Yes. And when they started holding the first open meetings,

*Lataine Limmer Lambert. There is a separate oral history interview with Lambert conducted by George Green for The University of Texas at Arlington.

GRAHAM: I don't think we'd have over three of four from each shop. And most of them were people who didn't really--I mean, if they lost their $1.98 a week, they could do without that $1.98 if they had to. And that's a true figure. That's not just a number at random. But it was mostly....

INTERVIEWER: Those were the dues you mean? Is that what you're saying?

GRAHAM: The $1.98 was not dues, it was a week's salary. The ones that would go to meetings were ones that either had a husband with a $10.00 a week job, or something, that if they lost their $1.98, they could exist. They were willing to stick their necks out.

INTERVIEWER: So when did you have the big drive?

GRAHAM: We had our strike in January of 1935.

INTERVIEWER: And that didn't pan out? People were blacklisted?

GRAHAM: And then we lost the strike.

INTERVIEWER: Were people blacklisted?

GRAHAM: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How soon after that did you leave or leave Dallas? Fairly soon?

GRAHAM: I left in January of 1936. The strike lasted a year and a day. And we couldn't get a job so we were given the opportunity to go other places, those of us that could. So many of them had families and couldn't. We first tried to get jobs even with the street car companies, sweeping. They had men that used to go around sweeping the tracks off. We tried to get jobs washing dishes where they had signs up, Wanted: Dishwasher, because we didn't want to leave Dallas. We wanted to.... They said they would run us out and we didn't want that to happen, but there wasn't anyone that would hire us. They had a blackball list. When we applied for any kind of work, they would say, "Ah, you're one of those street workers."

INTERVIEWER: so you went to California, and they promised you a union job in California?

GRAHAM: They just said we could find work. But when I got there I was offered a job in the union office because Perlstein had written ahead. And I wouldn't take it because up to that point I had only known how a union shop functioned by reading a book or listening to someone talk. And I refused to go to work in the office. I said I wanted to go to work in the

GRAHAM: shop and then went to work in the office.

INTERVIEWER: That was in. . .

GRAHAM: And that was an experience, because everybody there knew about the Dallas strike. And. . .

INTERVIEWER: This was the unionized ILGWU shop?

GRAHAM: Yeah. L and M they had a shop on strike in Dallas, and he was the one guy who had wanted to sign up because they had a shop in New York, Phoenix, Los Angeles, and then the one in Dallas. So he was the one who had wanted to sign from the beginning, and then the other manufacturers wouldn't let him. So I went to work in their shop for that nine months.

INTERVIEWER: Were the wages better out there?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes. At least they paid the NRA wage. And a little over.

INTERVIEWER: Was the makeup of the work force there in the shop different from Texas?

GRAHAM: Well, they had union conditions. This was an experience that I was real happy that I took instead of going on in the office. My reception in that shop was real hard to take because we'd been on the picket line a year and a day, and all the people that worked there were aware of that strike. They thought I was a strikebreaker from the shop. And because I went to work in here... see, even there,the union permitted them to keep you two weeks before you were considered a--they could fire you on that you couldn't do the work. So you couldn't tell that you were union for two weeks, even in the shops there. And so all the people that worked there thought I was a scab out of the Dallas shop. And boy, the treatment I got was something else! And you just had to take it because they told me in the office, "Now, just keep your mouth shut that you were on the picket line because Adelsberg will fire you." And so for two weeks I really took a beating.

And one of the things that happened there was....About twenty minutes one night before time for the shop to close, Adelsberg came around screaming and hollering. He said, "Clear your machines. We've got a special order to get out before you leave tonight." And the chairlady in the shop says--I'd never had the chance to see a chairlady function or anything--so the chairlady stood up and she said, "You just get out of here. You own this shop and we run it." And he walked away. Then she stood up and said, "Okay, we'll get his order out for him, but he isn't going to come around ordering us around."

GRAHAM: And so these are the things I had never seen happen. And then another time during that two week period....There was a little Italian girl working beside me and they got into a big fight over something--I don't remember what that incident was--and it was so bad it scared me to death. First, I'd never heard a man talk to a woman like that.

INTERVIEWER: The manager was talking to her like that?

GRAHAM: Yes, very ugly. And next, I'd never heard an employee be able to talk back to him that way. And I guess I got a little upset because I went in the restroom and washed my face, and when I come back they were laughing. And he laughed at me and he said, "What's the matter Tex? Did you get scared?" Well, that made me mad. And I forgot my two week period and I said, "Don't you ever say those things to me because I'll hit you right in the head with a chair." And he laughed and he said, "I think you would." But it was.... That nine months, I don't think I would have ever made it, really, if I hadn't had that experience.

INTERVIEWER: Were there a lot more non-English speakers or people of Mexican-American descent in the shops there than there were in Dallas, blacks? Was it different in any way in that sense?

GRAHAM: Well, say that nine months--you're talking about that one shop or in general?

INTERVIEWER: In Los Angeles, the shops in Los Angeles.

GRAHAM: It depended. The coat and suit operators were all Jewish men, no women allowed. There's another thing where labor was wrong. The silk dress, which was what I was in.... Well, you see, Los Angeles is sort of the melting pot. It was mainly Jewish, Italian. It was only in the cotton dress where we had the biggest proportion of the Mexican workers and [a] very few colored people. See, in Dallas they used all colored pressers only. And I remember when we started to organize the Jaffee shop, the first colored woman who came in to join the union was told by me that they couldn't join. My answer had nothing to do with my personal feelings. We did not have them in Dallas and there had been no colored people in the one union shop [L and M] I had spent nine months in. This was ignorance on my part. And the man I worked for in the union office handled it very well. He didn't come [out and] say, "You can't do this," when I didn't think about what I was saying. I just said what had happened, you know, what I knew had happened. And so afterward I said, "Did I do right?" I mean, apparently, it bothered me. And he said, "You go home and sleep on it." And I did. And the next morning, I was down at the shop to tell her she could join. I mean,

GRAHAM: I knew I'd been wrong. And I raised my hand to touch her on the arm to stop her. And of course, she thought I was going to hit her, I guess, because she gave me the biggest black eye and black face you ever saw in your life. Tore my clothes off of me! She really gave me what we'd been giving the scabs--oh, a good one. And it tickled me; I laughed. I went into the office. They had to go across the street to the May Company and buy me some clothes, and I can still hear Bill Busick laughing! And I went back when I got some clothes, I went back and met her at noon. And I didn't touch her, though! I said, "I want to talk to you." And I took her right up to the office.

