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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Project

with

BARBARA MERRILL

Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union

by

Elizabeth Balanoff

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

Ann Arbor, Michigan

VITAE

BARBARA MERRILL

Barbara Merrill was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1934 and grew up in a comfortable, lower middle-class neighborhood. She married after graduating from high school and attended the University of Illinois for a brief period of time.

Merrill's first jobs were short-lived, as she resented the paternalistic attitudes supervisors displayed towards workers. Her union activism began soon afterwards; as an employee of the City Department of Public Aid in Cook County, Illinois, she joined local 73 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

Merrill and others realized that the union was a sell-out and began organizing a Public Employees Association, which was later re-named as the Independent Union of Public Employees, Illinois' first public employee's credit union. Merrill became an "office rep," declining a position on the executive board because she "wanted to stay close to the people."

In 1967 Merrill helped found the National Federation of Social Service Employees (NFSSE). NFSSE joined the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in 1973, and later took her on as a district staff member. She was very active in the formation of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW); she attended the first CLUW convention and became a state convener, organizing CLUW chapters and developing programs throughout Illinois. As a top officer in the Illinois chapter and president for three years of the Chicago chapter, she feels that the CLUW made a great contribution in bringing working women together.

The Civil Rights Movement has been very important to Barbara Merrill since her childhood; at age 10 she defied authority by taking a front seat on an Oklahoma bus. Later she marched in the famous Selma and Murfreesboro marches.

Merrill now works for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) on the J.P. Stevens Boycott. Her goal is, "to bring all the textile workers we can under contracts." She feels that her work has been an exciting and vital force in her life, and she sums it with a quote from Kahil Gibran's The Prophet: "We work to keep pace with the soul of the earth."

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September 20, 1978

by

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MERILL: My name is Iris Barbara Merrill.

INTERVIEWER: Iris? After the flower or after someone else?

MERRILL: After the flower. It always comes as a shock. In fact, Sunday a couple of people who thought they knew me well for four or five years now found out for the first time that my first name is Iris.

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty.

MERRILL: It's very pretty and I really like it. When I say that people say, "Why don't you ever use it?" I use it on my charge cards and my business stuff, and on the job my checks come to Iris, but I never really thought that for what I do Iris fitted. I mean, to see someone taking public employees out on illegal strikes doesn't somehow fit someone named Iris. Or gathering up people for Civil Rights marches--you just don't think of somebody with the name of Iris. So I just kind of opted to drop it.

My grandparents' home was in Oklahoma City. My mother and my aunt were both born there. They didn't come to Chicago until they were in their late teens. But my mother never forgot the irises that grew along the fence in their yard. They just grew in great profusion and she always loved the flower and liked the name, so when I was coming along and they were deciding on a name, that was how I got the name Iris. Being born in Chicago, when I first discovered the flowers at my grandparents' home--my mother would send us every summer--I must have been about five or six and I said, "Oh, these are my flowers."

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about your parents, or your grandparents. What did your grandfather do in Oklahoma?

MERRILL: Well, my grandmother was always a housewife until years after they moved to Chicago. But in Oklahoma she was a housewife. She married my grandfather when she was fourteen--quite young. Her mother had passed away while she was an infant. Her father was half Cherokee Indian and half Anglo-Saxon. And she met my grandfather--I guess some missionaries had come to try to "civilize the natives" and she met my grandfather--and they married in Oklahoma. My grandfather worked at a various number of hotels in Oklahoma as a bellhop for years and years. It was after they came to Chicago and settled that they became active in a lot of other things. In Oklahoma they were just two kind of ordinary people.

INTERVIEWER: How close was she to the Indian part of the family?

MERRILL: My grandmother had a temper and could cuss like 40 sailors. She was pretty close, to say the least. She was a sweet kind of person who'd do anything for anybody but don't cross her. And at crossing time she could very easily let you know, especially as I got older and was around her more, boy, could she get mad!

INTERVIEWER: Now tell me about your mother coming to Chicago. Did she come ahead of her parents or with them?

MERRILL: No, they all came together. They had two girls--my mother and my aunt. They came to Chicago in 1930, and my grandfather was going to attempt to get work on the railroad in Chicago. Of course around that time was the beginning of the Great Depression so he had a lot of problems finding work and my grandmother began to do hotel work, to work in service, because my mother and my aunt were still in school. Off and on intermittently they stayed in Chicago until they both passed away. In fact, they both passed away in Chicago. They would go back to Oklahoma after my mother and my aunt became adults and established their own homes. My grandparents would go back and forth. They did this up until the late '40's. Then, for all practical purposes, they practically moved to Chicago. My father and my mother had by then separated, so they settled with my mother and my sister and myself, and they would only go back to Oklahoma say once every two or three years.

But all the time we were growing up, generally, they would always be there in the summer because Mama would send us to spend the summer with them. She had a fear about us being in Chicago during the summer when school was out.

My grandparents were really good people. My grandmother, she had a saying for everything, and even now a lot of them I use. I just used one last night. My grandfather was a very strict disciplinarian but he was kind with it. It's ironic that my grandfather on my mother's side and my father were both very, very strict, outwardly disciplinarians, but inwardly just like

MERRILL: clay. But I truly loved them both and I learned a lot from them. And I suppose it was them that kind of directed me into whatever I am because of a lot of the things that they believed and said and taught. I used to have some problems when I began to get active in a lot of stuff and my mother would always accuse my grandparents. That's the reason she has this kind of pseudo-radical daughter.

INTERVIEWER: Now tell me a little bit about your father's background and how your mother and father met.

MERRILL: They met in high school--it was in the Willard High School on Chicago's South Side. I know from talking to them that they met toward the end of grade school days and then went to high school. So he was like the only fellow she ever dated at the time they married. They married in late 1932. I, first of all, am very, very close to all of my family and I have a great sense of family. Folks that know me from being around my mother say I'm my mother's girl, those that know me from being around my father say I'm a father's girl. I'm really some of both. And as I said--my grandparents--I just really have a great sense of family. I love them all.

INTERVIEWER: Was your father born in Chicago?

MERRILL: No, my father was born in the South--he was born in Alabama. They both came with their parents to Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: What did he do?

MERRILL: In the early days I suppose he did whatever he could do. As the war began to break out he was in the Reserves and then he was inducted into the regular Army. After he came out of the Army he went back and finished his education. He went into social work and worked at the Department of Children and Family Services for many years. When they became a state agency in the early seventies, he did not remain with Children and Family Services but remained with the Cook County Department of Public Aid. He retired in August this year.

INTERVIEWER: Is your mother still living?

MERRILL: My mother died December 29, 1977.

INTERVIEWER: And are you the oldest of the two girls, or is your sister older than you?

MERRILL: My sister is the oldest.

INTERVIEWER: How much older than you?

MERRILL: Just a year and a half. She's the oldest but, for a lot of different reasons that evolve out of our childhood and after we

MERRILL: became adults, I sort of run the family.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that's good to know. How do you think you got that position? What were the circumstances that made you the dominant one? Was it just temperament? Were you, by temperament, more aggressive?

MERRILL: And a leader. I guess I just always had a kind of take charge attitude. Then, as I said, as we became older, well, I was a little bit smarter, I'm sorry to say, than she was in school, so therefore I passed her and excelled her in school. I finished grade school before she did. So that kind of threw me ahead.

INTERVIEWER: You could both think of you as being the older, then.

MERRILL: Right. I would always be the one that was sitting around in family councils while she was out playing with her friends or off to parties and things. A lot of the things at that time didn't appeal to me, so I was always in on problems and councils and changes as they affected the family. As we got older, I married and had one daughter, and the marriage didn't work out; but my sister married and she'd always said that all she wanted to do was to be a housewife. Of course I always wanted to do a lot of other things. So she just sort of settled into having children and making a home, and I sort of settled in doing other things. But still it kept me closer to the family because especially in the later years I was freer after my mother's sister, my aunt, married and moved to Washington and started her family. It freed me up to go back and forth between Chicago and Washington. I'd go back and forth between Oklahoma and Chicago when my grandparents got older and decided to sell their home out there. I was always the one that had that kind of flexibility.

INTERVIEWER: So you were the liaison for the whole group.

MERRILL: And she became really more absorbed in her husband and her own children and less absorbed in her sister and her mother and her father. If someone was ill--my mother, I suppose, spent about the last twenty-five years of her life with various and different illnesses, and she was in and out of hospitals some years two and three times a year, some years once. I think from the late thirties until my mother passed I think she had around eight or nine different operations for different things. She had different kinds of cancer operations. So I was always the one that could stay at the hospital. Then I suppose it was in the late forties my grandmother decided to do something different with her life and she went back to school and finished her education and became a practical nurse.

INTERVIEWER: How old was she when she did that?

MERRILL: She had to have been somewhere in her fifties.

INTERVIEWER: Did she need the money? Or did she just want to do something?

MERRILL: She just wanted to do something.

INTERVIEWER: And did she like it?

MERRILL: She loved it! She got her grade school diploma, her high school diploma, and took a course in practical nursing. The first couple of years she spent in what they call private duty nursing. She had to go into the hospital, so she began initially at what was the old Women's and Children's Hospital. Then she worked for a while at Presbyterian Saint Lukes when it was at 14th and Michigan. She did it up until about four years before she passed. Then she had to retire. She developed lymphocemia and diabetes and all those other things. But she went on and did that.

INTERVIEWER: I can see why they think you took after her. That takes a lot of spunk.

MERRILL: Well, she had never driven a car until my grandfather passed. She always wanted a car and my grandfather always thought that cars were a luxury that poor working people just couldn't afford. He could have bought a thousand different cars with some of the other things he'd done. He just had this fixation in his mind about a car. So the year that my grandfather passed my grandmother bought a car. She did not know anything about driving. That was in '54 or '55. She didn't know shit from shinola about driving, but she said that was the one thing he had always denied her. She had always had everything that she wanted. They had the kind of relationship--from the time I can remember I never saw one of them eat a meal without the other one. If only one was hungry they would just wait until the other one got hungry. They had the kind of relationship that a lot of young couples just won't even discuss having now. They never went shopping alone. From a loaf of bread to a suit of clothes it was a joint dual effort. Everything they did they did together. So even though she had always wanted this car it was something she suppressed because he never saw a need for it. A couple of months after he passed she bought a car; she learned how to drive.

That July we all drove to Washington to see my aunt. Now she was the only one with a car. She had begun to teach my sister how to drive, but I think Jeanette only had her permit at the time, so my grandmother drove all the way from here to Washington D.C. and back. We stayed two weeks and came back. Then she went in August--she and my daughter and my sister--went to Oklahoma to get some other things out of her house. They were trying to decide whether to sell her house or not. But she moved a lot of personal things that they had accumulated for years and years that she wanted. So they drove to Oklahoma.

One night about 12:30 she called us up. They were in Albuquerque, New Mexico on their way to California. Then at that time she had two half brothers and a stepsister that lived in California that

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MERRILL: she hadn't seen in years and years. So she just up and decided and she drove all the way to California. And at that time my grandmother couldn't park. She had learned how to drive but she couldn't park. She drove from Oklahoma to San Diego, California and couldn't park. When they got in front of her brother's house, my sister had to go in and get someone to come out and park the car.

INTERVIEWER: That's incredible.

MERRILL: Yes, it was frightening when it happened, and when you look back on it, it's incredible.

INTERVIEWER: I assume she learned to park.

MERRILL: Yes, she eventually learned to park. So those were the kind of grandparents I had.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of little girl were you? You said you didn't like to play outside as much as your sister. You sounded like you matured early. Or were you just quiet?

MERRILL: I was quiet, very introspective, as I said, pretty much a Mama's or whoever's-was-around girl. I liked to read a lot and I spent a lot of time reading. I never cared too much for doing the kinds of things that children did because that's what they always seemed to me--childish, a waste. I mean, I would be in the kitchen learning how to cook or asking my grandmother and I never learned how to do anything with my hands. My grandmother did a lot of crocheting and needlepoint, and I would watch her develop patterns. It was interesting to me how she could develop patterns or how she could take a pattern and make something out of it--not that I really wanted to do that myself, but I just liked to watch her do it. If she really did not want to put on her glasses or strain her eyes I would read the patterns for her, you know, the instructions.

Of course I did some of the little things. I did do some jumping rope and playing with jacks. I loved playing with dolls, and my sister and I used to have some fierce fights over my dolls because I always had a very nice doll collection. But things like skating and all that kind of junk--I just didn't care for it.

INTERVIEWER: You weren't the tomboy type or the outdoor type?

MERRILL: No, I liked the outdoors but I like it just sitting and reflecting. I love the outdoors now. I love to walk in the parks and the woods. That's one of the things I miss about Chicago--you can't just stroll through the parks. I like to go on hikes, that kind of outdoorness. I love the water--I like sailing and boating. I'm not too much for sitting and fishing 'cause I don't like that messing with the hook. Laying on beaches and swimming--those kind of outdoor things

MERRILL: I love. I suppose not the physical outdoor stuff.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when your parents separated?

MERRILL: Eight.

INTERVIEWER: Did it bother you much or not?

MERRILL: No, because up until the time my mother passed I guess that's what kept me going. The relationship that my grandparents had until my grandfather passed you don't see. And the kind of relationship my parents had after they separated, it was not like they were separated. Well, they were separated but they weren't; they stayed the best of friends. We would spend two Sundays with my father and his mother until the time that my father remarried. Now that's what hurt me, initially, was when he remarried--which I guess was about four years afterward. But then after I got to know my stepmother she and my mother were so much alike. You know, you hear a lot of times that when men remarry for whatever reason--death, divorce or whatever--that there are some qualities that both wives possess. Well, I'm a living witness to that. That happened. Physically my stepmother was a little shorter than my mother and a little smaller, but they were both good cooks, they were both meticulous homemakers, they had a great love of their family. They had a lot of qualities in common.

But when my daddy first told me it really kind of upset me and I cried for about a week. And I felt like he was really then at that point turning his back on us. I know the first time he took us over to Lil's house for dinner I wouldn't eat. And my sister, ironically, took to her right away. Then as we progressed my sister became more distant. My stepmother and I now are like good friends. We go shopping together, we call each other, we gossip over the phone. She's only a couple of years older than I am. Lil's about 48 or 49. And we're more like sisters than stepmother and stepdaughter. Of course we've got children around the same age. We've just become really good friends.

INTERVIEWER: That's nice. Your mother never remarried?

MERRILL: Well, she did, but it was a long, long time. My mother only remarried seven years before she died. And my daughters and my stepmother's children are all around the same age. They would come and spend a weekend sometimes with us and my mother and everybody. Or else my daughters would go and spend the weekend with them. So that that kind of separation--my mother was never in the hospital that my father wasn't there or at the house. Not one time.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like you come from a very civilized kind of family, more than most.

MERRILL: Yes, that's why you look around and you see a lot of things that's going on. I know when my mother passed--a girl that I've been

MERRILL: friends with for years--we had gone over to the undertaker to pick out the casket. A couple of my friends had come because I... well, I haven't gotten over it yet because my mother and I--you'll find out as we go on--were extremely close. After she became a divorced woman and after I was grown up we bought a building and lived together until she remarried. Then after that I was at her house almost as much as I was at mine. We travelled together after I got to the point where I could travel and could take her. I felt I owed it to her. It--her death was really a shock to me and some of my friends had been with me for about three days. My sister called them and said,"Well, you all are closer to her than I am." You know, we were not the closest of sisters.

Anyway, they were there, and my father and my stepmother came over and we had gone out--my sister and I--to pick out this casket. When we got back to my mother's house, my dad opened the door and I just kind of fell into his arms, and then after he got me some more by myself, my girlfriend said, "Do you know your stepmother's here? She brought all this food and she cooked dinner for you all, and she's made hot rolls, and she's baked a cake." I said, "Well, that's Lil." And she said, "That's your stepmother." And she was trying to whisper. She just didn't understand the relationship. And it was a kind of an eyeful, I guess, for a lot of people as people began to go and come, because they were there all the time or else she was on the phone. So I guess it is kind of a thing people really don't understand. But for all four of us girls I think it has done a lot for us. It's made us a little bit different, maybe a cut above.

