THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY - RADCLIFFE COLLEGE

and

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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

ESTHER PETERSON

Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America

by

Martha Ross

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

Ann Arbor, Michigan

VITAE

ESTHER PETERSON

Esther Peterson was born on December 9, 1906 in Provo, Utah. During her youth, her father instilled in her the importance of thinking and speaking one's mind in the liberal tradition. This significant attitude has remained with her to the present day as she serves as Special Assistant to President Carter for Consumer Affairs.

Peterson came to her current position after a long career within the labor movement, which began while volunteering in the industrial department of the YWCA. There she met Hilda Smith, who founded the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. She then joined the staff of the school as its recreation director.

During her activism in organized labor, Peterson helped to organize teachers for the American Federation of Teachers. She went on to work for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the Textile Workers Organizing Committee and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. She was the Assistant Director of Education for the ACWA.

While with the ACWA, Peterson acted as a legislative representative for the union in Washington, D.C. She spearheaded the successful campaign for an increased minimum wage in 1948.

Her role in the legislative arena continued with her position as legislative representative for the Congress of Industrial Organizations [CIO]. The experience gained through this work led Peterson into positions in the administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and now President Carter.

Oral History Interview

with

ESTHER PETERSON

August 13, 1977
Washington, D.C.

by

Martha Ross

INTERVIEWER: The following interview was conducted on behalf of The University of Michigan-Wayne State University Oral History Project, "Twentieth-Century Trade Union Woman: A Vehicle for Social Change." The interviewee is Esther Peterson, Special Assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs. The interviewer is Martha Ross, Bethesda, Maryland; University of Maryland, Department of History. The interview took place in Mrs. Peterson's office in the Executive Office Building, Washington, D.C., on Saturday afternoon, August 13, 1977.

Good afternoon, Mrs. Peterson.

PETERSON: Hello.

INTERVIEWER: Would you give me a brief personal background, please, in terms of your family, early influences in your life, say, until the time that you went to college?

PETERSON: Well, I was the fifth child--the fourth daughter--of a Mormon family whose background was pioneer stock, having come from Denmark both on my father's and mother's side. My grandparents on my father's side were pioneers who walked across the plains, so I have an immediate appreciation of the tremendous change because I barely remember them, but I do remember my grandfather and grandmother on my mother's side, who came on the first train that ever came to Utah.
So a lot of that early historical material is deep in me, with a great sense of pride for the hardships that they took to come to this country for their religious belief--exactly what it was. I later found out it wasn't quite that simple, when I went to find out why they really came to this country. But at least it was the religious conversion that was the immediate reason for them coming.

I grew up in a very happy family, I think. I had a fine father, a very strong father, and a strong mother, who both recognized--there's no difference in our family between the boys and the

PETERSON: girls, I think, as far as getting an education. We were all to get a college education. We could sort of have a choice of going on a Mormon mission or having an education; and we couldn't really afford both in our family. At least we were given a good deal of choice in this. Only one member of our family went on a mission--my oldest brother; and I think that was part of that period of importance.

Our family was very ethical, but not deeply orthodox religion. My father, I think, was really quite a liberal thinker; and I remember discussions around the family table and all, of really a lot of beliefs and things. So as a child I grew up kind of knowing that you talked your mind and you say what you feel; and I think there was a great sense of justice in those days and a sense of those things. At least, I remember it very definitely.

I think my first trade union experience was when I was--oh, goodness--probably in the eighth grade or so, when--it was during 1918, during the big railroad strike in Utah, when Eugene V. Debs was organizing railroad workers; and they [the representatives of the railroad company] came to where--it was right next to our house--where we all went to school, the Brigham Young University and recruited strike-breakers. And I remember as a child hearing of these terrible people that were coming up, and we had to go in and get these trade union people. I always thought that these labor people were outside agitators, with bombs in their pockets!

I remember as a child just hearing this. But then they recruited some of the students who boarded at our house. And we were one of the few families to have a little car then--I'll never forget, a Dodge touring car. (laughter) And I remember that we were to drive these students up to--some of them that were living--up to strike. And I remember going along for the ride, and I remember getting close to it. I shall never forget seeing all this confusion, and all these people milling around, and horses, and their opening the way for us to get the car through the picket line.

And I shall never forget a woman--the car had to stop a minute, and of course there are no windows and things, these were all open cars in those days--standing there with two little children. And it reminded me later of some of the Kathe Kollewitz's drawings of the strong faces, you know, that.... And it has haunted me to this day. If I were an artist, I could still draw it.

And she looked at me and said, "Why do you do this to us?"

And it hurt me. I can remember feeling something was wrong; I knew something was wrong. I wouldn't go back; I just wouldn't cross that line. I didn't know what was wrong, but I knew something was wrong.

PETERSON: And I really think that that was sort of a base for me for a lot of the things that happened to me later.

But I do know that in my college education it never concerned me again. We never studied about labor, and I had no idea of what was going on in our coal mines and our mines, and the immigrants that were brought in were treated rather badly during that period. But I didn't know about that until I came back after I got my master's degree and began to talk to some of the people when I began to work and found out what the situation was during those days.

So I became great friends of them who were the descendants of people that were brought to this country to work and were treated pretty badly in our own state, which is now pretty much a matter of history.

But I do think that that early experience had a lot to do with me. I worked always. We had to work. We were a big family, and Mother took in boarders. I worked outside mainly because I like it better. I milked cows. I worked my way always: all summer, I would always work. We started first picking strawberries and then raspberries and then apricots and peaches. And I was what you'd say nowadays, a migratory worker, only I was a regular local worker.

