3319

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

FLORENCE LUSCOMB

Women's Trade Union League

by

Brigid O'Farrell

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

Ann Arbor, Michigan

© Copyright 1978 The University of Michigan

VITAE

FLORENCE LUSCOMB

Florence Luscomb, born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1887, has dedicated her life to furthering the cause of women's equality and progressive social reform. After receiving her architecture degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1909, Luscomb spent only eight years working in that field because World War I slowed construction.

Luscomb delved into women's rights, especially the vote, with great vigor. She served as an officer for the Boston Equal Suffrage Association. After passage of the 19th Amendment, she held offices in both the Boston League of Women Voters and the Massachusetts Civic League.

Her desire to help improve the conditions under which workers were forced to labor led to Luscomb's involvement with the Women's Trade Union League. She was active with the WTUL for several years, serving on the Board of the Boston chapter.

Luscomb devoted much of her time and energy to organizing clerical workers. She joined the Office and Professional Workers of America when it was formed in 1939, and was president of the union's Boston local.

Oral History Interview

with

FLORENCE H. LUSCOMB

July 1976

by Brigid O'Farrell

The interview began with Florence Luscomb talking about her experience on a picket line in Boston in the 1930's. She was getting a copy of a speech she gave at Goddard College which also discusses this [speech attached].

LUSCOMB: . . . picket line the next day wearing gas masks, and when you've got a DuPont, a member of the inner circle of the DuPont family going on a strike picket line in a gas mask, all the . . . Of course the strikers notified the press, and they all came and took pictures of us on the strike line there. The story went all over the country of Zara DuPont out on the picket line.

INTERVIEWER: I can imagine.

LUSCOMB: In a gas mask.

INTERVIEWER: And then the investigation followed from that?

LUSCOMB: And then the investigation brought out what it was, so that was the full details that the policemen were not only public servants of the law but were simultaneously taking pay from the employers, with the approval of the chief of police. The police chief was fired. Yes, I learned firsthand much that you can't learn in colleges.

INTERVIEWER: Any other materials?

LUSCOMB: Zara DuPont was on that line. And also there was another line that we were on for--I think it was for thirteen months or so--

LUSCOMB: which was a trucking firm over here in Cambridge. And the man paid his workers very little, and they had very hard, very vicious working conditions. The law said that you couldn't have a man hire a Teamster driving a car and work him for more than twelve hours because he'd be so tired that he'd be a danger on the road. So what this man did--he would have his man work all day--it was a trucking firm and sometimes they'd be moving furniture, moving [companies] from one place to another--and he'd work them almost up to twelve hours, and then he would load up their trucks with a load to go to New York. He'd send them out to go to New York, so that they would get over the borderline of Massachusetts just at the twelve hours. They'd still have to drive all night long to get to New York or wherever they were going, down to Pennsylvania, what have you; they would still have to drive on. He would get around the law by that.

About four or five of the men said they thought they ought to have a union and get decent conditions and better pay. They began to talk to their fellow workers about forming a union and the boss got wind of it. He fired these men. They started a picket line outside of his garage, which was right down near Central Square in Cambridge. One of my friends, I guess it was one of the fellow members of the United Office and Professional Workers Union, she came by this picket line one day, and she asked them what they were striking about. And they told her the conditions and she reported it to us. So we went over there. I went over there, and Zara DuPont went over there. His trucks left at six o'clock in the morning--they left the garage then. And so we had to get there by six in the morning. And after they'd all gone out there was no sense in picketing there. So you were just picketing for an hour or so. But you had to be there at six in the morning.

So we kept that up I think for about thirteen months. And they finally got a decision by the court that he was doing illegally in requiring his men to work so long, or whatever it was. He was breaking certain of the labor laws. So then we no longer had to have the picket line there.

INTERVIEWER: But it took thirteen months.

LUSCOMB: But it was for thirteen months that we were picketing at six a.m. [laughing]

INTERVIEWER: Florence, are you from around here? Are you from Boston?

LUSCOMB: I was born in Lowell, but my mother moved to Boston when I was a year and a half old. I have lived in greater Boston all of my life, in Boston or Cambridge or Brookline--right in greater Boston.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your grandparents?

LUSCOMB: No. I didn't know them. They didn't live in these parts.

INTERVIEWER: On either your mother's side or your father's side?

LUSCOMB: I don't know anything about my father's side. My father and mother separated when I was a year and a half. They were never divorced, but they lived separately. And I don't think that my father's father and mother were alive. I never heard any mention of them at all. My mother's mother had died when she was twelve years old. My mother was born in 1848. And her mother died when she was twelve years. The family had come over before the Revolution on both my father and mother's side, and they had taken part in the Revolution. As I say I know nothing about my father's family. But my mother's family had settled out in the Berkshires as farmers. But my grandfather went to Amherst College and then he went to the Harvard Law School. He was a very successful lawyer. He married a woman from St. Louis, and he moved out there and set up his legal practice there. He was elected as a member of Congress during the Civil War, as a Republican, which of course at that time was the progressive party, believe it or not. [laughs] It's hard to believe now. So he didn't live around these parts. He had his law practice out there always. So I didn't know him, except one time, when one of his sons, one of my mother's brothers died, and he had lived here, the funeral was here, and my grandfather came on to the funeral. I just saw this very old man come in. And that was all.

INTERVIEWER: How many brothers and sisters did your mother have?

LUSCOMB: My mother? There were five. There were five children in the family. Mother had four brothers and a sister, but her sister died fairly young. So there was just left three brothers.

INTERVIEWER: Your mother was born in St. Louis?

LUSCOMB: No. Let me see. I don't think she was born in St. Louis. I think it was before my--I can't tell you that--just where she was born. But she lived in St. Louis for a while after her mother died and after she had graduated from school. After her mother died the five children were sent off to boarding schools. She was sent up to boarding school in Andover and then another one down in Connecticut afterwards. And after she finished her education, she went out to St. Louis and kept house for her father and one of his brothers who lived together. So she lived in St. Louis for a while.

INTERVIEWER: Did she go to college?

LUSCOMB: No. Not many women went to college in those days.

INTERVIEWER: But she went through elementary school and then. . . .

LUSCOMB: She went to female seminaries. Wasn't it Smith College [that was] founded as a female seminary?

INTERVIEWER: I'm not sure. So then she moved back to. . . .

LUSCOMB: And then she came back to Massachusetts.

INTERVIEWER: And then went to Lowell? Is that where she met your father?

LUSCOMB: Well, I don't know. Mother, because she and her husband had been separated, she never talked about him at all. She never said anything unkind about him or anything else. But I just never heard the details of their life. When I was a girl, he would come and visit me perhaps once a year or something like that. But it was just a strange man walking in. . . .

INTERVIEWER: It was never discussed.

LUSCOMB: I never knew anything about it or what the trouble was between them. She never talked against him or about their troubles.

INTERVIEWER: Just never talked about it, period.

LUSCOMB: No, never talked about it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

LUSCOMB: I had one brother who was six years older than I. And when my father and mother separated, they agreed that they would let him choose which one he would go to. He was only seven and a half years old and he elected to go with his father. But after some years, I think when he was around twelve years, he moved back and lived with Mother. So, he lived with us for some years. But then he got married when he was only twenty-two.

INTERVIEWER: He was gone.

LUSCOMB: When I was only sixteen so. . . .

INTERVIEWER: So he was around for a while but not. . . .

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know what your father did in terms of work?

LUSCOMB: My father was a, well he did two things. He was an artist, but not a very successful one. He set up his residence down in Nahant. I think the Luscomb family had settled up on the North Shore, in Lynn and Nahant and around that region. And my father lived in Nahant. He did painting, as I say, not as a very successful artist and in his home he took in lodgers to supplement.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever go there to visit him?

LUSCOMB: What?

INTERVIEWER: Did he always come to visit you, or did you sometimes. . . .

LUSCOMB: I never went to his house. No, never.

INTERVIEWER: When your mother moved to Boston then, did she go to work outside the home?

LUSCOMB: No. My mother had been named for her grandmother, who lived out in St. Louis, Hannah Skinner. The Skinner family were pioneers out there and had acquired considerable land out in the region which later became part of St. Louis itself and valuable because it was right in the heart of the city. My mother, as I say, was named for her grandmother out there. When her grandmother died, she left her property there to my mother. It provided my mother, it didn't make her a tremendously wealthy woman, but it provided her enough to live on all her life.

INTERVIEWER: So that she didn't have to work?

LUSCOMB: So that she didn't have to work for a living, and when she died, she left her property to my brother and myself, which has given me a little bit of an income, along with what I had worked for myself. But mother was a very remarkable woman because her family had become what you'd think was an upper middle class family. They'd come over, as I say, just as pioneers and been farmers out in western Massachusetts, but her father had been so successful as a lawyer and in all his life that they were really very well off. They'd all gotten education, all the children and all that. So that you'd think of them as an upper middle class family.

LUSCOMB: But my mother, as I say, her mother died when she was twelve. She hadn't been brought up in a family and taught what to believe and everything. But she was just living in boarding schools. So it means that she had thought through all these things herself. She was an outright progressive person and always on the side of labor and the working people, although, as I say, she didn't have to work for her own living. But she joined the Knights of Labor, which was the earliest national labor organization. It was open to people who weren't themselves workers and open to women.

Now, when she, as a woman, joined that, it was very, very early. I remember when I was a little girl, I suppose I must have been around eleven or twelve years old, we got up very early one morning in order to get down to Lynn [Massachusetts]--and of course transportation in those days was not as good as it is now--for a rally at which Eugene V. Debs was going to speak. She took me with her. She went to all sorts of progressive meetings. She was a member of the Populist Party and always on the side of labor.

INTERVIEWER: So she was involved in politics as well as the labor movement?

LUSCOMB: Yes, and was active in the women's suffrage movement. She was a delegate to the National American Women's Suffrage Convention in 1892, and she took me with her as a little girl of five. And I heard Susan B. Anthony speak. Now, as a little girl of five, I can't tell you what she said. But I remember very clearly that I was at that convention, and that they said to me, "Oh, this woman speaking now is Susan B. Anthony." [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: That's wonderful.

LUSCOMB: She would take me to all sorts of meetings. And she'd have books or leaflets around the house for me to read.

INTERVIEWER: So you got a very early start?

LUSCOMB: Yes, I got an early start. She never dictated what I should believe, but she always made it possible for me to know about these things. She was a remarkable woman, really remarkable. And as I say, she was born in 1848, and most women didn't take an interest in public issues at that time, only the really progressive, the really radical.

INTERVIEWER: It was a very small group.

LUSCOMB: Of the women's movement. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Which she was very much a part of.

LUSCOMB: She was not a very strong woman. She felt that the way she was raised and the schools and things, during the Civil War, they got very poor food, and she was rather frail. But she spent her life in taking part in the labor movement or the women's movement, in all sorts of progressive causes.

INTERVIEWER: Had her mother been involved in things like that?

LUSCOMB: Well, as I say, her mother had died when she was only twelve, and so probably her mother had not. And she wouldn't know about it. Anyway her mother wouldn't have affected her life very much.

INTERVIEWER: How old was your mother when you were born?

LUSCOMB: Well, Mother was born in '48, and I was born in 1887. You can [laughs] do the arithmetic. If I had been born in '88, and she in '48, she would have been forty. So she was thirty-nine when I was born.

INTERVIEWER: She had you quite late, especially for that time.

LUSCOMB: I think she was thirty-one when she was married.

INTERVIEWER: And your brother was six years older.

LUSCOMB: Six years older, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did she ever talk to you about getting married later?

LUSCOMB: No. No, never. She never, because of her break with her husband, she never talked about her matrimonial affairs.

INTERVIEWER: Did she talk with you about what she'd like you to do with your life?