INTERVIEWER: And signed her up.

GRAHAM: I had a black eye. It was black and then yellow and then blue. I went through the whole stages, the whole thing.

INTERVIEWER: But she joined the union?

GRAHAM: Oh sure, became one of our best members.

INTERVIEWER: Good.

GRAHAM: But he wouldn't even tell me, you know, but it bothered me. Apparently, subconsciously I knew it was wrong, but I had just said, "You can't belong," because they didn't in Dallas. And he said, "You go sleep on it." I guess he knew I'd come to the right decision, but I took her shiner for it--a good one. She tore my clothes! (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: So when you went into the office then, you were an organizer? Was that your position?

GRAHAM: Yes. When I went into the office, nine months after I went to Los Angeles.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me, you organized for how many shops or what kind of district?

GRAHAM: All of the cotton dress and lingerie.

INTERVIEWER: In Los Angeles, which amounted to how much?

GRAHAM: Los Angeles, which was--lord, I wouldn't even know. They might find those figures in some of those scraps, those. . .

INTERVIEWER: But I mean, more than ten shops, twenty shops?

GRAHAM: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: So part of the cotton industry was organized? Or none of it?

GRAHAM: None of it.

INTERVIEWER: So your job was to organize the cotton industry?

GRAHAM: Organize the cotton dress and lingerie.

INTERVIEWER: So how did you start?

GRAHAM: With the regular procedures: talking, pamphlets, meetings, strike.

INTERVIEWER: How did people respond?

GRAHAM: Of course, they were aware of what the union could do for them, better than Texas, because of the coat and suit industry and the silk dress industry. I mean, they knew.

INTERVIEWER: So they were more open to it?

GRAHAM: Yes, but they just had not had an opportunity. So they were aware of the union and its benefits.

INTERVIEWER: So...

GRAHAM: I don't mean they walked in clamoring for it, but they knew that they wanted it.

INTERVIEWER: So how long did this take from when you first started organizing until you organized the first shop in Los Angeles?

GRAHAM: Well, as I say, we had a general strike. We didn't sign any one individual shop first: we had a general strike and then we had holdouts that didn't settle with the general strike. And our general strike settlement, as I told you long ago, was strictly union recognition. And then we had the holdouts, so it wouldn't even do that. And then we went through the whole hard thug bit. In fact, Jaffee was a holdout and he kept me from a darn good beating by a guy named Whitey. I left the building one night just about dusk--and I only had to walk half a block to the streetcar--and we were all aware of this Whitey and I knew him by sight. We knew who he was after. And in that half a block,there was a little cafe which nobody went in but men. And at this point I don't remember whether it was a beer joint or just a coffee,hamburger place, but it was just a joint that we didn't go in. And when this Whitey--I was alone--started following me, I darted in that place and I don't know whether I was scareder to be in there or to be out on the street. But while I was standing at the window looking out deciding how to get to the street car or

GRAHAM: back to the office, Jaffee himself, who had hired this Whitey, came along and I ran out and grabbed him by the arm and walked to the streetcar with him. (laughter) So he took me to the streetcar trying to pull away from me. He actually saved me from the thug he hired to get me.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So these holdout shops would hire thugs. Is that what you're saying?

GRAHAM: Yes, just like Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: So were there other people, other organizers, that were beat up?

GRAHAM: No, they never got to any of us.

INTERVIEWER: How long a process was this--with the holdouts I mean--did they come in or...

GRAHAM: Well, not all of them. Now when I left, I left there in 1942...

INTERVIEWER: By that time, how many shops had you helped organize, roughly?

GRAHAM: I haven't the vaguest idea. I'll say 80 percent of the industry. But no good contracts at that point, just....

INTERVIEWER: Just union recognition?

GRAHAM: Union recognition.

INTERVIEWER: Why did that happen? Why was it that they could only get union recognition at that point?

GRAHAM: Well, the Hearst papers, I guess, played a big part in it. And you know Los Angeles, even though the silk dresses and the coats and suits were organized, was just as anti-labor as Texas was, at one time. So it was just...

INTERVIEWER: Really difficult?

GRAHAM: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a lot of community sentiment against the general strike?

GRAHAM: Well, here again as far as the general public is concerned, you have such a mixture of people. See, the film industry came and walked the picket line, all the movie stars came and walked the picket line with us. I think the general feeling there

GRAHAM: was: it exists and we have to deal with it, you know. Hearst was our main enemy.

INTERVIEWER: So the film actors union came out in solidarity with the picket line?

GRAHAM: No, they were just individuals.

LATAINE: Did Reagan ever walk the picket line with you?

GRAHAM: Who?

LATAINE: Reagan, he was the president of the union.

INTERVIEWER: Ronald Reagan.

GRAHAM: Are you kidding?

LATAINE: He was president of the film actors union.

GRAHAM: He didn't walk any picket lines, I'll assure you that.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember the people that did?

GRAHAM: It was people like James Cagney and Pat O'Brien and Louie Corello and you can bet your bottom dollar Reagan never came around.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any female actresses that came?

GRAHAM: Yes. There was a gal named Jean Muir and none of the big ones like Bette Davis or those that were big at that time. But they weren't against us, they just didn't come help us. But Jimmy Cagney helped me carry the flag in the Labor Day parade for a ten mile-hike and Pat O'Brien and a lot of actors.

