THE 20TH CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

ELIZABETH KIMMEL

International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union

by

Glenn Scott

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

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VITAE

Elizabeth Kimmel was born into a large German family in rural Kentucky around 1915. After graduation from high school, she worked as a domestic, a clerical, and in a radio tube plant.

In 1938, while employed in a small garment shop, Kimmel joined the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU). She was chosen by her local, #290, to attend a workers' school at the University of Wisconsin. In Wisconsin, Kimmel met ILGWU Vice-President Meyer Perlstein and was hired as a staff representative. Her first assignment was in Dallas, Texas.

During her tenure with the ILGWU, Kimmel worked in Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, as well as Texas. In addition to union staff duties, Kimmel has been active in the civil rights movement and participated in Houston's first sit-in for racial integration.

In 1963, Kimmel went to work for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) as an organizer. From 1965-1968 she served full-time as Women's Activity Director for the Harris County AFL-CIO. In 1968, she returned to her AFSCME staff job.

Kimmel was the first woman elected to the executive board of Houston's Central Labor Council and now sits on the executive board of the Texas AFL-CIO. She has been active in the American Heart and Lung Associations, the League of Women Voters, and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). She has also worked with the Democratic Party, paying particular attention to encouraging the activity of women.

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Houston, Texas
January 10, 1979

by Glenn Scott

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Liz Kimmel. Today's January 10, 1979 and I'm Glenn Scott. Okay, let's go into some of your family background if you feel like it. Where were you born? And let's just start off with that. Maybe describe a little bit of the community that you grew up in.

KIMMEL: I was born in a rural community in Kentucky's Muhlenberg County. The rural post office was Ennis, Kentucky. And the post office was in the general merchandise store. [The town was] perhaps eight or ten houses within a mile or two radius. So that was Ennis, that was where I grew up. I went to school in the one room school, walked two miles to school from the time I started until the time I was in the seventh grade. And in the seventh grade, we did have a three room eighth grade class to the twelfth that started at Ennis, near the general merchandise store.

INTERVIEWER: They built a school.

KIMMEL: They built a school. So I went my seventh and eighth grades there, ninth grade, then in the tenth grade--this was the Depression years, remember. And we had a rather large family, I'm the oldest of nine, and we were having a very difficult time. And I had an aunt and uncle and he worked for the government. He was a lock master, opened locks, let the boats through, in a little town about four miles away. So I went my sophomore year of high school there.

INTERVIEWER: So you lived with them?

KIMMEL: I lived with them, did little odd chores for the house. One of my major jobs was making breakfast for my uncle every morning. And then in my junior year I went back to Ennis and I graduated from high school from Ennis. You wanted to know some of my activities, and my background?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Was there a community--of course it was real small--but were there community activities that you recall?

KIMMEL: Well, I've been told that I've always been sort of a person who was very active and took a leadership part. In fact, I can recall when I was in fourth or fifth grade in the one room school I spoke about--was a church and a school together, and a cemetery. Other than playing ball, we were limited to the type of sports we had in this little school, so we'd have [play] church. And I'd somehow always end up being the preacher. So I think from, almost from the beginning of my youth I've been sort of interested in, and made myself interested in, being somewhat of a leader or took that role.

INTERVIEWER: Was that unusual for a little girl at that time? Were there any . . .

KIMMEL: Well, I guess it was. At that time . . .

INTERVIEWER: Were people remarking on how unusual it was for you to be so, I don't know what the word is.

KIMMEL: It was. And even in high school I always fought for the major role in the dramatics. And I have always sort of, I guess, been a very vocal, and maybe some people thought I was sort of a pushy person. I was a great competitor. Even in high school, I played basketball and I fought for my rights. And one year I did not play basketball and I fought very hard for cheerleader. So regardless of what the chore was, I've always been a competitor.

INTERVIEWER: Was there somebody in your family, or somebody in the community there, that made a particular impression on you when you were little, that maybe made you push yourself that way?

KIMMEL: Probably. Of course you had Sunday School every Sunday. And in my community we only knew Baptists and Methodists. My family was Baptist but the closest church in walking distance was Methodist. And there was a dear lady there, my mother used to say she was the community leader, busybody my mother called her. But she was a really great leader, she was always trying to inspire the young people to take part in Sunday School and church activities. And in the early days, I guess eighth and ninth grade, or that age level, she always opened her house for New Year's parties. And her name was Mrs. Mae Ramsey.

INTERVIEWER: It's a great memory!

KIMMEL: I don't think I patterned my life after her, but I saw her as a leader. In fact, her husband was the one that walked behind her! So....

INTERVIEWER: That was a model probably. One.

KIMMEL: Yes, and probably.... I've been a person who sort of motivated myself, too. And being the oldest of the family, I think that this probably created part of my desire to do things. And then coming along in the Depression when you had to make your own way,

KIMMEL: or you had to make your own pleasure, as well as your life, because certainly there was no money. It was a very trying time. And my father was a coal miner. But we also lived on a farm. In the early days of the coal mining, living in the camp, I had a fight with our next door neighbor's daughter, and my father said, "This is no place to raise children." So we immediately found a little farm a short distance away and we lived on that farm until all of us was grown and went away.

I come from a family though.... My background, my father's background, was of German descent. And there was always a great deal of pride in that family, and they always let us know that we may be poor, but they used this [proverb], "There's no better blood flows through the veins than the Kimmel blood." And of course they took great pride in giving us the family tree, and our family came from Germany in 1600's or something like that, and they settled in Pennsylvania, and they migrated on into Ohio and Kentucky. So my father often said to us, "You may be poor, but you must be proud." And one of his great desires until, I guess you could say the Depression in 1929, was that his family, his children, must be educated. But at that time, in 1929--I think I was about twelve or thirteen--we had some very difficult things happen in our family. My father had a bad injury in the coal mines, and at that time worker's comp [compensation] was unknown. And he was away from work for months. And also he developed a serious blood pressure problem and they didn't, at that time, know what to do for him.

INTERVIEWER: Do for him, yes.

KIMMEL: So he suffered death for months with headaches, and nausea, and all this, and the only thing they knew to do was to feed him more liver. And we also lost our house and barn both by fire within fifteen days of each other. This was early 1929, and my sister had just been born that year. So from then on my father sort of lost the will, you know, to keep going.

