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

## ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

FLORENCE PETERSON

United Automobile Workers

by

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Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

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Ann Arbor, Michigan

VITAE

FLORENCE PETERSON

Florence Peterson was born around 1910 and was raised in a rural farming community in western Michigan. At 16, she left the farming area to live and work in Grand Rapids, where she got a job putting hot rings into car seats for fifteen cents an hour.

Peterson held a number of different jobs in various industries. She worked in an arms factory, a General Motors plant and a brass plant through the Depression and World War II and was active in a union at each one. Peterson held various union positions, including shop steward, and President; first of a Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers' Union local, and then after its dissolution, President of the newly formed UAW amalgamated local.

In 1952, Peterson joined the UAW staff as an international representative. She then moved into the educational arena of the union, first in Battle Creek, and later working out of Solidarity House in Detroit, the union's international headquarters.

While working in Detroit, Peterson became involved with UAW retirees. Since her own retirement, she has kept up that involvement, serving on the UAW Retired Workers Advisory Committee and the Board of the National Council of Senior Citizens.

Looking back over her years as a union activist, Peterson is able to determine the manner in which her feminist consciousness has developed. Because she feels the labor movement has a long way to go in opening itself up to women, Peterson sees a strong need for an organization such as the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). She is in the CLUW chapter in the Grand Rapids, Michigan area.

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INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your mother talking about her parents?

PETERSON: No, you see my situation was different. I was a foundling. I never knew my own parents. I was raised by an elderly lady who was a Civil War veteran's widow as well, so my childhood was quite different than most people's childhood. I remember a great deal of the things that were talked about. It was another generation. I remember discussion of the Civil War, and what happened afterwards. You know, things that went a long way back. I had the impression parts of her family went back to the Revolutionary War.

INTERVIEWER: Did you treat the woman who raised you as your mother?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did she tell you about her childhood?

PETERSON: Yes, some things.

INTERVIEWER: Where was she born?

PETERSON: I remember her saying that when she was a little girl, they crossed Lake Michigan in a boat to come to Michigan. She also said that she had been born in New York State. I never could understand that until I was older and in grade school and saw a map of the territories of the United States back then and realized that what is now Illinois and Wisconsin was one time considered part of New York because New York extended all the way across. Her childhood, from what I remember her telling

PETERSON: it, had been lived in a log cabin. She had brothers and sisters, all of whom were dead by the time she was raising me, for she was a grandmother. She had grandchildren that were just about my age.

INTERVIEWER: What year did you go to live with her?

PETERSON: Oh, I think I was three months old when she took me.

INTERVIEWER: How old was she at the time?

PETERSON: She was in her fifties I would think.

INTERVIEWER: And when was that?

PETERSON: Well, this would have been 1910, 1909, which was a long time ago because she died about ten or twelve years later. She was getting close to eighty I think when she died. She had to be; she was a Civil War veteran's widow. And the Civil War was from 1861 to 1865, which meant that she would have been living as a child in the 1830's, or somewhere along there. So as I said, my generations are all out of context. Other kids had parents and I had what amounted to a grandparent or even older you know.

INTERVIEWER: Did this woman ever work outside her home?

PETERSON: Yes, oh yes. In fact, she talked about her early marriage days. She talked about canning fruit, drying fruit, working in the garden. She lived in an agricultural area. She talked about how when her husband was at war and she was raising children, she was frightened and at night would cover all the windows with blankets so no light was showing, because I guess they were afraid of returning soldiers or just people that were roaming around, you know, and looking for a place to stay. She talked about how she first settled here with her husband, which would have been considerably before the Civil War because all her children were born before that. I don't think she had any more children after he came back from war, because he died very soon after. But she talked about occasional Indians that came to their door wanting something to eat. And I remember when I was a child on what is now South Division. I remember when it became a gravel road when I was a youngster. Before that it was a dirt or plank road.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to you after she died?

PETERSON: I lived with one of her children and her husband for awhile, and then I finally married.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you married?

PETERSON: Sixteen.