So the public there didn't have the feeling that Dallas did--that we were a bunch of commies--because the union already existed there and was not new to them, and it was just part of the atmosphere. But Hearst was our enemy.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other organizing drives going on that you all helped with in any way when you were out there?

GRAHAM: Not at that point. Now later the aircraft, I went through the sit-down strike at Douglas*; I was one of the ones that was inside and wouldn't leave.

*McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

GRAHAM: 1947.

INTERVIEWER: This was in L.A.?

GRAHAM: Yes, or surrounding area.

INTERVIEWER: So what had happened there?

GRAHAM: Charlie West can bring us up on this, because that's where I first met Charlie West. He was UAW [United Auto Workers]. See, I was in that Douglas sit-down strike and was in there for seven, six days or something. They handed food in to us through the window. Then the rubber workers--we were active with the rubber workers. That's where I met Roberts the first time. All those guys that I later ran into in Washington and New York.

INTERVIEWER: Was the Douglas sit-down strike in reaction following up the big GM Flint, Michigan strike? Because that happened in 1937, too--it must have been a chain reaction or something.

GRAHAM: I think so. I don't know whether I've got anything on those things or not.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how was it you got involved in that sit-down strike? Can you recall? Did you hear about it and go down, or did people contact you?

GRAHAM: Well, you see, I worked for this guy Bill Busick,[1] and he was sort of even on a bigger scale, like our Don Ellenger was. He knew everybody--I don't know, we just all worked together. I can't even remember whether the UAW was part of the Central Labor Council or not. See, we were all active in that. I just don't remember. I presume through Bill Busick we got involved in that because I think they came to him for speeches and things and he said, "Come along," and we got involved. And then the Longshoremen's strike in San Pedro, I was involved in that.

INTERVIEWER: When was that, the same year?

GRAHAM: Oh, from January 1936 to 1942. I left in 1942. You're throwing history at me now, and I was the world's prize dumbbell when you throw dates at me. Because that's all they taught in history was dates, and I hated dates.

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[1] Bill Busick was head of ILGWU organizing and in big demand to speak at all organizations.

INTERVIEWER: Hated it, right. Well, were there very many women active in it, like when you were inside on the sit-down strike?

GRAHAM: Just me, and the wives.

INTERVIEWER: Was there an auxiliary that they were involved with inside?

GRAHAM: I don't know if they had an auxiliary or not, but they just went in, and then wouldn't come out. The guys wouldn't come out, so we wouldn't come out.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any support groups on the outside during the sit-down?

GRAHAM: Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Women, or just mixed?

GRAHAM: Well, there weren't too many women in the labor movement there, either. I mean, membership, but I mean not on a paid basis, working as reps or anything.

INTERVIEWER: Right, as volunteers.

GRAHAM: Wives were supportive, and the garment workers supported them and they supported us. But mainly my association with Bill Busick is how I guess I got in on these inside things because....

INTERVIEWER: He was real active?

GRAHAM: He was real active in everything.

INTERVIEWER: Is he still around?

GRAHAM: Last time I heard from Bill he was in San Francisco. He married one of our Hollywood Bra people on our strike there. She was on strike when we took our lingerie shop out on strike. but after he left the ILGWU, he went to Las Vegas, sometime after 1942.

INTERVIEWER: But he's not with the union anymore?

GRAHAM: Well, I just wouldn't know because I haven't heard from him. He came through Dallas after that sometime and I don't remember where I was, but the people in the Dallas office didn't know where I was. So I don't really know where he is.

INTERVIEWER: Well, during all this time in California, did you and your husband ever have problems with you being real active? Did that ever make any difference? Did it cause you any headaches or anything?

GRAHAM: No. However, we separated. He didn't like California and he wanted to go back to Dallas, and I didn't. We just decided to call it quits, and he went back to Dallas. No reason, I don't even remember. I guess he just wanted to go back to Texas and I wanted to stay there and I guess we just decided....

INTERVIEWER: You were really getting involved with the union activities there and you really wanted to stay there in L.A. So why. . .

GRAHAM: So, I didn't see any reason to go back and work in an open shop again and I really didn't want to go back to Dallas. But I did in 1942 and went to work for the union again. However, I had my satisfaction of going back to work for Justin McCarty, who said he'd never let me work there again, and not through the union.

INTERVIEWER: Really? So how'd that happen?

GRAHAM: A gal who had been on our strike, Bessie Boyken, had become forelady there. And so Justin McCarty had said I'd never work for him again and I had said I never would work for him again without a union. When I went back to Dallas, Bessie called me. Someone told her I was in town, and she called and said, "I want you to come and work here." And I said, "No way." And she said, "Well, prove your points that you'll work for him again." So I guess when I went back to work, it was sort of him proving I'd work in a non-union shop again and me proving that I would go back to work for him again. So I guess he was trying to get even with me and I was trying to get even with him. But then I went back to work and organized his shop. But we didn't get an agreement; we won the election, but didn't get an agreement.

INTERVIEWER: Didn't get an agreement. So that was sometime after 1942.

GRAHAM: Yes. That must have been in 1945.

INTERVIEWER: Well, did you first come back to Dallas as a union rep or as an organizer?

GRAHAM: No. When World War II started, Mom and Daddy just knew that California was going to be blown off the face of the earth. We had reached a point there where work wasn't that exciting anymore. After the excitement, you know, when you're settled into a dull routine of settling disputes, that's not interesting. So then I decided to come on back.

INTERVIEWER: So from 1936 to 1942 you got about 80 percent of the cotton industry in LA organized and by that time things were sort of slowing. . .

GRAHAM: Well, by the time I left there, I would say 90 percent.

INTERVIEWER: I see. So all you were left with was handling. . .

GRAHAM: Just routine stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Like what--can you give me an example?