INTERVIEWER: It's unusual. You parents didn't compete for your affection. There was plenty for everybody.

MERRILL: And we--especially after our father remarried and we got in our teens--my sister and I made a decision that Thanksgiving would be with my mother. Christmas Eve and most of Christmas Day would be with my mother, the remainder of Christmas Day would be with Daddy. We would always be at Daddy's on New Year's Day. Father's Day and his birthday was his. Those days were just blacked off the calendar and everybody knew it, and there was never any problem.

INTERVIEWER: Now when did you get married? Did you get married right after school?

MERRILL: Yes, right out of high school. I suppose I was a good girl. I very seldom personally got chastised for anything. Most of the things that I personally was chastised for was because of things I would be doing in conjunction with my sister, trying to keep her out of trouble. When I was a real little girl I would do a lot of things to get back at what I thought was injustice. I remember when my sister first started kindergarten and I couldn't go I thought that was an injustice. So I took some

MERRILL: sewing machine oil--my grandparents' walls at Oklahoma were all white--and I took this sewing machine oil and smeared it over one side of a wall. They thought that was just being a bad little girl, but to me that was getting back at the world because they wouldn't let me go to kindergarten with my sister. The way I rationalized it and the way other people rationalized it was a little bit different.

I had those kind of little idiosyncrasies when I was a kid. I was a very stubborn kid, and I wouldn't cry. I never did. I only cried I think three times when I got a spanking, but I would sit and make myself sick all over myself and the furniture, or over my mother or grandparents or whoever was nearby. That was my way of getting back at them for whipping me. Those are the kinds of things that I would do.

But as Jeannette and I got older, most of the trouble that we would get into would be because of things that she would want to do. And when we started going out, we'd get in trouble for coming back home late, until my mother discovered that most times I would sit out in the hall and wait for her to come in. But I felt that we were sisters and therefore it was unfair--even though I didn't believe in the things that she was doing or think they were right--it was unfair to not engage in it with her because she was my sister. To me that was just an extension of being family. If she wanted to do something that would cause trouble, then we were both supposed to do it.

INTERVIEWER: That's very unusual. So you shared the blame but not the game?

MERRILL: Uh-huh. I tried to talk her out of a lot of various and sundry things, but if I couldn't talk her out of it, then we just went on and did it together. Anyway, one of my sister's friends--I guess she was a friend of mine, too, but we got to be friends later on after I got really good and grown, because that was Jeanette's friends that would be outside playing. I think I was always kind of different from the rest of them. The boys in school seemed just like that--boys--to me. I never was interested in my peer group. So this friend of my sister's who lived across the street, she had an uncle who was about eight years older than we were but to me he was fascinating.

INTERVIEWER: You mean he was a man, they were boys?

MERRILL: That's right, as opposed to being a boy; and we talked about a lot of things that I just found very hard to talk about with the boys in school. I guess my mother had her first shock because when it was time for high school graduation and she and my daddy was kind of on my back about going to the prom and all that I couldn't figure out a way to tell them that I had invited Carl to be my date for the prom. And my mother was not too well at that time because I had come home....

MERRILL: Subsequently to that I had gone away to a convent for eighteen months. I had thought at one time that I wanted to be a nun.

INTERVIEWER: Was your whole family Catholic?

MERRILL: Episcopalian. That's another story.

INTERVIEWER: Well, go ahead, tell me about that, too. Were they always Episcopalian?

MERRILL: Well, when the missionaries came to the Indian reservation to civilize the Indians, they were Episcopal missionaries. My grandmother was a convert early on and after she and my grandfather married, then he automatically--I don't know whether he liked it or not. So we were all born and raised in the church. But when my sister and I were confirmed in Oklahoma--at our parish church there they had confirmation in the morning--I remember I cried to my mother, "I have to get up in the middle of the night and go to church at dark to be a Christian." But it always had a fascination for me.

And one year, two years that we spent in Oklahoma when Mama was again sick that time, my grandmother sent us to Catholic school for one year. All of that really had a profound effect on me. I was affected by a couple of movies that came out in the 40's, those two movies with Bing Crosby: "Going My Way" and "The Bells of St. Mary's". And when I was in Catholic school I spent a lot of time helping the nuns in the convent and reading the catechisms and asking an awful lot of questions about the church, etc., so it was at that time something that I thought that I wanted to do.

I think the problem was that I knew I wanted to do something to help people but I rejected the fierce obedience that I didn't realize I would encounter. Even talking about it outside is altogether different than when you get in. I don't mind being obedient, but I don't want to be ordered to be obedient. I wanted to be obedient because I wanted to. And that I just couldn't accept, and not being able to talk back. Being obedient is all right, and having respect for elders and all that is okay, but even though we were good children and always had to give our parents respect, we were always able to voice our opinions about things. Not getting smart with them, but, you know, if something was coming up, they'd ask us what we think.

Well, I couldn't deal with that, and then I'd begun to have some problems. Mother had to have a breast operation so I came home for her breast surgery and I never did go back. I went on and I finished high school in Chicago. My mother and father both assumed that when I finished high school I was going on to college, and they started making all these plans. My grandmother on my father's side belonged to a kind of prestigious black social organization. In fact, it still is--the Links. And she began to make all these dumb plans about me bowing to society.

INTERVIEWER: And you weren't having anybody's plans? You weren't planning to be obedient at home either?

MERRILL: No. I knew when I told them who I wanted to go to my senior prom with me, it would cause all kinds of squabbles. So I guess they didn't know until about a couple of weeks before the prom who I had decided to go with. My grandparents were the ones I eventually convinced first, and they convinced my mother and father.

INTERVIEWER: No wonder you were partial to them. So you took him to the prom.

MERRILL: Yes, and then I decided not to go away to college. I think my mother and my father kind of hoped I would go away. I went to the University of Illinois down at Navy Pier. And I suppose I married for a lot of different reasons. One of them was probably to escape all of this kind of stuff that I knew I was going to be thrown into with the Links and that damn debut and all that crap.

INTERVIEWER: You never had a taste for anything like that.

MERRILL: No.

INTERVIEWER: What did your other grandmother think about that? Did they disagree on that?

MERRILL: Yes, but she didn't really have too much to say about it. And that one grandmother wasn't that close. My father hit the ceiling. After I gave them the logic of it and, you know, they started talking about how I was young and all that, I said, "And how old were you when you got married?" So that's how I did it. I just really laid out the logic to them. After we married, I did go on and I stayed at school for a little while. Then I got pregnant with Denise and the Korean War started and he went into the Marines. Things went along all right until he came back home and I guess by then we had grown so far apart that I could just tell that it wasn't going to work out. And once again, it bothered me. I guess we're just the weirdest bunch of folks--we're still good friends. In fact his whole family is still . . .

INTERVIEWER: Part of yours?

MERRILL: Yes, in a sense. For years we would go to ball games together and play cards together, still very good friends.

INTERVIEWER: Just not man and wife. How old was your daughter? I suppose he was a stranger to her almost after he'd gone off to war.

MERRILL: Yes, but they get along all right. One thing, I followed something that my mother always said she never did. I never talked adversely about him in front of my daughter. Now there have been some problems that have arisen but they would never be discussed before her. I always said that I never knew when there might come a time when she might need him for something, anything. I mean,

MERRILL: nothing is promised to you, tomorrow's breath is not promised to you. So I always wanted to have a kind of atmosphere where she wouldn't ever feel reluctant to spend time with her father or to go around her father. I just never did want that. I never had it and I didn't want it for her.

INTERVIEWER: So she has a good relationship with both of you.

MERRILL: Yes. Of course it wasn't like.... Because I had almost nine years with my dad and she had practically no time. I think Denise was three or four months old when Carl went into the service. Even at that, she had a good relationship with his family that kind of made up for that. He had this one niece that was around my sister and my age. We are still good friends. He has two other nieces , in fact, one of his nieces and I are the best of friends. She married around the same time I did, and she and her husband are still married. She spent the whole day Saturday with me. We visit back and forth. Their kids and my kids were all born around the same time. Her oldest daughter and my oldest daughter went to school together, they dated together. When my daughter got married she was her bridesmaid.

INTERVIEWER: It's a different thing than I'm accustomed to hearing, but that's nice.

MERRILL: It was just a big group. And we used to have on the Fourth of July over at my ex-husband's oldest sister's home, everybody would gather, and it would just be everybody. I'd go, he might have a date,and I might, too. And his oldest sister has another girl around my daughter's age and they all got along real good.

INTERVIEWER: You have what, two girls?

MERRILL: Well, I have one that is naturally mine and one that I adopted.

INTERVIEWER: I see. And how much space between the two of them?

MERRILL: My daughter is 27 and Rosalind is 21.

INTERVIEWER: Did you adopt her when she was an infant?

MERRILL: Well, Rosalind is really my sister's oldest child that my sister had out of wedlock. After she discovered that she was pregnant she didn't want the baby. She was having some problems with the baby's father, so she had decided she was going to release the baby for adoption when it was born. She didn't really want to settle down. So she had gone over to the church and she had told the priest. She hadn't discussed it with us, but she'd discussed it with Father Martin. And one Thursday--I never will forget--he came by the house. My mother said, "Father Martin, what's going on? Ain't nobody died or whatever." So he came up and asked Mother, did she know that Jeannette had been over and talked to him about this baby. She said No. And he said, "Well, she

MERRILL: wants to give the baby up." And I got livid! First of all, I got livid that she went to Father Martin telling him all this crap without even letting any of us know. And I'm mad for Mama because she hadn't even told Mama. So then I said, "No, we're not going to have that. No babies in this family have ever been separated before." So on the weekend we went to Jeannette and my grandmother and I encouraged her to come back home until the time the baby was born. And at such time as the baby was born if she still felt like that, then I would just assume the responsibility for raising it. And that's what happened.

INTERVIEWER: And I suppose the child knows that, or does she?

MERRILL: Yes. I always encouraged her. Well, in fact, now she's living with her mother. She and her husband and their two babies are living with her mother. Had she been adopted by a stranger, I don't suppose I would have, and especially after her mother married and began to have--my sister has six kids. She took on a whole new idea about life and things. Her values kind of changed so I felt that it was not proper for me not to let Rosalind know who her natural mother was. Then I sort of put it to Rosalind that I was rather lonesome. I was a divorced woman who had a job and a lot of other interests, but I only had one child. I really wanted something else. When she was little I used to tell her that I kind of stole her away from her mother.

INTERVIEWER: Made her feel wanted.

MERRILL: You know, I told her I needed company for Denise. Well, that was true. It began to bother me that Denise was an only child, that she had all these various and sundry parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, and I felt that she was beginning to get too much for a girl. It was the hardest thing in the world for me: I'd say no to something and she could run to somebody else. We had some donnybrooks about my chastising her. My grandmother always felt the child hadn't done anything. I'd say, "You know the things she does we would get our ears pinned back for. She gets away with them." So it really became a problem and I felt that Rosalind would help and be a buffer and take up the slack. Some of the things that were coming to Denise would then be divided up between the two girls. And it was good for Denise because it gave her something to be responsible for--it gave her this younger sister.

INTERVIEWER: Are they close?

MERRILL: Oh yes, are they ever. If you were around them you would not believe that they are not blood sisters. But it was good for her, as I say, it gave her a really good sense of responsibility.

INTERVIEWER: Now, I'm not clear on your work experience. I know you started to college and then you got married and stopped to have a baby.

INTERVIEWER: Then when did you go back to work? Was it while your husband was in Korea?

MERRILL: Yes, I guess I went back to work in 1952. For the first time, I went to work at Montgomery Wards for a week.

INTERVIEWER: Doing what?

MERRILL: Doing some kind of dumb billing or something. I left on Friday. You got paid on Saturday at that time and I left on Friday and never did go back there and get my check. They mailed it. I just didn't like the atmosphere, I didn't like the way the supervisors talked to the girls. I just didn't care for some of the people that worked there. I didn't like anything about it. It was very frightening to me for my first job, so I just left.

INTERVIEWER: So you did not like Montgomery Wards.

MERRILL: No, I worked over there on Chicago Avenue.

INTERVIEWER: You worked one week and left them forever.

MERRILL: Yes, I'd never go near them again. Then I remembered that I had taken in high school--in the senior year in high school they would give the students the initial Federal Entrance Exam. So I went down to the federal building and put in an application for a job. Since it had been a couple of years before, I didn't think that exam would still hold up, but I think they hold them for three or four years. The man asked where I had taken the initial exam and I told him. So eventually I was called for a job at the Treasury Department on Clark Street, right there on Clark and Harrison, so I went to work there.

Well, I was hassling with my Mom and Dad and my grandfather and my grandmother. They wanted me to go back and pick up my college education and I did not want to because I had the babies. Certainly none of them was going to assume the financial responsibility for me and my babies and my college education.

INTERVIEWER: You mean you wouldn't let them but they would have been willing?

MERRILL: Oh, yes. I went to work in the Treasury Department in what they called the Savings Bonds Division. Well, stuff started happening. I didn't like the idea of having to sign in and sign out.

INTERVIEWER: Back to the nunnery, huh?

MERRILL: Even if I asked permission to go to the ladies room. All these kinds of things kind of bothered me. I didn't like--I gather it's the normal way that bosses talk to workers, but I just didn't like it. That whole attitude that supervisors had with the people that they supervised, that paternalistic way that they treated you.

MERRILL: From the very beginning it just did not sit right. I knew there was something wrong with it. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was just something wrong with the way that they talked and the way they treated people. I started talking to my grandfather about it. He, at first, was kind of noncommittal. When he would be in Chicago when we were younger, my grandfather used to go to a lot of gatherings and meetings over in Washington Park and Bug House Square, and he used to take me with him. Well, he loved two things. He loved that and he loved circuses. Well, I never liked circuses so he would take my sister to the circus with him, but he would take me when he would go to these rallies and meetings that I liked.

INTERVIEWER: So you were political even as a child.

MERRILL: And he had no business doing that, that's why my mother would blame him for my ideas.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of people were speaking there?

MERRILL: All kinds--people who were trying to organize unions. Some of the people that would be speaking are still alive and well in Chicago today, so I don't know whether they would like to be mentioned.

INTERVIEWER: Were they mostly left-wing political people?

MERRILL: Yes. It dawned on my grandfather after I went to work for the Treasury Department that all these things I'd heard were having a profound effect on me. So some of my co-workers, we were trying to figure out what to do. At that time there was not unions for federal workers. This was just unheard of. So my grandfather was the one who came up with this idea of us, at least, starting a credit union. That would make it possible, at least, for the people to be organized into something. So we started working on trying to start a credit union.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get one?

MERRILL: They eventually got one. I left before it really got going. So by the time President Kennedy had signed the Executive Order allowing federal unions, they had a good thing going.

INTERVIEWER: So they just quickly made a union out of it, or what?

MERRILL: A local.

INTERVIEWER: Then where did you go after that?

MERRILL: Well, I went to the County Department of Public Aid with my Dad. When I first went to the Department of Public Aid I was assigned to a department called Medical Payment at Madison and Damen. First of all, I had never really been to the West Side, as such,

MERRILL: more than two or three times, so I was--even more than in Chicago--kind of unaware of the situation on the West Side.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you live in Chicago?

MERRILL: We lived near Michael Reese Hospital. I was born at Michael Reese because Jeanette was a premature baby and she was born the year that they had just developed the incubators. Michael Reese had a display at the World's Fair. Jeanette was born premature and she was rushed to Michael Reese and then Michael Reese got my parents to allow them to take her and the other incubators on to the fair.