And I can recall, I sort of picked up where he left off. It was awful, and we'd have to lecture to him, you know, "You have everything even though we have no money." We often times had no food, you know, but we had our families together. And I guess coming from a thirteen year old, this did denote some strength. Now, where it came from I can't answer that, but I . . .

INTERVIEWER: Was he in a union, was there a union?

KIMMEL: Well, at the time--the union had been broken in 1924, the coal mines was.... They had a union and then in 1924 they lost their union, I mean it was broken with . . .

INTERVIEWER: Thugs.

KIMMEL: Thugs, and people coming down from the mountains, you know. And the union was just, it was dissolved. And it didn't get back then until the early thirties. And this was another thing that killed my father's pride, that he hated so badly, to ever think of working in non-union mines. In fact, he didn't. Maybe I'm speaking at random. But when he got able to work after '29--the year of 1929 when we had all the trouble--he went to work in Indiana in the coal mines, and went away from home. And worked there for quite some time until the union then came back in, and then he went back in the union and worked several years before he left the coal mines. So he spent many years, and he had many injuries. And you know, at that time they really wasn't as aware of all the things that they are now in safety. So it was a difficult period. And it was a period of fear for me because there were so many people that we knew, you know, had mine explosions and had been killed. And days you'd sit in the schoolroom and you'd hear the mines--the whistles--and you knew if it blew six times, you knew that was an explosion. And I guess having been the oldest I was always aware, you know, it was constantly on my mind that when you hear one whistle, you know, would you hear six?

INTERVIEWER: Five more.

KIMMEL: So I think from that I made sort of a committment to myself that my brothers would never follow in the footsteps of my father. And my father really was never happy in the coal mines, but due to surrounding circumstances this was the only industry in that part of the country at that time. Of course, he had a great ambition to become a doctor; he so badly wanted to be a doctor. And then at that time I also.... My father decided, "Well, there's no other way out," rather than to take my older brothers into the mines. And I recall so well, you know, standing up to my father and I said, "Well, it will only be over my dead body, will my brothers go into the coal mines." And I won that! (laughter) So, and I'm very grateful that I was vocal enough to keep them out of the coal mines.

INTERVIEWER: So when you graduated then, did you immediately go work, or did you have to work part-time sometimes during school to help the family?

KIMMEL: Well, when I graduated from high school, there was really nothing to do.

INTERVIEWER: There weren't any jobs.

KIMMEL: There were no jobs. And I did housework. When I say housework--some of the people in the rural community did have some money, you know, that they'd stashed away over the years. And I did domestic

KIMMEL: work, of course, then it was called housework. I was a sitter for some sick people; I've always not enjoyed sick people, but I've always enjoyed doing for sick people. And I, too, would like to have been a nurse. But times, the circumstances, just didn't permit it. So, I did that for some time. And then one of my first jobs after high school--and I guess this is the reason I've gotten so interested in politics--was that before I was old enough to vote.... After an election in the community, all the ballot boxes were taken into the county seat which was Greenville, Kentucky. And from the time the ballot box reached the county seat courthouse. there had to be watchers. Those watchers had to watch those boxes that got there on Saturday, and they didn't start counting them until Monday. So that was my first experience, I got a job watching ballot boxes. Then I worked temporarily in the County Clerk's office writing marriage licenses and all the different kinds of licenses, because everything was taken care of in that one particular office, from marriage license to hunting license, if they bought hunting licenses in those days.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So did you really like school and would have liked to have continued in nursing at that early age?

KIMMEL: Yes, so badly. As soon as I was out of high school, I so badly wanted to go. But at that time there was no money, there was nothing; we did well to have two cents for a stamp. So as I said, I did just, wherever there was jobs to help with the family. So you can imagine what it was like. And my father's health still was not good. So, in 1936 I went to work in Owensboro,Kentucky--that was thirty miles away--in a radio tube factory called Ken-Rad. And I got my job because I was a very fine basketball player, and at the time they were trying to build a well-known girl's team and a boy's team from this factory. And someone who knew me in high school and knew I was a good player recommended me, and the day I got my job--course the Depression was still on--it was a line two blocks long of people applying for jobs. And my name was called over the speaker to come forward, go to the front of the line. I shall never forget this: the door keeper said, "You're one lucky woman." Because you know, my name had been called and I did get the job and I did play basketball with Ken-Rad plant. I was there about three months and this happened in October. I went to work in August. October, Friday the 13th--I shall never forget it--we knew there would be a lay-off. And for several days they had been observing the department that I was working in. You know, they'd walk around, they'd take a look at everybody, and you just wondered what was going to happen. And on this Friday I was called into the manager's office and, of course, I assumed I'd be laid off. But I was made a supervisor. There were hundreds laid off at that time. So I was a very fortunate person. About a year later they had another general layoff and had several different departments that they combined--there was no such thing as a union or seniority or what--so I was laid off.

INTERVIEWER: What exactly did they do in the plant, was it mostly women working in the plant?

KIMMEL: Well, mostly women doing all the little nitty-gritty jobs. At that time it was making radio tubes, and it's hard for you to comprehend the tedious type of work that we did. For instance, I worked--you know what a hairpin--the tube . . .

INTERVIEWER: Filament inside?

KIMMEL: Yes. The filament was almost impossible to see with the eye, let alone the little wires that went across the two strands. And my job was to count to nine, that meant to count nine of these little wires that you could hardly see, and clip that ninth wire. And that's what you did all day long and you put it into a boat they called it, and then it went through a furnace. It went through heat.

And then after that was finished, it went over into another department where it was mounted on the mounting machine into the bulb. So it was, a majority of the tedious work was done by women. But my department was called the grid department and it was small components.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Were the supervisors in all the departments, were some of them mixed or were a majority men, or....

KIMMEL: Most of them at that time--it was a mixture, in this place.

INTERVIEWER: But this was, definitely this was an all white shop? There probably weren't even that many blacks.

KIMMEL: I don't recall, quite frankly I don't recall a black unless it was a sweeper. And you know at the time we never really thought about it, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

KIMMEL: You just never thought about, you know, the color, because like coming from a rural background, you know.