GRAHAM: Handing out leaflets, just nothing really. We had one little bit of excitement just before I left there. We were sitting in the office one day at noon and a man walked in and he said, "Can you people do anything for a deaf and dumb shop?" And we talked to him and we found he had a daughter who worked in this small shop--about forty-five people--sort of a runaway shop out in Compton. And this man would hire nothing but--of course, they don't call them deaf and dumb anymore, but then they did--and he wouldn't hire anybody but these deaf people. And their conditons were like the Dallas conditions and before we had a strike. So Bill Busick --it was a real small shop and really wasn't that important-- and he just says, "Talk to this young lady over here and give her your information," and pointed to me. And he really didn't intend to do anything about it. But part of my being born a rebel was you don't pick on somebody that can't defend themselves. So I didn't say anything to Bill, and we had a Mexican girl working with us and I said, "Frances, let's go out and take a look at this shop, but let's not tell Bill anything about it." I guess we were afraid of failure and didn't really know if we could organize this shop.

INTERVIEWER: What was her last name?

GRAHAM: Sanchez. Frances Sanchez.

INTERVIEWER: And was she an organizer also?

GRAHAM: Yes. We had three organizers. Well, at that time Bill was the head organizer but he didn't go out around the shops. He just handled the campaigns. And Frances Sanchez and I were organizers. Later a fellow named Nick Favlora came to work organizing. See, in the cotton dress and in the lingerie there was a big Mexican element. So we had two Mexicans and me there.

INTERVIEWER: What was that other name you mentioned, Nick?

GRAHAM: Nick Favlora, I believe.

INTERVIEWER: Favlora.

GRAHAM: Anyway, Frances and I went out to this shop and we did get interested because they looked so sad. We watched them come out of the shop and they were pretty downtrodden people. So we called this girl's father and asked him if he would get as many of them to come down to the union hall one night and talk to us. I've got pictures of that. We took big legal sheets of paper and with paper and pencil and using her father as an interpreter, talking with his hands, we got that shop. And we still didn't tell Bill till we had them all signed up. And then we took the cards in. And we called a meeting and I just threw the cards at Bill and I said, "Okay, it's your baby now." And he said, "What is this?" And I said, "That's your deaf and dumb shop out here." And he couldn't believe it, but we got an agreement for him.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the picture you showed, with you standing over there and then all the women standing....

GRAHAM: A big sheet of paper on the table?

INTERVIEWER: I think so. It's hard to see a sheet of paper on the table, but I think there was.

GRAHAM: Well, we would have never gotten it done without that sheet of paper.

....

LAMBERT: It was important to forget that you were a woman.

GRAHAM: That what?

INTERVIEWER: To forget that you were a woman.

GRAHAM: Well, we did and they did. And if you stepped on me as a woman or somebody else as a man, it was the same thing. They didn't think of me as a woman.

INTERVIEWER: So there were times when you were the only woman.

GRAHAM: I guess if they had any thoughts--I was real young. I suppose they thought of me--I know Bill Cox and them all did--thought of me as a sister or Bill Cox thought of me as his daughter that he didn't have. And I'm not saying that they didn't do their amount of kibtzing. Lataine and I had a similar thing, expression, where I remember people.... They called me

GRAHAM: pretty Charlotte Duncan. They called her the beautiful Lataine Limmer. I mean, they were aware we were women, but we were one of them. And the woman really didn't have that much to do with it. We just had a different face and a different gender.

...

GRAHAM: If we had wanted to use the fact that we were a lady to the last, we would not have lasted.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

GRAHAM: If they wanted to use a cuss word, they did.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Right.

GRAHAM: The first time I was asked to speak at the carpenter's union during our strike, and I guess it was the first time I'd ever been put up in front of three thousand people, and Frances and I went there to their big meeting. I don't remember [why], it was an extra big meeting. And we were asked to come in and ask for their support. And I was a little leery of it anyway, of the job I would be able to do. And they took us up on the platform and whatever the reason for their meeting was, they were serving hot dogs and beer. And they sat Frances and I up in front of all these three thousand people with a hot dog in one hand and a beer in the other. And they called on me to speak with a mouthful of hot dog! (laughter) And we were the only women with three thousand men. And we stayed for the beer-drinking and the hot-dogging afterwards. But we were not mistreated.... We were there for a purpose.

INTERVIEWER: But I guess what I was trying to get at was: were there times when you had difficulties as a woman? When men would tend to try to either make fun of you--and maybe not the union leadership but maybe people you were trying to organize--or men might try to embarrass you or try to make a pass at you and at a time when it was inappropriate? All those kinds of things that when you're dealing with. . .

GRAHAM: Oh well, I never ran into any problems like that except once during the McCarthy Era. I returned to Texas on a visit. During a meeting in Austin Don Canard was defending McCarthy. After some argument between he and I . . .

INTERVIEWER: Don Canard, was he an AFL-CIO person?

GRAHAM: Yes, he was. That's right. I was trying to think. His daddy was an IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] representative. But I was trying to think what

GRAHAM: he was doing at that time, and that's what he was--in the legislature. And he made a remark about a woman. I hopped on him when he defended McCarthy, and he came back at me with some quirk about a woman didn't know what the hell she was talking about. And before I had a chance to really land on him, Jerry Holoman did. He said, "She's forgotten more than you ever knew." But that's one of the very few instances when I ever remember that the fact that I was a woman entered the picture.

LAMBERT: I think the union people, the leadership, had typical male attitudes. There was--it's like if a fellow is an exceptional person.... And it was a degree of tokenism then in terms of getting local gals [in]. Most of the leadership wouldn't let them in.

GRAHAM: I think the worst thing.... When you were talking another thing came to mind. I was elected vice-president of the State Federation of Labor in Texas. Now when she said tokenism, this came to my mind: they only allowed one woman vice-president, and I was...

INTERVIEWER: Was it a rule?