INTERVIEWER: She was in the fair?

MERRILL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did they pay her?

MERRILL: My mother and my father, yes. And the ironic thing was my grandmother was very fair skinned because of this combination of her parentage, and at that time they didn't have like nurses and doctors that were black working in hospitals. And Jeanette was there--well, she wasn't at the fair for nine months but all total she was in the hospital for nine months with the incubators and all this crap. So when she first came home from the hospital, she wouldn't let anybody touch her except my grandmother. My mother, my father, my aunt, nobody could do anything with her. They teased about her later on. That was another one of the agreements, that if my mother had any subsequent children, they could then be born in the hospital at the hospital's expense.

INTERVIEWER: So you were a freebie!

MERRILL: Right. But my parents were living at 5040 Calumet when I was born. They stayed there until we were about five or six years old and then we moved to 53rd and Indiana. After my parents separated, my mother and my sister and I and my aunt moved to 5614 South Park then; it's now King Drive. But we had a first floor apartment, well, what's really called an English basement. I suppose word got around the neighborhood that there were these two women with these two children. From our back we had a number of break-ins. It was around Easter time and my aunt who worked at South Center--it was a department store--had bought us a couple of big chocolate Easter bunnies. She was working there and going to college. We had this icebox that sat out on this enclosed back porch and they were taken, and it really hurt Mama because our bunnies were taken. So she started looking around for another place to move, and it just was ironical that a couple of my grandmother's friends from Oklahoma lived in a building right back of us at 5614 Calumet. It was in a court way. So an apartment became vacant there in November '41, the year the war started, but the real estate owner would not rent the apartment to a single

MERRILL: woman. So my grandfather came up from Oklahoma and rented the apartment, and my mother and my aunt and all of us moved in. Of course, my grandmother came a little later. They just decided they'd all stay here through Christmas holidays. I never will forget the day the war was declared. We were scrubbing the kitchen floor. It really stood out in my mind because my grandfather had my sister and I down on our knees. We stayed at 5614 Calumet until my mother, my grandmother and I bought the home that I live in now. That had to be in 1955 'cause my grandfather died in '54 so we stayed there until 1955.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you live now?

MERRILL: 75th and Wentworth.

INTERVIEWER: So the three generations of you owned a building together.

MERRILL: Yes, and we had problems getting that. That's why nobody can say anything wrong to me about First Federal Savings and Loan. It was the only place that we could get a mortgage, three women. And I mean we tried a lot of places and we couldn't, but they finally did give us a mortgage. We didn't want to buy the house on contract. For three women, and three black women, that was really difficult back in those days, but First Federal did give us a mortgage. And we bought a two flat with the idea in mind that if I ever married we could separate and they could stay upstairs and I could stay downstairs. Or if any of the children--my mother had hopes of one day my sister getting by herself and coming on back home. But after Jeanette did come home and Rosalind was born, then the next year she married and moved away again. Anyway, we got the two flat building.

INTERVIEWER: Do you use both flats?

MERRILL: Well, we rented one for a long while. A couple of years my sister and her husband--I guess she had two kids then--they stayed there for a while. Now my daughter and son-in-law are there.

INTERVIEWER: Still a family affair.

MERRILL: That first floor apartment was vacant for a little over a year. That was in '76. I started just never really being home, you know I was gone all the time. So I was really kind of choosy about who I would rent the apartment to. And I just decided, well, if I can't find anyone I can rent it to and feel comfortable, I'd leave it vacant. So I left it vacant for a long time, but as I said, Denise and her family are down there now. It's kind of nice. She enjoys having me upstairs of her house. That's what my little granddaughter says to me, "I like being upstairs of my house, grandmother." How did the roles get changed?

INTERVIEWER: Maybe she knows she's due to inherit?

MERRILL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Now you told me that you helped start a union in the Public Welfare. Are we ready to talk about that now, or is there more that comes before?

MERRILL: Yes, when I got there, as I said, I started working at this West Side office. I never had much experience on the West Side because I was born and reared on the South Side. So the first thing that really upset me was going to work. I would ride with Mother to Clark and Madison and then take the Madison Street bus. Well, the first week I cried at what I saw on that bus. I didn't really realize that there was such a low calibre of people. I don't mean low in terms of low life, but I mean the people just seemed so lost and so pitiful. And that really bothered me. So I went in already shook.

INTERVIEWER: You had never lived near people like that?

MERRILL: No, because the areas that we lived in, at the time we lived in them, were always kind of, not middle class but always fairly nice neighborhoods.

INTERVIEWER: Sort of well-off working class?

MERRILL: Yes, we never was exposed to that. Some of these areas now are not as nice as they were, but at the time we were there they were always very nice areas. So we never had that kind of exposure. I just didn't believe it. I would sit there, and, of course, I was frightened. I didn't know what was going to happen next. So I went in already uptight. Well, there was a friend of mine that I had met through my father. Daddy was still working at Children's Division, which was in another part of the city. She worked there one year at Children's Division and had a Christmas party. So I called her up one week before I was supposed to go to work and told her I was coming and told her where I was going to be and she said, "Oh, that's where I work." She said, "The first day you'll probably be busy. The second day we'll get together and we'll have lunch." They have a nice cafeteria in the building for the workers. Now she had given me instructions on how to come from where I work to where she worked. Well, I was trying to get to where she worked and I took a wrong turn and wound up in what was called the auditorium. Now I don't know whether you've ever known anyone that worked for the Department of Public Aid, but in that building--that Damen and Madison building, the main office for the General Assistance program where all of the derelicts--all of the mental patients, everybody that could not be lumped into a specific program was lumped into this one. They would come in, in the mornings, to apply, and they'd put them all in this auditorium like cattle. Well, I walked into this place and the initial intake person that they would come to and give their name, she sat in what I guess

MERRILL: used to be the ticket office in this big auditorium, this little office with a cage. Now I went up to the door and I walked into this place and I see this lady in this cage and all these people. I mean, some with head bandages and some on crutches and some winos and alcoholics and all this in this place. I just slammed the door and I started crying and shaking and I went home. I went straight home. I got my purse and went right home and I went to bed when I got home. So I called up Daddy later on that night and I told him what happened. He said, "Oh, my God, that should have never happened to you." And I said, "I don't think I can handle this." So he came over and we had a long talk about it and I went back. Well, I guess I was there for about a month and then we heard rumors that this department that I was working in was moving. It made me feel better that we were moving to the South Side in a fairly new renovated building. Some of the other offices were moving. In fact, Daddy's office moved. We moved to where Mercy Hospital is now. We moved to 26th and Michigan but the next year we had to move again because they cleared that land to expand Mercy. But my little department, Medical Payment, moved into this building on the second floor. Children's Division took the first floor. And it was kind of an ironic thing because there we--father and daughter--ended up in the same building.

Well, when we got there I was trying to do good, trying to get along with everybody. The first three things that happened really didn't have anything at all to do with me. All I had to do was just to keep my mouth shut and out of somebody else's business, but I didn't. The Director of the Department of Children's Division, he had this really bad thing about wanting to separate classes of staff, the professionals. He didn't ever want the professional staff and the clerical staff to mix. In my department, which was all pseudo-clericals, he didn't want us to have any kind of relationship with his department downstairs. Yet, when they renovated the building for all of us to move in, on the mezzanine part they had like a canteen and a lunch room he designated for his people. And they had to build one up in the back where we were up in Medical Payment. He just didn't want any kind of mixing at all. He would only tolerate me coming down there if I wanted to see my Dad, going straight to my Dad's desk and going right back. He was really weird.

So there was a girl in my unit who had.a girlfriend who worked down in Chidren's Division and they would like visit back and forth. Well, one day he came up and said to our supervisor that Leona had been seen on a number of occasions visiting, and she knew that was against the rules of the office. And he would pull rank on our supervisor because, after all, he was the director of the entire department. I'm sitting there listening to all this stuff. I wasn't into plants then, but Leona had a couple of plants, and some of the people in Children's Division had, and there was a window sill in this mezzanine lunchroom where they all had their plants. And do you know the director brought her plant up there to her and told her she was going to have to find some place up

MERRILL: in our department to keep it. And I told him--that's when I first got in trouble because I said to him, "You don't have nothing to do about who plants associate with. You don't own them. Now you can't tell Leona where she can put her plant to grow." I said, "You might can tell her who she can't talk to, but you cannot tell her where her plant can grow." So he said, "You're Mr. Merrill's daughter, aren't you?" I said, "Yes." So he said, "I think that you're a little out of line, young lady." So I said, "Okay," and I went back and I sat down. He came back up that next week and told Leona she could put her plant back there.

Well, this same girl, Leona, got me into most of my initial trouble. She got in trouble for coming to work late. Well, our supervisor was a kind of heavyset woman. She and Leona was having words, going back and forth, back and forth, and she got up and she came over to Leona and she started shaking her finger in her face. I didn't say anything to the supervisor, but the next week I went over to her desk and I asked her if I could have a couple of minutes of her time. She said yes and I said, "I must tell you something." By that time I'd passed my six months probation but I said, "I realize I haven't been here too long. I like what I'm doing, I enjoy working for the Department of Public Aid. But I don't think that I would keep working too long if you ever shook your finger at my face like you did at Leona. My mother and my grandmother have never ever shook their finger in my face and I don't think I would take it off of you. And I just want to let you know now before the occasion ever arises that if we ever have any difficulties, don't shake your finger in my face because I just might hit you." I was just as nice and calm about it.

INTERVIEWER: What did she say?

MERRILL: She was flabbergasted. She didn't know what to say. It really took her by surprise. But I just really wanted her to understand that. Then I realized and I said, "You're the supervisor and I work under you so we'll probably have some difficulties. There'll probably be times when you'll be trying to explain things or give me orders about rules and regulations, but just don't ever shake your finger in my face. It's as simple as that, because I really think I might hit you."

INTERVIEWER: I assume she never shook her finger at you.

MERRILL: No, and she had a bad habit of doing it with a lot of people.

INTERVIEWER: Did she tone down any with the others after that?

MERRILL: No, she was a bitch right to the very end.

INTERVIEWER: But she didn't shake it at you.

MERRILL: She never did shake her finger at me, never ever. In fact, we

MERRILL: didn't become good friends but we kind of declared a truce. We had a couple of other problems after that. She had a bad habit of getting all the girls in the unit together and sitting around talking, and her idea of being a supervisor was she wanted everybody to tell her their problems at home and at work, and she's going to sit and straighten all this shit out. And I told her I wasn't telling her nothing. "The only thing you're supposed to know about me is when I get here, how much I do while I'm here, and when I leave. Nothing else is any of your business. You're not a member of my family and you're not a personal friend of mine. I don't feel that you have a right to know anything else about me." So I was exempt from the little chitchats.

The next problem that came up was one of the other girls whose father died. The girl was on vacation and she lived out in Harvey. She was due back to work on a Monday and her father died that Friday. So she had called in that Monday to tell them that her father passed and that she wanted an extra week time off. She knew she had used up her vacation but she was going to take leave without pay. The supervisor told her no, she couldn't have that time. She had to come in to work. Well, see, that really made me mad because the girl came in that Thursday and the job she had involved filing. The bins were tall stand-up file cabinets that you filed in standing up, and I just kept watching her all that Thursday filing in the bins and sniffing and snorting and crying. That really didn't sit well with me, so I went to the supervisor again and I told her, "I know I ain't got any business saying this. I know I got nothing to do with it, but I really think that you were really, really mean in having the girl to come back to work on Thursday. She just buried her father yesterday. Anybody should have been given the entire week off. And I want you to know if I'm working here and anything ever happens to my father, I am just not coming in and I don't care. If anything ever happens to my mother, I'm not coming." And I asked her, "Do you have a mother and a father?" I said, "I know you got two children because I hear you talk about them, but do you have a mother and a father?" And when she didn't say anything I said, "Did you ever have a mother and father?" Well, she did write me up for insubordination that time because I guess I was insubordinate.

INTERVIEWER: You knew she would eventually, didn't you?

MERRILL: Yes, I knew it was coming.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to you? Did anything happen?

MERRILL: No, I just had to go talk to next step supervisor and all that bullshit. She asked me could I please restrain myself from taking on the problems of everybody and just stick to looking out for myself. And I told her I'd do the best I could with what I had to work with. And I started trying to explain to her what motivated me to do these things. She told me she wasn't interested in my family, she wasn't interested in my background, she wasn't

MERRILL: interested in my religion. All she wanted me to do was come in and do my work and keep my mouth closed and stay out of everybody else's business. So I told her I would really do the best I could but I wasn't promising. I didn't, I never promised her. So things went along for about a year after that, really kind of shaky. I had taken an exam for promotion and after I passed the exam there was a couple of openings at what was then called our Northern office, 4200 North Lincoln Avenue. The promotion was what was called the financial clerk. Those are the girls that initially make up the budgets for the people on welfare. What I was doing was totalling up and approving the hospital bills, but this was a little step forward. They called the Area Manager for all the financial districts in the Public Aid Complex. I used to ride with her in a car pool. I rode in this car pool and on the days she had to come to the building where I worked, she would be in this car pool. So she and I had started kind of talking and we had gotten kind of friendly. So when I passed the exam and they called me down to the central office--the department was trying to integrate this office up on the North Side. At that time, they had one supervisor and one case worker--the switchboard operator and the matron--who were black. And all the other staff were white. God, they must have had 300 staff.

So when they called me down to the central office--I guess they called everybody in the group who had passed the exam down at the same time--they would like to assign you offices. Well, a couple of other black people they had asked about going up North; they all refused. Most of them didn't want to travel that far. Well, me, I accepted it. In fact, I thought it would be nice. I mean, it was difficult getting up there. Then I didn't drive so I had to take public transportation. I got up there and they took me into the department. There were three rows and the supervisor put me on the third row in the front--I mean, right out there where everybody could see. I don't know for whatever reason she did it, but I didn't like it. I looked around and there was a couple of other seats there and I said, "She's going to sit me right out here so I'll be an easy target." So the girl that was the switchboard operator, later on that afternoon, she came by and asked me my name, and I told her. And she started telling me all these things I was going to have to do in order to get along. And I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You'd better start talking to some of these other folks about what they're going to have to do to get along with me. Evidently they need their job as much as I need mine. My grandfather always said, 'Don't ever kiss anyone where you can't kiss yourself' and that means don't kiss nobody's ass. I ain't kissing no ass to work." Well, I don't think the two years we worked there we ever said a couple of words to each other because she thought I was really crazy. She thought I was really crazy. Well, my grandfather did always say that. He always told us that even when we were little things.

INTERVIEWER: Maybe she was afraid you'd end up getting her fired, too.

MERRILL: Then some of the girls started talking about how hard the work was and I wasn't ever going to be able to learn it. I listened to them talk a couple of weeks. One day one of the girls came to me and she started. Poor little Sylvia. I used to say some things to Sylvia that just really.... [laughed] We still call each other now and then.

The first thing that I said to her was that the unit--there was a couple of just white Anglo-Saxons and there were three or four Jewish girls in the unit. And I had never been around Jewish people that much until then and I didn't understand how they could argue so. I mean, they would argue and then in two or three minutes they'd be walking on off the best of friends. And I turned around one day and I told them, "You know, if a bunch of Negroes were carrying on like you folks are, somebody would be fighting or be hurt. Secondly, you're just making too damn much noise for me. I'm trying to read my manual." So Sylvia, she kind of looked up at me. I know they wondered what in the world is this we got now. And I told them, "The way you all keep on arguing, I just don't understand it." And I really didn't; to this day I don't. Of course, I've worked with a lot of Jews since then in and out of the union and I still don't understand how they can get in such heated arguments when it doesn't mean anything.

Anyway, she and I would start, she was the first one to start talking to me after that. But then she made the mistake of telling me that I wasn't going to be able to learn that particular job. I said, "I am not blind, I am not crippled, and I am not illiterate, as none of you are. And if all of you have learned it, I will, too. Don't you worry about that. I take that manual home with me at night and I study it, so don't you worry about me."