INTERVIEWER: Was that to get out of the house?

PETERSON: Partly I guess, probably. There didn't seem much else for girls to do then.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things did you like to do with your mother, this woman?

PETERSON: I didn't do anything with her because she was elderly. I had a dog, a log of cats, some farm animals. She had a son that was crippled and couldn't get around well. He taught me how to read, taught me the alphabet, taught me the multipication tables. I had been through the first reader before I started school, and knew the multiplication tables up to the fives. In fact, I knew most of what the kids get in the first grade before I started.

INTERVIEWER: How did he become crippled?

PETERSON: I don't even know. He was that way as long as I knew him. Might have been a bad fall.

INTERVIEWER: And did this woman work for money?

PETERSON: Oh, no. There was no work for women then. I remember when I was very small, she occasionally used to do a washing for a neighbor now and then. But she had a widow's pension from the Civil War and she had this little piece of ground. Even the son that couldn't get around well worked in the garden. Although he couldn't walk he would get his wheel chair out to the garden and sit and pull weeds and things. She had another son who lived across the road who used to help with the garden. And I had to help with the garden. I really learned about gardening and pulling weeds and picking fruit, picking potatoes, and things like that. So we raised a lot of our own food. Then she had the pension and that was about it. I don't ever remember being deprived of anything. We would have been considered poor I think, by most standards. But in those years everyone lived like that, unless you lived in the cities. This was long before rural electrification or anything like that. You used kerosene lamps. It didn't cost much actual money to live then. You butchered some pigs in the fall and put away your potatoes and carrots and cabbage and vegetables, and canned peas and stringbeans and apples

PETERSON: pears. And that's how you lived. You didn't really buy much except sugar, coffee, flour. That's about it, because you made your own lard and you had all your own vegetables. You had cows. You had milk and butter. So you didn't have to buy anything. This was a totally different kind of world.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Did this woman have any hopes for you? Did she want you to become anything?

PETERSON: No, no. You didn't think about those things. If girls were taught anything then, they were taught how to cook, how to make bread, etc., and that you better keep a clean house if you want to get a man. You were taught to wash your clothes and iron them and keep them clean. I guess one of the things that was the most difficult for me to learn was how to iron well.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Did this woman have any schooling?

PETERSON: She could read and write, but beyond that no. I don't remember books around the house at all. We had newspapers, and newspapers were discussed.

INTERVIEWER: Did you talk about politics at home?

PETERSON: Not very much. But, you see, my earliest memories are the first World War. Wilson, I remember his picture on the table that I had, and I remember much talk of the battlefields. There were some members of the family fighting in France. Things like that. I don't remember much else. I guess they voted, but I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Well, women couldn't vote then, so . . .

PETERSON: No, no, I mean the family. But I don't remember any particular emphasis on it.

INTERVIEWER: Did this woman have any ambitions for her children?

PETERSON: Not that I know of. I think your ambition in those years was that your children could own a piece of ground. That they wouldn't be lazy. That they would see that their crops grew, and that their families were well taken care of. In that particular setting, it was a mark of success if you owned a little piece of land and if the buildings were kept up and the animals were taken care of. Those were very simple things. And many people lived like that. Maybe it was different in the cities. I suppose if you lived in the cities you were worried about a job. But if you lived out in the country, you struggled with the elements and that's the way it was pretty much.

INTERVIEWER: How many people lived in the household when you were growing up?

PETERSON: Well, just the three and sometimes the son from across the road.

INTERVIEWER: And when you lived with her son and his wife?

PETERSON: I lived with the daughter for awhile after she died, I guess a couple of years. Then I lived with the son and his wife.

INTERVIEWER: Did they ever take in any boarders?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: Who were your companions as a child?

PETERSON: When I was a young child living with this woman, there was a family on the next farm with eight children. Because of that I didn't feel like an only child. I spent part of every day in their yard or in their house because they were close. We were like brothers and sisters. One of them I still see. Most of them are dead now. One of the girls who was there still lives in Grand Rapids and we see each other every week or two. It was a nice family. There were other families with children around there, but not as close. When I say close I mean that the walk from our yard to their's would be a half-mile. That was a close neighbor. Others were maybe a mile away.