GRAHAM: This was a set rule, only one woman vice-president. And I was elected in that position and during my term I did not get one assignment. I'd forgotten about that. I resented it at the time.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of assignments would people usually get?

GRAHAM: Oh, they'd be called on to maybe help with an organizing campaign or make a speech or something. But that was purely .... You were tolerated on that Federation board because they felt that they had to have one woman and one black person, and that's all. I don't know what they have today, because it's been a few years now. But they had one black person and one woman. And we were in all the meetings and we weren't resented for being there, but we were just tolerated. We were just there.

INTERVIEWER: Did you encounter times when you or other people felt that the very fact that the leadership of the ILGWU membership being 90 percent male made for some bad leadership decisions at times? That they were insensitive to the women at the base membership of the union?

GRAHAM: Well, unless you're referring to the fact that the coat and suit people wouldn't allow women to work in the shops--they thought they couldn't turn out the heavy work, it would bring down their conditions rather than.... And I don't even know if that even still exists today. But they wouldn't--

GRAHAM: I remember having some resentments there. But of course, women's lib wasn't heard of then, and it was more like an accepted fact. But I resented that they said that women would bring down.... I don't even think I resented [it] when they said women can't handle the heavy work. It was when they said they'll bring down the conditions that I got my dander up.

INTERVIEWER: There was something I remember reading. . .

GRAHAM: Now I'll tell you somebody--I don't remember if Rose Pesotta is still living or not.

INTERVIEWER: I was just starting to mention her.

GRAHAM: Rose Pesotta had already gone to New York. She was one--if not the only--woman in the early days of the silk dress and the earlier organizing in Los Angeles. She wrote a book. I have it; I haven't even read it, I have to admit. We might find something in her book on those days. It's Bread Upon the Waters, but I don't really know what it's about because I never read it. But Rose Pesotta was in New York when I got here. But I don't know exactly whether she was just a rank and filer who was active or whether she had been on the staff. I don't know just what part she played.

INTERVIEWER: She became an [ILGWU] international rep [representative].

GRAHAM: Yes, I know what she was in. Well, she became a vice-president, wasn't she?

INTERVIEWER: You mean earlier?

GRAHAM: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But she quit. It's my understanding that she quit sometime in the forties. She quit because the union wouldn't take enough stands on some women's issues.

GRAHAM: You mean that was after she was vice-president?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. She quit her vice-president job and went back to the rank and file in protest.

GRAHAM: Because I went to Los Angeles in January of 1936, and she'd already gone to New York then. Now she might--if she's still alive--have more on that. Or we might even find something in her book which I still have. But you see, Frances and I were the only women there on the staff.

LAMBERT: What about the international unions? Did they have women on the staff?

GRAHAM: In Los Angeles?

LAMBERT: Yes.

GRAHAM: There wasn't any other, unless it would have been the film industry. And of course, we were so involved in our own thing that.... And actually the film industry was more clannish than they later became and took active parts. The individuals who came and walked the picket lines with us were just people who did. And I don't--as far as I can think of--women don't even hold offices in the film industry union, do they? Now Louise Wright was something in the film industry in Dallas. I don't remember what she was, but she worked in the industry. But I think she also had a title of something. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: She was in an actresses union or...?

GRAHAM: No.

LAMBERT: No. Processing the film.

GRAHAM: Yes, but we were talking about the film industry in Los Angeles and I think that the officers were all men. I don't know of any women that's ever held an office there, but then, I don't keep up with it that much either. I know Charlton Heston and, you know, the different men, and they've always come to our conventions and things. But I don't remember any women even being in there and outside of the.... What [do] the Amalgamated [clothing and Textile Workers' Union] have in los Angeles? Do you know? Did they have any women?

LAMBERT: The Amalgamated had women on the staff. They always made less than the men.

GRAHAM: Now, that was true in the ILGWU too. And I wouldn't be surprised if it's not still true today.

INTERVIEWER: Mary Jane Miller mentioned that.

GRAHAM: When I was business agent in Dallas, I made fifty dollars a week and I didn't like being business agent. I wanted to go back to organizing. And they brought in Ray Haggerty at ninety [dollars a week], doing the same job I was doing.

INTERVIEWER: And when was that--in the forties?

GRAHAM: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Well, so let's. . .

GRAHAM: Because in Los Angeles I made twenty-five dollars a week.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of changes did you see when the war started, in L.A. [Los Angeles]?

GRAHAM: Well, that's when I left. Things had reached a standstill it was not interesting. There was no excitement. And Mom and Daddy thought that Los Angeles was going to be blown off the face of the earth, and my daddy had gotten ill. And I think when I came home I wasn't sure I would stay, but then [there was] the satisfaction in walking back in [to] McCarty's shop and then organizing it. I got involved. I went back to work for the ILGWU again in Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And when did you go back to work for the union? I mean, how long did you stay in the shop before you went back?

GRAHAM: Well, not very long because we started organizing right away, and held the election, and Perlstein called me to come into St. Louis. And he had asked me before, and I didn't feel I wanted to get involved in Dallas again--that was too depressing. But he happened to call one day when I was mad at the boss. I had asked for a raise and Mack had told me no, he was going to call me assistant floor manager or something; he was going to give me a title. And I said, "Call me a floor sweeper, but give me enough to eat on," and I grabbed my purse and started home. He said, "no," and I said, "Titles don't pay my bills." And Martha Zerbey was living with me, and I went over by her machine and I said, "I'm going home. I'll see you later." And Tony--Mack was the general manager and Tony was the floor manager--so Tony was a little Italian fellow and he came over and grabbed my purse away from me and he said, "Go downstairs and drink a cup of coffee." I said, "I'm going home and drinking a whole pot of coffee!" And I said, "Martha, give me carfare to go home on, and when this idiot gets through playing with my purse, bring it to me." So he handed me my purse then and I went home. And Perlstein happened to call that very afternoon [and asked me] to come to St. Louis, and I took off. (laughter)

INTERVIEWER: So that's when you went on the train.