I passed my six months probation. The day after I passed my six months probation I joined what was then the union in the department. It's still Local 73, but we had a unit of Local 73 of service employees. It represented the workers in the Department of Public Aid. I never will forget. I passed my probation I think it was on a Wednesday and that Thursday I joined the union because I thought I was going to need it. I said to myself, well, you've been with Public Aid now almost three years. With luck, you've stayed out of serious trouble, but you're going to get into some serious trouble. So I joined the union. And then I said, well, if I'm going to stay up here in the Northern office with all these white folks and every time somebody says something to me I'm ready for them: I know I'm going to need it. Well, when I joined I started going to the meetings. I didn't like the way the office meetings were being conducted. Then I went to a couple of meetings at the union hall and they was even worse. I get along well with Irv Kurash now. He still calls me the young radical. Now Kirschenbaum--he was our business agent.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of problems did you have?

MERRILL: Well, he did not represent the people. I mean, they'd go to him with problems and he'd start explaining to them management's side of it. I had enough sense to know that that wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Then a couple of times, when we went down to the union halls for union meetings, he wouldn't let the various office stewards or the members ask any questions from the floor. He ran a very tight ship. You didn't question anything. Then, Public Aid was under Cook County, it wasn't under the state. To make a long story short they were going to impose a pay freeze. The department had come out with this memo that they were going to impose this pay freeze so that they would be able to adequately provide services for the people. It pitted us against the clients, you know. Well, I read that crap and I said there's something wrong. So I waited to see what the union was going to do. A bunch of us was going to go to the union meeting and see what the union was going to do. He started explaining all the problems that the agency had been under and the spiraling cost of welfare and all this crap. So what we kept pressing for was some kind of one-day demonstration to at least demonstrate our displeasure and get out all this bottled up feelings.

They finally, after about three or four heated meetings, they finally agreed that we could have a demonstration at the County Building at ten o'clock on Saturday morning. Now, ain't nobody in the world at the County Building on a Saturday morning. And we knew right then it was a sellout. So two or three other people--they were on Division Street, 73 was on Division Street then, it wasn't on Wells. So we were coming out of the union office after we'd heard this whole big deal, and to them it was great that we were going to have this demonstration on Saturday morning at the County Building. I guess it was the first time they'd ever had anything, a lot of the members thought it was great. A couple of people behind me, they was mumbling and grumbling so I turned around. I knew how I felt, so I just kind of started talking to them. This one girl, she's since passed away, and a young fellow out of my office, Alan Kaplan, who I'd seen was one of the case workers. I had seen him around the office and he's now the Regional Vice President of AFGE.* Helen worked in one of the South Side offices, but I guess they had been seeing each other over the years at union meetings, so they were just walking out talking like this. I turned around and I said, "Oh, me too. That's the way I feel about it." And we started talking.

So outside on the street some other people came up who kind of knew Helen and Alan, and folks just started talking. We went to a restaurant there at Clark and North Avenue and we were just sitting around talking. Everybody was disgruntled and displeased. One of the fellows said, "Well, can't we do something? We need a group of our own. Maybe we're just in with the wrong group. They represent janitors and everything and they don't really know anything about the people that work for Public Aid." I said,

*American Federation of Government Employees

MERRILL: "That sounds pretty good to me. So we just kept talking and talking.

Well, the next union meeting Don Litch, who's the one I told you went to England, he got up, he challenged Kirschenbaum on something and Kirschenbaum told him to sit down and shut up. Well, I knew damn well it wasn't his union because we were paying dues so it couldn't have belonged to him. And Don kept talking and started walking toward the podium. Now, I don't know who hit who, but somebody hit somebody and the place just went up in pandemonium. The meeting, of course, was adjourned, to say the least. So everybody got out of there and that night we went back to this restaurant and that's when we really kind of decided--that night--that we didn't know what we were going to do, but we was going to start something on our own, a group within the department just for us. It didn't have anything to do with any of the other 73 people.

Well, we decided we needed to talk to somebody who knew something about unions. One of the fellows knew somebody that knew Charlie Chaiulkis. Charlie Chaiulkis is deceased now. I don't know whether you've ever heard of him but he came out of the UAW. He was an old time union organizer. And through some people that I knew in Hyde Park, I knew Carl Shier. If there is anybody that I think I revere as much as my father and my grandfather it would be Carl. Carl took up time and did things with us and for us that I just don't know anybody else that would have did it.

Anyway, we got in touch with him and we told him what we we trying to do. And after they got over having their first stroke they said, "My God, we got to give you all a fast education in a hurry." So, we'd go over to Carl's house and they would just sit and talk for hours to us about unions, the trade union movement, early organizing, the history of unions, what we were going to be about, independent unions versus affiliated unions, public employee unions--which was really kind of a new thing then because this was in late '64. They took up time with us that was just priceless. You just don't find people that are established and have things, that will take up that kind of time with a group of folks that didn't know what would come of what we were talking about. As we progressed into '65, this group kind of grew to about fourteen or fifteen people. We knew then that we had to get together more cohesively, so we decided we would just kind of call ourselves an independent organizing committee of public aid workers. We had one person in just about every office, so we started talking to other people who were disgruntled as we were and telling them that we were thinking about trying to start this union. We didn't call it a union at first. We were going to start a Public Employees Association, that's a nicer word. And I never will forget that one meeting a week. We would give up our lunch hour to meet and then we would meet like once a week in different one's homes. That was really good. The first thing that it did was allow people, who probably never would have had any kind of contact with other kinds

MERRILL: of people, to see how they lived, where they lived, and their life styles. There was single men, single women, a couple of the girls had families, blacks and whites. So that was the first thing that we accomplished--was putting us all in a group where we had to depend on each other and where we really got to know each other, not as a man or a woman or a black or white, but just as another worker. So that was good. Well, we started meeting and then Charlie and Carl finally said, "Well, you either got to shit or get off the pot." Actually they didn't say that, my grandmother said that. They said we got to decide what we are going to do. And if we're going to become an independent group, we got to start working toward that end. So we decided on the name--the Independent Union of Public Aid Employees--and then declared ourselves publicly as to who and what we were. That's when the shit hit the fan. The agency came out with a decree that we could not meet on any of the agency's premises. If any one of us was ever seen talking to another, just all kinds of shit; we were constantly watched all day for any little infraction of the rules. We were called into our Supervisors' offices. Everybody's work had to be just so, top-notch and without any flaw or error. They really started in on us. They picked off a couple, two or three got suspended for various things. They began to pick us off to kind of isolate us, reprimand us publicly in front of our co-workers so that the co-workers could see what happened to dissidents.

Of course, meanwhile 73 was sitting back clucking, doing nothing. And at that time, we were all still dues-paying members of 73. Well, I don't remember what happened but Tom Lesch got suspended for a week. I don't remember what the reason was, but we really felt that 73 would have found occasion to fight his suspension and we went to them. And they said they were taking a hands-off attitude, we were regarded as a bunch of radicals, we were trying to disrupt the department and disrupt the flow of the relationship of the union and the department.

Well, they did nothing. So that was the last straw. We said okay, we'll go out and we'll form our own group and we'll still call it an association. So I was talking to my grandfather about it and he said, "Association is not going to cut it, what you all are talking about is unionizing. Haven't these two men you've been talking to, since they're both from the UAW, had that in mind?" I said, "No." And I think, looking back on it--they probably felt that they were trying to wait until the proper time to spring it on us that that's what we were really doing. My grandfather said, "Well, that's what you're doing. You'd better get your act together." He said, "Are you ready?" I said, "I don't know. Well, we've already started now and it's too late to go back."

So, we started. And we got a little storefront office at the corner of Harrison and Plymouth Court, a little storefront walk-in, through some various means. A couple of people donated our

MERRILL: rent. Money was gotten somehow or other from the UAW and from the then old Packinghouse Workers before the merger. Just whoever Charlie and Carl could find. And word started getting around that there was this group of young people from the Welfare Department. It kind of caught people's fantasy to think that of all places--the Welfare Department--was fixing to start organizing. Not only the whole thing about public employees but welfare and social workers. It began to get out and catch people's fancy, so we began to meet folks and hear from folks from a lot of different places. Meanwhile all this was going on, we're still getting all this inside pressure. And I mean, they got to the point where they would start staggering folks' lunch hours so we never would have a chance to have lunch together. So we still had to meet before work or after work. They issued an order that we couldn't pass out any material on agency time. So we would have to get up and come to work and be outside the offices leafletting as people were going in before 8:30. Once in a while, somebody could think of a good excuse to get an early dismissal so we could be out when people got off work.

That winter of '65 I got a very, very bad case of flu and I was home for a couple of weeks. I think I must have went back to work too soon because I had a relapse. Well, then I still wasn't driving, so my doctor felt that to travel up to the Northern office was too far for me to go after having been sick. I asked for a transfer. They denied the request for the transfer. I went back to the doctor and he asked me, had I gotten my transfer, so he wrote up this whole medical thing. "No," he said. "There must be some kind of way I could send in a slip or a notice to get you a transfer." I said I didn't know. I told them that I had been sick with the flu, and they know because I brought in my slip from when I had been off. So I said I'd find out. I didn't ask anyone at the agency, what I did was ask Carl. I says, "If a person is sick or has a very good reason to want leave or be transferred, do they have a right to deny it?" He didn't know but he said he would try to find out the personnel rules, which he did. And he let me know that I could get a medical transfer.

So I did get a medical transfer. I was transferred from there--at that time we had offices in the housing project--and I was transferred from there to the offices in the housing project. That made me doubly mad, going to work in that concrete concentration camp. I was mad at the Agency, and I was mad at the City because then I was exposed to the conditions of folks living in housing projects. I was just mad period. I was mad at everybody.

We kept on working, organizing, starting a union. When we began to collect, we had a dues structure of a dollar a member. And I mean, for eighteen months we collected dues from the people by hand every payday, going around and getting the dues and writing out a receipt. In 1066 we had gotten a pretty good

MERRILL: group, I guess we had gotten a couple of hundred people. We had gotten a constitution, we had worked out a structure of officers and everything. The first constitutions--Carl arranged for them to be printed at Solidarity House in Detroit. Max had a raggedy car--Max is the fellow that's now the president of the Local. He had by then come into the group. The thing was that we would have to go over there and pick them up and come back. The UAW was going to print them, but they would not mail them back to us. We would have to figure out a way to get over there and get them. So, to make a long story short, Carl loaned us his blue Chevrolet to drive over there. Coming back, we got caught in a snow storm; it was Pat, myself, and Max. We got caught in this snow storm. We tried to get a motel room in Grand Rapids. Now, one black and two whites, they wouldn't let us have a hotel room. We didn't have enough money for no two rooms. We was going to rent a room for me and Pat. So all three of us ended up sleeping in the lobby of that hotel. Now that was dumb! The hotel would rather have us three out there in the lobby than let us rent a room. But anyway, that's what they did. We got to Chicago anyhow with the contracts. We thought we were pretty well on our way and our next step would have been to have gone to the department and to 73 to file for a recognition of the group. The agency denied recognition. In May of 1966 we called a strike, what we called a recognition strike, and we were out on the street for eight days.

INTERVIEWER: But you got it?

MERRILL: We got it. Not only that, but we also won the right to have a representation election in the department, the first time ever that the employees would have been able to vote in an organization to represent them; an organization they wanted. It would have been us on the ballot, 73, or no-union. The other thing that we won while we were out on that strike--remembering my days with the Treasury Department--I come up with the idea that we should start a credit union. It would be another organizing tool. At that time, credit unions were not legal for public employees to have through check-off. When we were negotiating with the County Board the agreements under which we would go back to work from this eight day strike.... Of course, every day they was threatening to get an injunction and throw us in jail and all that stuff. They didn't do nothing, but they kept threatening. They were trying to get us back to work before they really had to throw us in jail. So as we were discussing all these things, we won check-off, we won dues check-off. We told them it was just too hard to keep trying to collect this dollar once a month. We raised the dues to two dollars but we did get dues check-off. We got recognition and the procedure set-up whereby we would have the collective bargaining election. In getting check-off, the fellow that we then had representing us, who is now a state representative, he came up with the idea of having the Credit Union by check-off, in other words, having different classes of dues. Some dues could be $4.00. We called

MERRILL: it dues but when we would get the print-out sheet and the check, then we would write a check. I mean, this is how we did it after we got it, but that's what we did. When we got check-off then we told the department that we would have different classes of dues and we were the first public employees--I don't count the teachers in that--we were the first public employees in the state of Illinois to establish a credit union.

INTERVIEWER: You got a lot done at one fell swoop.

MERRILL: And when they came with the charter, nobody had no money because we'd all been out on strike. Everybody was poor and seven of us had to sign the charter, and then to start the credit union, everybody had to open up an account of five dollars and a quarter. Nobody had no money. I called the house and Mama loaned us $37.00. Everybody else was scraping but we got it together and we started the Credit Union. Well, we really thought we was on our way. We had gotten the Credit Union, we had gotten recognition, we had gotten dues check-off, we had gotten the mechanism satisfied where we would have a collective bargaining agreement. By that time, 73 was really getting nervous because they saw this group. What did they call us? Dissident, radical, pinkos. Just poor little simple social workers, but that's what they called us.

INTERVIEWER: You said something about you still had the name of 73, or the number.

MERRILL: No, not now. We had dropped that, we was the Independent Union of Public Aid Employees. We had nothing more to do with 73. There were still a lot of people in the agency, though, that belonged to it. See, 73 had a good Credit Union. That's how I really got the idea also. And then there were a lot of people who thought this was a bunch of young radical people. Some of our leaflets--good organizing leaflets--but they said a lot of things that some people didn't want to hear, and some people thought were kind of foreign to social workers. You just don't start talking about bosses.

INTERVIEWER: So both unions still had members.

MERRILL: Not now, but they did until we won, until after we won the election. 73 then filed an "Intent not to be Included" and I think the County Board ruled against them in the election, that they had to be included on the ballot. Then we started organizing big for the election. 73 at first was campaigning to vote for them. About three weeks before the date of the election they could see that they were losing and they started campaigning on a no-union vote. They came right out and said that they would rather see no union there than us. And they entered into a massive campaign to vote no-union.

INTERVIEWER: Was the election close?

MERRILL: No, we won by about 470 votes. The ballots were counted at the American Arbitration Association. Everybody was down at the hall that night. And when they came out and announced the vote, we won.

INTERVIEWER: So then you had to elect officers.

MERRILL: We had to elect officers and we ran an election campaign. We elected officers and we were finally an established union.

INTERVIEWER: And what year was all this?

MERRILL: It went from late '66 to early '67.

INTERVIEWER: So the union is only a little over 10 years old, it's an infant still.

MERRILL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were you one of the first officers?

MERRILL: I wasn't on the first Executive Board. I was what we called an office rep because I wanted to stay close to the people. We had a president, vice president. The next year we changed the constitution and made more officers but the first officers were the president, vice president, secretary and the treasurer. And a case-work vice president and a clerical vice president so that those two main classifications would have slots on the board. Now the slot that I would have normally had would have been the clerical vice president, which we let Helen have, first of all because Helen worked at an office where there was a larger contingent of clerks. By that time, I enjoyed being able to go around to the different offices and sign up members. I had begun to really get a taste for organizing, so I wanted to stay kind of free. So they gave me the clerical rep at large type and I wasn't taking time off. I mean, I was using up sick time and everything else going around organizing and, of course, on lunch hours all the time. And of course, we had the Agency roster--so I was calling around talking to clericals in the various district offices encouraging them to join the union. That I enjoyed.

INTERVIEWER: And I bet you did a good job of it.