They used to pick us up on the hayracks, and early in the morning -- we'd go very early because the sun would get too hot. I remember the joys of the cherry-picking, which I loved. I'd get up in the top of the tree and eat my fill of these sweet cherries, and I could really pick fast all day.

So that--I know those things. I know backs. I know stoop labor. I know these things.

Frankly, as I look back, I think it was very good for me. And I was a good healthy person, and I was contributing, and the money I made went toward my schooling. And I didn't think about myself as an exploited worker. (laughter) I was, you know....that period that I went through, which I remember very well.

Then I--when I graduated, I went to Columbia [University], though I taught school for two years in Cedar City, Utah. I majored in physical education; then I went back to Columbia.

And there I met my husband. And he is the one who really changed my life tremendously, because he began talking to me and taking me around. He took me to hear Sidney Hillman, and I'll never forget that as long as I live--down at the Cooper Union, in New York--because it just opened up a whole new thing for me. I had just never had an idea or concept of any of that.

PETERSON: Then he took me around to all the slums. He took me around to the factories. He took me around--he was studying sociology. He gave me a knowledge of [Robert] LaFollette, and he was a Socialist, which I thought was simply terrible-- I, who had come from a Republican family, you know. That was just awful.

But he was so strong as a person, had such conviction. And all the men that I had gone with before, they'd say they loved me, do anything for me, but this is the only one that said, "My beliefs are so strong I can't--I do love you, but--but I'm not going to change my beliefs." And I just loved it, because here was strength that has been a tower of strength for me through all my life with him, because I just loved him and admired him then. And I thought, "Here's a man that's stronger than I am." And that's what I wanted, frankly, as a woman, I guess; I don't know. But he is the one who really turned things for me.

INTERVIEWER: And this was while you were in graduate school.

PETERSON: That's when I was in graduate school, uh-huh.

So I think my early days--even at that protected life--I had a little seed, because my family was always liberal as far as religion goes; and we had to defend our positions, having gone to church school. And I debated; I was on the debating team and I was very active in all these causes and things like that when I was in school. So I think it was a natural development. But it took someone like Oliver to really turn me to the labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: If we could go back just a moment, you mentioned the strike in 1918 in Utah; and you had mentioned earlier the tendency of your family to have discussions at home. Now, I gather that your family was unsympathetic to the strikers. Do you remember . . . ?

PETERSON: Well, I think--no, I don't remember particularly about that. I remember that they went on doing it. It was--I just don't remember a lot. It was a very personal experience for me. I couldn't understand how those guys would continue to go. But ten dollars a day was big money in those days; they were paying the strike-breakers. And these were all poor kids from the farms, you know. But I don't think they had any concept of what was involved. I really don't think they had.

I know some of the students that went there. One turned out to be a brother-in-law of mine. This was one of the nicest guys in the world. Maybe if this woman had looked at him as searching as she looked at me, it might have--you know.

I remember on the way one of them said, "Why are you crying?" And I said, "I don't know." And I didn't know. I just knew that

PETERSON: something was wrong. That was all. Just something was wrong. Now I don't recall--I don't recall a bit about it.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you had prepared evidently for a career as a teacher.

PETERSON: Yes, a gym teacher.

INTERVIEWER: And you had taught at Branch Agricultural College?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And then later at . . .

PETERSON: Winsor School, Boston.

INTERVIEWER: And at that time you decided to go back to graduate school.

PETERSON: No, no, I did the graduate school before I went to Winsor. I had taught at Branch Agricultural College, and then I got through graduate school, and then I went to Winsor. And then I met Oliver at Columbia, at graduate school, before Winsor. And then, when I went to Winsor, I got more deeply into the labor movement and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: In what way did you get more deeply involved?

PETERSON: Well, I volunteered at the YWCA. Two things happened then. And there again Oliver influenced me. We were always raised that you do something in addition to earning your living and always give of yourself. We were just raised that you have to do that. That's our church. And you don't live an isolated life; you have to participate and give of yourself. That's my father and my mother. So I just knew -- I either taught Sunday school, or I was state recreation director. I always did something extra. And Oliver said, "Don't just go to your church. Do something new, Esther. Branch out a little bit." So I went to the "Y" and I volunteered, and I was assigned the industrial department. That's the days when the "Y" was extremely liberal and they had an industrial section to help the "poor working girls," you know (laughing); and I was assigned that, and I was a gym teacher.

But then there's the first time I had firsthand acquaintance with industrial workers. Then, parallel to that was.... Hilda Smith came to the Winsor School, which was a private school for very wealthy girls, and talked about the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. And she was there to raise money. And that was another big change in my life. I saw this woman, and I thought that's the way I want to be. I just fell in love with her, literally fell in love with her. And I remember I had my gym suit on, because I was a gym teacher. I went up to her afterwards and asked her if I could talk with

PETERSON: her; and through that conversation I was offered a job to be recreation director at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. And Oliver, my husband, was to be librarian. And she met him, and that's how we got started in that.

So I had two parallel things. I had my experience with the industrial department of the "Y" and my experience with the Summer School. And at the "Y", the girls--and I've written this up in things; I don't know where I've got it written but I've told it many times--the girls had a. . . . Have you done any research on these things? I don't want to repeat myself if you have.

INTERVIEWER: No, I have not been able to get up to the Schlesinger Library; but I've done some independent research.

PETERSON: Well, anyway, the. . . . In this, because I have done it. I don't want to bore you if you've had it. But it was important for me, because I. . . . The girls did not come to class one Thursday night, and they said they were on strike. And of course, then I. . . . the old feeling again hit me. And I remember going to Oliver. And he said, "Go find out why. Go find out why." He's always been the one that kind of pushed me into these things.