LUSCOMB: No, she took me with her to all sorts of progressive meetings. She tried to influence me by exposing me to these ideas. She would encourage me to take part in the suffrage movement. As a child, as a youngster, all through my school years, in my spare time, I'd do what a high school girl could do. I would usher at meetings, and I'd hand out leaflets, and I'd address envelopes and do things like that in my spare time. Mother would encourage me.

INTERVIEWER: When you grew up, you always lived in the Boston area?

LUSCOMB: Always I lived in the Boston area, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you move houses when you were growing up, or did you live in one neighborhood pretty much?

LUSCOMB: Well, we lived in the heart of Boston for a good many years, which of course at that time Boston wasn't such a large city. We lived on Yarmouth Street for, I think it was around thirteen years or so. Then we moved up on Huntington Avenue.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a house or an apartment?

LUSCOMB: An apartment.

INTERVIEWER: Then your brother came back to live with you when you were about six or seven.

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Whom did you play with when you were a child? Did you have other girlfriends or did you play with the boys?

LUSCOMB: Oh, just all the kids in the neighborhood would play together. We'd play hopscotch and . . . . [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Did you have special chores that you had to do as a child around the house?

LUSCOMB: No. My mother had, as I say, gotten this property from her grandmother, for whom she was named, and so she always had a household servant, a cook and a nursemaid. It freed her time to take part in some of these social activities. I don't mean social but. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Social causes.

LUSCOMB: Social problems activities. In those days if you had a housemaid, the regular standard pay was $2.00 a week plus their room and board. One time, my mother's neighbors came in to protest. A delegation came in to protest because she was paying her household servant $3.00 a week, and all of their servants were protesting and getting dissatisfied because here was somebody who was getting fifty percent more pay than they were getting. The household servants also had to stay in and they couldn't go out any night except one night a week. Thursday was the maid's night off. My mother said that after the

LUSCOMB: girl had washed the dishes, she ought to be able to go out if she wanted to. So after she got through she not only had Thursday night off when she didn't have to cook and could go out, but she also could go out any night of the week. All the other housemaids were indignant that they didn't get that same treatment. You see it was Mother's sense of the rights of labor and justice and fairness to other human beings.

INTERVIEWER: Did the neighbors get her to change her mind?

LUSCOMB: No, they did not. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Were you close to the woman who worked in your house?

LUSCOMB: Well, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was it the same woman for most of your growing up?

LUSCOMB: Well, they would change every now and then. They would change. Later on, after I got well grown up, I said I'd take over the cooking. Mother didn't want to have a nurse, the cook was leaving for something, and the difficulty was to find somebody else to come in. On yes, the neighbors also objected to the pay that mother was paying her household servant.

INTERVIEWER: She must have been quite strong to do that.

LUSCOMB: Stand up for them.

INTERVIEWER: There must have been a lot of pressure on her to change.

LUSCOMB: Well, she was on the side of the people.

INTERVIEWER: When you were little did you think about what you might do when you grew up?

LUSCOMB: No, I. . . .

INTERVIEWER: That you would be like your mother or different from your mother?

LUSCOMB: Well, I guess, Mother, as I say, she never dictated what I should believe, but she exposed me to all of these ideas. She would take me to meetings to hear Eugene V. Debs or to hear people and to read books and things. So that I just automatically believed in these things.

INTERVIEWER: Did religion play an important role?

LUSCOMB: No. My mother was a very religious person, but quite early in her life she felt that the organized churches were supporting the wealthy and not the needs of the working people. Although, of course, she was brought up as a member of a church, everybody was in those days, she left the organized church. She never belonged to a church again, but as I say, she was very religious. She would read her Bible and all that, but not as a member of any church.

INTERVIEWER: So you didn't grow up in any. . . .

LUSCOMB: So I wasn't brought up in any religion.

[INTERRUPTION]

INTERVIEWER: Part of what we're trying to understand is how does one person get the strength to be that different from the rest of her community.

LUSCOMB: Well, she always encouraged me, as I say, to think for myself and not to accept just the conservative ideas. She never dictated what I should believe, but she exposed me to all of these ideas.

INTERVIEWER: How long did your mother live?

LUSCOMB: She lived to be, I think it was eighty-four. She lived until '33, I think it was, or thereabouts.

INTERVIEWER: She was in Boston and she was able to see the suffrage movement turn into the right to vote and all of that.

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go to school?

LUSCOMB: Well, that's quite a story, too. [laughs] When I got old enough to go to the public school, I suppose that would be go to primary school, the law said that nobody could go to public school without being vaccinated. So Mother took me to a neighboring physician to have me vaccinated so that I could enter the primary school that fall. It so happened that this particular doctor that she just happened to select--he had his shingle out on the street somewhere--he had a son who had died from an improper vaccination. And he was bitterly opposed to vaccination. He lectured my mother upon the dangers of it. She got convinced, and she wouldn't have me

LUSCOMB: vaccinated, which means that she couldn't send me to the public schools. So I had to go to private school.

I went to a little private school. One woman was teaching herself and so forth. And all through my school years, I went to private schools. There was one school that was both grammar and high school that was called Chauncy Hall, and it was coeducational. I went to it through grammar school and high school. The high school was especially a preparatory school for MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. When I was there, most of my boy fellow students were going on to MIT. And I thought to myself, "Well, why shouldn't I go to MIT." So just that accident, the fact that I wasn't vaccinated and had to go to private schools and that the private schools that I happened to go to was one that made a specialty of preparing children for MIT, meant that I went to MIT. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Did any other girls go?

LUSCOMB: Not from that school. I was the only one from that school. At that time, MIT had a student body of twelve hundred, and there were twelve coeds. There were an unusually large number in my class. There were five women in my class. And I graduated in 1909. Mother wasn't especially anxious for me to go to college or to go to MIT, but if that's what I wanted to do, she would finance it.

INTERVIEWER: That's what you did.

LUSCOMB: I went to MIT.

INTERVIEWER: What did you major in? What were your subjects?

LUSCOMB: Well, I was very fond of the growing things, the plants and trees and all that. I wanted to be a landscape architect. They had a course in landscape architecture, but it had been dwindling, and the year that I entered they gave it up. But they said that if you took the four years course in architecture, they would have a graduate one-year course in landscape work. So I took my four years in architecture in order to get my graduate course in landscape architecture, and I was the only one applying for it so it wasn't given. So I became an architect. But I always enjoyed drawing and all. I don't know whether I inherited that from my father, who, as I say, was an artist. At any rate, I'd always enjoyed drawing and art work, so I became an architect.

INTERVIEWER: Were you very close with the other four women in your class?

LUSCOMB: Oh, yes. We were all very friendly. And the other eleven women in MIT as well.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any teachers in elementary or high school that particularly encouraged you or that you remember especially?

LUSCOMB: They encouraged the students to go to college, the girls as well as the boys. Several of the teachers were urging us to go on to college.

INTERVIEWER: Were they women teachers or men teachers or both?

LUSCOMB: I think as far as I remember it would be both. But I don't remember what it was. But they tried to get the students to go on.

INTERVIEWER: So they were encouraging.

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But there was no one special. You just decided on MIT. . . .

LUSCOMB: Yes. [laughs] Well, it was because Chauncy Hall specialized in sending its students to MIT. Of course, they didn't have to go to MIT; they could go to any other college. But they told you what a nice place it was, what a fine education you'd get there, how it would fit you for your life career and all that.

INTERVIEWER: Did anyone try to talk you out of it when you said that you wanted to go too?

LUSCOMB: I don't recollect that anybody did.

INTERVIEWER: Even though you were the only girl from that school going, the teachers were supportive. Did you enjoy the four years there?

LUSCOMB: Oh, I enjoyed it very much. It was the things that I was interested in. As I say, I always had enjoyed drawing and the art work. So that I was very much interested in my course there.

INTERVIEWER: Were you involved in other groups, political groups with the students or labor groups or any of that?

LUSCOMB: Yes, as I said, all through my high school years and even some of my grammar school years, I'd been working in the suffrage movement, doing what I could do in my spare time. Of course I didn't have very much spare time at MIT, but I did some things. Of course there was the summertime.

INTERVIEWER: And the suffrage movement was the main activity?

LUSCOMB: Yes. That was it. That was it very decidedly. Do you know what the condition of women was a hundred and twenty-five years ago, before the women's movement really started? I mean just the whole legal standing of women? The law said, "Man and wife are one, and that one is the husband." Women didn't have any personal existence. It also said, that a married woman couldn't own any property. She might be very wealthy, but the minute she got married, all her property became her husband's. If she worked and earned wages, the wages that she worked to get belonged to him and not to her, who had earned them. The children that she bore belonged to him and not to her. And the law said that he had a right to give them away. He could leave them by will, and after he died, they'd be taken away from the mother and given to whomever he'd specified in his will. And it might be a total stranger who lived out in California, and the mother'd never see her babies again.

She had no right in her own children. They were his. Of course, there were no public schools for girls. Oh, incidentally, there was just one state in the union where the mother had a right to her children with the father. That state was Massachusetts. That was the only state in the union.

There was no public schools for girls, except again, Massachusetts had very briefly a public school for girls for a couple of years in Boston and then they stopped it. Down in Marblehead, I think it was, at one of the town meetings, some man had gotten up and suggested that they really ought to appropriate money to set up a public school for girls. Another citizen got up and said very indignantly, "What? Spend public money to educate SHE's!" So that the wealthy people, and that means just a very handful of the population, could either send their girls to private schools, or they could hire tutors to come in and teach their girls. But for the whole mass of the women of the country, there was no education at all, except what their own families might teach them, just the elements of reading, writing and 'rithmetic so that they could read a cookbook or keep track of what money they might have spent in buying some of the food for the family, something like that.

INTERVIEWER: So that they had no way to fight the laws, which they couldn't even read.

LUSCOMB: Nothing. Nothing. And they had no knowledge, no real education at all.

INTERVIEWER: So in that sense, the education that your mother got was really unusual for women at that time.

LUSCOMB: Yes. Well, that was because she belonged to a family that could afford to send her to one of these female seminaries.

I think that the women's movement started in 1848, with the Seneca Falls Conference in New York, which was just a local conference. And two years later, there was the first national conference in Worcester, Massachusetts. You know how the Seneca Falls Conference started, don't you?

INTERVIEWER: No.

LUSCOMB: Well, the women's movement really grew out of the anti-slavery movement. The more public spirited women, women who weren't satisfied to be just interested in their own family affairs were horrified by slavery, and they wanted to take part in the great anti-slavery movement. Although woman's place was in the home, of course, some of the anti-slavery societies in some of the states would admit women into their societies. And in 1840, the British Anti-slavery Society decided to call a world conference against slavery, and they sent out an invitation to the anti-slavery societies of every country in the world to send delegates to this great world conference in London against slavery. Along with the men delegates, two of the states of America sent some women delegates. Massachusetts sent three women delegates, and Pennsylvania sent five.

When these women arrived in London and presented their perfectly legal credentials as delegates, the British were horrified. They'd never dreamed of women taking part in this public conference. It just wasn't done, you know. It was indecent for women to do it. They spent an entire day debating whether they would accept these perfectly legitimate credentials from the women. At the end of the day, they voted that they would not seat the women, that the women had got to sit in the gallery behind a curtain.

LUSCOMB: One of the most world famous leaders in the anti-slavery movement was William Lloyd Garrison. It so happened that his boat had been delayed in getting across the Atlantic by storms. He didn't arrive until the day after this vote against the women had been taken. Garrison refused to present his credentials and participate in the conference, but sat with the women in the gallery.

There were two of the women sitting there in the gallery one of them was a Quaker. The Quakers were the only group in American--a very small religious group--that believed in and practiced the full equality of women. The other one was a young bride on her honeymoon. Her husband was one of the delegates to the conference. And these two women, as they sat in the gallery, were so indignant over the treatment they'd received that they'd vowed that when they got back to this country they would call a conference on the rights of women.