GRAHAM: That's when I went back to work for the union.

INTERVIEWER: ILGWU.

GRAHAM: In Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: So what happened in St. Louis? Did you train as an organizer up there? Or did you. . .

GRAHAM: No, I'd already been organizing.

INTERVIEWER: That's what I thought.

GRAHAM: No, I just went out and let him talk me into going back.

INTERVIEWER: So then how long were you organizing in Dallas?

GRAHAM: Until I thought I'd outlived my usefulness. We could win elections, but had no way to [en]force contracts. I went to work for the [Central Labor] Council. When was that, Lataine?

LAMBERT: When did you and Frank get married?

GRAHAM: Well, it was before Frank and I married.

LAMBERT: I know, but when did you.... Because you had been with the [AFL] Council at least two years when you and Frank got married.

GRAHAM: I'd already left the Council. I'd been fired at the Council. (laughter) The only time I ever got fired was by the union! Wallace thought I instigated his being defeated as president of the Council. I got fired and...

INTERVIEWER: Why would he think that?

GRAHAM: I guess because I helped! (laughter) I guess I really started--no dreaming it would develop. Dusty Miller walked in and I hopped the Teamsters out for not paying on their true per capita.

INTERVIEWER: Their what?

GRAHAM: Their true per capita.

INTERVIEWER: What does that mean?

LAMBERT: Per capita is the number of members.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, they weren't paying into the Labor Council for their membership?

GRAHAM: For the true membership. They were just paying part.

LAMBERT: A token.

GRAHAM: And he said, "If we get a different president of the Council, he would pay on the true per capita." And I said, "Well, do something about it." And he said, "Will you help us?" And I said, "You've never heard me say I wouldn't." Well actually, I didn't dream of [doing] anything, but it did start,

GRAHAM: and I did play a part in it.

INTERVIEWER: Who took over after that? Who won the election?

GRAHAM: Frank Graham, but I wasn't married to Frank then and never had had a date with him or even knew him. Somebody else brought in Frank because I didn't know him. And he defeated him and, of course then I got fired, which probably started Frank and I going together.

LAMBERT: Well, I'm trying to place the year.

GRAHAM: Well, Frank and I got married in 1951.

LAMBERT: I would estimate that you were with the ILGWU two or three years before...

INTERVIEWER: 1948, 1949?

GRAHAM: Somewhere. And it wasn't really that I was mad at Perlstein, but Thelma McGuire and I weren't getting along. He had fired another little girl in there that I thought he was wrong on--Elena LaBarbara. You remember her. And just a general.... Dallas was very dull and depressing anyway due to no contracts after elections.[1]

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask you about that, because Liz Kimmel[2] has said that she felt like the ILGWU made some mistakes, too, in their organizing approach in Texas. And she was talking, I think, primarily about Perlstein. I don't know that for sure. But I wondered what you thought about her remarks. She said that she thought they had tended to use organizing approaches and tactics that they had learned from up in the Northeast and didn't really...

GRAHAM: Well, not true. Liz was not in Dallas or Texas at that time. She may have made reference to a guy named Schultz who came down in 1934 for a short time and who was there when the first election was held on having the general strike. Now that was a mistake because it was later learned that there was some stuffing done, and we were not ready for a general strike at that time, and that was premature. However, I have my doubts whether we would have ever been ready. I don't believe the Dallas situation--outside of that strike maybe being called prematurely.... I just think Dallas--it's like all of Texas was such a hard nut to crack. I just think we were fighting Texas and that was all there was to it. Now definitely I think the first strike was premature, because this guy Schultz pulled this stunt, though the rank and file knew nothing about it.

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[1] We could force an election through the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] but had no enforcement body to follow through.

[2] An interview with Elizabeth Kimmel, ILGWU organizer, is included in Twentieth Century Trade Union Women Oral History Project.

INTERVIEWER: What stunt was that? You haven't mentioned anything.

GRAHAM: Stuffing the ballot box to vote for the strike. And it was done. I was one of the watchers at the polls, but when I went to lunch it was done. And I think every method--Eastern or Texan or anything else--was done because we did things that everybody else thought was very amateurish. And I don't think you could say Dallas was a mistake of the organizing, do you? I think it was just a well organized manufacturers' association in a very anti-labor city with the backing of big money and the police force and the whole community was against us. And I don't believe--because I don't know of any tactic or method or stunt or shenanigan or anything else that wasn't done in Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: So after you left the ILGWU there in 1948, then you took the job. How did that come about that you took the job with the Central Labor Council?

GRAHAM: I guess I actually was asked to take that job when I left the ILG because I went right from the ILG to the Council then. I think Wallace just said, "Oh, Maureen was going to get married and quit," and Wallace said, "Why don't you quit and come with the Council?" And I don't remember exactly, but I think I just moved from upstairs to downstairs. And then when I got fired at the Council I went to work in the office of Local 69 IBEW. Stayed there till we went to Washington. That was a dull job of bookkeeping.

INTERVIEWER: After you went to Washington, did you do any kind of support work for various union causes?

GRAHAM: Well, that's all international offices there, there's no support work there to do. If you saw a picket line, you walked with them. Like in a restaurant once. But, see, that's all IO [International offices] there; there's no industry there.

INTERVIEWER: But were you ever involved with legislative kinds of work?

GRAHAM: Nothing but local politics. See, people who come in there to work on the legislative programs all come in from the different organizations. I did my part of heckling the IO people.

INTERVIEWER: On what--like the salary issue?

GRAHAM: Jurisdictions, salaries, discrimination--breaking rules mainly.

INTERVIEWER: Discrimination like what, how do you mean?

GRAHAM: Well, by this time you're conscious of the discrimination on women and. . .

INTERVIEWER: I see.

GRAHAM: Against their attitude toward the office workers which were small because they helped to make them small and insignificant. And jurisdictions.