And I did. And it was the first time I had seen the tenements of Cambridge. And that was the first time I had ever seen industrial homework. I'll never forget as long as I live seeing all these people working around the table, doing things for Filene's and tags and hairnets and bobbypins and--oh God! And this whole family could make a living if everybody worked.

And the girls that were the factory workers there had gone on a strike, and I found out that there was a--and the family was upset, because it meant that they wouldn't be bringing in their money, which all contributed to the family. I loved these strong families. That's when I got a conviction: "To heck with you, talking about the working family as not being. . . . " These were so, so much more than these wealthy girls that I met during the day, you know. Just the contrast to me was really quite something, and I got acquainted with quite a few of those working families.

And the girls told me that they went on strike because they were making Hoover dresses, and they were getting $1.32 for making a dozen dresses. And their paychecks which I remember so well--the envelopes were $4.50 and $5.00. I think the highest one I ever saw was $7.00 for a week's work. And, you see, this was in the Depression, too, and every dollar meant something; and they were just cutting wages like mad before NRA [National Recovery Act] or any of that, or before Fair Labor Standards Act.

PETERSON: And I remember asking why they went on strike. Well, it was spontaneous because they changed the pattern of the dress--of the pocket from a square to a heart. And the heart--they couldn't make as many, because it was hard to go around the corners; so they named it the Heartbreakers' Strike.

So I went out and picketed with them in the morning and helped them, and helped organize a citizens' committee, because I just really was furious at the injustice of what those kids were going through. And, as a result of it, we organized a union. So I helped get that first union started up there in that garment. . . . It was long before women were really in it much. They weren't covered by Fair Labor Standards.

At that time I had a real difficult time, because here I was talking and teaching at a private school for girls. But Miss Lord, who was the director of the school, was absolutely magnificent. She's another heroine in my life. I've had very strong women who are heroines for me. Hilda Smith was one, and Katherine Lord is another--was director of the school and a very high. . . . She said, "We hired you to teach, and you're a good teacher. What you do in your private life is your own business, as long as it doesn't interfere with your teaching." And she supported me in that. She also supported me later, when I couldn't stand the teachers' oath. It was during that terrible period, and even came up to the Legislature to testify against it.

So I've been very lucky to have supportive people whom I admired, and that helped me a lot in that period.

But then I got really excited about the labor movement and felt that I should put my lot with it. And since I was a teacher, I thought, "Well, the thing I should do is, is organize teachers." So I started working for the American Federation of Teachers. And I was paid by some Harvard professors that were kind of the radicals of those days: Ray Walsh, Alan Sweezy and Bob Lamb and a lot of these great names of people who were kicked out of Harvard later on (laughing), if you remember that period.

And they put into a pool their tutoring money and paid me to be an organizer for the teachers' union up there. And I kind of worked under their direction. That was during the time when the teachers' union was really somewhat in the control of the Communist group, I didn't know anything about the politics of anything then. But I did a very good job, if I do say so, and I had some tough experiences. And I really organized three locals, which I thought was terrible not to do more; and I find out now it's magnificent. (laughter) But it was really good. And I had some awfully tough times with that, too. But I just had to.

INTERVIEWER: Can you give me some examples?

PETERSON: Well, I think the first was when I went to Lawrence, the textile town. "How do I start?" I thought. "How do I start?" And the taxi taking me from the station over to the hotel--I asked him about teachers, if he knew anything about any of the teachers in town. And he said, "Oh, there's a great big meeting tonight. They're really up in arms." "Well, where is it, and what is it?" And he told me about it. They were having trouble with some pay cuts and all. And I said, "Oh, my goodness." So I went. And I'll never forget: I had a red hat and a red suit--of all the crazy things for me to wear!

And I got talking to some people beforehand. "I'm a teacher," I said. "And I'm really just in town, and I'm really sympathetic with what you're doing." And I went in and sat down by some of them, kept talking to them, very friendly. And oh, "We're not allowed." And I'll never forget the woman, Frances Masterson; I still remember her name. She said, "If there's any in this room who should not be here, will they please get up and leave." I thought, "I don't need to leave because I'm a teacher, and I agree with them." So I didn't stand up and say, "I am an outsider." But I did qualify as a teacher, but I knew I wasn't one of them. And I was scared.

Well, anyway, we went through the meeting, and I just got a feeling of what their grievances were. So as soon as it was over, I went right up to the Central Labor Union and told them what I was and who I was and what I had done. They knew these teachers, so they telephoned them and they came right over. And the teachers said, "You're the one that we want." I said, "I didn't think that I didn't belong to be there, because . . . " and I told them why. "And I thought I could see the looks on your face. I thought the only honest thing was not stand up there and cause you embarrassment and me embarrassment, because I'm on your side. And I did this, and I hope you'll forgive me." Well, as fate had it, that was the first local I organized. And I got the Central Labor Union to cooperate with them on this.

And I had another terrible experience at Springfield. Oh, I had awful [laughing] experiences; they're terrible. I'll never forget that one, going to Springfield and being at the Union Hotel, I think it was, and went around--I had some names and I called the people to a meeting in the hotel. And I was talking about the need of it and how we, the teachers, could save education, that we needed an independent voice--the usual arguments, which I believed in very deeply. And there was a strange person sitting just outside the door. And I thought, "What are you sitting there for?" You know. But I was very new in my ways then; I didn't know as much as I knew a little bit later on.

Later on I got a call from the Springfield Union Press, from a reporter who had talked to the reporter who was there, and he said, "You know, an article's going to be written tomorrow about your meeting at the hotel. And I think

PETERSON: you really ought to do something about it." And I said, "Well, what do you advise? I don't know what to do." He said, "Well, you ought to ask who that was who was there and find out if it was a reporter." And it was not honest of him not to say that he was a reporter.