INTERVIEWER: You never encountered it?

KIMMEL: No, I didn't know. The only thing I did know that my father.... You know in the United Mine Workers, you know that's one union that never showed any difference in race. And at one time I thought ....

(Part of narrative inaudible)

KIMMEL: And my father, you know, he thought as much of him as any, as he could think of a co-worker. And I remember he brought my father home once when my father had an injury. I don't remember whether it was a back, hand, or something, anyway. They didn't bother to bring you home, you know, if you got injured, somebody had to.

INTERVIEWER: Somebody had to.

KIMMEL: And I recall that he helped us; he took up a collection or something you know. This was during the time my father was ill for so long. And there was no, as I said, there was no worker's compensation. No, there was nothing, just what we had.

INTERVIEWER: So this black man took up a collection?

KIMMEL: That's right. As a young kid, I remember, my mother had a friend, a black--I remember her name was Anne--and Anne used to always come to visit mama, and I never knew why she came to the back door. You know, now I understand, but then I didn't know why she came to the back door and I never thought to ask. This was when we lived in the coal camp when I was a little girl.

INTERVIEWER: So there were blacks living in the coal camp?

KIMMEL: But they lived across the creek. There was a division, the creek was all the division. But in the coal mines they all went in, you know, together and when they came out one was just as black as the other you know, from the dirt. But Anne used to come to visit mama and always came to the back door. But I never knew, I never asked any question, and I don't guess mama thought anything about it, you know, because this was....

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Okay, so you were laid off at the radio tube plant?

KIMMEL: Yes, I was laid off and I was home one summer, and of course, didn't have to... There was no money so you made your own entertainment. And I was involved with the church, and still the same little community church. And whatever was doing in the community you know, I attended. And then I guess that in the late fall--my uncle was a mechanic in a garment shop in Henderson, Kentucky, the Betty Maid Garment Shop, and he got me a job there. So I went to work in the garment shop, and on my first day I worked, I made ninety-six cents.

INTERVIEWER: Did they pay you each day, or how did you know that?

KIMMEL: No. But, well you worked piecework, and . . .

INTERVIEWER: So much per piece.

KIMMEL: So much per piece and I made ninety-six cents; they paid you by the week. I was there about two or three weeks and one day I went to work and all these people were on the outside. And I says, "What's going on here?" And they said, "We have a strike." And I said, "Well, I haven't been here long enough to belong to the union. And I don't know what to do." So I went inside to find out why they were striking. Well I learned why they were on strike was, they had had--it was a piecework factory--and they had been paying them a sort of bonus, and they decided that they'd take the bonus away. And the union was very new there, I mean, unions at this time and around 1938, it was [very hard].

So, that afternoon when I went out, I went back to work the next morning and they just went back down there and they said, "If you don't want to be thrown in the river down there, you'd better not go in." And I said, "My father was a union man, and I don't want to do anything that would hurt a union." So I stayed out three weeks. I lived with my aunt and uncle--of course I did pay board, I don't know whether it was two or three dollars a week or something like that--and the strike went on for about three weeks, and then we went back to work. And I wasn't too active in the union. For one thing I didn't know anything about it. I guess the communication was very bad, the stewards and....

INTERVIEWER: Nobody came around to you?

KIMMEL: Nobody came around. But after several months then, I joined.

INTERVIEWER: Was this the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union]?

KIMMEL: This was the ILGWU, 1938.

INTERVIEWER: Was this one of their first locals in Kentucky, or had they been in Kentucky for a while?

KIMMEL: I think this was one of their, probably one of their first locals. It was Local 290 I remember (laughs) and it was, I would say yes, one of the first. So I worked there for four years. And during that four years there would, you know, be times when we'd be off three months at a time. And we didn't have unemployment compensation then, I mean you were on your own. You had to struggle any way you could. And I did babysitting. A minister who was a distant relative of mine and his wife--and I lived with them for room and board during the times we'd be without work. And sometimes I would go home if I had earned fare--bus fare to go home--which was only about eighty or ninety miles away.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you something real quick about that strike. Did they get that bonus back when you went back in,do you recall? Did you win that?

KIMMEL: No, they didn't get the bonus back right away, but when the new contract came up they did. But it was something the company

KIMMEL: had given them, and it was not written in the contract.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

KIMMEL: And then they took it back. Of course, today if you give them something--you don't take it away, you know, even if it isn't written in the contract. But this happened.

INTERVIEWER: After that four years, what happened?

KIMMEL: Let me tell you a little about the four years.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

KIMMEL: I decided I wanted to get active after a couple of years because I didn't have too much to do and very little activity. And one thing about the ILG--in those days--the income was low but the union was very educationally oriented, and thank God for that. And so we had new members' classes. We had all kinds of educational programs, as much as they could afford. And this was a young group of people, oh, I guess from the twenties to early thirties, and there were about four hundred.

INTERVIEWER: Not many older women.

KIMMEL: Not many older people.

INTERVIEWER: Were there older women in the plant who just weren't members?

KIMMEL: No, everybody had to be, it was a compulsory. . .

INTERVIEWER: It was a closed shop.

KIMMEL: It was a closed shop. But we had educational programs, we did a lot of dramatics, we did plays, we did musicals, which did a lot of things, you know, it made it very interesting. We had a credit union, and I was elected secretary-treasurer of the credit union. And then election time came up and I decided that I wanted to be an officer because I had two years and that was the rule; you had to be a member two years to be an officer. So I was elected vice-president. And I guess I was beginning to push forward pretty well. And the business agent--that's what they called them, the business agent or business rep [representative]--I was all smart aleck, I guess, and I used to put a lot of questions to her and she sort of took a dislike to me. So time came for us to send students or representatives to the University of Wisconsin to the workers' school--are you familiar with the workers' school? Okay. And it was a duty of the executive board which, me being vice-president, I served as a chairperson. And there were two or

KIMMEL: three names that were submitted, and I submitted my name to be one of the representatives to go. It was a tie vote and I voted for myself and so I got to go to the University of Wisconsin workers' school. I was only there just a few days and one night.