But they lived in different states, several hundred miles apart. Of course, in those days the automobile hadn't been yet invented and you didn't just hop into a car and drive for a few hours. You had to take a train or maybe a stagecoach and travel for days perhaps to get from one state to another. So that it was not until eight years later that they happened to be in the same town together. One of them went to visit a friend in a neighboring town to where the other lived. They got together, and they decided that now they could carry out their plan of calling a conference on the rights of women. But they got it up in a great hurry, because, as I say, one of them was just visiting a friend there.

INTERVIEWER: They had to do it quickly.

LUSCOMB: This was in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. And they found a place to hold a meeting. They drafted a call to a conference on the conditions of women and got it printed in a local newspaper. So the news of it just went out to the neighboring towns. And they drafted the resolutions that they wanted to get passed, and provided for the speakers and all.

This Seneca Falls Conference was the first in all the world on the rights of women. But as I say, it was just a local one. But the news of it went all over the country. The newspapers carried the story of this awful thing that had been happening in Seneca Falls, New York. But two years later, in 1850, there

LUSCOMB: was a nationwide conference on the rights of women in Worcester, Massachusetts. And it had a thousand delegates, coming from eleven states, as far away as California. Now there was no railroad out to California at that time. You had to come by stagecoach up over the Rocky Mountains and across the praries and take perhaps weeks to get across. Yet some women delegates came all the way from California to take part in this national conference in Worcester, Massachusetts. That was the start of the women's rights movement. They worked from then on to do away with all those hideous oppressive laws as well as to draft laws to make women equal citizens of their country.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. They had a much broader concern about economics and legal rights than just the right to vote.

LUSCOMB: Yes. Well, you see the right to vote wasn't so important as it was to make it illegal for a man to beat his wife, or to say that she should own the children that she had borne, that he couldn't give them away, and all of those things, that she should have a right to own some money and buy the things that she needed.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother belong to specific groups within the suffragist movement?

LUSCOMB: Oh, she belonged to the organization, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did she have any leadership roles?

LUSCOMB: No, Mother, as I say, was rather frail. She was never a public speaker or anything like that. She just was a supporter. But she was an utterly devoted person.

INTERVIEWER: Did you hear stories of the Seneca Falls Meeting, as a child at all?

LUSCOMB: No, not especially.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other women that would come to your house or talk about it?

LUSCOMB: No, no.

INTERVIEWER: You've learned more of that from what's. . . .

LUSCOMB: Yes, what I've read in books. As I say, I did, as a youngster, and all through my school and college years, I did whatever I could do in my spare time. And there was plenty to be done. They started having open air meetings. The British started that. The British militant suffragette movement. Of course, there was the suffragist movement and the suffragette movement, but it was Mrs. Pankhurst in England who decided that when they called meetings in halls or in private homes, the only people who came to a meeting would be those who were already interested in the movement, and that you had got to convert the whole mass of the people.

So they decided to go out on the street corners and hold open air meetings. It was considered perfectly shocking for a woman to stand up on a street corner and make a speech in public, but the militants did that. And then they did all sorts of other things to bring the issue before the public, make it a dominant issue.

In 1911, there was a world conference on women's rights held in Stockholm, and I was a delegate to that. I and one of the other women, a Massachusetts delegate, and I. We spent about four or five weeks in London, studying the British suffragette movement and the British suffrage movement. We went to dozens of meetings, both of the suffragist and of the militant suffragettes.

INTERVIEWER: Now, can you explain the difference to me?

LUSCOMB: The suffragists was the old movement, the conservative movement that would only hold indoor meetings. They stayed as a separate group, but Mrs. Pankhurst and the organization that she set up were called suffragettes. They went out. They said they'd got to go out and take it to the man in the streets. So they held open-air meetings. They got a publication and they had it sold. Women went out as newsboys and sold it on the streets. When I was there in London, I sold the suffrage paper on the streets in Trafalgar Square.

One woman refused to pay her taxes until she got a vote. You know, no taxation without representation. I think she was a woman doctor. The government seized her household furniture, and they were going to auction it off to pay her taxes. The suffragettes had a parade of protest from somewhere in the heart of London down to the auction room, and I marched in that parade. It was also rather amusing.

LUSCOMB: Of course, while we were there, we not only studied the suffrage movement, but the militant and the non-militant movement and went to all sorts of meetings and rallies, but we did a lot of sightseeing. One thing that we thought we would like to do was to see the House of Commons in session. When we tried to go into the women's gallery to see the House of Commons, we found that the suffragettes had gone into the gallery and staged a demonstration. They'd shouted out, "Votes for Women!" Thrown down leaflets onto the floor of Parliament. When the guards rushed in to drag them out, they found that the women had chained themselves to the railing. So they carried on the demonstration for half an hour or longer until the guards managed to saw them loose and haul them out. So they made a rule that no woman could go into the women's gallery without a letter of permission from some member of Parliament.

Then they discovered that many of the members of Parliament were in great sympathy with the women's movement and were quite willing to give the women letters of permission. Then they made the further provision that Parliament members could only give letters of permission to their own relatives. There was one American woman, Mrs. Glendower Evans, who lived here in Boston, and had lived in England for quite a while. She had been a friend of a man who was a member of Parliament there. She'd given us a letter of introduction to him, and we called at his house one day. He wasn't home, so we didn't meet him but we talked with his wife, who was a very lovely woman, and we had a nice visit. And we happened to mention how disappointed we were that we couldn't see Parliament in session. So in a couple of days, there was delivered to us at our hotel, a letter of permission for his "cousins" to go into the House of Commons to the women's gallery. So we went into it, and we saw the Parliament in session. Of course, he knew he was perfectly safe, that we weren't going to stage any demonstration. It was just that we should have a chance to see this. A few years later, however, my "cousin" became the Prime Minister of England. It was Ramsey Macdonald. So I am a cousin of a Prime Minister of England. [laughter]

It was rather commonplace saying that Americans were cousins of the English. We were all cousins. That was a common phrase at that time. The two countries were cousins, and so that was what he took advantage of, that common slang, common phraseology that was in use.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get to be a delegate to the Stockholm meeting? That was after you had graduated from MIT?

LUSCOMB: Yes. It was 1911. I graduated in aught-nine.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do when you got out of school with your architecture degree?

LUSCOMB: Oh, I became an architect. I worked for Ida Annah Ryan, a woman who had graduated a good many years before I did from MIT, and she'd made a very distinguished record there. She had taken the highest honor that they offered in the architectural department. It was a year's traveling fellowship in Europe to study the European architecture. Her home was out here in Waltham, so when she came back from her year's fellowship, she set up her office there in Waltham, and when I graduated, I went out as her draftsman.

I worked for her there, and after a few years, she very generously took me into partnership. So I worked as an architect until the First World War came along. And in time of world war there is no building. I've never seen any official figures for the First World War, but I know what happened. Nobody was doing any building. The government did make an investigation in the Second World War. Ninety-eight percent of all the architects in America were unemployed at that time. It was the same way in the First World War.

The woman that I had worked for was equally interested in woman's suffrage. She was quite willing to let me off if there was any special activity that was necessary. After the war began and my architecture folded under me, I took a full-time paid job as the assistant executive secretary with the Boston Equal Suffrage Association. I never went back to my architecture. I stayed on all my working life as an executive secretary in various civic organizations, such as the Joint Board of Sanitary Control, inspecting safety and sanitary conditions in garment factories. And other jobs like that. The last paid job I held for about seven years was the executive secretary of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom here in Massachusetts.

INTERVIEWER: So you had about ten years experience as an architect before you went full time into. . . .

LUSCOMB: Well, it was a little less than ten years.

INTERVIEWER: Were you elected as one of the two representatives to go to Stockholm?

LUSCOMB: No, there were more than two. There was a large body. I don't think there was any limit on the number that could go.

INTERVIEWER: From Massachusetts, were there more than that that went?

LUSCOMB: A good many. I don't remember how many, 1911 is a long way ago. [laughs]

As I say, I took extra time while I was going over there. I not only went to England beforehand, but then we went across to the Continent and spent about a week in Paris and then went up, spending a couple of days in Belgium and in Holland and in Denmark and went up to Stockholm. We came back through Norway.

INTERVIEWER: So you had a really long trip.

LUSCOMB: We did a lot of sightseeing in addition. Since we were over there, why not?

INTERVIEWER: In the architecture firm, did you have any trouble, getting business because you were women?

LUSCOMB: I think we were the only architectural firm in the town. So that while people could go to other architectural firms outside the town, we had a lot to do. We built one of the schools in the town. We built a school in one of the neighboring towns. We built the motion picture theater in town, and then of course a great many private homes, so that we usually were kept busy.

INTERVIEWER: More than enough to keep you busy. Were you active in the Women's Trade Union League at that time?

LUSCOMB: I was. I was active in the Women's Trade Union League, and, in fact, I think I was president of the Boston Local for a while.

INTERVIEWER: And that was one of the many women's groups that you were involved in.

LUSCOMB: As I say, my employer, who generously took me into partnership, was equally interested in the women's movement, so that unless we were awfully rushed in our architectural designing, she'd

LUSCOMB: let me off to do various activities if there was any necessity for it. And then of course, sometimes there were necessities or activities right there in Waltham.

There was a little traveling circus that came to town. They were going to have a circus parade through the town, as an advertisement. And then, of course, they'd have the circus in the evening up in the tent, somewhere out in the fields there. Right in our office, we painted a sign, and then I got up very early in the morning and went to see the man who owned this little traveling circus and asked him if, in the circus parade going through the town, he would hang this sign on the elephant, VOTES FOR WOMEN. [laughs] It so happened he believed in women's suffrage and was very glad to do it. So when the circus parade went through town in Waltham, here was an elephant, VOTES FOR WOMEN! [laughter] We did all sorts of things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your first project or work with the trade unions. The first picket line you got involved with?

LUSCOMB: I don't know what one would be the first one. I know that this one over in Cambridge in the transportation company there was one of the early ones. But I was on so many different picket lines. At that time, there were a good many strikes. It was during a period of labor activity. There were a group of prominent citizens in Boston, including women especially, who were perfectly willing to go out on picket lines and on labor lines. So that we had a great many picket lines when there were strike situations.

INTERVIEWER: So that the women involved in the women's movement and the suffrage movement very often were on picket lines and involved.

LUSCOMB: Yes. Although I think this was largely after the suffrage was won. I'm not sure. I'd have to check on the dates.

INTERVIEWER: After you graduated from MIT and started as an architect, did you continue to live with your mother?

LUSCOMB: Oh, yes. I lived with my mother all while she lived, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you consider getting married?

LUSCOMB: I never got married. I had a great many good friendships with men, and one or two of them would have liked to marry me. But I never felt that I cared enough for any man to really marry

LUSCOMB: him. I would have been very happy to have met a man that I wanted to marry. But I wasn't going to get married just for the sake of being married. I had enough self respect as a woman to live my own life.

INTERVIEWER: In looking at your work experience then, if you had the choice of any job, with training and all the things that would go with it, what kind of work would you choose now? I mean would you want to work in anything different than you did?

LUSCOMB: No, I don't think so. I think that one of these great social movements would be the thing that would be most interesting and most satisfying. You feel that you are really a part of history, of making history, of the advancement of the human race, the advancement of society.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever consider going back to architecture?

LUSCOMB: No, I never did.

INTERVIEWER: While you were at MIT, did you feel that you got all the proper training the same as the men and all of that?

LUSCOMB: Oh, yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Once you were there, it was all equal?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me more specifically about the work with the office and professional workers, when that began?

LUSCOMB: That began, I think, as far as I have been able to dig out in my records, it was around 1839. I mean 1939 [laughs] And there was a national movement for the organization of women and especially the women who, there had never been any organization of the women who worked in offices. Women who worked in factories had various union organizations. But no unions for the women who worked in offices. So they called a conference to organize a union of women office workers. And it was set up as the United Office and Professional Workers of America, the UOPWA. And I think that I attended that national convention.