So I just was tipped off. And I was also tipped off in the hotel by people who'd call me and say, the telephone operator. People would call me and say, "You know, there's some guys that are following you and want to know what you're doing," and such and such. And the operator would say to them, "I don't know where she is, because she didn't think I'd want to talk to them." The thing I found is a great bond between working people and is so beautiful to me, so many people helped you. This little cub reporter that called me over there and told me what to do, just to call and wanted to know if there was a reporter there, because I'd like to talk to him because I was not interviewed, which I did. And they said, "Yes, there is somebody." And I said, "Well, could I talk to him?" "Well, you'd better come over." So I went over. And I sat down and talked to him. I just said, "You know, I think that was....I was wondering: why didn't you come up and talk to me? Why didn't you come ask some question? Why didn't you ask to come in?" You know. And I said, "I think that's very, very wrong. I'm open."

Well, anyway, the next day there was a nasty article on the front page of the paper. But the person who had tipped me off turned out to be one of the very dearest friends, Val Burati who later came here, was MacArthur's--way over the Pacific--his public relations man; and he did a lot of writing here. So he advised me and helped me an awful lot on those things. That one was kind of a frightening experience.

And then I remember the day after the article I went right to the top, to the Superintendent of Schools, and said, "I'm here to organize your teachers; I'm not going in the back door. I'm going ahead right on the top." And he was flabbergasted. (laughter) I'll never forget as long as I live. And I said, "My father was Superintendent of Schools and he's been State Superintendent of Schools," and this guy said, "What the hell are you doing here?" (laughter) "I'm a former teacher at Winsor, but I believe in this deeply." I decided in that one I'd do it all open, absolutely open, after that experience in the newspaper. So I did it very openly. I haven't thought about this for years.

And then we got in a union started there, too, in Springfield. But, oh, the resentment was just terrible, just really terrible.

Then the next one was in Bennington. That wasn't as hard. There were more intellectuals and could do it from the radical point

PETERSON: of view. But the ones I really wanted to get were these grade teachers, which was Lawrence and Springfield. Anyway, that was an interesting period of my life.

And then I was married around that time, too. And then began having children, and came to New York. And Oliver was working then; and then the Amalgamated [Clothing Workers of America] called me and asked me if I'd work for them. So I worked kind of part-time, because I had kids.

And then I began....I often helped for the ILG [International Ladies' Garment Workers Union] before we moved to New York. I did a lot of teaching for them in the evening schools. I helped with the Textile Workers Organizing Committee and the big textile strikes during the sit-down days in New England. I helped with....in New Bedford, I'll never forget: I used to stand and lead singing during the sit-down strikes, when the people were hanging out of the windows, because I had been a recreation director, and it was marvelous standing there, just leading singing with all the workers hanging out of the windows during the textile strike. (laughter) I remember that so well. It was a very exciting time for me, you know, in those periods.

But I always worked through the Central Labor Unions. Bob Watt, who was president of the Massachusetts State Federation at that time, was very helpful to me, and Frank Fenton and some of these people who were labor leaders during those periods. I worked with Hyman Blumberg. I did a lot of organizing in those days. Then I had--you want my trade union stuff, don't you?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. And I wanted to ask if I could: you mentioned that the Amalgamated approached you.

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And asked you. How did . . .

PETERSON: Well, that happened because I was at the Summer School for Women Workers.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

PETERSON: And [ACWA President Jacob] Potofsky came up, and his daughter was an undergrad, and we were good friends. And she said, "Look here, Pop. The union needs Esther." And they offered me a job. And that's how I got into that, through Potofsky, and through Delia Potofsky, Potofsky's daughter, who had been there. While I was doing that, I also worked for the ILG there, too; I did a lot of work for [ILGWU President] David Dubinsky. And I was kind of doing both, and things got tight between the ILG and the Amalgamated. Hillman didn't like me to do anything for the ILG because they were having a fight, you know. (laughter)

PETERSON: And I used to kid him because one summer then they asked me. . . Dubinsky calls me: (imitating his accent) "Ess-tair, Ess-tair, I need a Mormon." (laughter) There'd been some runaway shops from Los Angeles to Utah, and that's my hometown. So I said, "Sure I'd go." But Hillman didn't like that a bit. He said, "If you want to organize, you organize for the Amalgamated. And don't you organize for our competitor." I said, "Well, Sidney, you always told me that the thing to do was to organize the unorganized!" (laughter)

But it meant a lot to me, because Mother could help me with my children. So I organized a local there. And I had a very interesting time there, because here I was a Mormon come home. And I'll never forget trying to buy radio time and, you know, to tell our story.

And I went into the KSL, which is a Church-owned station; and the man who was head of it was a friend of my brother's. And when I walked in, you know, and they saw who I was, "Esther! What are you doing here--disturbing the peace?" (laughter) I'll never forget it as long as I live, because here I'm from an old Mormon family and, well, the gossip around that I had turned communist and everything--ugh--was just awful.

But my family--it was hard on them, but they were wonderful, I must say. They were tolerant. And you know, it goes back to . . . my father had died, of course. Mother was a little upset. She was always a little afraid of socialism. She was afraid this man I married was a little too radical, you know. But there was tolerance, which was a beautiful thing, I think, to my family that I've always appreciated a great deal.

Anyway, we organized there. But the Church used to just behave in a. . . They'd follow me from door to door. The ward teachers, you know. Tell these girls to have nothing to do with this person who has fallen from the ways of the Church. But we organized a good local. I was very proud of it--very, very proud of it--and it's still going strong.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that your mother, when you were in Utah, was able to help with your children.

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of provision were you able to make for the children otherwise?