Mark Starr, who was the educational director of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, in one of our get-togethers he asked us why we had a desire to come to the workers' school. So I made a little speech that I felt that this was one place that I could learn more, take something back to the people to remember so that they would all be motivated to become better members and be a better person. So he says, well, he was sure that I had shown some desire and that I would do a good job as a leader. Well, it never occurred to me that one day I would be an international rep. So after a few days there, about a week, the international vice-president came to town. And everybody was making over him, he was a little short guy and spoke very broken, and I didn't know him from anything. So this particular day--at that time we stayed in either a sorority or a fraternity house, whichever one was available.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you about then?

KIMMEL: Oh, I was in my twenties, twenty-four maybe. Anyway, I was mid-twenties.

INTERVIEWER: So this is around the forties . . .

KIMMEL: Oh yes, 1942. And this particular Sunday Mr. Perlstein, who was vice-president, goes down on the pier to watch everybody enjoying themselves. And I went down in my bathing suit--and I could never dive--but I just, you know, took right off and I splashed that white suit of his. Oh I just wet him all over! And I came up and, you know, I was very apologetic. And in a few minutes he said, "Are you a student here?" I said, "I'm here with the workers' school." "Where do you live, where do you come from?" "Kentucky, Henderson." "Why haven't I met you before?" I said, "I don't know. I have been in Henderson." So he asked me a few questions about me, you know, if I would be available to work or to travel, and I said, "Well, what are you referring to?" And he said, "Well, there's a lot of organizing." And he thought probably that with training that I could become a union organizer. Well, that was just Greek to me! It was just beyond my comprehension. I'd never even thought of such a thing before! But anyway, we had more conversation and he gave me a week to make my mind up. And I went back to Henderson and I just decided well, it was time for me to leave; the war was going, and I was getting bored in that garment shop. So I went back and got a leave of absence, and I shall never forget what the superintendent of the plant said, he said, "If you make good, you'll be the first

KIMMEL: one that's ever gone with the ILG and stayed." Well, my first assignment was Dallas, the most anti-union town in the whole country I guess.

INTERVIEWER: Did your family, was your family worried about you, or was it kind of an unheard thing for a woman to go off and take a job?

KIMMEL: I don't know as I even asked them. Because I had one run-in with my daddy when I went to work for the radio tube plant. Now as poor as we were--to give you an idea of the thinking of a father--my father would have rather I'd stayed home and gone hungry with all of them than to have gone to work in a factory; this was a disgrace to the family. In fact, he said to me, "If you leave here to go work in that factory, don't you come home." I mean, he was just humiliated to death to think that I would go to work in a factory. And I guess this indicates or denotes a great deal of pride that he had.

INTERVIEWER: Couldn't bear it.

KIMMEL: But he just couldn't bear it. But the first week I came home and, you know, I had some money, I remember giving him money to buy molasses buckets because they were making molasses at the farm, you see. So I don't know if I even . . .

INTERVIEWER: Felt that you needed to ask him.

KIMMEL: I just think I told him, as I remember. So I went to work for the garment workers. But this is interesting. I don't know why the Southwest region of the ILG had so many women on its staff, it was sort of believed that Mr. Perlstein felt that he could work, get women for cheaper than men.

INTERVIEWER: As organizers.

KIMMEL: Their salaries. As organizers. And that was true. And the vice-presidents in the other areas were just real bitter with him for even giving women a break, because this was almost an unheard of thing in the garment workers industry; and remember that in the ILG ninety percent of the people are women. But there's no leadership.

INTERVIEWER: But not in leadership.

KIMMEL: Still not. Monetary or not (laughs) he gave us a chance. He was a very difficult man to work for but I'm very thankful that I had the fifteen years with him, because he taught us so much. I guess if anybody ever motivated me from, you know, after I started working, it was Meyer Perlstein. And made me recognize [me] being a person, a whole person and a self-educated person. He was very concerned about a person, the type of literature they read and all the different parts . . .

INTERVIEWER: Parts of a person.

KIMMEL: Parts of a person. And I'll always be grateful to him even though he paid me twenty-five dollars a week less than he paid the men. But that didn't keep us from, particularly me, from just raising a heck about it, you know, and letting him know that I knew it was wrong. But what could you do? Because at that time I was more or less, well, taking care of the family.

INTERVIEWER: So you would send money back?

KIMMEL: Oh, every week. And I was determined that my younger ones, younger brothers and sisters, would never have to go through the hardship that I had, and thank God they haven't. And I'll have to take a lot of credit for it because I . . .

INTERVIEWER: Helped make that happen.

KIMMEL: Now you asked me about my mother. I had a good mother, a hard working mother. She was never really motivated towards education. She was a reader herself, that is, as far as the weekly papers, daily papers and magazines. But mama never felt too much about education. She always felt that, you know, whatever you do you do well, and if you make a good living, that's the only thing that matters. Which, I happen to have a different feeling. I feel that the more educated, you know, the better you can see life and understand life. But I had a good mother and she did a good job toward her nine. And seven boys and two girls and all my family is doing very, very well.

INTERVIEWER: Let's see. Well, why don't you tell me just a little bit about some of your experiences as an organizer. You were an organizer out of St. Louis, now Dallas was your first job.

KIMMEL: I had a great time. I stayed in Dallas for a period of six weeks. One of the first jobs I had, assignments--by the way, it was by Don Ellinger, Ruth's husband, he was my first boss. My first job was to more or less open up the office in the mornings and sweep it out and clean it out because Perlstein had come to town and said, "You've got a teenager and you can't have that person cleaning." So I did the work. I made an attempt to organize. I did everything they told me to, including having a terrible run-in with one of the organizers in Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: There in Dallas? You mean there were two organizers there?

KIMMEL: There in Dallas. Well, they had one out of the plant that did the organizing and . . .

INTERVIEWER: What was the run-in about?

KIMMEL: She would order me around, as though I was her inferior. And one day I just had enough of her and I said--I can't remember her name--but I said, "Do you see that window there? I will pitch you out that window, because let me tell you something, I came from the Hatfield and McCoy section of the country and I'll whip you . . ." Well, in a few days Perlstein came to town and Don told him about my fight, about my run-in. So when I walked in Perlstein's hotel room that day, he said, "Well, you have just made it." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Any time you can stand your ground with," whoever it was, I can't remember her name, "you have got what it takes to be an organizer."