MERRILL: Well, we got a pretty good number of clericals into the union. We were having some kind of ideological differences in the union, the kind of case-work philosophy versus the clerical. The clerical philosophy was more union-oriented, the case-work philosophy was more client and social service oriented. A lot of the things that the union would do and a lot of the stands that it took, they wanted a lot of them to reflect the interest of the client. It caused, I would say, for the next three years some very, very serious divisions in the union. We kept going and we kept building. After

MERRILL: we were established and set up everything and got going, the governing body was called the Rep Council. We could have Rep Council meetings that would start at 5:30 or 6:00 in the evening and go on until 1:30 or 2 a.m. in the morning, right down in that little hole in the wall on Harrison Street. And we'd have ideological arguments and fusses and fights. I mean, it would just go on and on and on.

INTERVIEWER: Did you finally resolve this difference or did it just disappear or what?

MERRILL: It finally died down. It still is there a little bit but it's not nearly like it was back in the early days. And a lot of it was because of people's naivete in terms of what a trade union was, people's social responsibility based on the kind of work they did--something that you really couldn't separate too much. It was hard, even with some of us clericals it was a hard thing. You just couldn't take a hard bread-and-butter trade union line because of the kind of work that we were involved in. When we started talking about the agency rules and regulations, some of them did spill over into client activities. So it was really rough, but we withstood it all from within. We would always put up a very, very unified force to the outside. But we've had some infights that was just unbelievable.

INTERVIEWER: Who was your first president?

MERRILL: Our first president was Alan Kaplan, the fellow that's now with AFGE.

INTERVIEWER: Did you keep that same job or did you switch around and take different jobs in this union?

MERRILL: I kept that job for a while. Okay, this is early '67, so then we started discussing pay raises, conditions of employment, client needs, all these kinds of things that you're supposed to discuss with your employer, with the agency. We were supposed to start having negotiations to negotiate our first contract. We got a "Memorandum of Agreement" from the County Board. Arnold Weber, who at that time was a mediator, I think--he's teaching Economics and Labor something now at an eastern university--but he mediated the agreements under which we went back for the '66 strike, and one of them was that we would start into labor-management meetings. I remember this memorandum had set up a structure for us to begin to have some kinds of negotiations on certain issues with the agency. So, naive that we were, we thought that all this was going to go along smooth, we were well on our way. It brought us--in April 1967--to another strike vote, which we took. We went out, by April 1967, on one of the longest strikes ever. We were on strike seven weeks. Personally, for me, that seven weeks was a lot of things. I was then an officer on the Executive Board because Helen had died of a heart attack. Helen had had the flu and I think she went back to work too soon. Anyway, she sat at

MERRILL: her desk and had a heart attack and died. We were like the two leading clericals, so I went on the Board then. My mother had gone in the hospital the week before we went on strike for one of her operations--that wasn't the total hysterectomy; yes, that was the year before she had the total because she had had the partial one the year before--Mama was in the hospital. Dearie, that's my grandmother, she was at home. That was when she first started having problems with her diabetes and emphysema and the kids were there. Well, to make a long story short, if I had not been on strike I would have been the only breadwinner in the house. So there was nobody gainfully employed in that household.

INTERVIEWER: You needed to become one of your own clients. How did you manage?

MERRILL: Well, the first thing we did was we talked the situation over with my dad. I told him, "You know people are going to call you a lot of things. You're going to be under a lot of pressure." Because by then, a lot of people in the Agency knew that we were father and daughter and here I am vice president and leading the strike. "But you're going to have to go to work every day because we're going to have to depend on you somewhat for some kind of financial aid." Now that was not to say that everybody agreed with what I was doing, but they knew that I was doing it. So my mother and my grandmother, they did have a little savings and I talked it over with them. We just had a family conference. We marched off to the hospital and everybody sat up in Mama's hospital room. Mama said, "Well, you know, you've got to do what you've got to do. You are what you are and I cannot change you. I've tried and it hasn't worked. If you have to go out on strike you just have to go." And we made it.

INTERVIEWER: That must have been rough.

MERRILL: It was rough both physically and mentally. I was carrying an awful lot of different kinds of burdens. We would go to the picket lines and then to negotiations. We didn't know till the end of the strike that the negotations were a farce. We were in negotiations with the Cook County Board that whole seven weeks, supposedly negotiating a contract. They sat in that federal building seven weeks with the Executive Board and the other members of the negotiating team, and when we finished that document, then the sons-of-bitches said that they had no authority to negotiate a contract with us. They went to the State's Attorney and he ruled that that body had no authority to enter a contract with us.

INTERVIEWER: That was a heartbreaker.

MERRILL: It was a heartbreaker. Anyway, we would go to the picket lines. The Executive Board would go because we felt like the members should see us on the picket line, so we'd go to the picket line some mornings. We'd be down at the Federal Building. Negotiations started at 10 o'clock. We'd be on the picket line from 7:30 to

MERRILL: 9 o'clock because most of the people had to go to work at 8:30. We'd go by our union office, freshen up a little bit, go to the Federal Building and we would be in negotiations from 10 to 1, break for lunch from 1 to 2, and then negotiate from 2 to 3:30 so that we could get back to the picket line. And every night we had a Rep Council meeting. Now this went on for seven weeks. And in between that, my mother is having all these operations and I'm running back and forth between the hospitals.

INTERVIEWER: What happened after seven weeks and you got it all arranged and then they told you they didn't have any authority? Then what happened?

MERRILL: Well, the reason it went seven weeks was because the extra week after we found out they had screwed us. When we had negotiated this agreement we were about beginning the sixth week and we thought everything was fine. We had the Federal Conciliation and Mediation Service in. They were going back and forth, so we come up with this document, hammered out a contract. Then we went to a County Board meeting for it to be ratified. And then the County Board threw it back at us and said that they had no intentions of ratifying it, and that they had no authority to enter into a collective bargaining agreement with one of its subordinate bodies. The only one of the commissioners that was on our side at that time was Simrow and, of course, he didn't stay a commissioner for too long. As things started going down toward the wire, there were a couple of sit-ins in the county offices and the County Police took some folks to jail.

INTERVIEWER: How many did they put in jail?

MERRILL: I guess at any one time there was probably never more than three of us. We were sitting right over there at that corner at Congress and Wabash deciding on who was going to go to jail, who was going to go sit-in to get taken to jail. I remember a little girl that was our secretary, Mary Hargrove, nice, sweet, little Irish girl from Melrose Park and she was saying, "I can't go tonight because I haven't got my toothbrush. I'd have to go home and get my wash-cloth and toothbrush." I said, "Mary, you won't have to worry about no washcloth and toothbrush in the County Jail."

INTERVIEWER: Wouldn't get a chance to use it anyway, right?

MERRILL: But on various occasions we had sit-ins in the County Building. So when we found out they had screwed us, we called a mass membership meeting over at Dr. Frye's church. We would meet anyplace. A lot of people were really good about letting us meet at different places. So we had this membership meeting over at Dr. Frye's church and we just put the proposition to them. Did they want to accept what the County Board said and have a six week strike with nothing? Or did they want to stay out for longer for something? So it was decided that we weren't going back in empty-handed.

MERRILL: We voted to continue to strike until such time as they agreed to at least some portions of the contract. Well, when the county saw that we were going to stay out, they were losing money, they were losing matching funds. We had escalated the sit-ins and the demonstrations and the carting off to jail. It really got kind of messy. Then we started a picket of the County Building. And a lot of little things [happened]--some management harassment, some people found sugar in their gas tanks and flat tires on the street, and some folks was getting pelted by raw eggs as they came out the door--a lot of little things like that. So, what it is, how it ended up, we didn't get too much and they didn't get too much. We went back in with a pay raise, vacation days, a couple of new classifications established. We did get some things for the clients. We won a graduation allowance and another allowance for the clients, I don't know what it was. But we ended going back for something. We did not go back with a completed contract. We did go back with the establishment of what they called the Union-Management Committee. Also, the grievance procedure, we got the grievance procedure with advisory arbitration; we didn't get binding arbitration. We set up a panel of arbitrators, the union would propose some and the agency would propose some. So we got something. And most of these things city and county employees just did not have in the entire state, so we were like a model for what eventually became massive statewide organizing for AFSCME. When we first started all this, another couple of people who helped us after Carl and Charlie initially took us under their wing.... Carl and Charlie, who knew Victor Gotbaum, began to talk to Victor about this group of folks and what they were about. Of course, Victor and Lillian Roberts were still here in Chicago over at the University of Chicago, organizing over there. He was head of the AFSCME Council here in Chicago. They donated to us one Xerox machine, just a little copying machine. When we were out on the first strike in '66, the recognition strike, they would do a lot of our leaflets and stuff. 73 filed raiding charges against AFSCME.

INTERVIEWER: But they weren't raiding, were they? You weren't joining them. So what happened?

MERRILL: They got the charges to stick. So AFSCME was under raiding charges for seven years. That's the length of time that you can have raiding charges.

INTERVIEWER: And that meant that during that seven years you couldn't join AFSCME or they'd be in big trouble.

MERRILL: Right, but I don't think we would have joined.

INTERVIEWER: You hadn't intended to join AFSCME, had you?

MERRILL: Oh, no. We intended to stay independent for the rest of our lives. We didn't want anything to do with anybody. We went out there

MERRILL: doing stuff that was making history for the state and doing things that had never been done before. I would never ever do it, but I have always hoped that someone would write a book about that whole story. Adelade Wheeler was talking to me when she was doing that book, The Roads Women Made. She was saying then that we need to write just a story about that. I said I had the records; I've got those cardboard file boxes stacked there down in the basement. And the kids argue, "Mama when you going to throw all this crap out?" But it would make a good story because it showed how a union could be organized from scratch. At the point that we started maybe thinking about affiliation it was in the late sixties, and not because we felt we needed it. But we just kind of sat down and took a good hard look at ourselves. Our membership had grown then to almost 3,000 members. The Department of Children and Family Services had become a state agency. We knew it wasn't going to be too long before the state took over the County Department of Public Aid, and we were looking at our inability then to organize on a statewide basis all the public aid employees throughout the state. We knew we did not have the resources or the manpower for that and a lot of other things. I mean, the whole political climate. That even though we were a union of sorts, we were still kind of outside the AFL-CIO and outside the AFL-CIO family, you know, an independent. We had changed our name again, we were now the Illinois Union of Social Service Employees. We thought it would be best to drop that Independent Union of Public Aid Employees; that didn't sit right with some people. Then we began to think seriously about possibly an affiliation. We sort of started putting out feelers. District 65 sent some people in to talk to us. Then, of course, Service Employees had elected a new national president, George Hardy. He started sending a couple of people in to talk to us, a couple of their national organizers. And one fellow we sort of fell in love with, George Gaegen, came out of California and had been involved in a lot of the farm work and the grape organizing. (The first time Cesar [Chavez] came to Chicago in 1966 Alan and I fought over who he was going to stay with. He spent one night with Alan and one night with me. Since then, we were always great contributors to the Farm Workers.)

When Eliseo* was here, by that time, we'd moved twice. We'd moved from the little hole in the wall on Harrison Street to Dearborn Street to 323, the same building Labor Today is at now. John Kailen, who came out of our sister union in New York, he came to Chicago and started Labor Today, he started Labor Today on our machine. All around that period was kind of an upstart of public employee unions around the country. What's now that large AFSCME local in New York City of the social workers was an independent [union]. We all started out independent at the same time. They, of course, had an eight week strike and many of them were jailed. It was all going on at the same time: Baltimore, Maryland; Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Well, somebody got the bright idea out of New York that we should all kind of come together in a national organization. So we formed a National Federation of Social Service Employees and

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*Eliseo Medina, Vice-President, United Farm Workers

MERRILL: it was both affiliated and independent unions across the United States of social service agencies. A couple of the ones from California were all Service Employee affiliated unions, there was one AFSCME union, and the rest of us were all independent. The first one to actually go AFSCME was the New York local. Victor, by then, had gone to New York and he and Lillian was doing all these great things. Victor talked to them and they went into DC 37. If Victor had stayed here we probably would have joined. But by that time he had gone to New York. So the union in New York went under AFSCME.

All of the large cities had the same kind of inter-union troubles we had: the ideological difference between the professionals and the clericals, the question of where workers' rights end and clients' rights begin. There was a lot of this going on in all of these unions. We had Federation meetings quarterly and we'd talk about that and that would always be one of the things on the agenda. But then on top of that, there was a lot of political infighting. I mean, unions was changing officers. That's one thing, we only changed officers every two years, we didn't have a whole lot of dumping of officers. But down in New York--everything was going on in New York. Well, I don't know for what reason [but] John just threw up both hands and decided he wanted to come to Chicago and start a paper. When he got here he called the office. We all knew him because during one of the strikes in New York, we had all gone out there while they was on strike and some of them had come here. We knew that he was part of a kind of dissident group. So he came and started his paper and initially Labor Today got a little space in that building and started off on our machine.

INTERVIEWER: One of the by-products of your movement.

MERRILL: In late 1969 I was still with the Social Service Employees Union as vice-president. We had intensified our lobbying efforts in Springfield. So myself, as one of the officers, and another member that we had hired just as a lobbyist, spent a lot of time in Springfield. In fact, we spent three or four days a week in Springfield just lobbying on our issues. One of the things it did for me--I guess it gave me a closer insight into the workings of the state legislature. I'm not saying that's good or bad but anyway it did. And I learned how to write legislation and the legislative process; how legislators don't really write legislation, they have all these people to do it for them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you write legislation and ask them to introduce it?

MERRILL: On a couple of occasions, yes, we got some things done. We would write amendments with our own ideas for a number of bills that were coming up. I always said life was a learning process and everything you learn you can use somewhere. Well, we began to get ready for the union's 1970 elections. A couple of people had asked me about running for the presidency of the Local. I had

MERRILL: some reservations about it. First of all, I didn't really want to be president of the Local, I felt it would restrict me too much. Having been a vice-president those six years was restricting enough, but after I looked around at the available talent, I guess it got down to a couple of people. The other person at that time was knowledgeable and ready enough to run. So I ran [and won] and for two years, from '70 to '72, I served as president of the Local. It was kind of an interesting period because it saw a lot of changes in the public aid system.

One [change] that we had fought for was the ability of the clerical personnel to move into the casework field without benefit of going back to college for the degree. Now in some states and in some other areas.... It had really been pioneered in New York with the whole New Careers Program where clerical personnel were sent to colleges to receive an AA degree and then could move into the casework field. It had been explored here with the state and in particular a couple of initial pilot programs had been discussed with the City College system and with Circle Campus. For a number of different reasons nothing ever came out of it. We sat in on some of those discussions but the state and the schools couldn't come together on agreements in terms of money and all that kind of stuff. What we were able to get was the movement into the lower case work classification based on seniority and testing programs, inter-department testing. So that made those of us who had fought for that for the last five or six years really happy. It created a lot of problems. And I'm very happy that at that time I was, I suppose, a role model for the clericals. To be able to point to their then-president as being one of them; it kind of helped them over the hump. It was good for the casework staff, too. So that was a kind of a good two years.

At the end of that term I was seriously thinking about not really wanting to run again. I began to really feel I wanted to leave and do something else. I always had this feeling that things happened for the best. Well, I had gone away on vacation in the August of '72, the first time I had had a vacation in about four years. And when I returned, the fellow that was my vice-president--and we had been dear, close friends since the beginning of the union--I found had decided that he was going to run against me for the presidency and had been able to get a number of people on his team while I was on vacation. So I kind of put up a half-hearted--at first I was just going to drop out and the girl that was my treasurer, Sue Brown, who's with Actor's Equity now, she talked to me and said let's keep on. So she agreed to run as the vice-president. And a number of other people talked to me. We put on a pretty good campaign. We lost and I really kind of feel that it was because I really didn't have the kind of fight in me. It was one of those things where I would have done it another two years had I won but I wasn't really all that enthused in it.