PETERSON: Well, I always had. . . I've always had good help and you just have to. I've had--well, I've only had three people in my whole life, all my life. First, it was Irene who helped me, who went with me to summer school when I was teaching, and then took care of my first baby, Karen, while I was teaching. I also went to

PETERSON: the convention. They always laughed because they had to fix the meetings around the times so I could nurse. (laughter)

But, you know, the point is I never said I had to go, but they wanted me there. And I always loved that, and I felt terribly lucky that I was asked to come. "Well, can't you arrange it? What can we do to make it so you can come?" And that meant a lot to me. I know that part of it was that I was non-Jewish and in a Jewish organization when they were beginning to get the Irish and the others in, that it was important to have somebody. And I'm sure that because I have an education, that's something.

But I never exploited any of that. I would not take out a union card because I felt like it's not right for me when I've not worked in a factory. And I always felt I was staff, and I was working for them. It's a principle that I've felt was terribly important in my life. Maybe it was wrong; I don't know because they'd say, "Why don't you.... maybe you can be a board member."

It just wasn't quite right during those periods of my life, anyway, when I felt that way. I think you've got to earn your dues some way or other. But, anyway--but I had nothing to complain about, because I really loved what I did. I worked with [J. B. S.] Hardman who was absolutely beautiful, a great influence on my life. And the education work was part of the cultural activities.

Then I went out. . . One of the exciting parts with all of that was when I went out to help organize the locals of Pennsylvania. And these--during the war when they had to be organized from the top, because Sidney Hillman was WPB [War Production Board] Administrator and labor person. And these fair employment union contracts--well, they could not get the contracts unless they were union.

So finally, when they'd been fighting the union all their lives, they had to accept it. Well, I was the one that went in to help sell the union to the workers. And that was a tough job. And the workers had been really geared against unionism for so long. Once I took Karen with me, and my little girl who was four years old, and I remember going to these places, and she used to stand by me when I spoke. I'd usually lead singing and talk to them a little bit. Karen would stand by my side, you know. (laughter) Her little red pigtails--and I'd leave her in the workers' homes during the day while I was working. People were always so beautiful and generous and lovely. I have very warm memories of all those years. I never forget coming home once. The family where she was staying there, right by the railroad track, and I was terrified because I thought, "What if that kid. . .?" She'd never played on a railroad track. Well, she'd been picking up coal for them. She was just black with dirt, beaming with

PETERSON: happiness. And you know, it was quite something. She didn't understand the significance of it at all.

INTERVIEWER: It was a fun, different thing.

PETERSON: Yes. Quite a different thing, you know. Every day they'd go and pick up coal that had dropped. . .

INTERVIEWER: That had fallen off the cars.

PETERSON: In buckets. And you know, these experiences are quite something: they stay deep within you when you see these things and experience them yourself.

But, anyway....so those are the kinds of things I've done an awful lot of.

INTERVIEWER: These were assignments that you've had while you were Assistant Director of Education?

PETERSON: Uh-huh. Oh, I just dealt with whatever would come along.

INTERVIEWER: Well, this is one of the things I wanted to ask: so often one's title is a matter of convenience on the organization chart rather than descriptive of what one does.

PETERSON: Yes, I think that's true.

INTERVIEWER: And would you say this was the case with you?

PETERSON: Yes, I helped--I did an awful lot of education work. But I helped whenever. . .

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned that you had participated in organizing. . .

PETERSON: I did a lot of organizing. I did a lot of organizing. I went over as education director in New Jersey when there was a run-away shop. I had a little difficulty then because some of the Italians that are in the Amalgamated were dealing a little too cozily with some of the racketeers. And I got slapped for telling people to stand up to them, you know, for what they wanted. And that was--oh, that was kind of a bad period. But Hillman and all defended me and I think I even helped matters a little bit in that case.

INTERVIEWER: Were you slapped down by some of the local officials?

PETERSON: That was a slap by the local official whose local I went into.... was giving people a little bit of workers' education. (laughter) I brought their contract and read them what their rights were. Which is what I would do again. (laughter) And, you know, I also learned that you have to be tough. You have to be tough.

PETERSON: 'Well, look then, why the hell, Tony are you here? This is--you don't believe what they say about. . .?" (growls) You know, kind of neurotic. "I'm sorry, but I believe what it says. And you say this, that, and the other thing. So come on." And, you know, I think that I had the security of a husband and a family and all of this, which meant a lot to me. And I think that's always given me a little bit more courage to stand up.

I'll never forget going to Louis Hollander when I needed to see him. And he sat there behind his newspaper. He knew he had to see me. And I just sat down. "Well, what do you want?" And I said, "I want to talk to you, not to your newspaper." And he said, "Well, you go ahead and talk." And I said, "I won't, Louis. I won't talk until you look me in the eye, and I know you're hearing me. And if you can't do it today, I'll come back sometime." "Okay. I'll hear you." And I said, "Louis, now--now listen to me. You know. Just come on. Are we--I want to know: do you want this program or not--you told me you wanted the program here. Here's what it means." And I just had to [clapping her hands].

But, you know, after that he admired me. He called me back. You know, he said, "Well, you know, this gal's got guts. And I like that." I've decided you just must not shrink from a tough encounter. That toughened me. And I was very glad, because it's been extremely good for me, because one of my weaknesses is I'm just too soft sometimes. I have a hard time trying to, you know, stand up in some of these things you believe in. In those cases it's not hard for me. It's hard for me when there's a possibility that I might hurt the person. Then it's hard for me to criticize, do things, when I know that that person is weak and insecure; and then I have trouble. But the other helped me no end to deal with tough labor leaders. I think that's been extremely good for me.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you thought perhaps some of your assignments arose from the fact that you were a Mormon, non-Jewish. Are there instances in which you felt that the role you were asked to assume was because you were a woman?