INTERVIEWER: So he really liked that response because you were able to stand up.

KIMMEL: He liked that. He liked me to stand up even to him, you know, even if you had to scream at him at times. So I worked there and then I went back to Evansville, Indiana, and I organized a plant. I organized it on my own. And it took from November until January until we had the election. We had the election and we won it. I went home that night and I was so weary I took the reciever off the hook and went to bed. And the next morning [I] put the receiver on and the phone was ringing and it was Mr. Perlstein. And he was so angry because he had tried all night or evening to try to reach me to congratulate me and I hadn't even thought about being congratulated, I was so weary!

INTERVIEWER: You just wanted to be left alone.

KIMMEL: I just wanted to be left alone. So after that then he called me into St. Louis and he sent me out to St. James, Missouri, and this was a very anti-union place. I went to St. James and I got myself active in the community, a little town. And I just made myself a place in the community.

INTERVIEWER: How, like through the church?

KIMMEL: Oh, through the church, wherever there was somebody. I was active. But the day I arrived in St. James though, it was so anti-union that I couldn't even stay in the hotel.

INTERVIEWER: I mean even though you had some of those. Right? You'd just keep going.

KIMMEL: You'd just keep going. Oh, you may have a few moments when you, a setback, frustration.

But I became a very conservative dresser after that. I really almost went into dark colors and dark shoes, and I think it probably paid off many times. Because people look at you, you know.

INTERVIEWER: They judge you.

KIMMEL: Not now. But in those days they judged you by your appearance. And my hair was long, I wore it up. So I tried to represent what I [supposed was] their best image.

INTERVIEWER: Well, so you stayed in the St. Louis office, out of the St. Louis office and then . . .

KIMMEL: I travelled out of St. Louis. Then, after St. James, I went into St. Louis and I had what we called a territory. And I travelled Illinois, part of Missouri, in different little towns where the union was already organized then. So I became a representative, taking care of their grievances and servicing and promoting some type of educational work or.... Something to motivate people or to motivate the workers.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember any early problems in that time, of times where you may have disagreed with some of the other union leadership about policies? Or times when the women, maybe in the local, were disagreeing with some policies of the union?

KIMMEL: Oh, I've had my share of problems. One interesting time I recall.... What we call the chairlady--it's a steward--slapped a supervisor. And in this little town . . .

INTERVIEWER: The supervisor of the management?

KIMMEL: Yes, in the plant. And they did not fire her but the employer demanded that she be removed as a steward. And we had to support that cause because it would have been rather difficult for her to take care of grievances after having slammed a supervisor. And we went several months and they refused--the employees, the union members--refused to name a steward.

INTERVIEWER: Because they were angry about her.

KIMMEL: So I had to take a strong stand. I said, "Now you people are the ones that are going to be hurt; you're not going to have someone here daily to take care of your grievances, and your piece rates are going to fall." And, "You'll have the difficulty, not me, because I will not be here every day." And it took about six months to get them to understand that they had to appoint someone and they could not be that brutal, even though she may have had it coming to her.

I had another interesting one. One day I got a call from Nacomas, Illinois, a town, and they had a work stoppage. And I got there; I find that they had decided that they were not going to work with this new boss that had been brought in--they called them floorladies, supervisors we call them today. So, "Well, what's wrong with this floorlady? You didn't know

KIMMEL: her." "No, we didn't know her," but a few miles away she had been a floorlady and they hadn't liked her down there. This was a coal mining town and this is the things that the coal miners did, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Get passed around.

KIMMEL: So, I recall I said, "Well, how do you know she is going to be just as bad here?" And they said, "Look, we're not going to work with her. And why kill a dog after it's already bitten you? So we'll get rid of that one before she comes." So the woman only stayed one day. But it was my position and I had to take you know: you give them a chance, you don't know what the lady can do, because we don't have that say as to who to hire to be the supervisor. I've had to, I've had many, many difficult times.

INTERVIEWER: But they overturned that. They just said flat, "We're not going to have her?"

KIMMEL: Oh, they just said that. And she didn't desire to stay from then on.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any instance you can remember of--I know you said earlier that there were problems with the union leadership being largely male and the base of your organization being largely female. Were there any examples of conflicts in policy decisions or situations where male leaders made sort of insensitive decisions, to your memory?

KIMMEL: This was more or less on the international staff, on that level. On the local level that I worked--our district level for instance--I did not have that problem because, as I told you, our boss hired all these women because he could hire them cheaper. So he had less men than most of the eastern and other districts had. But, of course, we felt that because we were not paid the same salary. And of course, the argument he used was that they [men] had families. And I once said to him,"But you don't know my situation."

INTERVIEWER: You've got a family.

KIMMEL: "I have a family, too." And he had told us, you know, very frankly when we went to work, "I don't want to hear anything about your family," you know, "I want production," more or less. So I let it go at that.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. You said in the earlier interview that in reflecting on Dallas and all the hard times the union had there, that the international union may have made some mistakes in not being sensitive to the fact that maybe organizing strategy in Texas might be different than what they'd used up in the East.

KIMMEL: I think this is very true. I think from the very beginning they made a serious mistake. Texas people are not eastern people and they, their approach.... Had they studied their proper approach in Texas in the very beginning, it would have, no doubt it would have been different.

INTERVIEWER: Might have been different.

KIMMEL: Not only that.... Had they been more consistent. They'd spend a million dollars organizing and then if they needed another half a million, they'd pull out. And about the time you'd think we were making a breakthrough, you know, somebody would say, "We can't afford any more money." So each time you went back it was that much harder because the people would say, "Look, you've been here before and you left us out on a limb." I think that the national policy people wrecked Dallas.

INTERVIEWER: Was it different in Houston?

KIMMEL: In Houston, yes, it was different. Because you were working with I think different people. You were working with.... One employer had about four or five hundred people, the largest shop there.

INTERVIEWER: Kaplan?

KIMMEL: Kaplan, yes. And he was a different, they were different characters. And you could frighten them, you know, you could threaten a strike and they'd....

INTERVIEWER: Back down.

KIMMEL: And they'd back down.

INTERVIEWER: Dallas was a lot different?