We had started discussing, with a number of other unions, the possibility of merger. We had talked with District 65, of course, with Service Employees from their national office level, not from their

MERRILL: local level here. And we had just decided that for a lot of reasons we could never really affiliate with 65. Then AFSCME had come and started talking to us since the period of the statue of limitations on the initial raiding charges was over. They could start talking to us, so it kind of looked like the union was leaning toward affiliation with AFSCME, which I thought would be good for both parties concerned. They did officially affiliate with AFSCME in '73. As I said, we got a very good affiliation agreement, one that many of the other locals don't have. We took the largest local in the state into AFSCME with us. So I kind of felt there were a lot of other things I wanted to do. The union still thought of itself as small and still does and it doesn't really branch out. It doesn't get involved in a lot of other things.

So after these elections, when I did go back into the district office in late '72, I felt really a kind of restlessness. First, being with Public Aid. And secondly, with the union I started working with the Constitutional Committee after it looked like we were going to affiliate, but my heart really wasn't in that. So I just started doing a lot of other things that I had kind of let go. Then in '73, at the request of Addie Wyatt from the Meatcutters and Clara Day from the Teamsters, a couple of other union women--and Connie Seals from the Department of Human Relations--we started meeting with a group of union women down at the Packinghouse. Initially, we started meeting with these women--rank and filers, not too many officers and some women out of the community, the Urban League and NAACP--just to talk about the equal rights of women and how it affected us as trade unionists; [how it affected] some of the white women and some of the black women and just women in general. Because back then the AFL-CIO was opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment. So we were trying to sort of educate women around the Equal Rights Amendment. Well as we began to talk, then we discovered the other kinds of problems and similarities that women in various unions had. And it didn't make any difference whether it was in a service industry, a non-service, a public or a private. Union women just had a lot of kind of unique problems as union women.

Around that time there was a group, called The United Union Women, that was meeting; they weren't really doing too much of anything. So Addie and Clara and a couple of union women from out on the East Coast decided to start having a series of conferences on union women. And we drew on some of these things that we'd been discussing at these Monday evening meetings at the Packinghouse. They had a couple of regional conferences--one in Indiana, one in Illinois--through the early and middle part of 1973. Then we had a fairly large midwest conference for union women here in Chicago in the fall of '73. And some of the leaders of that conference invited a couple of women from Washington and a couple from New York to a meeting out at the Hyatt near O'Hare Field. As a result of that the idea flew into a lot of folks' heads that we should start this national organization for union

MERRILL: women. Now, that sounded really good on paper as we kicked it about. In the first place, we really didn't conceive it as a nationwide organization. We just conceived it as something that would draw from the Midwest, from the East Coast, and just with a few union women as a kind of brainstorming session, nothing really programmatic. And then we decided we've got to pull all these women together, though. So Addie and Charlie, as they always do, volunteered the Meatcutters for everything. They volunteered the use of their offices and we decided we would have this conference. We started doing mailings and talking to people and meeting in and around Chicago and they were meeting on the coast. Well, as we begun to go into '74 we had another meeting in January and this name [Coalition of Labor Union Women] was decided just because it sounded good. And it was a coalition.

INTERVIEWER: And it does sound good.

MERRILL: So that name was decided on. Now the corker was that we would have this conference in Chicago. Another reason for that consideration was that we had been doing a lot of the initial work out of the Packinghouse. Charlie Hayes had given us this room and the use of one of the switchboard operators who doubled as a part-time secretary: Miss Baker, who has since retired. He gave us the use of her and this space and all that. So that was the initial consideration in having this founding meeting in Chicago. The corker was, of course, we didn't have any money. We couldn't find a place to meet that we thought would be big enough for about a couple of thousand women, which is really what we thought would be coming. We finally found the Pick Congress Hotel and they agreed to take us on good faith, with no up front earnest money, and we would then pay them after the conference out of the proceeds from the registration. At that time their director of sales was a woman--oh, I should never forget her name because she was so nice to us. Even after that we would have a lot of smaller meetings there--it was Bea Abercrombie. So we had it at the Pick Congress. And many times many of us have said this, we honestly thought we was only going to have about 1,500 to 2,000 women there. And when all those people started coming in, everybody started to kind of freak out.

INTERVIEWER: How many were there?

MERRILL: It ended up around 3,600 or 3,700 women. It really freaked us out.

INTERVIEWER: Probably freaked the hotel out, too.

MERRILL: Everybody.

INTERVIEWER: I remember that they had to serve lunch twice.

MERRILL: Yes, the place was so crowded. And we had made up the little convention kits and everything. We had to run back to the

MERRILL: Packinghouse and get more supplies and make up more kits. And Florence Criley and somebody else went crazy working on registration. Florence was just crazy. She would keep running back in and say, "Okay, we signed up another hundred kits. Get back on the assembly line and get us another hundred kits." It was really wild, but we got over that and it was a very, very good conference, we thought. It was good coming together. Now the thing though, we had all of these women and initially we weren't geared, not set up, to do more than what we had done. After the conference was over, everybody left the conference so buoyed up that they started wanting programs. They wanted everything right away, and this was not in nobody's mind. We had set up, of course, the structure and everything, but it was just something that nobody would have thought they was really going to have to start working this hard this fast. It didn't really bother me too much, having gone through having started a union from scratch. But I think the women that came into it from unions that were established, they weren't used to making a lot of decisions and they weren't used to really jumping into organizing. It really kind of become a problem for them.

But women started calling us and writing us around the state. We had set up this structure and part of that structure then called for a State Convener; and myself and a girl out of the IAM* in Joliet were elected the Illinois State Conveners. Now, the girl out of Joliet, she was a fairly young girl. She worked a night shift at a plant. I think they were just trying to balance the two state conveners so it ended up with myself and Cathy. But Cathy and I did go down to the state fair that summer because that was the first summer they had the labor tent. I started doing a lot of traveling around the state, you know, talking to women. We went down to Danville and Taylor Springs and a lot of places.

So we started out trying to do a lot of things and then, of course, get Chicago together. The problems that Chicago had were unique. Initially and even somewhat now--although not as bad because we've gone through four years of serious growing pains--a lot of women saw CLUW as an alternative union, which was never what it was intended to be in the beginning and it never will be. That created a whole heck of a lot of problems. You know, it's like a kid that has to be on his best behavior at home and then when he goes to visit he feels like he can just do whatever he wants to do. That is the way a lot of women viewed CLUW: that this is the place I can bring all of my frustrations and my antics that I can't do in the union hall, and to denounce the national AFL-CIO, I mean, it was just not the kind of thing to do, especially to accomplish the kind of program we wanted.

You know, if you look at the initial four point program--legislative, affirmative action, organizing the unorganized, and the upward mobility of union women--none of us were about to get out of our unions. Too much time and effort had gone into it. We initially viewed a couple of things as important to the women. One was

*International Association of Machinists

MERRILL: education. And not just simple "ABC education" but education in terms of union politics, in terms of union negotiations and contracts, the kinds of things that historically women had been kept from doing for a lot of reasons. Some because they had never been given the opportunity and some because, to put it simply, they just couldn't function. And we had sense enough to know that if we were going to take our rightful place in our unions we had to have certain skills. Just like with women and minorities, the first thing people ask is what are their qualifications as opposed to a white male. It's one of those kind of situations. So we knew we had to have skills.

To our surprise, hundreds of women just don't know how to function at union meetings, how to [use] parliamentary [procedure to] maneuver things through. And I have always felt it was a deliberate attempt to keep them back. So we did a lot of education on parliamentary procedure. I personally did a lot of classes for CLUW and for a lot of local unions. But even with all of this, as I said, we had our problems: women that felt we should get involved in initial organizing drives, bring in all women as opposed to union women. We had our sectarian groups. Did we ever have our sectarian groups! The first two years were rough but we weathered that storm.

While nothing is ever perfect and it does have its little problems here and there I think that CLUW really has grown into a very, very visible organization and I would certainly encourage any woman that belongs to any kind of a labor organization to belong to CLUW. People often ask me what do I think that CLUW has accomplished in these last four years and my answer is probably something that they're not expecting. Because personally, I have to really say that, I think the largest thing that CLUW has accomplished is bringing women of diversified background--in terms of their work-life and their home life and their union life--together. I knew nothing hardly about piecework or about classes of machinery. I've met women in steel; I've met women coal miners; I've met women ditch diggers; I've met women that worked on the assembly lines and have talked to them about their problems and what it means to work on the assembly line. I had spent all my life as a public employee. These kinds of things I didn't know. So that is what CLUW has really meant to me. It's meant going to a lot of cities and towns in Illinois with some dirt roads and cornfields that I didn't even know exist. You know, you get out of Cook County [and] Illinois is another whole thing. And being able to talk about these things and come up with some solutions that transcend your union affiliation or your job classification, I think, is really good. And just to give an opportunity to grow. I have met union women, I have got friends that I never would have had had it not been for CLUW. I have a better understanding of myself as a person and as a worker; I certainly have a better understanding of a lot of other women and have been able to bridge a gap that never would have been bridged had it not been for CLUW--and not only just in Illinois but all across the country. I really think

MERRILL: if we haven't accomplished anything else that we've accomplished that for a lot of women, not just for myself.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever belong to NOW or any of the other women's organizations?

MERRILL: No. I've just never really been into that. I still have some problems with that whole group of what they call feminist women's organizations. And one of the things that kind of disturbed me about CLUW is because for a while, and even to a point now, it was lumped in with that whole kind of feminist movement and feminist organizations. And as a result of CLUW goals I have worked with them. In fact, there is one organization I'm now on the board of that I've worked with for a couple of years. But initially you'll find that a lot of feminist organizations were anti-union. They have had to change their position here lately. Just as you evolve and get involved in things you see that you have to have certain kinds of allies. And I think a lot of their position is changed just based on their need for certain kinds of allies for their programs, and it's been good for them and it's been good for us. But I was never into feminism.

INTERVIEWER: What's the name of the other organization that you've been active in?

MERRILL: The Illinois Women's Agenda and the Midwest Women's Center. So, as I said, you can pick up the phone now and you can talk to a Gloria Johnson in Washington if you want to find out something or else Marjorie Stearn in California, people that have existed as long as I have but we just never knew each other. I really think if CLUW's done nothing else--of course it's done a lot of other things--but I think that's the greatest accomplishment.

INTERVIEWER: How do you account for the fact that people in it get along better with each other than they did at first? Did some of the people drop out or did you come to a meeting of minds about priorities?

MERRILL: Well, I think a lot of them dropped out and what it left was the real trade union woman. And I differ with a lot of my friends and associates here in Chicago. I was not out to castigate. There were some that just almost wanted us to bodily pick them up and throw them out and I said, "You know if you let folks talk long enough people will get to know them." And I took the position it was better to let them talk as long as they wanted to. I used to tell them, "Write whatever you want to write, just spell my name right. Come up with all the resolutions you want to come up with." And I was against those who wanted to repress and suppress them. Because I had sense enough to know that if you repressed and suppressed them they would only go underground for a while and resurface later. So let everybody know right off the top where they were coming from, and then when they found it out they would make them so unwelcome--which eventually is what happened. Of course, it took us through out next convention, the one in Detroit, to get over this hump. There was a

MERRILL: lot from other places around the country but we had a fairly good group from Chicago. Now they eventually just left. I understand some are still with some unions some places and some have gone into other kind of radical activities and some are just hanging out, so to speak. But it was healthy for us and it was best that it came in the beginning.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think CLUW has a good future ahead of it now that it's gotten on its legs, learned how to walk, et cetera?

MERRILL: It has a good future. Another one of the problems--we have said this oft times in our executive board meetings both here and our national--is that we had to catch with the media's portrayal of us. There were people and there are still people out there [when] you mention CLUW, the Chicago chapter or the national, they've got visions of this large organization doing all of these great things, and I think "Thank God for the media" in this case for what it did. It did propel a lot of us into areas that we never would have been propelled into. What we have to do is to go about the business of living up to that image that has been created for us. I think our last convention was a very firm, good step in the right direction. We have a new officer structure and I hate to say this because she comes out of my union and I work for Amalgamated, but our new national president is one heck of a person. She is just so together and she's really motivated us all. She's a 24-hour workhorse, she's a slave driver; but yet and still, she's gentle, she's compassionate, she's just all kinds of things that a leader could be. It has really given us a whole new outlook and we have restructured our committee system.

INTERVIEWER: Don't you think you'd better mention her name after saying all those nice things about her?

MERRILL: Joyce Miller, Vice President of ACTWU [Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union]. She's really kind of brought us all together. When she sends you a letter or calls you up, you just don't mind.

There's more of a division of the work load, not only in terms of the national executive board members and the local chapters. Everything is just changed and it has really just made it great. We made some other constitutional changes at that convention. We put in another state structure to take the place of the original structure that we started out with, the state conveners. That position is called the state vice-president, but it still is almost the same thing. That person is helping in terms of organizing chapters around the state and staying on top of chapter problems and assisting chapters with their programs.

INTERVIEWER: You have just one state vice-president?

MERRILL: We have a state vice-president and an alternate state vice-president in every state. Now every state hasn't elected a person to that

MERRILL: position. Those states that haven't, the national board appoints the person we call the convener to go in and hold the election, then the person is elected. But in Illinois we had the two elected.

INTERVIEWER: Are you getting new chapters?

MERRILL: Oh yes, I'm sorry to say we don't have but the one active chapter in Illinois. That's the Chicago chapter. But we have been working with a couple of other groups, one in Peoria. Springfield was almost at the point of getting a chapter a couple of years ago and they ran into some problems. We've got to really do a lot of work with them to bring that group back; a lot of it was internal problems. But it looks like we might get something going down in Decatur, Illinois. So there's a lot of feelers out. It's just that the requirements in terms of the number of meetings that you have to have, the number of unions that you have to have involved.... What we do is, we might get a feeler from one or two union women and we've got to go out and find five other unions and twenty-five other women that'll join us. Our membership has increased in the state.

INTERVIEWER: I see, but not the number of chapters.

MERRILL: Our membership has almost doubled within the last twelve or fourteen months in the state. And you know, we get requests for material and stuff from all over so I think probably before too long we will see a couple of more chapters. One of the other things that I think has been good about CLUW is that a number of union groups of both rank and filers and a number of lower level union officers have been able to become involved in a lot of other community type things, and to have their voices and their thoughts as union women known, to be able to make input. We've been involved in conferences and seminars and weekend educationals, things that I would think had it not been for CLUW, we would have never been able to become involved in.

Many of us got put on a whole lot of boards, and they're good now because they would have never had a union woman's perspective. We've run around the state and the country making a lot of speeches to a lot of groups that five or six years ago you never had union people involved in. And we have taught in universities' labor education associations. We have set up these geographical schools for women workers. We have the one in the South, the one in the East,and the one in the Midwest area, which have brought together union women from all around in those areas and taught them basic skills. So people say "what have you done?" and a lot of them say it kind of menacingly and you almost are frightened, but look at what has been accomplished. As I said, it has opened a lot of doors for us. We've also opened up a lot of doors for a lot of other people. I think it's been time well spent.

INTERVIEWER: You've been a top officer of the Illinois group since its founding, right? You're vice-president now and you were a convener earlier.

MERRILL: Yes, and then I was president of the Chicago chapter for that same length of time, three years.

INTERVIEWER: Have you passed that on to someone else?

MERRILL: Yes, Muriel Tuteur, who is the director of our Amalgamated Day Care Center, is now Chicago Chapter President.

INTERVIEWER: Looks like the clothing workers are prominent in CLUW.

MERRILL: Oh yes, we've always had good membership. Of course, I'm a clothing worker now, when I started out I was not.

INTERVIEWER: And we have to talk about that, too, how you became a clothing worker.