PETERSON: Oh, I wouldn't doubt some of them. Yes, I think that dealing with women--I think dealing with women workers it was good to be a woman, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any specific instances in which this would have been the case, that were of significance to you?

PETERSON: No, just in general. I think women can talk to women about their problems, although I worked with men organizers who were just great. And I don't remember that being a factor, but I think it could be. I mean, it could be. But I don't--I just don't

PETERSON: recall an instance where we're saying because you're a woman.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any role in the Operation Dixie, the attempt of some of the unions to organize through the South?

PETERSON: Well, I did some work. I don't know whether you'd call it Operation Dixie. But I did an awful lot of work around Staunton, Virginia, and some of those. And I remember the first days down there, the segregation, because some of our locals were already organized. I remember really working hard there on the desegregation. Some of the locals we organized there were the first ones where the blacks really moved in.

And it was beautiful for me to go back, at first, where the blacks would have been sitting together over in a far corner in the courthouse--they had to use a side door--and then go back a few years later and see them throughout the audience. I'm very proud of that.

Yes, we did some....I worked down there. I just don't remember every place I've been. (laughter) I've never kept a diary of it. But I went around a lot of those places wherever I could. I guess it was part of Operation Dixie. Those were Amalgamated Clothing Workers operations where I worked, that I helped with. I don't recall the name for it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any opportunity to introduce women's issues as a concern of the Amalgamated, such as day-care or equal pay?

PETERSON: Not until later, not until I became a legislative representative, and then I did. Yes. You see, then when I came to Washington--my husband was transferred to Washington and I'd been here a few months--and Hillman called me again and said, "Esther, we need you." And I had no idea that I'd be working again, because at that time I had three children. And the woman who had helped me in New York came with me to Washington, but she was black and just couldn't take it here. We'd go shopping together, and they wouldn't let us sit down and have an ice-cream cone together. And I would refuse to not sit down with her. And she just said, "This is not my place." And so I had no one helping me. Oh, she stayed and helped me off and on; but she was not happy. And so I just visualized, "Well, Esther, this is something that you give up." But then Hillman called me.

But before that, I had found another person to help me, by a very strange thing. A woman who had--this is a story in itself--had worked for a Mexican embassy counselor. Her daughter had done some babysitting in the neighborhood and they appeared at my house one night, and I took them in--literally befriended them. They were running away from their employer because they were almost like indentured servants. So I took them in and befriended them.

PETERSON: And to make a long story short, we almost had law cases and suits. That woman has been with me ever since, and she's still my housekeeper. (laughter) I didn't realize I was doing myself such a good turn in those days; but, anyway, it was and with that my labor people helped me with that, too, because they.... Again the sense of injustice that taught me that things like this could happen to this woman and her daughter just made me furious that she had no rights.

And I went to the Justice Department with Gardner Jackson, whom I had worked with in the labor movement, who was there during the Roosevelt days. And he helped me, you know--how to get her papers fixed. We had to hide her long enough to get her ration cards fixed and turnstile exits. Sent her to Mexico on a turnstile entrance and exit so she could be here legally.

And oh, dear--it was a really cloak-and- dagger thing almost because if they'd caught her they could have shipped her back to Mexico without any rights at all. But they helped me in the Department of Justice, and it was Gardner Jackson who did; and he was just beautiful. And Ernesto Galarza, who was the big organizer for the migrant workers. I didn't speak Spanish and this woman didn't speak English. And I had Ernesto come and translate. And he said, "Esther, if you will help her; this is a great cause."

I had to threaten to go to Mrs. Roosevelt, because she was working on the Human Rights Council. And I threatened to go to the newspaper with my story. And I just laid it on. And finally, I got the Mexican Embassy to recognize this, too, and to lay off. But oh, boy, that was a battle. It took me months. But it was a personal battle with it.

But that's not labor movement. But except my experience in the labor movement helped me with things like this, you know, to put the pieces together and to know who had the integrity to stand up for a human being. That was the thing.

"Oh, no, we can't do--that's diplomatically wrong. We can't upset our relations with a country." To heck with it, you know. And I think that's the kind of thing that gave me, you know, strong feelings.

And then I began working for the--be the legislative representative for the Amalgamated. And then I began to do lots more in a lot of these areas, representing Sidney Hillman on the [Capitol] Hill.

INTERVIEWER: How was this responsibility described to you when you were invited to. . . ?

PETERSON: Well, they wanted to get an increase in the minimum wage--from forty cents at that time--and asked if I would represent them

PETERSON: on this. And I did. And that was a very fine and basic experience for me, and I worked very closely with Sidney Hillman then. So I learned so much from him. I just--oh, I look at some of these men that I've been able to work with, and what I think they've done with me and meant to me and giving me training and teaching me how to do.... It's not book learning. It was just practical experience in how you handle various things.

And he--he was, you see, the bigger the man and the bigger the woman, the more they support you. That I've learned. They don't have egos that are afraid somebody else is going to. . . I think my whole experience, one of my biggest troubles is only when the people that have such big egos that they don't have room for anybody else. But the bigger the man is--Mrs. Roosevelt, just so beautiful; Sidney Hillman, so beautiful; J. B. S. Hardman, so beautiful; Jane (Hilda) Smith, so beautiful. You know, the people who have really been influential in my life--my husband, another one. You know, these things are simply great; the people that are not threatened by somebody coming along.

And Hillman was that way; and he took me by the hand and introduced me to Hannegan; he introduced me to all these others. "This is my gal. I want you to listen to her. And she can get me on the phone any time if there is any question."

There was never the running around.... The same way with Jack Kennedy: it was never this running around you. It was just a a secure person who can deal with it.

Arthur Goldberg was just the same. These people that have.... you grow under them. You grow under them. Other people diminish you.