Now, I can't say absolutely. I have an impression that I was at that national founding convention. But I know that I immediately became active to try and get a local organization set up here in Boston. And several of my friends who were

LUSCOMB: working in offices also got together, and we founded this little Boston local affiliated with the national organization. We were just really a handful of us. We tried to get other people that we knew among our friends who worked in offices, and we gradually built up a membership. But I don't think it was ever more than fifty or at most seventy-five, probably nearer fifty here. The first place where we really made an effort at unionization was one big firm down in Post Office Square. Now, I don't know the name of the firm. I don't remember it, and I don't know just what it did. But it had a large, a very large office staff. As I recollect it was fifty or seventy-five girls who worked as office workers. It sounds as though it must have been a secretarial office.

They paid them miserable pay, and they had very poor working conditions. I remember vividly that as an example of the treatment of the girls, if there was some job that the firm wanted finished, and it wasn't done at five o'clock, the girls would have to stay and work over time, work all evening, all night. It might be, maybe you had a ticket to go to the theater that night. But if you didn't stay and work you'd be fired. Or you might be going to a party. Whatever your plans were, it didn't matter. You'd got to give up your own life for the sake of doing what the firm wanted done. And, as I say, very poor pay.

One of the members of our union happened to get talking with one of the girls who worked for this company. They were sitting next to each other on the streetcar or something like that, and they got talking. So the girl who worked there gave us the names of some of her fellow workers, the names and addresses. And we called at their homes and talked with them and said they ought to belong to a union, and they could force the company to give them better pay and better conditions. We built up quite a little group that was interested in forming a union.

Then the owners got wind of this movement among their workers to organize. They immediately raised their pay, and the girls were no longer interested in the union. Not one of them would continue as a member of the union. They hadn't ever joined, and they wouldn't join, although we had won them decent pay. We felt that was a union victory. But it didn't build up the union any. And the same thing happened in many other shops or offices. Altogether, we knew we had gotten better pay for several hundred of the office workers in Boston.

LUSCOMB: But it didn't build up the membership in the union. And then, just then the Second World War came along. You see this was around '39 and '40, and the labor movement in this country made a pledge that during the World War, they would not have any strikes. They would stop their labor movement, hold it in abeyance rather than in any way endanger the war effort of the country. So the entire labor movement stopped, stood still, all during World War II. And at the end of World War II came along the McCarthy era.

I don't know whether you know what the McCarthy era was, but it was an era of almost outright fascism, of the denunciation of every labor movement, of every progressive movement whatsoever. Anybody who was affiliated, who joined any organization with any progressive social purpose, any person who was known to belong to one of these organizations would be fired from his job, his or her job. They didn't dare sign petitions. You couldn't get anybody to sign a petition because if your name appeared on any one of these petitions, you'd be fired or you'd be discriminated against in some way. And the whole social progress was absolutely stopped. And many of the trade unions were destroyed. And our own Office and Professional Workers, UOPWA, went to pieces at that time.

INTERVIEWER: Before the war, when you first started, in '39 and '40, did you get support from other unions in trying to organize?

LUSCOMB: We were a member of the CIO, the national, the left wing. It was the AFL and the CIO. And the AFL was the old labor organization, and it was conservative. CIO was the more militant and new labor movement that was coming in. And the UOPWA was a member of the CIO. I know because I was at some time a delegate to the national meetings of the CIO.

INTERVIEWER: When was that?

LUSCOMB: It was before the. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Was it before you got involved in the UOPWA?

LUSCOMB: No. No. I was representing the UOPWA at the national.

INTERVIEWER: To go back just a little bit, could you talk more about any involvement with the unions after you left the architecture firm?

LUSCOMB: I forgot to mention that for two years, 1918-20, I worked as assistant executive secretary for the Boston Equal Suffrage Assembly for Good Government and when the vote was won in 1920, it became the Boston League of Women Voters and I was executive secretary for two years, till I went to the M.C.L. [Massachusetts Civic League].

It [the M.C.L.] was not a really radical organization, but it was an organization which had been founded by a rather wealthy man here who was very progressive in his outlook, to do work for legislation in social reform. They sponsored and did work with the legislature to try and get the passage of various measures. And I say, not really radical but all that would be social betterment.

I was put on their staff as the assistant executive secretary. And they assigned me to try to get the legislature to pass a bill for the payment of wages to prisoners. All the prisons maintained industries of various kinds and often manufacturing goods that were needed in the prison system itself, or maybe some of them would be for sale. But they got no pay for their work. It meant that often when the men got released at the end of their prison term, many of them would have not a single penny in their pocket. They'd go out, and how could they get anything to eat that night, how could they get a place to sleep that night, except by committing a robbery?

INTERVIEWER: Even though they'd been working all those years.

LUSCOMB: Even though they'd been working all those years. So the Massachusetts Civic League said that they ought to be paid wages for their work. And part of their wages they would have while they're in prison so they could buy extra food or subscribe to magazines or what have you. And part of it would be saved for them so that when they were released, they would have a sizable amount of money in their pockets to keep them alive and for their subsistence until they could find a job working.

They put me in charge of getting that bill passed by the legislature. And it meant that I had to draft all the leaflets that would explain this bill and the need for it. I had to interview prominent people and get them to sponsor the measure and support it. And I had to arrange for meetings or to get organizations to let speakers come before them and explain the need for this bill and to get them to endorse it and all, do everything and to have lobbying at the state house with the legislature.

LUSCOMB: We finally got the bill passed, but they set an incredibly low pay for the prisoners: three cents an hour! But we felt that we had established the principle and we could get a later legislature to increase the amount. I think that's gone up now, but it's still a very miserable sum. But at least we got that thing through. And that was the sort of thing that the Massachusetts Civic League worked on. I worked with them for a couple of years on that and other measures.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any particular trade union people that you would have been involved with on getting legislation passed?

LUSCOMB: We would appeal to everybody that we could, according to whatever particular bill that was. Then I was asked to take a job of inspecting the women's garment factories in Boston. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union in New York City, which was the center of the industry, had for many years had this inspection service as a part of their union agreement. In New York, the garment industry was very largely unionized. Most of the garment shops were union shops. They had had this additional inspection to guarantee the safety and sanitary conditions.

INTERVIEWER: That must have come after the Triangle [Shirtwaist] fire [in 1911].

LUSCOMB: Yes, after the Triangle fire. Yes. Exactly. And so they had it. Well, the industry here in Boston had finally gotten strong enough in its union organization to get this as one of the terms in their union agreement here. And one of my friends was put in as the inspector, the director of what they called the Joint Board of Sanitary Control. It was called a joint board because it consisted of equal members of the owners, of the union and of the public. That Joint Board of Sanitary Control was to control the sanitary and safety conditions in the factories. When the union got strong enough to insist on this as a term in their union agreement, this friend of mine was the director of the Joint Board of Sanitary Control. And she did the inspection for two years.

INTERVIEWER: It was a woman.

LUSCOMB: That was a woman, yes. At the end of the second year, her husband got a job somewhere else, in some other city. I forget, I don't know where. So they were moving away. And she recommended that I be made the director, and to take her place.

LUSCOMB: So I took over as the director of the Joint Board of Sanitary Control. So I was with the civic league for two years, working on legislation. And then I became a factory inspector. It was in 1927.

INTERVIEWER: Was that then a full-time job?

LUSCOMB: That was a full-time job, yes. For two years, I did the factory inspection in the women's garment industries here, and conditions were very, very bad. Of course, as you know, in the Triangle fire in New York, the factory doors were locked.

[INTERRUPTION]

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a set of regulations that you inspected by?

LUSCOMB: Well, of course, I was only trying to enforce the state laws governing the safety and sanitary conditions of factories. And it was because the state inspection was so imperfect. They didn't have enough inspectors to get around with any degree of frequency. Perhaps once or twice a year. The result was that the conditions were intolerable. When I started in my inspection, I would find that women would be sitting there working at a sewing machine for eight hours a day, and there'd be an electric light hanging down to put light on their work. The law required that any light like that had to have a shade around it, so it didn't shine into their eyes. But none of them had shades. And the women would sit there for eight hours a day with an electric light like that glaring right into their eyes. You can imagine what that would do to their eyesight!

The law required that any moving part of the machinery that might strike their hands have guards around it. They didn't have them. The law required that the doors be kept unlocked, but the doors would often be locked. It required that the factory rooms be kept clean. There'd be filth all over the floor! I mean, girls would eat their lunch there, and they'd throw down banana peels and everything else all over the floor, and they'd never be swept up. And the toilets would be filthy. The law required fresh clean drinking water for them. No drinking water at all. No safety, no health supplies. All of these things. And, as I say, the factory inspectors might get 'round once a year and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: Your inspections were part of the union contract?

LUSCOMB: Part of the union contract. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So these places were by then organized.

LUSCOMB: Yes. And finally, I would send in complaints to the inspection department and the labor department of the state house for such and such conditions in this factory. So finally one day I got half a dozen very socially prominent, wealthy women in Massachusetts, who were interested in labor conditions. They probably were members of the Women's Trade Union League or something like that. And I took them with me. I took two at a time on different days to inspect some of these factories.

Now under the terms of the union agreement, I had no right to demand that they let in these other women, but when I knocked and I went in the door with these two women, why the owners didn't say no. Maybe they didn't know they had a right to say, "You can't bring them in." At any rate, they didn't. So I took these women around to the worst factories that I had and showed them that. Then they got together, and they wrote up a report as to the conditions that they had found in the garment factories in Boston. They sent this as a complaint to the state inspection department, and I sent a copy of it to every newspaper. [laughs] And the newspapers printed it when it was signed by these socially prominent women in Boston. Within five minutes, the state inspection had inspectors down over these factories. [laughing]

INTERVIEWER: Did they change the conditions?

LUSCOMB: They changed the conditions in those factories. Yes. But then the two years of the union contracts were up. There had been in the women's garment factories a great many what they called "runaway factories" moving South, where they could get unorganized, nonunionized labor very cheap. And it meant that practically the women's garment industry was being almost destroyed in the North. And the union became very weak. When they came to negotiating another union contract, there were so few union shops up here and the union was so weak that it wasn't able to insist on their having this Joint Board of Sanitary Control put into the union contract. So that was done away with. In fact, I'm not sure that the union still existed in Boston. It had very few shops left anyway up here. So that inspection was done away with. So that ended my two years of factory inspection.

INTERVIEWER: When you were doing that, were you the only one working for this joint board that was doing inspections?

LUSCOMB: Yes. There weren't so many factories in the Boston area, to require more than one person to do the inspection.

INTERVIEWER: And then you made your reports to the Massachusetts State and the labor union?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you also work closely with the people from the garment workers' union, since it was under their contract?

LUSCOMB: Yes. Of course they cooperated very much with the inspection because it was all in for their benefit.

INTERVIEWER: Were there women within the ILG then that you worked with who were leaders at that time? Or was it mostly men who were at the top of the union?

LUSCOMB: I think they were largely men, but I can't say. It was a long time ago. I mean I was active in the labor movement in general so that I. . . .

[INTERRUPTION]

INTERVIEWER: Yes. We were just talking about your two years as the inspector having ended. You were saying that you were just generally involved with the labor movement, so that the various social issues that you were working on often also concerned labor unions and they were working on those same issues?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do then after that job ended?

LUSCOMB: Now let me see. In 1928, that was the time I took the job as the executive secretary for the Massachusetts Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

INTERVIEWER: So you went right into that. Were there women from the unions involved in this group as well? Were there women from the trade union movement, who were part of the state group for Peace and Freedom?