MERRILL: Well, we've got CLUW going and I'm really spending a lot of time with CLUW and its activities. I've taken a lot of days off going around the state talking to union women and I've gotten involved in speaking to a lot of universities. And I never would have had that kind of opportunity had it not been for CLUW. I mean, we did a couple of things before in Champaigne but not on the scale that we began to do it. Now I'm traveling all up and down this state, all over.

It was good for me, because as I said, I was tired of Public Aid and I kind of lost interest in the union. So I was beginning to become involved with a lot of other people and I had gotten out of that tight little close family of just public aid workers. I'd met all kinds of people, men and women, union folks from all over. Folks can have their kings and their queens and their presidents, just give me a bunch of good old-fashioned trade unionists and I'll have a ball. They're some good fun people and I was beginning to meet a lot of them and just really enjoying myself. We were getting ready for our CLUW meeting in the early fall of '75 and I had been hearing and reading a lot of stuff about the problems of textile workers and the Textile Union of America and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. Now this is such a weird story that I have to say that it is the gospel truth. I had really become engrossed in a whole new wave of trade unionism that was sweeping the South and I had not been aware of this because I just hadn't had a chance to. I saw the movie,"Contract"--about three or four times--on the organizing of the Oneida textile plant. Of course, I knew a little bit about the Farah stuff because,even being public employees, you go out and walk a picket line and stuff with them. But these textile workers were always getting shafted. I remember reading early labor history about what they were doing in New England, but this stuff in the South was kind of new to me. So I started getting my hands on everything I could about what was going on and especially the involvement of the women and the black workers in the organizing.

MERRILL: So then I heard that the unions were going to merge, the Textile Workers and the Amalgamated were going to merge, and that one of their top priorities would be this organizing: a stepped-up intensive organizing of the Stevens plants. That boycott sort of caught my fancy so I always stayed on top of it. And we began to think that it was something that we could start talking about to some of the CLUW women, just to kind of educate them and to get them thinking. As much as we talked about our unions and what they didn't do for us, where we would be if we had had no unions. I used to tell them that the union is the best insurance card you can carry and this kind of thing.

So in late summer--we don't usually have a summer CLUW meeting but this time we decided that we would have our first meeting in August--so in August (or July) of '76 the girl that heads the Education Department at Amalgamated asked if I had sent the agenda for the CLUW meeting and I said no. She said, "Well, our Union Label Director who is in charge of the boycott...." I said, "Yes, I know that the boycotts are under the Union Label Department." I went on and started telling her all I knew about it, this whole thing about textile. I had really gotten into this union label and buying America. I don't know how you just start getting involved in new things. One day I woke up and I was interested in all of this stuff. I told her I knew who he was, and she said he wanted to come and bring some literature on the Stevens campaign and maybe he could get some of the women working on store surveys and stuff. So I said, "Oh sure, it will be the first time we've ever had a man as a guest speaker at one of our CLUW meetings." So he came that Saturday. We had the meeting there at the Amalgamated office where we had most of them. And I'm going on and on getting them interested and I'm still talking about the Stevens situation and the workers in the South and the union and going on and on. Then I sat down and I never thought any more about it. I appointed two women to work with him as the CLUW women to set up the initial store surveys and I was just through with it after that.

Well, that next week Bronwyn and Heather Booth from the Midwest Academy.... Now, Heather was also the vice-president. I had told her to be in charge of the women that were going to make the surveys, plus Heather and I are also very good friends. I just think she is a remarkable person. I've known her for a long time and I could go on about her and the Academy. Anyway, they called me and said that they had had lunch with this Stan Clare, the Union Label Director, and that the Amalgamated was going to be bringing on a lot of staff people all over the country, but they were specifically looking for one in Chicago because Chicago was a big key area. He had taken them to lunch at a new Chinese restaurant, the Abacus up on North Clark Street. And then I got angry, you know I love Chinese food. I said, "You went to the Abacus!" And they said, "Well, we started not to tell you where we went". But as it turned out, he wanted to feel them out as to how I would accept an offer to come to work for the Amalgamated.

INTERVIEWER: Had you thought of it yourself?

MERRILL: Not in my wildest dreams. I was kind of satisfied that I would probably stay with Public Aid but I wouldn't have to spend too much time with the union there because I had CLUW. And I was getting all involved in a lot of other things and so I had a kind of freedom based on my positions in the union and based on how well I was known. Nobody bothers me about taking two and three hour lunches, and nobody bothers me about staying on the phone all day or coming in late or leaving early, because they didn't know that I might take a whole unit out on strike or something. So I had a lot of freedom to still do a lot of the other things that I wanted to do. And I mean, I could take a day off, vacation or sick or whatever, to go on off to a school or something. So I had just kind of made that peace with myself and I was not looking for another job. So they told me that they were going to be interviewing a couple of other people but he wanted to interview me, too. He wanted to know from them whether if he would make the initial feeler he would be accepted or rejected. I said, "What did you tell him?" Heather said, "Well, we told him to talk to you, that I thought you might be amiable. And we went on praising you, that you'd be a good organizer, that that was really your forte."

So at that time, it was shortly after the two unions merged, they were putting on a lot of staff in a lot of places. The editor now of our national newspaper, Tom Herriman--who had been in charge of our Midwest news--he was still here and going to New York. He had been appointed but he hadn't left yet. So he was asked and he turned in a glowing recommendation. All this was going on and I didn't really know all this. I'm getting all this stuff secondhand. Finally, I supposed Joyce Miller was approached. Joyce knew me from CLUW. I assume that she gave a very good recommendation. I'm pretty sure she had to because her word carries a lot of weight.

Then I was called by this Stan Clare and asked if I would like to meet him for lunch, that he would like to talk to me about working for the Amalgamated, and I told him that I'd heard this, that I did expect a call. But I told him I'm really not interested in a job, I'm not looking for a job. I'm happy with what I'm doing and I just thought that CLUW could play a part in the boycott. So I said I would meet him for lunch and, bless his heart, he took me to the Abacus. I told him you'd already gotten off on the wrong foot if you took me anyplace else. So we talked about it. Early September they were going to have the first meeting of all the new boycott staff from all over the country and bring in all the national officers. He called me and asked me would I consent to come down to the hotel and meet with the national director of the union label department and a couple of the vice-presidents. They were coming in that evening so I went down there and I had dinner with them. Well, I don't

MERRILL: know what I did or said, I just heard that they all said they liked me right off the bat.

Now, I know that they were interviewing an Amalgamated member out of one of the shops out in another state; and another person that had done some organizing in the South around brown lung and had been doing some environmental stuff, who had also come out of Heather's Academy. When I got back home that night from the dinner--which was about eleven o'clock--Stan Clare was calling me on the phone asking me could I come the next day and sit in on their staff meetings all that day. And I just kind of hesitated because it shocked me. And he said, "Oh, we'll pay you whatever your daily salary is and your parking and all." I guess he thought I hesitated because of that. I said, "Well, wait a minute, this is all so...." And he said, "Well, Joyce Miller wasn't in on the meeting last night but she will be there tomorrow and I think she might want to talk to you." He was really talking fast and was telling me that Stan Rosen, who I already knew had been an organizer for Textile, would be in part of this meeting tomorrow and a couple of other people out of the Amalgamated, some others that I knew. He was just giving it a big build up. But I thought they were really trying to railroad me into something that I didn't want to do.

Anyway, I went on down. I thought I might as well go on and check these people out and see what they're talking about. I had a very pleasant day. The only thing was that when I got there, word had kind of got around that I was going to be the new staff person and I'd be sitting in. And they were going, "Welcome." So I guess it was already a kind of pre-decided thing.

INTERVIEWER: They just hadn't let you know.

MERRILL: And the vice-president in charge of personnel, he said, "We can negotiate salary." And he asked me did I have a car. I said yes, and he said we'd negotiate car allowance. I mean, they were just going on and on like I'm going to.... And then I got cool. I said, "Well, we'll talk about all this. Why don't you get back to me in a couple of weeks." So in the meanwhile, I guess that next week--and I never have known if there was any connection but I know that until I came to work for the Amalgamated, Joyce [Miller], all the time I had been the CLUW leader, she'd never had an occasion to call me--so then she called me and wanted to know how much CLUW was involved with this woman in Oak Park who was running for Congress, Dee Clancy; how much we were involved in Dee Clancy's campaign and was I aware that that was one of the top priorities of the Amalgamated. And I'm going to myself, "Well what the hell do the Amalgamated priorities have to do with CLUW?" So she said, "Well I understand that you're going to be coming on the Amalgamated staff, aren't you?" And she says, "You call Tom Herriman." I told her, "I don't know whether we've got any CLUW manpower to spread anyplace else because we're already

MERRILL: into a number of campaigns. This is late September and the elections are in November." So I did call Tom and I got a number of girls out of the Amalgamated and one other girl from the Auto Workers. Then the first week in October we had a CLUW national board meeting down in Memphis. Well, when I got to the board meeting in Memphis here come a couple of teachers from Philadelphia, a couple of women from Washington, "Oh, we're so glad you're going to work for the Amalgamated." I mean, it had gotten all over.

INTERVIEWER: You could hardly say no.

MERRILL: That's a fact and that's how it happened. I went on the staff October 15 and I actually went to work the first of November, because I told them I wanted two weeks to get myself together and to really study the union and the industry. That's how it happened.

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty good and since then I know you've been involved in a lot of exciting things.

MERRILL: Well, I suppose the most exciting thing has been the coordinating of the boycott, which is what got me into all this in the first place. I don't have to tell anybody how I feel about that. First of all, I guess I'm like a mother that doesn't like to see their child publicly chastised, would rather chastise them themselves at home. I have really been disturbed about the kind of image the trade union movement has had for the last number of years and a lot of the things that people were saying about some unions, in particular about some of the leadership. While I might have my own individual ideas, I didn't like seeing it. We've finally realized that we have to get back to organizing. We had just stopped organizing, there ain't no two ways about it; and we thought, I suppose that we could get through this century on what we already had. We had to get back to organizing, there was no place to go but to the South.

INTERVIEWER: The South has always been so hard though, that's probably why people tend to quit when they get there.

MERRILL: Right. Well, that's because we've become kind of comfortable in what we had accomplished. In the 30's organizing Auto was hard and I don't see it as any harder then than it is now there. To me it's the kind of people and the dedication and what people are permitted to suffer in terms of inconvenience, in terms of the hard work. A lot of us have really got to go back to where we began. And there are some people in this union movement that, you know, just walked in and there it was. They don't even understand what I'm saying. I try to talk to them about it, and I guess I feel it because even though it wasn't that many years ago and it wasn't an industrial union, it was because I built a union and I know what that meant. Many people say, "Oh, you built a public employees union, that ain't like steel and auto."

MERRILL: And that's true. But it still was a powerful lot of hard work. As I said, I just feel that organizing is where it's at and that's where the new workers are. It's not only Textile--of course, Textile is the least organized industry in that part of the country--but you've got furniture and you've even got steel and auto in the South that needs organizing. And if we don't.... We have seen in the last couple of years what has happened to us and our unions and our members and everything. We've really got to be selfish, we've got to get some more dues paying members. And we ain't going to get them in the northern industrial cities because the plants are leaving and going to the South or going overseas. So where are we going to get the members? Somebody got to grit their teeth and go down there and face some hard battles. And why should those people be denied the opportunity to join unions if they want to? That to me is really kind of un-American.

The boycott, of course, was a little slow getting off the ground. We had to walk cautiously. It was the most difficult kind of boycott that had ever been undertaken and we had a lot of restraints placed against us that we didn't experience in Farm Workers or anywhere else.

INTERVIEWER: Can you explain that?

MERRILL: The whole threat of secondary boycott, the threat of court injunctions, a lot of the new court rulings that had come down. This is the kind of thing--the Farm Workers aren't covered under NLRB. The diversity of the Stevens products and the vastness of the company. And we were placed under a lot of restrictions. A lot of us had to come up with a lot of novel, ingenious ideas--because of the boycott--that we didn't have to use with the others. I have seen a lot of movement, especially in the last eight or ten months. And as I said,it's been good for the trade union movement. We're all working, we have staff now on loan to us from the other unions. It's one thing that everybody can agree on, the Auto Workers and the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO. I mean everybody agrees on this thing.

INTERVIEWER: It's a righteous cause.

MERRILL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That's nice, you've got some unity there.

MERRILL: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: What about some of those novel things that you've done? Can you put some of those down on the tape here?

MERRILL: Oh, I think like the entire corporate campaign, which is an inherent part of the boycott. To me, it really caught my fancy. First of all, I learned a lot about corporate America and the

MERRILL: workings of corporate America that I didn't know. As I said, I'm always interested in learning new things. You'd be surprised at the things you learn just doing your job. I mean, the way people make their professional sitters on boards of directors and the whole kind of corporate interlocking family that goes on. You find that a few people, a small number of white males control so much of the economic life of so many people. It was just really kind of interesting to find out how most decisions that affect us are made in these little small boardrooms or over lunches or on the golf course.

In terms of the Stevens Company, many of their board of directors sit on other boards and there's this whole kind of family unity there. There's so much more that can be done in that whole area, not only as it affects Stevens but as it affects other corporations. Those corporations who are doing a large amount of monetary business with South Africa, those corporations who are tied into the whole university higher education system of the whole country, how those kind of things affect what these people and what these institutions do. And it kind of filters down to our children. It's really kind of interesting. Nobody's perfect and I've always been against trying to legislate people's feelings. I don't believe that you can legislate people's feelings. However a person is.... Basically people never change. However they start out is how they're going to end up. So what you have to do is eliminate them, just step on over them and put them out of your way. Just roll on over them and get them on out of your way. So the kinds of men that worship a dollar instead of worshipping a god in the heavens, those kind of people just have to be stepped on and pushed over because there ain't no sitting down reasoning with them. They just ain't going to change, so you just have to find some other thing to do with them. So I've enjoyed it.

We've been doing a lot of campus work involving students on the campus, giving them a lot of projects to do: investigating their campuses' buying habits and what kind of products their campus is either buying or leasing from linen services. And of course [there is] the retail campaign where organized groups go in and visit the retailer. So there's a lot of different components to the boycott that we have had to use because of the very nature of the kind of boycott it is. It's been interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say it's having an impact?

MERRILL: Yes. It has had a very good media impact and it's had an impact on the company. At first the company tried to ignore it and then they started trying to respond to it.

INTERVIWER: They're really getting a very bad public image. One thing I noticed is that Dinah Shore designs sheets for them and I think Suzanne Pleshette, and I wondered how you felt about having a couple of leading women supporting the enemy, so to speak. Has the union made appeals to them?

MERRILL: I just really feel shitty about it. The union has made appeals to them. The union has informed a lot of other groups, especially women's organizations and they've made appeals to them, various actors' craft unions, especially to Dinah Shore. They seemed to have felt that she, as a southern bred woman had more compassion for her brothers and sisters in the South than she has. They've appealed to her. I just really can't watch her show anymore. I never did care to watch that Bob Newhart show very much because I don't like those silly comedies. When I watch TV it's got to have some kind of meaning because I don't have that much time to watch that silly thing. But if I was home during the afternoon I did kind of like Dinah Shore because of the kind of talk show format it was. I've only watched her twice since she's done this and each time I thought of Stevens, so I can't fool with her no more.

INTERVIEWER: Did they ever get a response at all from her?

MERRILL: The only response that I'm aware that Dinah Shore made was that she was sympathetic toward the plight of the workers. As far as she was concerned she was going to honor her contract. I would hope that she would still consider and rethink her position.

INTERVIEWER: She could have invited some of the workers on her show and been a big help.

MERRILL: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: If she has that much freedom, I don't know if she does or not.

MERRILL: I did see Suzanne Pleshette in person when she was here a little over a year ago at [Marshall] Fields promoting her line. She's a little, petite lady but she didn't come across too great.

INTERVIEWER: But you think the boycott is making progress?