INTERVIEWER: How was that unfair?

GRAHAM: Well, in taking in office workers. International officers sometimes wouldn't recognize office workers and take them in. And then when the IBEW let Schlectchler join the IBEW--and he was a bakery worker--I was bitterly opposed to that. And oh, I always fight with the building trades. That's been going on since the day I was born. You know, the building trades had to be forced to take colored people in. The biggest fight I ever had was with Dave Cooper. A group of colored carpenters, all working, they weren't somebody looking for work. Whether they were all craftsmen or not I don't know, but they had some members that weren't craftsmen, too, because I used some of them. Came in a group representing two hundred colored carpenters, they were building houses.

INTERVIEWER: Where?

GRAHAM: In Dallas. Cooper was business agent for [Local] 198 there in Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: IBEW?

GRAHAM: No. Carpenters.

INTERVIEWER: Carpenters.

GRAHAM: And they wanted to come into the union and they wouldn't let them. At that time--it was right after the war, those years after the war--they weren't interested in building houses. They just wanted to do buildings, you know, big buildings, work with bonuses and things. And they came first into the Council meeting, so I called Cooper and told him they were there and did he want to come down and talk to them or did he want me to send them up there. And he said, "I'll come down and talk to them." So it took place right in the Central Labor Council Office and he turned them down. And when they left, he and I really went to fist city. I told him I hoped to see the day when they wanted to build houses and I'd be the first one to build a scab house. So I fought with the building trades for years.

INTERVIEWER: Were the union people, or some union people, active in any early civil rights activities in Dallas?

GRAHAM: What year was that? I don't know whether I was even in Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: It was in the forties, you know, after 1942. There were some black voter registration drives.

GRAHAM: I think I was in Washington, really, when the civil rights thing started.

LAMBERT: I guess at some point we had a black labor caucus. It must have been in the fifties.

GRAHAM: Yes, because the first big civil rights thing I remember, right at this moment, was the Little Rock [Arkansas] thing and I was in Washington then. Now we met with the colored people at the Y [YW or YMCA] when we held our political meetings, before that.

LAMBERT: That was in the forties, wasn't it?

GRAHAM: Yes, and what was the guy's name that was with the federal housing thing?

LAMBERT: Oh, Smith?

GRAHAM: Yes. See, our liberal group in Dallas went to the colored houses and they came to ours and we met.... We had to meet at the Y, it was the only place we could meet with them.

INTERVIEWER: And what was this about, was this about a political...

GRAHAM: This was in the forties, this was politics. But I told you about the time we went to Olivia's house I think, in that other interview, and the police came. But we met at the Y in the daytime and then we went to Mayfield's house and the Unger's house and your house and.... We met with them, but if we were going to do it in public it had to be at the Y. But when the real civil rights movement started I was in Washington.

INTERVIEWER: How did the labor people around you in Washington respond to that? Do you have any recollection?

GRAHAM: Well, there wasn't a whole lot in Washington. The big incident that happened there, when it happened, was just before Millie left. And that was sort of a spontaneous reaction to something I think that happened somewhere else. They did their thing locally as a result of--it wasn't Selma [Alabama],it was when that civil rights man that was leading down there...

INTERVIEWER: Martin Luther King?

GRAHAM: No, it was after Martin Luther King. Was it Evers' brother or somebody that had been down there in the army or something and was coming home and they killed him. He took even a back road.... Who was that, what was that incident? It seemed to me like the Washington burning incident was the result of something that happened somewhere else, and they just did their thing there. Because I never will forget. I called Millie, I couldn't get her for the longest [time].

INTERVIEWER: Who is Millie?

GRAHAM: Millie Smith. She had to go right through where all this burning was and she lived close to the Hill [Capitol Hill]. And I was concerned about her getting home and I called because they'd really--all hell broke loose. And it was not anything that happened right there, I think it was just a. . .

INTERVIEWER: A reaction?

GRAHAM: A spontaneous reaction. I started trying to call Ruth and Millie because I knew they could be in an area where the fires could be. And I got Ruth and she said they were fine and she said she wasn't uneasy. But the tone of her voice, she was a little concerned because some of their friends had quit coming to play with the kids or something. But anyway, I finally got Millie and she had had a helluva time getting home and so she hadn't.... In the crowd somebody who knew her had gotten in the car with her and took her through. And I remember she said, "You're the first person that's been concerned about me." And I said, "Well, I wouldn't think that," I said, "I may just be the first one that got through to you because I've been trying for a couple of hours." It wasn't too long after that Millie left and I often wondered if that sort of frightened her enough, if it had anything to do with her leaving there.

INTERVIEWER: Was she white or black?

GRAHAM: She's white. She's from Oklahoma, I believe she was.

INTERVIEWER: She was a union person also?

GRAHAM: Yes, well she was working for the government there, she went up there with Kennedy's administration. I don't really know what Millie's background was, she was union somewhere along the line. She had reason to get frightened because she got

GRAHAM: caught up in this wave and it would have frightened anybody to have your car covered with people that were, you know....

INTERVIEWER: Angry at you.

GRAHAM: Angry at everything, you know. And they had a right to be angry, but she had every right to be frightened too, it could be frightening. But I think that was the only incident in Washington where there was any big civil rights demonstration of any kind and I'm trying to think.

LAMBERT: [Was it Medgar Evers?]

GRAHAM: Was Evers in the army and he was coming back to Washington or something...who was it that had been down there and had been transferred back to Washington? ...it was one of those things where somebody had gotten shot or killed.

INTERVIEWER: It wasn't Jackson State?

GRAHAM: People were just angry. ...And boom, all of a sudden, whatever this was a reaction to, or it gave them a chance to react to something and it was a big reaction. ...this demonstration in Washington was in sympathy, a chance to get rid of all the built-up anger that existed.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say the most exciting part of your work with the union was to you?