LUSCOMB: Not so many. It was largely the upper middle class women. I mean the working women would be believing in peace and freedom. But they would be too busy, and so that they couldn't really be active in it.

INTERVIEWER: It kept them more than busy just doing their own jobs?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I read in the histories of the Women's Trade Union League, that in the twenties there was a split between the working women, union organizing, and some of the other women's groups that were more concerned after the vote was won about the peace movement, or other social reform measures. Do you have particular recollections about that?

LUSCOMB: No. I haven't any special information on that subject.

INTERVIEWER: Particularly in the Women's Trade Union League, some of the men in the union said that the women weren't interested enough in organizing.

LUSCOMB: I was a member of the Women's Trade Union League, which was trying to help to organize women.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do any specific organizing at that time? That was just one of their goals, organizing.

LUSCOMB: Yes. The Women's Trade Union League was not a union itself, but it was trying to promote the union movement.

INTERVIEWER: During that period are there particular things you remember about the union movement: like you were telling me earlier about picketing for the truck drivers. Any other kinds of incidents that you particularly remember?

LUSCOMB: Then there was this one I spoke of where they threw tear gas at the crowd. [laughs] I remember one time there was a strike somewhere near downtown. Of course the law said a legal picket line was lawful, a nonviolent picket line. You had a right to picket in case of a strike. There was one time that the mounted police came. We were picketing in front of a building where there was a strike on and the police drove us off and around the corner so that the scabs could get into the building without going through our picket line.

INTERVIEWER: So you would often be called by the unions to come and support their picket lines?

LUSCOMB: Yes. As I say, at this period, which was when there was the great union movement, there was a large body of women, who were not themselves laboring women, who would be called to come on the picket lines.

INTERVIEWER: Like the DuPont woman that you mentioned earlier.

LUSCOMB: Yes. But it was a great union movement at that time.

INTERVIEWER: And very much had the support of other progressive organizations. Any unions that you worked with more than others in that capacity? I mean you worked with the Garment Workers, obviously.

LUSCOMB: Well, that of course was a full-time job. No, I can't say any one special. I was out on a great many picket lines when there were union strikes.

INTERVIEWER: Then it was not until the late thirties that you got involved in the office worker and professional union?

LUSCOMB: Well, that was around thirty-nine.

INTERVIEWER: That was after Roosevelt had come in, and progressive movements were even more supported. You said that you went to the CIO convention.

LUSCOMB: I don't remember whether it was the convention or whether it was just a national board meeting that I was sent, that our union would be having a representative on, and I was asked to go this time or several times.

INTERVIEWER: So were you actually a member of the United Office and Professional Workers in your. . . .

LUSCOMB: Yes. Oh yes. I was the president of the local union here at one time.

INTERVIEWER: And what were some of the main problems? You were organizing primarily women clerical workers.

LUSCOMB: We were trying to. [laughs] But we never got very large.

INTERVIEWER: As you look back on it now, what were some of the major problems in organizing the women? Things that you ran into.

LUSCOMB: I think a major problem was the women office workers felt socially superior to women factory workers. They thought of unions as being what factory workers had. It never occurred to them that unions would be appropriate for them. And that is why I have been so very very much pleased over the recent developments. It started out with Nine to Five*, which doesn't call itself a union, but it does exactly the same work and the fact that they are forming actually what they do call unions in many organizations. They have a movement on over at Harvard and at MIT.

MIT has quite a strong one. And I have spoken at both of those places to the union organizers. To groups that were meeting for the organization of their office staff. Office and other. At Harvard it includes not just clerical but staff in general.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find any things then that were particularly successful in reaching the women, or it was just that they generally considered themselves above unions?

LUSCOMB: Well, that I think was one of the difficulties that we had.

INTERVIEWER: Were the women who had clerical jobs also the more upper-middle class women?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But yet there were other women like yourself who joined. There was a small core of you who formed that union here?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What other women did you work with, were you close with in the union?

LUSCOMB: In the unions?

---

*Nine to Five, formed in 1973, is a working women's organization in Boston whose membership consists mainly of office workers. Nine to Five's goal is to improve working conditions for clerical and office workers and to teach women the benefits of organization. Local 925 of the Service Employees International Union, representing office workers in the Boston area, is a direct off-shoot of Nine to Five.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Other women that you worked with. Or when you started the local of the United Office and Professional Workers, were there a core group of you who organized?

LUSCOMB: Yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you work in other companies around here? Do you remember much about them or what they did?

LUSCOMB: No, we just were on the lookout for any office where there was a real dissatisfaction and a feeling of the need of united action to improve their conditions.

INTERVIEWER: And then go and talk with them?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any men that were particularly supportive of your activities?

LUSCOMB: I don't recall. There were men, but of course the office workers were primarily women. And the men from some of the other unions would be approving of our endeavor to unionize the office workers, but they wouldn't help actively.

INTERVIEWER: It was up to you to do it?

LUSCOMB: It was up to us to do it. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything in particular about the CIO meeting that you went to?

LUSCOMB: No. No.

INTERVIEWER: It was just a regular convention business meeting?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see that there were any barriers on the part of the union to getting women involved? Were there any things that the union itself did that would have prevented the women from getting involved, I mean any struggles you had within that organization?

LUSCOMB: I don't think of anything.

INTERVIEWER: Since it was mostly clerical workers, you were mostly women. I mean there was no top level of men?

LUSCOMB: Of course, the United Office and Professional Workers was a women's union. It didn't have any men involved. I can't say that there weren't any men members. But I don't recall any men members. I don't recall them now. That was a long time ago. [laughs] But its official body would have been women.

INTERVIEWER: You said that during the war most union activity stopped. Did you still keep your membership and keep your group together?

LUSCOMB: Oh, we kept our membership but just stopped trying to make union demands for better conditions of labor and better pay and all that. We made no struggles like that.

INTERVIEWER: You said at one time you were president. Did you negotiate contracts and that sort of thing?

LUSCOMB: We never got to that point where we actually had a union contract with any firm. As I say, we got better conditions in several offices and covered hundreds of workers. But it was not through a union contract. It was through the threat of a union contract.

INTERVIEWER: Who were you working for at that time?

LUSCOMB: Who was I working for? I wasn't working. I wasn't holding down any paid jobs at all.

INTERVIEWER: So, when you were with the, after the garment worker inspecting job, then you went with the peace movement. . . .

LUSCOMB: Yes, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

INTERVIEWER: Was that a paying job?

LUSCOMB: That was a very low paying job. [laughs] The peace movement was not a wealthy one. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: During the war, what were your main activities, the main groups that you were involved with during the war years.

LUSCOMB: I can't tell you.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any other job you held that was particularly involved with unions?

LUSCOMB: No. I don't think so.

INTERVIEWER: Especially not after the McCarthy period.

LUSCOMB: [laughs] It was getting very close to fascism in this country. Very close. It was terrible.

INTERVIEWER: Let me ask you just a few general questions. If you can, what would you say was the most exciting part of your life, what period and activities were most exciting?

LUSCOMB: The campaign for women's suffrage, for the freedom of one-half of the human race to have a voice in their own government. This was to be a democracy, a government of the people, by the people and the only people who were not allowed to have any voice in their government were criminals, the insane and women.

INTERVIEWER: Have you been at all disappointed in what's happened with the women's movement since that time?

LUSCOMB: No. I'm not at all disappointed in it. I'm just trying to insist that it isn't finished. We've only come so far. And we've got to go on until we finish it. In the last few years I've had a tremendous number of speaking engagements. And it is with the new upsurge of the women's movement. In one three-year period, I had over a hundred and seventy-five speaking engagements, as far west as Chicago. More than half of them have been on the history of the women's movement. I always end up by telling about how we got our political freedom but saying that we haven't finished the job yet and that we've got to go on. The Declaration of Independence said, "All men are created equal." Until we make that read, "All men and women are created equal," we haven't accomplished what the Declaration of Independence was meant to stand for.

The most bitter discrimination against women today is that against the working women. According to government figures, forty-six percent of all women of working age are working outside the home. That's pretty close to one-half of all the women of America. And again by government figures, the average pay of the working woman is fifty-nine per cent of the average of working men. Or if you're a black woman, the average pay is forty-nine per cent of the average pay of men, less than half. That means that women who work are held down regardless of their abilities, to the lowest paid and the least interesting and creative jobs. They're never promoted according to their abilities. That is the greatest discrimination against women that still remains.

LUSCOMB: Now there are other things that need to be done. We need to have child care centers so that the woman who is working outside the home knows that her children are taken care of and are having development and training and all that will make them happy and valuable citizens of the country. The child care will do that for them. Sometimes I point out the fact that I visited China in 1962. This was long before the United States government was willing to have American citizens go into China. In Shanghai, I went to see a great industrial plant, a machine shop. It had five thousand employees, and about a fifth of them were women, women working as skilled machinists, driving the overhead cranes and all that, and getting equal pay for equal work. The factory maintained a child care center which included a nursery. If a woman got pregnant, she had fifty-six days of maternity leave with pay. When she came back, she could bring her baby there, to the nursery. She would get free care for the child and she would have two half-hour periods a day, with pay, to nurse her baby. So that you had the woman as a mother not sacrificing, but the government recognized that the welfare of the children and the welfare of motherhood was social welfare.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. That's important for everyone. Do you see China as one of the places to learn more about how to do this?

LUSCOMB: I absolutely do. I absolutely do.

INTERVIEWER: Have you been back again.

LUSCOMB: No. I've never been back. [laughs] I was a delegate to a world disarmament conference in Moscow that year. And I was a delegate to the conference against A and H Bombs in Tokyo.

Well, I had been very much interested in China ever since I read Edgar Snow's Red Star Over China when it first came out almost forty years ago. And I'd followed the developments in China. So I made up my mind that I would like to go down through China to get to Hong Kong. But there was no way in this country that I could get a visa from China because I knew the United States government at that time was so bitterly opposed to China that if I mailed a letter to the Chinese government, it would never be delivered. But I went to the conference in Moscow, and I hunted up the Chinese delegation there and asked them if they could get me a visa. About a dozen of the other American delegates also asked if they could go into China.

LUSCOMB: China had been welcoming people from every country on earth except the United States. They were afraid of getting in spies and saboteurs. Now that we know what the CIA has been doing in other countries all over the world, we know that they were wise. There was one very prominent American woman journalist, Dr. Anna Louise Strong, who had visited China many times and had written various books and lectured on it, and she spent her last thirteen years living in Peking. So they gave her the names of these dozen Americans and asked her if she could vouch for any of them as being safe for them to let in.

It so happened that when she was on a lecture tour in this country many years ago, I had presided at her two meetings in Boston and entertained her overnight in my home. So she vouched for me that I was not a member of the CIA, and I got a visa.

Of course, generally, a country gives you a visa by stamping it in your passport. But China knew that the United States government would be critical. Therefore, they gave me my visa on a separate sheet of paper so there wouldn't be any record in my passport of my having come into China.

So I flew out over the trans-Siberian airline to Novosibirsk in the heart of Siberia. The Peking airline came up to there. I just swapped planes in the airport and flew down to Peking. The trouble was that the dates of the two conferences to which I was a delegate only allowed me eleven days in China. But I spent about four days in Peking and the surrounding territory up in the North. Then I flew down to Shanghai, which was the only place that had industries at that time. I had four days in that region and then flew down to Canton in the South and had three or four days in that section. That's only about four hours ride by train out to Hong Kong.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have someone with you the whole time, interpreting?

LUSCOMB: Yes. The Chinese Peace Committee provided me with guides and interpreters. They had one young woman who went with me all the time. In each city the local peace committee would provide me with local guides to all the most interesting things in the neighborhood.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to go back and see it again?

LUSCOMB: Oh, I would love to go back. Yes. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Is China a country, more so than say Sweden or the East European countries, that you would look towards in terms of women.