KIMMEL: Dallas was different; it was a larger industry. But when I went to Houston in 1947 it was a difficult situation in that the people were very unhappy and their wages were very low. At that time they had black pressers and they had white machine operators, and Mexican-Americans. I mean, they didn't make any distinction between Mexican-Americans and Caucasians but they did with the blacks. I recall one of the first meetings I had after going there. You know, I said, "Everybody come up front,

KIMMEL: everybody come up front." Because people would sit in the back of the meeting hall. And the president said to me, "Well, you know, the blacks are not supposed to come up front." And I turned to Edith and I said, "Edith, as long as I'm here and as long as they're members, they're going to sit wherever they choose to sit. Now this is one thing we must have an understanding [on]." And she said, "Well, you'll have nobody else coming to the meetings." And I said, "I'm sorry, then we will have just whoever comes." So I broke the ice there. I mean, everybody came to the meetings, everybody participated.

INTERVIEWER: But the blacks were members even though they were pressers?

KIMMEL: They were members, but they were pressers. But they had to sit, you know, I mean that had been the policy, and that was just understood.

INTERVIEWER: So it wasn't a segregated local situation like there was in Dallas?

KIMMEL: No, it was not.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. What was the story about the early civil rights thing when people would meet in your office because there was no . . .

KIMMEL: Well in 1947 when I went to Houston there were very few places if any downtown that people could meet. In 1948 the presidential election, the women were getting together, and they'd invited some black ladies to come, and they had no place to meet. So they called my office and asked me if they could use my office. And it was interesting to see the eyes lifted in this office building that blacks were coming in to meet. To meet, into my office.

INTERVIEWER: This was a women's meeting there?

KIMMEL: Yes. We had a group of women.

INTERVIEWER: Was it like a civic group? Was it League of Women Voters?

KIMMEL: No, they were Democrats.

INTERVIEWER: Ah, okay.

KIMMEL: Democratic women. A group of democrats who, I guess you'd call them good liberals or just good Democrats, because we really didn't know the word liberal at that time, too much, you see.

INTERVIEWER: Well, when did black women actually get to be hired as machine operators, can you remember when that changed?

KIMMEL: Well it was several years before they started in Houston hiring.... And I don't think that they did it because they.... I just don't think that they had too many applications. And I assume that it's because the blacks probably didn't think there was a chance. So it was in the fifties before they started hiring black operators.

INTERVIEWER: Probably didn't have much training either.

KIMMEL: No, unless they came from, you know, the East or some part of the country where the garment industry was....

INTERVIEWER: Had the shops in Evansville, or those other places up north of St. Louis, had they been integrated? Were there black operators, or most of them?

KIMMEL: Yes, during the war we integrated and the union played a very strong part, and the Urban League. In St. Louis, you know, the need was there because people were leaving the garment industry, you know.

INTERVIEWER: To go into the war industry?

KIMMEL: Yes, because the war, you know . . .

INTERVIEWER: Better pay.

KIMMEL: Better pay. So we had training programs to train the people, the black women, to be operators.

INTERVIEWER: The union sponsored this?

KIMMEL: The union and Urban League. There were many difficult problems. And we had an A and a B type local because the whites didn't feel they were ready for this. So you had to gradually build in the relationship. And Urban League was very helpful because the people's working habits were not such to be conducive to regular employees. So, I guess it was my first experience probably of the social needs of how to reform people's behavior patterns and attitudes.

And it was a difficult period, but it was, I guess, a great enlightening period for both blacks and whites in the garment industry in St. Louis.

INTERVIEWER: In Houston, did the union take a stand later on in the fifties with civil rights, different civil rights activities?

KIMMEL: Yes, we had a very difficult time writing a contract in 1960 using the words, "There'll be no discrimination for race, creed, or color...." the regular preamble that goes in all the contracts now you know. But we had a real fight to get that in, at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the ILG in 1960?

KIMMEL: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: So how many shops did they have?

KIMMEL: Oh, we had about three there, three or four then.

INTERVIEWER: When you first came to Houston, how many were there?

KIMMEL: Well we had about five shops, and somehow, you know, they.... Garment shops, they are short-lived. They come and they go.

INTERVIEWER: Were you active with the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] or the CIO council before the merger and after the merger?

KIMMEL: Oh yes, I was active.... From the time I arrived in Houston, February 2, 1947, I started being active in the AF of L council.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, ILG was with the AF of L then?

KIMMEL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

KIMMEL: And now I'm the oldest in Houston, the oldest council delegate. You know, I've served more years than any other person. But it took me from 1947 until--what would six years ago be--nineteen....

INTERVIEWER: 1972?

KIMMEL: 1972 to be elected as an executive board member of the council. (thumping table) I'm the first woman to have ever served on that council.

INTERVIEWER: You would come and attend as a representative, but you were never. . .

KIMMEL: Oh, I would be very vocal, be active, serve on commitees like labor committees or whatever commitees.

INTERVIEWER: But never be elected to the executive board?

KIMMEL: That's right. But was never elected. It was always men.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.... What happened with the decline of the ILG in Houston? I mean, it went from five down to three and then probably less, how did that happen?

KIMMEL: Well the first shop we lost could have been my fault. This garment shop was owned by--he's supposed to have been a socialist--but as Kaplan's said about I. Nadd, he was a socialist when somebody else's money was being used.

INTERVIEWER: Ianad was his name?

KIMMEL: His name was Isadora Nadd, N-A-D-D. We had a very difficult time with some of his employees because he refused to give them a piece raise or something. Anyway, they decided they didn't want to work there anymore. So operators were very scarce. So Mr. Kaplan hired them [Nadd's workers]. Then Nadd accused me of recruiting for Mr. Kaplan, which was not true; I just saw that they got a job because they were going to leave. So we had this terrible knock-down-drag-out--in fact he tried to knock me down an elevator shaft--we had a fight. And there were very few people, small shop, about twelve. So after that, we had so many fights that when time came for the new contract, Mr. Perlstein said, "Forget it." We sued him for his failure to pay into the health fund plan. And this one thing that I recall, he said this to the federal judge, that I was a very charming woman but he believed one of the meanest that he had ever dealt with. So (laughs) that's on record. (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: That's in the court record, huh?