INTERVIEWER: They give you room to grow.

PETERSON: And they give you room to grow and they help you grow. But many others diminish you.

INTERVIEWER: The minimum wage, as I recall, was signed by President Truman in 1948.

PETERSON: (indicating framed pen on the wall) I have one of the pens that was used. That's a real thing, too. That's not when you hand them out by the dozen.

INTERVIEWER: Right. What were your significant recollections about you. . . ?

PETERSON: My work on that?

INTERVIEWER: Your work on that.

PETERSON: Well, I helped. There I worked with John Edelman, who was another

PETERSON: great man. And he taught me a lot of the red tape of lobbying. We had our offices by each other from the Textile Workers. And we worked up this whole plan of what was John's idea of the victim witnesses, bringing the people who were, and I did a lot of work bringing in the actual workers. We called them "victim witnesses." And that was very difficult, because most of these people would lose their jobs; and we had to see that the union brought them in. They had to be protected. And they were all the left-out ones, the least well-organized ones. That's where, again, where John Edelman was so marvelous, because we learned how.... My recollection on that was actually bringing people in. I had my first encounter with some of the communist groups then, not only communist but some of the almost right-wing unions, who almost killed the bill by wanting too much. Well, that's the whole chapter in the political side of it.

That, too, was good for me, because I learned firsthand the political lines and why people do things and the tactics. And that was just terribly valuable. The experience of those years are still very important in my glossary--or whatever you call it--of experiences.

INTERVIEWER: Knowing when and how to apply. . .

PETERSON: How--and be able to detect it, detect it in.... I mean, in my book the objectives that help people, that cover people, not the politics of it. The objective is to get people covered by the minimum wage law and make it as broad as you can. And it's being sensitive to how far you can go and how, if you go too far, you're going to kill it. And that's what the communists tried to do at that period.

INTERVIEWER: This was the electrical workers?

PETERSON: Some of them. Some of them.

INTERVIEWER: What particular legislators did you, do you remember as having significant roles?

PETERSON: Well, Elbert Thomas was very marvelous--from Utah, Labor Committee. And he was--I went out and worked in his political campaign, too. So I--Hillman sent me out; and I worked for him and took my kids out that summer, and they stayed home again with Mother and my family.

So he was--Senator [Claude] Pepper in those days, Senator McNamara, Senator [Scott] Lucas--was helpful. Oh, there are a whole list of them.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any situations in which you had disappointments in that?

PETERSON: Oh, you always have. You always have. Where political lines are down and you hold your breath on the vote. But that's part of the whole job.

INTERVIEWER: Then in 1948, your husband went abroad?

PETERSON: Yes, I was working then for the Amalgamated. And then we went abroad. And I had been over there a short time, then, I got a call from Potofsky asking me if I could possibly come back because I was the only one that seemed to be able to get into Thomas. That's when they were trying to get the Taft-Hartley [Law] repealed.

So they sent me back. They sent for me, and I went back with my baby, literally. And we had sold our house. But I went back, and Julia, who had been my housekeeper before. It was Wilbur Cohen that had bought our house, so I stayed with them; and Julia took care of Lars, and I worked here for about oh, almost two months on two things: one on the minimum wage, and the other helping on the Taft-Hartley repeal, because I seemed to have entry to some of these offices that others didn't have. So I helped.

INTERVIEWER: And the Taft-Hartley Law was passed over President Truman's. . .

PETERSON: Yes, over the veto. And the point was that after Truman was elected again, we were trying to get it repealed. And it was toward that that I was coming back to see if we could work on it.

INTERVIEWER: This was after Truman's election?

PETERSON: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any particular incidents that come to mind, of significance in that campaign?

PETERSON: Oh, there's a lot of them. I remember the corridors full and the people coming in. I remember the difficulty in working with Thomas, who was the chairman of the Education Committee. And I got Arthur Goldberg in once to see him, which was what they wanted to do, and they hadn't been able to get in. And I remember wishing that I could tell him how to work with Thomas, because he started off with the main issue wrong. You don't do that; you lead up to it, you know. (laughter)

And I've had that happen here in the White House since I've been here. And I don't know, it makes me feel like an old lady a little bit. I keep thinking, "Look. The way you get them to say 'yes' is not--you don't hit them over the head. You build a brick at a time in your reasoning, in your logic, of how to do it."

PETERSON: And I was very disappointed about that. That conference.... I just almost wanted to cry that night because I thought we could have won it if we'd handled it correctly. But I think that Arthur felt--I just adore Arthur because he's one under whom I grew; and this just happened to be a difference--he hadn't worked with Thomas long enough to really understand him, you know, as I had worked closely with him on his campaign. My golly day! You know, I worked for him, negotiated for him. And he claims that he would not have been elected if it hadn't been for me. So I had a real inside track with him, obviously. So that was very disappointing to me. But....

When I came back from Europe--oh, you're just about done, aren't you?--while I was in Europe with Oliver, I did a lot on the trade union work over there, too, you know. I kept up my contacts with them. And I did a study on household employment, of household employment for the government. I went to the ILO [International Labor Organization] a couple of times from Sweden for the government.

So I really kept.... I was delegate to the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions]. Phil[ip] Murray called me and asked me to--there was a seat that was vacant, and could I run in from Sweden and do it for them? And I appreciated these things along the line. This is why I keep thinking, "They shouldn't say that women aren't accepted." I never asked for one of those assignments ever in my life, you know. So it's a lot of things around there that some women are a little fuzzy about, being left out and.... You know what I mean? (laughter) But, anyway, I'll never forget that; it was an exciting time for me for Phil Murray to call me and ask me if I'd go in and take this spot and help them, which I did.