INTERVIEWER: What chores or responsibilities did you have as a child?

PETERSON: Oh, I carried in wood and I carried out ashes. I took the cows to water. I occasionally fed the pigs. I always fed the chickens. I gathered eggs. I picked apples. I picked grapes. I pulled the weeds. I pitted cherries and hulled strawberries. I did all the things that you do on a farm.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I don't know much about farms.

PETERSON: Well, that's the way you lived. If you're a youngster on a farm, or if it's a big place like my friend's, they would have the chores and making beds and washing dishes. I had to wash dishes occasionally, too. But I didn't have much of that. If there had been a boy on the farm then I would have done more housework and he would have done the outside work. But because there wasn't any boy, the girl fed the chickens and gathered eggs, although feeding chickens and gathering eggs is usually a woman's job. I also fed the pigs and milked the cow.

INTERVIEWER: I tried to milk a cow a few summers ago. It was very hard.

PETERSON: It's not easy. I don't know if I could do it anymore but I could do it then.

INTERVIEWER: It takes so long to milk a cow, and the farm I was on had milkers.

PETERSON: Milkers had never been heard of then. You had cows, you milked them. I used to carry the milk in. I used to churn butter, skim milk, make cottage cheese. Oh, and wash the chimneys. I learned to clean the lamps and fill them with kerosene. That was always a job a youngster did. But even when my kids were growing up, even in the city, it was the years before everybody had gas heat. Even then when you had furnaces, there was the carrying out of the ashes. And sometimes carrying coal upstairs, you had a hard coal stove upstairs. It was an entirely different kind of life.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever think that boys had an easier time than girls?

PETERSON: Not when I was a real youngster. Later, when it became a question of how much freedom you had. Maybe when you get into your teens, I think then you do. But when you're a youngster on a farm, you see the boys working just as hard as the girls. And at the point when you get beyond whether or not it's a question how many hours you have to put in a working day, when it's a question whether you can go someplace and stay out till nine or ten o'clock, when you had a feeling that the boys had it better. And I think also that when you got to the point where you were trying to work to make a little extra money, that very often it was easier for the boys than for the girls. They could find more things to do to get paid for because girls could only get paid for doing housework.

INTERVIEWER: What did you daydream about becoming when you grew up?

PETERSON: Oh, one time I thought I would like to become a missionary because I wanted to travel, to see some of the world. Beyond that, I don't think of anything specifically I guess I always wanted. I guess every youngster at one time thinks they would like to be a teacher when they're quite young. The job of teacher looks good to you. Beyond that, I don't recall anything specifically.

INTERVIEWER: Was religion important to you as a child?

PETERSON: Not particularly. It was not a religious family.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of arguments were there in the family?

PETERSON: Well, I don't really recall arguments. Because, you see, it wasn't a husband and wife relationship. There was a mother and a couple of sons. If they argued about anything, they would probably argue over which side of the garden they were going to plant the corn on, or how much of it they were going to plant. You know, something like that. I really don't remember disagreements of that kind.

INTERVIEWER: Was your family different from the neighbors in your community? How did you feel about that?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. My family was very different in the sense that it wasn't a normal family, if a normal family was a husband, wife, and kids. My family was not. Aside from that, my family had been there a very long time and they were well-respected. Everybody knew them. So it was a different kind of setting, very different.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about your family being different?

PETERSON: Oh, I was unhappy about it. I was very unhappy about the fact that I didn't have brothers and sisters. I remember one year being in one of their homes and the youngsters were making a big issue about hiding the Christmas gifts from each other that they had made for each other, or bought for each other. It just seemed like so much fun, that Christmas was so much fun in their house. And it wasn't in mine. If I couldn't get out to go next door, I was terribly lonely. Some days I couldn't go over, the rain or snow or something. The dogs and cats were companions.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of school?

PETERSON: I liked school. I liked it very much.