KIMMEL: Charlie Morris reminds me of that every so often; he was the attorney for the Local 214 in Houston. Sc ....

INTERVIEWER: Sometime in the sixties then did you leave ILG, or was it when ILG closed down, or what?

KIMMEL: In the sixties, early sixties they had a change from the top, the ILG. And they sent a man--who is now president of the ILG, Saul Chakin--in because Perlstein was getting to be an old man and they felt he, that they should begin to make some changes. And they were going to do a great deal in Texas. So again, an easterner comes down and he's gonna hire him some

KIMMEL: people with some stiff muscles, you know, they're really gonna change Texas. Well they did. They lost about a thousand members from San Antonio, you know, just like that, with some of their rough tactics.

INTERVIEWER: And this was in the early sixties.

KIMMEL: This was in the early sixties. So after he left, then another man came. And I no longer stayed in Houston, I spent much time in Dallas. And I was on an organizing drive down in San Antonio which we lost the election. And they decided that they should reduce the staff in Texas. And I took the position that I was the oldest employee in Texas and that I should be the one to stay. And still think I should. But anyway, they were very cruel--I don't mind to tell you--very cruel in the approach they used. Fred Simms who was the area director of this district came to me and said, "I'm reducing staff." And he said, "If you want to stay on with the ILG, we'll try to find a place for you." Now how cruel can you be to someone who has spent twenty years and who had never caused any problems? Who had always produced and had been absent two weeks in twenty years for illness. Well, this was the most heartbreaking thing I've ever had. I cried for a week, I could have left the job, because I had many offers, but I was so heartbroken to think that a union that's supposed to have a heart would approach a twenty-year employee with this kind of approach.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember exactly, or any comments on when this union easterner came into San Antonio that lost a thousand members, what was the cause of that?

KIMMEL: Well, part of it was, of course, they maintained that the people who were there were not strong enough and had not .. educated and developed the people. The fact was that it was most difficult to develop any more than what you could develop. They were all Mexican-American people that had.... I guess they had been mistreated all their lives that, you know, they were always so grateful for a job. Mr. Boss, whoever he was, was a good man. And it was hard to develop and organize and to keep a group like that together. And when they came in with some of their approaches, well they immediately felt sorry for Mr. So-and-So who was the boss. Poor Mr. So-and-So, he has a bad heart. And you know, they went on the boss's side. We had a long strike there, three or four years with Texson. And so it was most difficult to build.

Now you ask me about the declining days of the ILG in Houston. As I said, membership was very small to begin with. And three or four or five years, you know, garment shop's not making a profit, they would just fold and go away. So the only thing that

KIMMEL: was left there was the Kaplan shop. And that's when they began to send me from place to place. And I travelled in several states up until Chakin came, and Chakin sent me to just a certain territory, and he took me out of Laredo. I did a good job in Laredo. I went back to Houston under Simms, and that's when I--took assignments as he gave me--I finished up with the San Antonio strike and then he decided to reduce staff. And this is when he told me if I wanted to stay on he'd find me a place.

INTERVIEWER: So that's when you left?

KIMMEL: So he asked me to please not relate this to the local in Houston. Well, I had no other alternative but to tell the executive board exactly what had happened. So when this happened, they were very unhappy, and they let everybody know. So Mr. Simms had to send two or three people down to quiet the people, because you know, they were so unhappy.

INTERVIEWER: They were unhappy.

KIMMEL: Well it was wrong and they knew it. I just told them the facts and they knew my activity . . .

INTERVIEWER: Right from wrong.

KIMMEL: . . . and they knew what I was like in the community. And by this time, I was well known in the community, politically, with the civil rights movements. And I was one of the first who in the sit-in--Molly Parrot who was a black school teacher and I were the two that sponsored the first sit-in--saw that nothing happened to the youngsters. So I was well known in the Houston community, and I didn't want for a job.

INTERVIEWER: So was that when you went with AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees]?

KIMMEL: I was at a Democratic meeting one night and I said, "I'm looking for a job, does anybody know where I can find one? I will leave Houston." And somebody said, "Yes. AFSCME is a young new union and it needs somebody with some political know-how." So I made an appointment with the man who was in charge, and I went to see him. And he said, "Yes," he did need help. Well when he explained, I said, "Maybe you need a man." He said, "I don't give a damn who it is as long as they can do the work." And I said, "Well, I can do the work." And at that time the hospital--it is called Ben Taub and Jefferson Davis Hospital. It was just Jefferson Davis at that time--it was run by the city and the county. And the mayor

KIMMEL: owed me a political debt because I had run his runoff campaign, just a few months before then.

INTERVIEWER: When was that?

KIMMEL: This was in 1963, Cutrer, Louis Cutrer. So I went to the mayor and told him I wanted some rights at that hospital to try to organize. So he called the board together and told them that I had every right to contact the people. So I was hired on a ninety day trial period.

INTERVIEWER: Trial run.

KIMMEL: Trial run. And I started working in the hospital, on January 20, 1963.

INTERVIEWER: How many members did AFSCME have when you first started?

KIMMEL: Oh, well, I don't know whether they had a thousand members or not....

INTERVIEWER: Just starting.

KIMMEL: I think they were lying a little when they said a thousand, but anyway . . .

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

KIMMEL: It sounded encouraging! So by three or four months--I remember it--by April I had about four hundred members from the hospital. And I worked, well I worked night and day. I almost killed myself, you know, because I was determined that I was going to make it.

INTERVIEWER: Show them that you could do it.

KIMMEL: Yes, that I could do the job, and I did the job. And it was mostly.... A big percentage of them were black, and by my civil rights contacts they knew me or somebody else knew me, and if I had problems I could bring in somebody from the community who could speak in my behalf. So I stayed with the AFSCME then until 1965, and I went to work for a Harris County AFL-CIO, as the Women's Activity Director. Now that was working more or less with volunteers, in political actions.

INTERVIEWER: I see, campaigns.

KIMMEL: Yes, campaigns. Trying to educate members on the importance of political action, and.... I stayed there almost three years, and on July 1, 1968, I went back to work for AFSCME.

INTERVIEWER: At that same hospital, or . . .