LUSCOMB: I think it's the most interesting country on earth at the present time. [laughs] That's not saying that Sweden and other countries aren't tremendously interesting and tremendously important. What's developing in Africa and what we have got to look forward in course of time in Latin America. It's not yet developed there but right now China is the most interesting in the world, I think. The most significant.

INTERVIEWER: Particularly in terms of women and the level of equality that they have reached?

LUSCOMB: Absolutely. Now I was in China just a little less than thirteen years from the liberation in '49. And in the old China, and that means in '49, the condition of women in China was just unspeakable. A man had a legal right to kill his wife. He could sell her as a slave to anybody else. One of the first things that the new government did was to declare the full equality of women. And when they had the land reform and took away the vast landlord estates and distributed them among the peasantry, the women got their share of the land. All of the laws regarding women were made equal. When I was there China had two vice-premiers. That's the equivalent of vice-presidents. And one of them was a woman, Madame Sun Yat-sen. Have you ever known of a vice-president in the United States who was a woman? [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: No. I don't think we're likely to have one soon either. In this country, do you see the ERA, the Equal Rights Amendment, as the most important thing for women?

LUSCOMB: It's one of the very very important things, yes. If we don't get it ratified by the required number of states within the next couple of years, why we'll have to have it passed again. And we're going on until we get it ratified.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the organized labor has been supportive of that?

LUSCOMB: I don't know. Probably it's very different in different unions.

INTERVIEWER: Have you followed or been involved at all in the Coalition of Labor Union Women that got started just three years ago? It's called CLUW.

LUSCOMB: I know of it, yes. [laughs] Not being a labor union woman myself now. . . . [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: You haven't been directly involved.

LUSCOMB: After all in about seven months I'll be ninety. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: From everything I hear you're extremely active and involved.

LUSCOMB: Yes, I am. [laughing]

INTERVIEWER: One last question that is here on my list: If you were sixteen again, and could relive your life, is there any particular thing that you would do differently in terms of the women's movement or your activities?

LUSCOMB: No. I don't think I'd do anything different. I've tried to be active in the outstanding social reform movements of the time. And they'd be the same. My judgement may have been wrong. Or I may have not done the best that could have been done. But I did the best that I could judge.

INTERVIEWER: What do you see is the outstanding social issue today?

LUSCOMB: I think that the world is in the midst of one of the great ages of social transition. Just as they came from slavery to feudalism and from feudalism to capitalism, I think we are in the process of going from capitalism to socialism-communism. And no great change like that occurs except over a period of scores or hundreds of years. You don't change the whole foundation of society. But I have visited in China. I went into the USSR many years ago, '33 I think it was or '35 the first time. I've been into Cuba. I've been into East Berlin. And I know that that is what the human race is moving towards. It means the welfare of a vastly greater proportion of the human race than you get under capitalism. Capitalism is founded on the welfare of a wealthy ruling class.

INTERVIEWER: I think that ends the questions I have for now.

[INTERRUPTION]

INTERVIEWER: Florence, in the written history that you gave me, you said that you became a member of the Boston local of the Stenographers, Typists, Bookkeepers and Accountants Union, Af of L.

INTERVIEWER: At one time, you were president and delegate to the Boston Central Labor Council. When the CIO was formed, you became a member of the United Office and Professional Workers. In our previous interview we didn't talk about the Stenographers, Typists, Bookkeepers and Accountants Union. I wonder if you could just think about it and tell me any more about that local union where you met. If you were president of the local, some of the things you were involved in.

LUSCOMB: The branch here in Boston was a very, I don't know just what word to use, it was almost a fake union. There was one firm that were public stenographers. I mean where people who didn't have an office, office work themselves, but if they wanted typewriting done or anything, they would bring them to this firm. Many of the small unions didn't have offices and didn't have office workers, so they would bring their work to this one firm. This office founded the office worker's union here, but they didn't want any other public stenographers office to join the union because they, the first one, had a monopoly on all the stenographic work for all the unions around. So instead of trying to get the other public stenographer's offices organized, they were trying to prevent them from joining the union. It was just a business advantage for them.

When I finally was made at one time the president of this one union and I wanted to go out on a large organizing campaign to get all the other public stenographers' offices organized and union offices, they wouldn't stand for it, the people who owned this one. So that it was not really looking after the interests of organized labor, but they were looking after their own business interests. I was quite disappointed in that union, and that was why when the CIO union was set up here, I immediately joined that and worked with that and paid no more attention to this AF of L union.

INTERVIEWER: Was the AF of L union, the people who actually worked there and did the stenographic work, were they members of the union, and were they the ones that didn't want to organize? Or did the people who owned the company itself not want others organized?

LUSCOMB: The people who owned the company were the ones who were the workers there. It was just two or three people. There were a couple of women and I think there was a man in it, too. I don't know whether he was in the union or whether it was merely that he was a friend of the couple of women who worked in this business. So it wasn't large.

INTERVIEWER: But you worked with those women as president of the local?

LUSCOMB: Yes. As I say, I was very anxious to go out on an organizing campaign all over the city with the other public stenographer's offices. They wouldn't let me do it. So when the CIO started up an office worker's union, I immediately joined that and worked with that and no longer had any membership in the other one.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get to have a membership in the other one?

LUSCOMB: It was just founded, and I was one of the ones who founded it, one of the group that founded it. I think the national union was just founded, and I'm not sure but what I was a delegate at the founding convention of the national one. I can't say that. I don't remember. But at that time, of course, when they founded the national one, then we had to organize a local branch here. I was one of the group who worked and founded this branch.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember who else you worked with in doing that?

LUSCOMB: No. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: When you were a delegate to the Boston Central Labor Union. . . .

LUSCOMB: Of course, that was AFL. The Central Labor Union was.

INTERVIEWER: Now, is the Boston Central Labor Union, is that a labor council made up of all the. . . .

LUSCOMB: Of all the unions that belonged to the American Federation of Labor. This would be a Boston branch of the National Federation.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember when you were a member of the AFL union and on the Boston Central Labor Council?

LUSCOMB: No. It would be just two or three years before '39.

INTERVIEWER: So in 1936, '37, can you remember anything more about the Boston Central Labor Union?

LUSCOMB: No, I. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to meetings every month or. . . ?

LUSCOMB: I don't remember. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Do you by any chance remember any other women who were involved? Or was it mostly men?

LUSCOMB: In the Central Labor Union? There weren't very many women in the labor movement. Mostly the jobs that women held weren't organized. The sales women in department stores. . . I don't remember that they had a union at that time, but that would be a field that women would work in. Of course, in some of the clothing industries and in the weaving mills, the making of the cloth. But that was not done in Boston. The making of the cloth was up in Lowell and up there. That was the center of those. But the making of dresses, making of clothing, sewing up the cloth into clothing was an occupation that the women had very much, although the owners of the shops where they did their sewing were men, primarily.

INTERVIEWER: So you were one of the few women who would have gone to the Boston Central Labor Union Meetings.

LUSCOMB: I don't remember whether I was merely filling in when somebody who would have gone from the office worker's union was not able to go. I know I did sit in on the Central Labor Union Meetings some time, but I don't think that I was the one who ordinarily went to it.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember anything else about those meetings, what kinds of things might have been discussed? Any prominent Boston labor union people?

LUSCOMB: No. I don't. [laughs] I was very active from then on for a number of years in the labor movement. When they had strikes on, I went out on the picket lines with all sorts of workers' groups. There were quite a number of women who were not workers but well-to-do women who were very much interested in the labor movement. When there was a strike, there was a little group of them that would very often go out on the picket lines with them. I think it was in the latter part of '39 and around that time and from then on. But after we, the U.S. joined in the world war, all the labor union's activity was suspended for the war effort. So it would only be up to '41.

INTERVIEWER: You had told me about a trucking company that you had been involved with picketing. Was that around this time as well, in the late '30's?

LUSCOMB: I think it was, but I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember what trucking company that was by any chance?

LUSCOMB: I don't remember. I know where it was located. It was just near Central Square in Cambridge. It was just off Central Square. I could point out now where it was on the map.

INTERVIEWER: You said that you were part of the founding group of the United Office and Professional Workers, and you told me a little bit about some of your organizing efforts. But can you remember anything more specific about founding that group, other people that were involved, people from other unions who might have assisted you?

LUSCOMB: If I went upstairs and looked over my mailing list, I would know one or two. Mills was one of the women. She lives down towards, not Lynn but up in the northern area there. I'm still in touch with her occasionally. I could get that name for you.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, we could do that when we're finished talking. We had talked about your mother and her involvement in various movements and your growing up with lots of different ideas presented. Were there any major differences between you and your mother in terms of the programs that you were interested in?

LUSCOMB: No. No difference at all. Mother was interested in the things that I was. In fact the reason I was interested was because she had exposed me to those ideas when I was young.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember any more detail about any of your childhood friends or classmates, any differences that you may have had because you were in a single-parent family and your mother was more radical than many other people?

LUSCOMB: No. I don't think there were any special differences. I guess I explained why I had to go to private school rather than a public school. Going to this little private school--it was small--the class would not be very great. It wouldn't be like a neighborhood school where we'd all know each other because we lived in the same neighborhood, but they would come from different parts around about, different parts of the city and all, so that we didn't socialize so much after school hours. We were all friends in the school.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other children who had mothers or parents whose views were similar to your's?

LUSCOMB: I don't recall any.

INTERVIEWER: Do you recall being different in that respect?

LUSCOMB: Well, I don't think that in our school we discussed the social issues or anything like that. You don't generally with grammar school children or high school, not many of them. You're too busy studying, learning your [laughs] mathematics or chemistry in high school or history.

INTERVIEWER: Even though you didn't go to school in the neighborhood, you still had friends from the neighborhood that you would also play with?

LUSCOMB: Yes. There was a group of us when I lived in Allston that always played together and worked together. We had regular monthly meetings, and we went on picnics and things like that together so that there was this little neighborhood group.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything special about the things you did?

LUSCOMB: No, except we had this one group. We called ourselves the Philistines. I don't know how they got that name. It was named, I guess, before I moved into the neighborhood and joined it. We'd have a monthly meeting at one or another person's house, and in the summertime we'd go on picnics together and all that.

INTERVIEWER: Was this mostly girls?

LUSCOMB: No. It was both.

INTERVIEWER: Was this when you were in high school or younger?

LUSCOMB: This was mainly in high school. I'm still a friend of the younger sister of one of the boys that belonged to that group. They lived right across the street from us when we lived in Allston, the first place. The boy was very active in our Philistine group, and he had a younger sister. She was just a youngster who was two or three years old. I'm still in touch with her. She's the one of them that is left alive and is still in touch.

INTERVIEWER: You had mentioned that even when you were very young, you had volunteered and been involved in the suffrage movement and gone to meetings with your mother. Did this group of kids that you played with, were they involved in things like that as well?

LUSCOMB: I don't think that they were. It was just a social group of youngsters rather than a group to take part in any civic activities.

INTERVIEWER: So that you would mostly do the civic things with your mother rather than with other friends?

LUSCOMB: Mostly, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any times when having different ideas made you unhappy or was a problem? I suspect that there were many other kids at that time who just didn't have the same kind of ideas.

LUSCOMB: Well, I don't suppose that I, as a youngster, was really putting very much of my time on social issues, social questions.

INTERVIEWER: You had talked about your trip to England and learning more about the suffragettes and the suffragists.

LUSCOMB: Nineteen hundred and eleven.

INTERVIEWER: Could you talk a little bit more about the relationship of the British movement with the American suffrage movement. Was there a similar kind of split here, like the suffragists and the suffragettes?