Anyway, when I came back from Europe and I went to the Amalgamated. I was having trouble with Frank Rosenblum then; there was a lot of tension. And Oliver had been quite ill then; and it was the first time in my life where I felt that I really had to work. I was real nervous about getting the kids through college and everything. And I thought I'd go back to the Amalgamated, but I had trouble with Frank Rosenblum.

And the idea was, "Well, Esther, you...." I just had a little feeling that he didn't want me. I know Potofsky did, but Potofsky was kind of a weak person. Hillman was gone, you know. And I had not--I'd been in the Potofsky-Hillman faction, not in the Rosenblum faction (laughter), and I think that that influenced it a little bit.

But, anyway, they--I could feel that there was no warmth toward their taking me back, which was a great disappointment because Potofsky had said, "Come down, Esther. Let's find out what you're going to be doing."

PETERSON: So then I went to the [CIO] IUD [International Union Department], and they asked me. And I did. And Jim Carey was the treasurer. I remember what they.... I was to take the place of somebody who'd been there before, and I can't remember who was doing the lobbying for them. And some of the women there had talked to me about "Don't let them undercut you, Esther," you know. And I remember I was getting eight thousand [dollars]--I could be wrong, I can't remember--or six thousand [dollars]. Anyway, I was below what the person had been getting that I was replacing. And I remember asking Jim [Carey], "Well, shouldn't I get the same, at least the same?" It was the first time I'd ever asked anything moneywise in my life. And I really--I remember it was like this. And he said, "You know, Esther, Oliver has a job. He's doing all right."

And I remember saying to Jim, "Is that the way you bargain for people? Do you base your wage rates on the family income? On the husband's working?" I said, "Come on, Jim!" And we had--I remember that; that period was the, really stands out in my experience as the only one that, really, I kind of flag as the place where I felt that there was some discrimination.

INTERVIEWER: This was in the late 1950's.

PETERSON: Yes. This was I guess the late fifties. I can't remember.

INTERVIEWER: As I recall, you came back in about 1958.

PETERSON: That's right. That's when it was.

INTERVIEWER: Then you became legislative representative of the [CIO] Industrial Union Department.

PETERSON: That's right. That was that time. That was that.

INTERVIEWER: . . . of which Jim Carey was treasurer.

PETERSON: Right.

INTERVIEWER: What were the issues that were involved, that you were lobbying for at that time?

PETERSON: Well, then I worked on a minimum wage again, on the increase in minimum. I worked on unemployment compensation and a good deal on UI [unemployment insurance]. There was a lot on that. Oh, I did a lot on Social Security, quite a bit on housing--all the issues that the Amalgamated had worked with.

INTERVIEWER: And this was at the end of the Eisenhower administration?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I know that our time is limited this afternoon, and I had not planned to go into your service for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, because I understand both the Presidential libraries have done interviews with you.

PETERSON: I would think they'd have quite . . .

INTERVIEWER: I would like for you to . . .

PETERSON: I don't think I've sent in all those tapes, but I will someday.

INTERVIEWER: (laughter) I think you haven't, and they asked me . . .

PETERSON: To tell you please to do it?

INTERVIEWER: . . . well, to ask . . .

PETERSON: If I could just finish these darn jobs I keep doing, then I'm going to do it.

INTERVIEWER: But I think it might be appropriate to . . .

PETERSON: I have sent a lot of stuff up to the Schlesinger Library, though. I'll be sending more. As I go through boxes, I'm just going to send it all up and let them sort it out.

INTERVIEWER: You're too busy doing . . .

PETERSON: I just haven't time.

INTERVIEWER: It's like the person who has pictures but doesn't put them in the scrapbook.

PETERSON: I guess so. (laughter)

INTERVIEWER: As we've gone along, I've been asked for your appraisal from time to time of the impact of your having been a woman along with the positions that you have held.

PETERSON: I don't think it's hurt any.

INTERVIEWER: . . . and, on the other hand, the impact of your having worked on your family life. But I think that in your responses you have volunteered answers to that. I would normally ask for an assessment at the end of the interview.

PETERSON: Well, I think that the key of that is that, first, that I have had terrifically good support. I just don't think I could not have just left my child with somebody else every day, or something like that. I just couldn't do it. And I'd have to have the time--I could never have had during that period a nine-to-five job; I just couldn't have done it, that's all. And my requirements were--I'll do the work, but not--I just can't say--

PETERSON: if my kids need me, they need me; that's all there is to it. And I've been lucky that way. And I know that's why I'm sympathetic with women who have to work but cannot have that type [of help.] And I think it's helped me to be more sympathetic with them, and who holds your home together, and everything else.

So I do know I've been fortunate, because I've had a supportive husband and I've had supportive help at home, which makes all the difference. And this beautiful woman, who's able to support when I come home and then she can relinquish--she's just a very beautiful person, that's all.

INTERVIEWER: I think there have been also sociological studies that indicate that many successful women have had a mentor. And you have expressed exactly this sort of feeling in terms of Hilda Smith, Katherine Lord, Sidney Hillman, and others.

PETERSON: Oh, yes, and Mrs. Roosevelt.

INTERVIEWER: Mrs. Roosevelt, Arthur Goldberg, and others.

PETERSON: They're my--uh-huh. Uh-huh. Very definitely. Earl Cummins was another one who was a teacher at Bryn Mawr who meant a lot to me. J. B. S. Hardman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. These are people that really were bulwarks of my life, that I feel.... I think it's very necessary for people to have.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I'd like to thank you for your time. . . .

PETERSON: Well, you're welcome. (laughter) It's kind of fun to reminisce again, isn't it?

ESTHER PETERSON INTERVIEW INDEX

YWCA Industrial Department - Boston, 5