MERRILL: Yes, I think so. It took it a while because it took a while to get off the ground and for people to really understand what it was all about and all. We had to spend the first year just doing a whole lot of grass roots education.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you'll keep working for the Amalgamated indefinitely or do you think this may be one of many different unions you'll work for?

MERRILL: That's hard to say, Betty. I think that what it will hinge on is if the Amalgamated decides that they want to keep me on their staff where would we go after the boycott. As I said, my great love is organizing. I would like to be able to spend a little time in the South actually doing some organizing.

INTERVIEWER: Have you done anything like that in the South?

MERRILL: No.

INTERVIEWER: Are you sure you would like to do that?

MERRILL: I don't think I would like to do it too long at a time or else if I could do that for a while and then come back. The boycotts are conducted under what's called the Union Label Department. The Union Label Department is involved, of course, in not only boycotts but the whole union label campaign of the Amalgamated. We go to a lot of conventions with the union and that's nice for people that enjoy that, but that standing around making small talk and glad-handing, I would rather see someone else do that other than myself.

INTERVIEWER: You like the nitty-gritty part.

MERRILL: Yes. I would really like the opportunity to go South. I'm pretty sure at this stage in my life--maybe 20 years ago I could stand up under it for a long siege--but I would like to do a little of it on a small scale. Then when we win the Stevens one, I don't know how soon we will be going into another phase of our textile organizing. I think it's quite clear to everybody that Stevens is not going to be the end. There are a lot of other textile mills to be organized, a lot of other textile companies that we have not tapped. Our goal, of course, is to bring as many textile workers as we can under contracts. So therefore, it quite possibly would involve confrontations with other textile manufacturers such as Stevens. So a lot will depend on what they have in mind for me to do and if anybody else approaches me. I've kind of had some joking conversations with a lot of other people that I know were not joking conversations, but just lightweight conversations with people that I know in other unions. But nothing ever definite has been said so I'll just kind of roll with the punches and take each day as it comes. I know that as long as I work it's going to be involved in something that I think is meaningful and I would hope that it would never get too far away from the trade union movement.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to say a few more words about the Midwest Academy? You said you'd been involved with them and you described,a little bit,your friendship with Heather Booth. Is there more to the story than that? How long have you been involved?

MERRILL: Well, a lot of people think I have, but I've never actually taken a course at the Academy. I've been fortunate enough to hang out with the people that run the Academy and a lot of the Academy graduates and the Academy associates and to have at least partaken of the Academy's program and its outlook on life. And Heather used to always say to me--because a couple of times I wanted to take a course--and she said,"What do you need to come over here and learn about organizing?" I think forthe people that have gone through the courses, that they have had probably the best training course of that kind to teach people basic

MERRILL: grass roots organizing that is available in the country. And I'm really kind of disturbed at what's been happening to the Academy lately.

INTERVIEWER: What's been happening?

MERRILL: It's been under a couple of investigations coming out of Congress from a couple of our right wing legislators.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't even know about that.

MERRILL: Oh yes. They're trying to gut the Academy and its work and are attempting to--well, we don't say blacklist anymore. We went through that with the McCarthy era--but an attempt to really discredit Heather as a person. And they're raising a whole lot of issues, her relationship with SDS which goes back, you know, a thousand years ago.

INTERVIEWER: Carter has people on his staff here and there who were in SDS, like Sam Brown and some of the others.

MERRILL: Well, that is one of the things that has come out; that that agency supposedly has entered into a contract with the Academy and gave them a certain amount of money, but it was to train VISTA workers. Now who is better able.... you know, the kind of person that you would want to go into a VISTA program or a peace program, they could not get any better training than out of the Midwest Academy. And this is why I say that this country is such a goddamned contradiction. We talk about a VISTA program and then you get the program and who the hell they want to train them? You just get tired of it. It is really now underfoot though, a movement to discredit the Academy and her. It's very disturbing.

INTERVIEWER: And you feel they've made a genuine contribution to the trade union movement.

MERRILL: Yes. To organizing, to trade unions, to community organizing. They were initially responsible for the initial training for the women that are now in charge of the Women Employed organization. They trained a lot of NOW workers. They've done a lot of training with the CAP*program and the Illinois Public Action Coalition. I mean confrontation politics--I guess, to coin a phrase--is really what it's all about. But then that's what we need more of.

INTERVIEWER: Now what have we missed in going over the high spots of your life? Some important segment that we haven't covered.

MERRILL: Nothing important, I guess. We pretty much dwelt on, I guess, a combination of the home life and the trade union life. There was a lot of spin-offs from that, little things that we did in terms of Civil Rights. I guess I was politicized kind of early, as I said, first of all by not playing too much as a child and

*Community Action Program

MERRILL: following my grandfather around. And then, my aunt who was very close to us, my mother's only sister, after she became engaged, we knew that she was going to marry and move to Washington. Well, she got a job--her second job in Washington was with the Atomic Energy Commission and that was in the days of security checks--so they had to go start checking the whole family. They went all the way back to the Indians on the reservation and to Oklahoma and Alabama and all this stuff. For a while her job position was held up because the FBI seemed to have felt that there was a little concern about her father, which would have been my grandfather. That hurdle was eventually cleared up, they cleared us all. But what really pissed me off was that a couple of years after she and my uncle were married and they decided to buy their first home in Washington, they bought their home in an area called River Terrace. Okay, so the area was an all white area. Washington, D.C. is the nation's capital, my aunt was with the Atomic Energy Commission and my uncle was in advertising for a large Washington radio station. I mean, they were pretty solid citizens. Of course, they weren't white, [but] I couldn't understand why these people didn't want them moving into that area. I thought those things only happened in certain other parts of the country. And I guess what really kind of turned my whole thinking around was when the [Ku Klux] Klan began to burn crosses and to throw fire bombs into their home.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

MERRILL: And you're taught this shit in high school, you know, civics, the capital of the United States of America, and I have stood in their home and seen them son-of-a-bitches burning crosses in their back yard. Her son we brought to Chicago, we kept the oldest boy for eighteen months while they were going through all this crap. And that just really.... I mean, I haven't ever been the same since.

INTERVIEWER: When did this happen?

MERRILL: Oh, this is in the late forties.

INTERVIEWER: The late forties. Yes, those were bad years. All that trouble in Trumbull Park was going on in Chicago, too.

MERRILL: Right. I mean all that began to happen all around the same time. Even my grandparents, they were from Oklahoma. And when we would go down there on the bus, when we got to Missouri we would have to change. We could start off sitting anywhere we wanted to and then we'd have to move to the back of the bus to go on to Oklahoma.

One time, though, my sister and I--I guess we were about ten and eleven--we decided.... Now see my sister, as I said earlier, was the bad girl and I was getting into a lot of trouble with her. She would do the bad things. I would do the devious things. We got on the bus one day in Oklahoma. Dearie was letting us go downtown and I got this bright idea we wasn't going to go to the

MERRILL: back of the bus because when we got home to Chicago riding the bus we didn't have to sit in the back. Now those are the kinds of things that I would think of. It caused some problems, folks got on and started looking at us right weird. The bus driver asked us who were our people and where were we from. We told him and he just shook his head and said to people, "Those two kids are from Chicago." Well, by the time we got downtown word had gotten back, because there were a couple of folks on that bus that knew my grandparents. It was just a small town. So they were waiting for us when we got back. My grandfather was livid and my grandmother, she was wringing her hands and crying, thought something terrible would happen to us. But we made it there and back alive and well. So, you know, I would do those kind of things. But as I said this whole situation in Washington with my aunt and uncle really got to me.

So as I began to get older and we went into the fifties and the whole Civil Rights Movement began to take hold, that is one of the things coupled with all the other stuff. But I never could.... I tried to really learn the rudiments and the fundamentals of nonviolent participation. I dropped out of the school, the one that the Reverend Bevel had on the West side. I dropped out twice because I couldn't deal with it,

INTERVIEWER: You weren't nonviolent in your heart or what?

MERRILL: No, I really wasn't. A lot of other people had also had a lot of bad firsthand experiences but it really got to me, and I never was able too much to deal with the whole nonviolent aspect of it. I tried and I didn't make the school. But we'd do a lot of other things, and I began to involve the girls, too, and a couple of people in our block. The day that we had the big march from Grant Park to the Board of Education Dr. King came in and I took the girls. That was their first Civil Rights march. I took the girls with me and some of the neighbors in the block were aghast that I would take those girls. And I said, "Well, you know, they're the ones that are going to school. Why shouldn't they come? They're going to school, I'm out." It was good for them, it taught them some values that I think that neither one has ever forgotten. We took them after that to Gage Park on the Southwest side, especially the oldest girl, Denise, and I think it was very good for her. I didn't even take her with me when we went to Cairo a couple of times. I never, of course, took her to the South. I guess the first time she went to the South she was in her late teens. That was a little bit deep for her. So . . .

INTERVIEWER: Did you go South with the Civil Rights Movement?

MERRILL: Twice, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go?

MERRILL: We went to Murfreesboro , Tennessee, I guess it was, on a voters'

MERRILL: registration, and to Selma. I didn't stay in Selma through the time of the bridge crossing because I honestly just couldn't deal with the kind of situation that we were being told that we were going to have to go through. And I knew that either I would get seriously hurt or killed or else I would wind up.... Either way I would get seriously hurt or killed either on the march or in jail. We'd already kind of had a scenario of what was going to happen. As I said, I'd already flunked out of the school twice. It was some of the other people's decision that some of the people that really felt that if they encountered violence, that they would return violence, it was felt that they should not go through the whole scene. But I did stay in Selma I guess about a day and a half.

INTERVIEWER: So you showed your moral support. You had a very active participation in the Civil Rights Movement really from childhood on, even before there was a movement you might say?

MERRILL: Yes. Because my aunt and uncle finally, after the first two years when the harrassment ended at River Terrace, we would go and we did a lot of integrating of some of the beaches along Chesapeake Bay.

INTERVIEWER: How was that?

MERRILL: It was really kind of rough. You know, you had to experience a lot of rock throwing and sand throwing, and your stuff being turned over, and you'd get back to your car and your tires would be flat or they'd be gone. It was rough and lot of that took place, as I said, in the capital.

INTERVIEWER: Of the three things that we've really been talking about: being black, being a woman, or being a poor worker, which seems to be the worst?

MERRILL: Oh gee. Well, I'm going to have to say really I think being black is worst. And unless you are that nobody can really understand.

INTERVIEWER: You think that's the deepest prejudice.

MERRILL: Yes, I really do.

INTERVIEWER: Is that one of the reasons you think you weren't particularly attracted to feminism? Did you see it as a sort of competing battle when one thing was more serious than the other?

MERRILL: Initially I did. And even though feminists themselves have tried to decry the whole white middle-class portrayal, it was that and it still pretty much is. I mean even a lot of the local feminist organizations. And this is not to say that I'm not for a lot of these things, even this whole question of the Equal Rights Amendment. And I've had to do a lot of deep soul-searching and a lot of putting together a lot of other things in order to take a

MERRILL: strong position. And when it has come down to whether I go and speak to an ERA rally or whether I even try to go to a meeting for workers I'm for the workers.

It's kind of hard to really explain. But they still have no concept of what it means to be poor, black, and without a job, you know. Legislators, lawyers, college professors, even high school teachers--the kinds of women that the feminist groups and organizations have still organized into their ranks--are not for the most part.... Even white women, they had not for the most part been everyday, ordinary working white women. The poor housewife has just not been the blue collar housewife. Now whether it's true that these organizations have turned off those women or whether they haven't spent enough time trying to cultivate their participation--I can't agree with one or the other. I can only say that from my own experience I would have to say that I don't think that they have reached out enough. They have taken a kind of elitist attitude: we're here and we're right and they ought to see the right. And don't nobody see the rightness in nothing, it's got to be shoved down their throats. I just really feel that they have kind of formed their own kind of in club.

INTERVIEWER: But you don't feel any contradiction between struggling against being poor and struggling against racism? Those somehow seem to fit closer? Or am I misjudging your feelings?

MERRILL: There isn't any definite defined contradiction. You run into some contradictions but it's not a total definite contradiction.

INTERVIEWER: That's why you can work comfortably with working women and not that comfortably with other women?

MERRILL: Yes, I do feel that way. They can be zebra colored but I still feel more comfortable with them.

INTERVIEWER: You still identify with them.

MERRILL: Yes. Definitely.

INTERVIEWER: What about working men's housewives? Or working-class housewives, I should say.

MERRILL: Even so, I don't think that we're that different. If we just sit down and talk, I don't think we could be that far apart. Working-class housewives, they're the ones that are dealing with the budget, trying to make ends meet. They're the ones that are concerned about the high cost of meat and the rising utility rates. They're the ones who in all likelihood face the prospect of early widowhood or their husbands becoming disabled because of an on-the-job injury. So I think that there's still a lot that we could find in common. Even when you get down to some of the basic services, some of our service needs would overlap more so than a lot of the women in the other class. Just workers--they're great people!

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the future as far as women are concerned? From your point of view what would you like your granddaughter to do or be or become? What kind of advice would you give her about school or marriage, work or anything?

MERRILL: Well, I would first tell her just to be herself. Don't compromise her principles, her thoughts, her ideals for anything or anybody, not even for her grandmother. And if she disagrees with her grandmother, to let her grandmother know and to debate that disagreement. Of course, that's kind of something that we've all been taught in our family. As I said in the beginning--whatever comes up comes out. That causes us to get in a lot of hot water. But I guess what I would like to see is for her to have the kind of freedom without too much inner struggle and outward struggle just to be whatever it is that she wants to be and not to have to put up such a fight for it.

INTERVIEWER: You mean not as big a fight as you've had to put up? Or not as big a fight as most women have to put up?

MERRILL: Most women.

INTERVIEWER: You kind of came out on top in your fight, didn't you?

MERRILL: Yes. But it took its toll. It takes a lot out of you.

INTERVIEWER: Would you want her life to be easier than yours?

MERRILL: Well, I don't know. Mine has been fairly easy, I don't see it as having been too rough a life. You don't want it to be too easy because then they get too soft. I don't think I would want hers to be any easier. If you're thinking about easy in terms of comfortableness and in terms of having a lot of luxuries and things that are really not necessary, no I wouldn't want it to be any easier because mine has been fairly easy. I can't say that it's been a rough life. I don't know what folks mean sometimes when they talk about rough life.

INTERVIEWER: People all mean different things, I guess. You wouldn't feel badly if she had a life similar to yours?

MERRILL: No, I wouldn't.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think is the best thing you ever did, the best part of your life? What are you most proud of in your own life?

MERRILL: Well, I'm trying to narrow two or three down.

INTERVIEWER: You can put all two or three in if you want to. You can be proud of three things.

MERRILL: I suppose I'm most proud of deciding what I really wanted to do

MERRILL: with that working part of my life, and that I wanted to get involved in helping other people to help themselves. Because I didn't have to really do that, I could have just gone on along.

INTERVIEWER: So that was a clear choice, not something you just drifted into.

MERRILL: I'm very, very proud that I was born into the family I was born into. I think it's one of the greatest. And I'm proud of the girls. I mean, they're not perfect but I'm proud of what they've become based on the kinds of things I was able to expose them to. So I guess that's it.

INTERVIEWER: Alright, is there anything else you'd like to add?

MERRILL: Well, I have three books that I keep on my night table and I have to just read a couple of lines or a few words from all of them, and that's the Bible, the Book of Psalms and [Kahil] Gibran's The Prophet. I hope nobody that reads this considers it blasphemy but I think a lot of times I feel closer to The Prophet than I even do to the Bible. The Prophet condenses a lot, I mean, it cuts through a lot of the murk and the mire. I usually find something that affects whatever is going on. There is one when he's asked to speak of work and he begins and says that "we work to keep pace with the soul of the earth." So whoever might hear this or read it or whatever, if they forget everything else that I've said, remember that. We always work to keep pace with the soul of the earth.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

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