LUSCOMB: Of course, the older organization there was the suffragists, and then Mrs. Pankhurst felt that they weren't being active enough, and they weren't taking the movement out to the man in the street, so that they founded, Mrs. Elizabeth, Emmeline Pankhurst founded, the suffragette movement to do the shocking thing of holding open-air meetings and to do all sorts of things that would bring it to the general public. I guess I told you about what they did at the gallery at the Parliament there. Things like that. They invented all sorts of things to get publicity to make the public think about the status of women. To hold open-air meetings on the street corners was shocking.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a similar division in the American movement?

LUSCOMB: We had at that time no militant movement here. We didn't have any open-air meetings. But along around 1908 or '09 or '10, along around there, we read about what had been happening in England; that they were holding open-air meetings. So some of

LUSCOMB: the members of the suffrage association here in Boston, Massachusetts decided that they would like to try and hold open-air meetings. So they arranged to go out to the small town of Bedford here on a Saturday afternoon and hold an open-air meeting. There were two or three of the women who were prominent in the suffrage association here. One was a woman lawyer, Mrs. Teresa Crowley, and another one was a Mrs. Fitzgerald, Susan Fitzgerald and one or two others. Those are the two names that occur to me immediately.

So they went out one time, one Saturday afternoon to Bedford. I think they had gone out before and put up notices that they would be there the following Saturday. Right in the heart of the town where they had a little common, they stood there and held their open-air meeting. I went out and saw them. Probably mother went with me. I don't know. I think that was the first open-air meeting that had been held for suffrage in this country. But then the movement spread, and we just took to the streets so as to reach the common man and make him think about it.

INTERVIEWER: Did they get a crowd for their meeting?

LUSCOMB: They got quite a crowd. Out of just curiosity people would come to see this strange thing, women speaking outdoors in public. They thought that first one was so successful, so valuable that they decided that every Saturday afternoon they would go to some different township around here and have an open-air meeting. It was three or four weeks later that they asked me if I would speak at one of them. I did. It was my first suffrage speech, and I guess it was my first open-air speech certainly.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember where that was?

LUSCOMB: I don't remember which because they went to these different towns every week. I think I have recorded where that was, but I don't know whether I could dig out any papers that would tell me.

INTERVIEWER: Is this when you were a student at MIT?

LUSCOMB: It depends on whether I was still in high school or at MIT. I can't tell you whether I was in high school or a student at MIT.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do that again and again.

LUSCOMB: Then I was regularly speaking at open-air meetings. They had them, not just on Saturday afternoons, but they'd hold them downtown Boston at various times.

INTERVIEWER: What specific things would you talk about?

LUSCOMB: Of course, we talked about the fact that mothers wanted to vote, ought to have a right to vote in order to have a voice in the public schools that her children were going to, make sure that they were good schools, and all the other conditions that affected the lives of her children. So that was why the mothers needed to vote. But for some women who were not mothers but were working women, we would talk about the conditions in which they worked, the amount of pay they got for their work, whether they were healthful and good for their health and the length of hours they worked, the factory laws that governed the conditions of their work, and might decide whether they would be healthy and strong or whether they would be sick. So that's why the working women needed a chance to vote.

Then, of course, the tax-paying women, the wealthy women, we said, well their money is taken from them in taxes on any property that they own, but that money may not be spent for purposes that they would like to see it spent for. Maybe they'd like to see better schools or public hospitals and so forth. Instead of that, maybe the politicians are spending the money on something that they think is wasteful or even harmful. So we put up all of these things.

INTERVIEWER: For each of the different groups of women, were there women who opposed your going out and speaking in open-air meetings?

LUSCOMB: Of course, there were some women who were opposed to suffrage at all. They were mostly the wealthy privileged classes. Their living conditions weren't affected by law especially. Of course, the old motto was that woman's place was in the home. The anti-suffragists were never a large organization, but as I said, they were largely the upper middle class, upper class women who had plenty of money to spend, so that although they were few, they had power and could put on political campaigns.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any like the women in England who supported suffrage but didn't think that you should go out and have open-air meetings?

LUSCOMB: There were some. But I think most of the women who believed in suffrage were accepting the open-air meetings and all of the activities. We learned from the British to go into outdoors and go to the open-air meetings.

INTERVIEWER: Did you work with any labor union people during that period in the suffrage movement?

LUSCOMB: There were some of the men who were active in the labor movement who were supporters of women's suffrage. If we had a big meeting, why some of them would speak sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know people like Emma Goldman?

LUSCOMB: She, of course, was not here in Massachusetts. I don't know whether she ever spoke at meetings here or not. But I didn't have any direct contact with her.

INTERVIEWER: Besides these outdoor meetings, did you go to regular meetings of the suffrage movement?

LUSCOMB: Oh, absolutely. Of course, the outdoor meetings would be only in the summertime. You couldn't get a crowd to come out much in winter. Today I don't think many would want to be out standing on a street corner for hours.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a group of you that continued to work together during that period? Was it a large group or a small group of women?

LUSCOMB: In the suffrage movement?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. In Boston.

LUSCOMB: Yes. We had an active group, Boston Equal Suffrage Association for Good Government, was the name of it. Then, of course, there was the state headquarters which was also located in Boston, but that worked throughout the whole state, and then in other cities and towns, there would be local bodies that would carry on the work.

INTERVIEWER: Any other kinds of things that you would do? Did you do leaflets?

LUSCOMB: Yes. One time, the argument that the anti-suffragists used was that the women didn't want the vote. Of course, that meant not only the anti-suffrage women, but it meant any politician that was opposed to it would say, "Well, the women don't want it. It's just these handful of cranks that are asking for this."

LUSCOMB: So we set out in Boston once to get a petition signed by women that would be the equivalent to the majority of women in Boston who would be eligible to vote. Nobody knew how many women would be eligible to vote, but we assumed that there would be just the same number of women eligible as the men who were eligible. So we set out to get a petition signed by women that would be the equivalent to the majority of men voters. I can't remember just how much it was. I may have some record of that somewhere. It was thousands and thousands. I don't know. The number that comes to mind is a hundred thousand. But if there were two hundred thousand men voters, we set out to get a majority of the same number of women voters. So for about a year, we worked canvassing door-to-door all over the city, and getting the signatures of women, and we got the majority, the number that was the equivalent to a majority of the men voters.

Every year we were trying to get the legislature to pass a bill to enfranchise the women in the state elections. So we'd have a hearing at the state house on the bill that was filed to amend the state constitution to allow women to vote on the same terms as men. After we'd got all these signatures and petitions, I remember the hearing at the state house, the hearing that was being held on the amendment to amend the state constitution. We brought in these great big piles, piles and piles, armloads of petitions, that said women were asking to have the amendment to the state constitution to allow women to vote. We went in the public hall, up in the state house where the hearing on the bill was being held and laid down on the table in the front of the hearing these thousands, tens of thousands and perhaps a hundred thousand names. We got the number whatever it was that would have given us a majority. Their eyes fairly bugged out. It was very impressive. But that had meant that we had actually canvassed door-to-door all through the city, in the slums, in the fashionable Back Bay district, in the foreign sections, all of that.

INTERVIEWER: How many women were there who were doing this kind of work. Were there just a couple of you who kind of kept at it?

LUSCOMB: Oh, there were more than that, a great many more. I can't tell you how many. Of course, we not only did the canvassing, but if there was a women's club, we'd try at one of their meetings to ask if we could speak there and circulate the petition there. Or one of their members might undertake to circulate the petition at the club meeting.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do other lobbying at the state house?

LUSCOMB: Oh, yes. We lobbied. Every year we put in this amendment to the state constitution. So we lobbied every year.

INTERVIEWER: You then became secretary of the Boston Equal Suffrage. . . .

LUSCOMB: I was the assistant executive secretary. The executive secretary was Mrs. Pinkham, Mrs. Winona Pinkham. She was the executive secretary to plan all the work, and I was the assistant executive secretary.

INTERVIEWER: You were saying that the state sent out two groups to reach the women who lived in rural areas where you didn't have any contacts. You were in charge of one of these groups.

LUSCOMB: Yes. Between these two, why we covered all of these small towns. We would go and spend a day in each township and canvass. If we saw a man out in the field working, we'd run out to him and hand him a leaflet and tell him why he ought to vote yes on the referendum that fall. Then we'd canvass all the homes and talk with the women and try to find a little group of them that were really strongly in favor that would form a little local group and carry on the agitation up to election day.

If there was any small local industry, there might be a sawmill or something like that, we'd have an open-air meeting at noontime. When the whistle blew at noontime, the men came out to get their lunch. We'd be there handing out leaflets and saying, "Come back at half past twelve for an open-air meeting." So a lot of them would come back at half past twelve, and we'd have half an hour for an open-air meeting until the whistle blew at one, and they had to go back to work.

In a good many of the towns we'd have a noontime meeting at the industry and then we'd have an evening meeting. If there was an East Podunk and a West Podunk, we'd have two meetings in the evening, one at seven in one place and the other one at eight-thirty in the other place. That's when I made two hundred and twenty-two speeches in nineteen weeks on that campaign.

I did all the speaking on that campaign. I was the speaker on one party, I was in charge of the party. At the end of one meeting, after I got through speaking and having a little question period, then I announced that we had large yellow

LUSCOMB: VOTES FOR WOMEN buttons. We'd sell them for a penny a piece. But of course if you wanted to help the cause and pay more, why we wouldn't refuse to take it. So there was one very small town. It was up just outside of Haverhill. I don't remember the name, but it was a very small country town. I'd made the speech, and I was going through the crowd with a handful of these buttons, "Anybody want a button, want a button, want a button." One man said to me very earnestly and very sincerely as he gave me double the required amount, he said, "It was worth two cents to hear you speak." [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Who were some of the other women that went with you? Do you remember who went with you on that trip?

LUSCOMB: I can't tell you their names. They shifted. Generally they would come out for a week or two. There were one or two of the people, girls who stayed through the entire campaign. But I don't remember the names.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any state legislators that you worked with particularly?

LUSCOMB: If we were working in the home town of one of the legislators, why we would call on him decidedly, but most of them would live in the cities. Most of the legislators lived in the bigger towns. We were going only in the extreme rural areas, so it was very seldom that there would be any man who had been elected to the legislature who came from a very small town.

INTERVIEWER: What happened with the state referendum?

LUSCOMB: We were defeated in that state referendum, but it left the state thoroughly organized. We had contacts to every city and town. The movement was very much stronger because of that referendum even though we didn't get a majority of the men to vote for it, but we undoubtedly had converted a lot of men that hadn't ever thought about it, anyway. It was just four years after that the Congress passed the federal amendment, the amendment to the national constitution. That had to go down to the states to be ratified by the thirty-six state legislatures. Massachusetts' legislature ratified it within four weeks. It was one of the earliest states to ratify it. We always felt that it was because we'd built up such a strong organization and educated the whole population of the state so much through our 1915 referendum that the Massachusetts legislature was willing to ratify it immediately. We were one of the earliest states to ratify it.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any legislators that you had particular contact with or remember as particularly supportive?

LUSCOMB: I'll read you a little poem that I wrote on two of the state legislators. [laughs] [reading out loud] "There are a few men here and there who fight the battles of advancing womanhood in halls of legislation, platform, press. Where woman can not serve herself, they serve her. I speak them words of thanks. A dumb dog can not speak his thanks when he is served, but he fawns before you, he crouches at your feet. He writhes his gratitude from head to tail tip. His adoration overflows his eyes. He licks your hand. I can thank the men who serve advancing womanhood. I thank them with set phrases. I thank them with conventional glances. I thank them with formal handclasps. My spirit is a little dog at their feet." [laughs] You asked about some of the men. These were two of the Massachusetts senators.

INTERVIEWER: Which senators were they?

LUSCOMB: Shuebruk and Gibbs. So they were two of the men.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember anything more about those two men?

LUSCOMB: No.

INTERVIEWER: Would you go and meet with them in their offices and talk to them about the legislation?

LUSCOMB: Probably would have.

INTERVIEWER: Did the Boston Equal Suffrage Association have offices in Boston?