GRAHAM: I don't know of one that was more exciting than the other. I mean, people are people whether they're in Dallas or Los Angeles, organizing is pretty much the same.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you say that sometimes it got dull.

GRAHAM: That was after I came back to Dallas, when there is no big campaign going on, it was just routine. We could get no agreements after winning NLRB elections.

INTERVIEWER: If you had any of that to relive at any point would you do any of it differently?

GRAHAM: Couldn't. I did everything I could do. I would do it all over again, if that's your question.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

GRAHAM: Except there's something called age that would prevent. . .

INTERVIEWER: Prevent that. Do you remember anybody with the unions, or maybe it was somebody not in the unions, who really made what you would consider a major influence on your ideas?

GRAHAM: Well, I don't think that there's any doubt that Perlstein influenced us all. He was that kind of a guy. He was the kind of guy that you could hate, but even when you hated him you loved him. He was the kind of guy that gave of himself and he demanded that you give, and you wanted to give. Certainly none of the other vice-presidents or officers that I met--and I guess I met them all during my time.... Perlstein gave and he made you want to give. And even when you were angry with him you wanted to show him you could do it. You never got angry with him to the point that you wanted to betray him. Even when you hated him, you loved him.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me at least one of the things when you all would get in a tiff? Or when you all would get in a disagreement, what was it about?

GRAHAM: Oh yes. Lots of things. Back to the other question about anyone who influenced you, I think if any other person influenced me it was Jack Johannes, our attorney.

INTERVIEWER: Why is that?

GRAHAM: Well, I think he's another one that is just that kind of a person. He believed in you and he made you believe in yourself. [To Lataine] Did you ever get to know Jack Johannes?

LAMBERT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Would he help you to do things you didn't think maybe you could do?

GRAHAM: Well, to show you--this has nothing to do with the union, but the type of person he was--I bit my nails. I was nineteen when this happened. With all of the spankings and putting pepper on my hands and making pajamas with hands in them and everything else, and going to doctors, even rubbing elephant ear leaf on them that burnt you up.... I had so much respect for Jack Johannes that I was sitting in his office during our strike, working on a case that I had pending, and he looked at me and he said, "You ought to be ashamed to bite your nails like that." And I didn't bite my nails another time after that. I thought, if this guy can notice that my hands look ugly then.... I mean, it just did the trick, and he was that kind of guy. You respected him and he believed in you and he made you believe in yourself.

INTERVIEWER: So what were you saying about Perlstein?

GRAHAM: What was your question? I sidetracked and got back to that.

INTERVIEWER: Right, what did you argue about?

GRAHAM: Everything: what you wore, what you ate, where you ate.

INTERVIEWER: What would he say?

GRAHAM: Do you want the personal arguments or do you want the business arguments?

INTERVIEWER: Both, an example of both.

GRAHAM: Well, one of the biggest fights I ever had with him--we had a fellow in the office there in Dallas named Jack Mayer. His wife had just left him, left him with a child to raise, and he got up and fixed the kid's breakfast that morning. And either there or somewhere after he left home, or maybe before--who cares--he got a spot of grease on a tie. And that was in the days when men wore ties. And we started out with our leaflets that morning and he [Perlstein] turned and said to Jack, "You can't go out with this young lady," talking about me, "with a spot on your clothes. Go home and put some clean clothes on." And I guess that ended up being one of the biggest fights. Now, he could have said that to me and I probably would have just said phooie and walked on. But you didn't jump on somebody else in front of me for something like that. I guess that was one of the big fights we had.

Another one we had was--he sent [out] a bunch of leaflets; it was not threatening, but it inferred general strike action. And I don't suppose we had ten cards signed in the whole industry. And as I said, it was not a threat, but it inferred we were getting ready. And he sent them into Dallas for us to put out, and I buried them. And Ray Haggerty was there, Thelma McGuire, Lois Howard, Elena LaBarbara, Jack Mayer, Rita Overbank, and since I was in charge I just took them and buried them. And I said, "That's the biggest mistake we'd ever make here. Because they know we're not ready." This wasn't even a case of running a bluff. So we all agreed that none of us would say a word to Perlstein until he came in, which was going to be something like ten days later. And of course, we all knew, too, that Lois Howard and Thelma McGuire were going to tell him. And so sure enough, he came in and.... See, we never met him at the airport, and that day Lois and Thelma went to meet him at the airport. So somebody--I don't remember who--said, "What brought this on?" And I said, "Well, you ought to know." And first thing when he came into the office was, "Where's my leaflets?" I said, "We'll talk about it," he got in right at suppertime and we all always went out to eat. I said, "We'll talk about it after we eat." So we went to eat, nobody would say a word. Of course,

GRAHAM: we knew he already knew everything. So we went to Broccle's and ate. And he wanted to discuss it there. I said, "This is a public place, we'll go back to the office." And he turned to Ray Haggerty and he asked Ray something, and Ray said, "I'm the business agent; I have nothing to do with the organizing." And he turned to Rita, she was out of St. Louis, and he said, "And what were you doing?" And Rita said, "I was playing with my knees." (laughter) I don't know why she came up with that, but she said, "I was playing with my knees." And he turned to me and he said, "What have you got to say?" And I said, "I told you I'm not going to have any screaming fit here in a restaurant. We'll go back to the office and/or we'll discuss it in the morning." And so we all left.

[The next morning we did discuss the leaflets. After cutting remarks from both sides,he agreed that maybe the leaflet was a mistake. Perlstein had more respect for people with convictions who would hold out against him. He fired Lois Howard before he left town that trip. I'm not sure why but I'm sure he really did not appreciate her meeting him at the airport with tales. He was a great man, born ahead of his time. I think he influenced more people and left his mark on more people than any one man I have ever known. He was never doubted as a true union man who worked for the health, welfare,and education of the working man.]

(end of interview)

CHARLOTTE GRAHAM INTERVIEW INDEX