KIMMEL: In a few months I became the assistant business manager for the local.

INTERVIEWER: And this was the local at the hospital, or were there more than one local?

KIMMEL: No, no.

INTERVIEWER: The whole city?

KIMMEL: We had one local for all the different units.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, it's like 1199.[1]

KIMMEL: Yes. And so I'm now the assistant business manager. And I serve on the executive board of the Texas AFL-CIO now, and I still serve on the Harris County AFL-CIO. I serve on the American Heart Association and the Lung Association.

INTERVIEWER: So you have kept up your interest in the health aspect.

KIMMEL: The YWCA,[2] yes. And you know if I had my life to live over, I'd dedicate my life to health care, some way or other.

INTERVIEWER: That's real interesting.

KIMMEL: I don't know what I should say now.

INTERVIEWER: You'd probably do it well. I think we've covered about everything. You must be worn out talking.... Maybe you could go on for another six hours, but that's great.

KIMMEL: I've enjoyed Houston. I want to make one more comment. At the time I went to Houston, women were not as active in political work, and we had what we called poll tax then. And I recall getting up at three o'clock in the morning and somebody picking me up and taking me to a mill, iron foundry, or something to write poll tax for people. Now this is far back, in 1947.

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[1] District 1199 of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees

[2] Young Women's Christian Association

INTERVIEWER: You'd go in and pay.

KIMMEL: Yes, they had to pay a $1.50, you see. But very few women were active. And that year then, 1948, in the spring, I recall my first precinct convention, because I didn't know anything about them, where I'd come from. And we had very few women to participate in the precinct conventions, because they really didn't know anything about them. And it was 1952, really, in Houston, before women really started getting active in political work.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think motivated that?

KIMMEL: Well, I think that the time, and then we had a very dear lady who had a lot of money, and her name was Frankie Randolph.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard of her.

KIMMEL: And Frankie had the money, and she needed something to do and some way, I guess, to spend her money. So she helped to organize the Harris County Democrats. And while I have not always agreed with them in the last few years, it was the making, it was another phase of education for people like me, to realize the need for citizens to become active in political action. So I would say that Harris County Democrats gave me more than I can ever repay, in that it made me so aware of the great needs of political work for everybody, and how important it is. The same as the YWCA meant so much to me, because the YWCA made me aware of what women have been deprived of.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting.

KIMMEL: And they made me aware that women together, if they stuck together, they could do anything they so desired. I have been active in the League of Women Voters, but I'm more touched by the YWCA, particularly in the early stages of the YWCA in 1947, 1948, when I went there, they did a great deal for me.

INTERVIEWER: That's wonderful.

KIMMEL: One other thing I'd like to tell you, that I think [was] one of the highlights of my life. During the long strike of the automobile workers union--when they made every attempt to break that union, after the war in 1945 or sometime in there --I was travelling to Kansas and Northern Missouri, and I made.... Number and number of towns and locals pleading for money for auto workers, for UAW [United Auto Workers]. In my activities and through our membership I suppose that ILG under our local in Houston, 214, probably made thousands and thousands of cookies for people who were on strike, like the taxi drivers, or the parking lot attendants.

INTERVIEWER: In the Houston area.

KIMMEL: Or wherever the need was. Or like the CWA [Communications Workers of America], when it was an independent union, we walked their picket lines and encouraged them.

INTERVIEWER: That's great.

KIMMEL: The telegraph workers.[1] In other words, we'd been there.

INTERVIEWER: And wanted to express that solidarity. Do you want to say anything else about, an example of, where the AFSCME union has or some of the unions or organizations you've been with have been active on feminist issues in Houston?

KIMMEL: I think the feminist movement, as it is today.... Women have always felt that there is something wrong, but they really never....I mean, from childhood on I suppose they always--this was the man's job, and this is the woman's job. And I guess people of my age, you know, we accepted it. We, you know, we just didn't know any different. Today I still have some mixed feelings. Not that I don't think that a woman shouldn't have every right that a person should have, because I think they are a person. But I feel that when it comes to equality, when it comes to money, or a job well done, I think it's a sin, I think it's as bad as anything they've ever done to any of the minorities; I think women have been even treated worse. But I don't think we realized it so much. I recognized that when I was paid twenty-five dollars a week less as a union rep than a man. And I knew it was wrong, but was better than anything I had. But it was wrong then....I think it will take another generation before it will happen. But I would hate very badly to see women, if they decide they want to become mothers and have a home, I would hope that they recognize this youngster they brought into the world and realize that this is just as important a job as. . .

INTERVIEWER: As a worker.

KIMMEL: . . .as any work that they can ever do outside, any executive job they can ever take. And I guess I am old fashioned enough to believe that our real youth problems stem from the mother not having the time. . .

INTERVIEWER: To be at home.

KIMMEL: To be at home. And I am most concerned about divorces, not for the sake of the adults, but for the sake of those children. And I came from a family that my mother and father fought like dogs and cats; they rarely agreed on anything. One was a

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[1] Referring to the Communications Workers of America.

KIMMEL: Democrat and one was a Republican; they went to the polls and they voted against each other. And I hated so badly to see election day come, because I knew there'd be a fight. But I'm not sure yet whether living even in that environment, that we weren't better off than we are to see the separation. Course you know in those days you didn't separate, you know, you tolerated it.

INTERVIEWER: That's true, yes, that's true.

KIMMEL: But when it comes to money, when it comes to the economics, I truly believe that a woman can actually give more than a man can. I think that they lose less time on the job than a man does, and I think we work harder.

INTERVIEWER: And I guess you have had plenty of experience seeing that happen.

KIMMEL: I have seen it. And a man can get by with a lot more than a woman can get by.

INTERVIEWER: I've seen that.

KIMMEL: So hopefully, maybe not in my time, but in your time, if all of you keep working.... I know that the pendulum is going to swing, I mean, they've used everything they could use you know, "They're hippies, the women are hippies," and all this, and, "they want to do their own thing." The pendulum will swing and someday, all the efforts that were made.... It's just like with the civil rights, we have a long way to go, but God help where we came from.

INTERVIEWER: Come from, sure. Well said, well said.

KIMMEL INTERVIEW INDEX