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember where they were?

LUSCOMB: At various times they were at different places. Beacon Street runs right in front of the State House. There's a street that runs parallel to that just the next street over. If you went down Charles Street, you'd come to it. Our offices were on that, opposite the Public Gardens.

INTERVIEWER: So you were very close to the State House.

LUSCOMB: Yes. That was one of the places where we had our offices at one time, but I don't know the others.

LUSCOMB: [shuffling through papers] We got the vote by demonstrating. This is the way we looked when we did it. The women's clothes at that time came down all the way down. This was our little automobile that we toured the state in 1915. This was the young man who was our chauffeur in it.

INTERVIEWER: Could you drive yourselves?

LUSCOMB: We had a young man.

INTERVIEWER: Was that because you didn't know how to drive?

LUSCOMB: I learned how to drive during this summer when we were going around the state. He taught me to drive. Remember we weren't going to the cities; we were going through the rural areas, the small towns. So we went over just little dirt roads and up over hillsides and all. When you got to be able to drive like that, it was nothing to drive it through a city, with well paved streets, afterwards. So I got my driving license in 1915 from that. All that you had to do in those days to get a driving license was to send in a sworn statement that you had driven a hundred miles. Then my mother gave me a first car in 1920. But those are pictures of the campaign in 1915.

INTERVIEWER: Were people friendly when you went out and talked to them like that?

LUSCOMB: Mostly. Yes. That's the National Organization of Women. These are very old. This is from the Syracuse newspaper, January 27th, 1914. Mrs. Catt was the national president of the Suffrage Association then. At that time, just before the federal amendment was passed by congress in 1919, the suffrage associations all over the country had, I think it was two hundred thousand members of the organization. I did some special campaigning out in New York State in Syracuse when they had a referendum on their state constitution.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember Mrs. Catt very well? Did you talk with her?

LUSCOMB: Yes. Not intimately, but I have met her.

INTERVIEWER: Your mother went to this meeting as well? It says Mrs. H.S. Luscomb and Miss Florence Luscomb.

LUSCOMB: H.S. Luscomb would be my mother.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe Carrie Chapman Catt? Do you remember much about her at all?

LUSCOMB: She was the national president, and she was a regular statesman in planning all the strategies, the things that we should do, where we should concentrate in our activities on certain congressional districts when we wanted to make those men vote in Washington on the federal amendment and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: Did you work with Frances Perkins at all when you'd go to New York? She became Secretary of Labor under Roosevelt.

LUSCOMB: She used to come to the annual national conventions that we held. I've heard her speak there.

INTERVIEWER: One newspaper article from the Syracuse Journal in which Florence Luscomb and her mother, Mrs. H.S. Luscomb attended a meeting with Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt and a group of district suffrage leaders photographed at the Y.M.C.A. Which one are you?

LUSCOMB: Oh, am I in there? I think I'm there, just peaking 'round that hat.

INTERVIEWER: The second article is from the Post Standard, Syracuse, New York, Tuesday morning, January 27th, 1914. "'Women will vote in 1915,' says Mrs. Catt, chairman of Empire State Campaign Committee, speaks at opening session of suffrage conference in Y.M.C.A. Hall."

LUSCOMB: This is a talk which I gave before the League of Women Voters, and you might like to take this. It tells about how the League of Women Voters got founded through Mrs. Catt's suggestion at the National American Women's Suffrage Convention in 1919 when the federal amendment had been passed by Congress but not yet ratified. This is just my general talk on the history of the women's movement. These are just various talks that I have given, generally the same, or covering the same ground. Now the Boston Suffrage Association had its headquarters at 585 Boylston Street, Boston.

INTERVIEWER: That gives some of the names of some of the other people involved?

LUSCOMB: Yes. Those are the offices on the letterhead. We had all sorts of publicity stunts, a bluebird! [laughter] There were suffrage leaflets that they got out, published fortnightly by the American Women's Suffrage Association at 3 Park Street, Boston. This one is September 1, 1889.

INTERVIEWER: Was your mother involved in something like this?

LUSCOMB: Did I tell you about how I got started on this? Mother was a delegate to the National American Women's Suffrage Convention in 1892, and she took me with her as a little girl of five, and I heard Susan B. Anthony speak. Now as a child of five, I can't tell you what she said. But I remember distinctly the two things: the fact that I was at that convention, and that they said to me, "Oh, this woman speaking now is Susan B. Anthony!" So from that time on, I was in the movement.

This is Olive Schreiner who lived in South Africa, and she wrote, "Three Dreams in a Desert." These little leaflets were published. I don't know whether they came monthly or what, but this is her story and a list of other leaflets. You can see the subjects that they covered. Now this is another women's suffrage leaflet on Lucy Stone. This one is September 1893. That's just a personal letter from Margaret Bondfield in England who was very active.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have some articles written on your trip to China?

LUSCOMB: No. I don't think I have. This was during what we call the McCarthy Era. I got called up. They had an investigation here in Massachusetts, and I got called up for it. This is the speech that I made there. I didn't take the fifth amendment, but I just told them it was none of their business.

INTERVIEWER: Were you called up because of some of the organizations that you had belonged to?

LUSCOMB: Oh, yes. Very much.

INTERVIEWER: Did you belong to the Socialist or Communist Party?

LUSCOMB: No, I didn't. I believed in communism and socialism, but there were certain of the policies and the activities that they were doing that I didn't think were the proper way of selling their cause to the public and all, so I didn't belong to them. But I never hesitated to admit that I believed in that system. In 1935, I went to the Soviet Union and had a month and a half there.

INTERVIEWER: Were you with a group that went?

LUSCOMB: No. I went by myself.

INTERVIEWER: Did you know anyone?

LUSCOMB: Well, they were having a world congress inviting people from all over the world to come to this conference in Moscow, and I went as one of the delegates to study what the new conditions were. Of course in '35, it was less than twenty years from the founding of the Party. This was an article that I wrote for publication in the Monthly Review. This was for the American Socialist, "Witch-hunts I Have Seen." It was during the witch-hunt period. So they asked me to tell them what I had seen.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned the Women's Trade Union League a little bit in our last talk. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the Trade Union League here in Boston. There's really not a great deal of information available about the League.

LUSCOMB: I was a member of that. In fact, I think I was on the board for a while. We were trying to build up the labor movement among the women who worked in Boston of course, and also when there were bills before the legislature, we would attend and speak, either for or against depending on what the bill was purported to do. So it was to be the voice of the working women.

INTERVIEWER: Were you involved in the lobbying, speaking for or against different bills?

LUSCOMB: Yes, we would. I can't tell you what particular bills. I don't remember now because it was many years ago. But I know I did lobbying on various bills.

INTERVIEWER: Was that at the same time that you were working on the suffrage movement or was it after?

LUSCOMB: It was afterwards. I don't think the Women's Trade Union League existed during the suffrage period.* I don't know when it was founded. But the women who were working on the suffrage movement had so much to do that we were not taking part in other things. We might belong to an organization that was something we believed in, but there was not much time.

---

* The Women's Trade Union League was conceived of at the 1903 AF of L convention in Boston and chapters were established the following year in three states.

INTERVIEWER: So it was after the vote was won that you then became active in the Women's Trade Union League.

LUSCOMB: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any of the programs? You did lobbying. Did you do educational programs?

LUSCOMB: I can't tell you. I do not remember.

INTERVIEWER: Were you active in the League for very long?

LUSCOMB: Oh, yes. It was several years at least that I was on the board there. I always worked with it. I was a member.

INTERVIEWER: You had also mentioned that your mother was involved in a meeting of the Knights of Labor. I just wondered if you could remember any other stories about that?

LUSCOMB: It wasn't a meeting. She belonged to it. She joined the organization. It was the first nation-wide labor organization that was in existence. It would take in as members people who were not themselves workers. My mother had inherited some real estate property in St. Louis which was where her grandmother lived. I judge that the family had gone out there [in] pioneer days and just had a farm and that it finally became in the heart of St. Louis and very valuable real estate. When she died, she left her real estate there to my mother.

But my grandfather, my mother's father, graduated from Amherst and from the Harvard Law School and was a very successful lawyer. Her mother died when she was twelve and the five children were sent away to boarding school. So she wasn't raised in the heart of a family and educated to believe certain things. All the causes that she was interested in were things that she herself had thought through before.

INTERVIEWER: And the Knights of Labor was one of those?

LUSCOMB: She joined the Knights of Labor, and she was active in the suffrage movement.

INTERVIEWER: Did she every talk about going to any meetings of the Knights of Labor?

LUSCOMB: She didn't talk about that, but she took me as a child to all sorts of meetings that might be on labor issues, or they might be on other issues. But she was not a very strong woman. She felt that in the private schools that she was raised in as a small child, this was during the Civil War when there was shortages of food and all, she was half-starved then, and she was never very physically strong. But she took a part and went to meetings and contributed to organizations and did all that. But it meant that she had thought through her opinions. I remember that when I was fairly young, I suppose I was ten or twelve or something or other, we got up very early one morning to go down to Lynn--of course the transportation was much slower in those days--to get down to Lynn in the middle of the morning for an open-air rally for Eugene V. Debs. I voted for Debs. I cast my first vote for president for Eugene V. Debs. But Mother was always on the side of labor, of the working people.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember much about Debs, about seeing him?

LUSCOMB: No. I was a ten or eleven year-old child, wouldn't remember much of what he said. But I followed his career and all of that.

FLORENCE LUSCOMB INDEX

AF of L, See: Unions, AF of L

Catt, Carrie Chapman, 53-54

China
- Luscomb's visit to, 1962, 36-38, 55
- women in, 38

CIO, See: Unions, CIO

Conference Against A and H Bombs, Tokoyo, 1962, 36[illegible]

Du Pont, Zara, 1-2

Early influences
- family background, 3-6, 8-9
- mother's influences, 6-7, 9-0, 43
- neighborhood influences, 8, 44
- religious influence, 9-10
- school, 10-11, 43-44
- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 11-12, 19
- architecture, 11-12, 19-12

ERA, See: Women's Movement, Equal Rights Amendment

Legislation
- sexually biased, 13
- prison, 25-26
- Equal Rights Amendment, 38
- suffrage amendment, 51

McCarthy period, 35, 55

MacDonald, Ramsey, 18

Massachusetts Civic League, 25-26

Organizing drives
- office workers in Boston, 23-24, 31
- office workers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 32
- office workers at Harvard University, 32

Pankurst, Emmeline, 45

Political Parties and Organizations
- Boston League of Women Voters, 25
- League of Women Voters, 54

Ryan, Ida Annah, 19-21

Soviet Union
- Luscomb's visit to, 1935, 55-56

Strikes,
- trucking, Boston, 2, 21, 42-43

Strong, Dr.Anna Louise,37

Triangle Shirt Waist Fire, New York City,1911,26-27

Unions and Labor Organizations
- Knights of Labor,6,57-58
- Joint Board of Sanitary Control,19,26-29
- Women's Trade Union League,20,28,56-57
- United Office and Professional Workers of America,22-24,31,33-34,43
- AF of L,24
- CIO,24,33
- Nine to five,32
- Stenographers, Typists, Bookeepers and Accountants of Boston,AF of L,39-41
- Boston Central Labor Union,41-42

UOPWA,See: Unions, United Office and Professional Workers of America

Women's movement
- National American Women's Suffrage Convention of 1892,6,55
- League of Women Voters,54
- sex-biased legislation and,13,16
- public schools and,13
- suffrage movement,6,13,21,25,45
- Seneca Falls Conference of 1848,14-15
- National Conference on the Rights of Women,Worcester, Massachusetts, 1850,16
- British militant suffragist movement,17-18,45

Working conditions
- office workers,23
- garment workers,27-28

World Disarmament Conference,Moscow,1962,36

World War Two
- Labor movement and,24,34