INTERVIEWER: What subjects did you like?

PETERSON: Well, when I got in high school, algebra was my favorite subject. And history. I liked those two the best. When I was in grade school, it was just reading, writing, arithmetic. I was good. I was usually one of the youngest ones in my class. I skipped a couple of grades.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any favorite teachers?

PETERSON: Yes, I had one in high school. I don't remember much about her except that she was the best disciplinarian in the school. I liked her.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you like algebra and history so much?

PETERSON: I don't know. Algebra was easy for me and history was....well, I'll tell you, I think I was a smart-aleck where history was concerned. In those years, I had a retentive memory and I really didn't absorb as much as I should. But I liked the idea of having my hand up in class, and I liked the idea of having the answers. And I discovered that I could read the lesson in the last fifteen minutes before I went to class and retain enough of it to know all the answers. I used to do that. And then the next day I would have forgotten much of it. So that was maybe why I liked it. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: What did your family think about school?

PETERSON: Oh, my family encouraged me. To them, education was the most important thing in the world. I remember them stressing over and over again, that what you learned could never be taken away from you. They were very simple people, very simple farming people. But they had tremendous respect for learning and they just wanted young people to have every advantage to learn which they had never had.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have different ideas about schooling for boys than for girls?

PETERSON: I don't think so. It was never really discussed because the only thing we ever got into was grade school or high school. We never discussed the idea of higher education.

INTERVIEWER: Were your classmates from the same background as you? What kind of ethnic background were people from?

PETERSON: Well, there was only one family in the area or in the school that I know of that had parents that spoke broken English, and they were German. Otherwise, what you would have was a second and third generation of people, or farther back, that were just all mixed up. There might have been a little bit of everything, when I think of the names.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember some of the names?

PETERSON: Bowman, Stauffer, Gordon, Voison. There was a Wiltzer that was a German family. With the others, it could have been almost anything.

INTERVIEWER: What religious groups were in the community?

PETERSON: Well, there were some Catholics, but not many. And there was an old Methodist church.

INTERVIEWER: Were you raised as a Methodist?

PETERSON: I went to that church and then when later, when I went out to Fennville to live with the daughter, I went to the Baptist church. It was the kind of church that's a church. There was no strong Catholic group in the area. There could have been some five or six or seven or eight miles away, you know. And you see, when I was young in those years you didn't have cars. You traveled in a horse and buggy. So you didn't go those distances very often. A mile or two was about it. And if there were Catholic families five or ten miles away, I probably would not have seen them. I don't even remember any Catholic kids in my school. There could have been some there.

INTERVIEWER: What about the teachers? Were they from the same socio-economic environment?

PETERSON: Yes, I would say so. You see, we only had one teacher who taught eight grades in a country school. And usually each year it would be a different teacher.

INTERVIEWER: What were the teachers like? Were they young women?

PETERSON: Most of them, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Had they been to teacher training schools?

PETERSON: Yes, I think they had to go through high school and then, I think they called it normal schools for teacher's training. Then later, see I went through the seventh grade there. Then I went to Fennville, which is south of here, to live with the daughter. I think it was two years or three years, four years, something like that. I went to high school. There it was a little bit different because Fennville was a very small town, although there were farms, too. There we had teachers for each grade unlike the country school.

INTERVIEWER: When did you stop going to formal school.

PETERSON: Eleventh grade.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

PETERSON: I came to Grand Rapids to work and live with the son and his wife. I didn't go back to school. I got a job.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever wish you had gone further?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Has the lack of a high school diploma ever hindered you in any way?

PETERSON: No. But only, I think, because I became involved in the labor movement. The lack of a high school diploma doesn't necessarily impede you from a career in the labor movement if you start at the shop steward level. It might in today's movement. It didn't when I started. And I had always read all my life, from the time I was a very young child. I loved to read and I read books and books and books by the dozens and dozens. Without ever intending to, I became reasonably educated. It wasn't a conscious thing.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever involved in other kinds of schools, such as settlement house classes or unions? or YWCA?

PETERSON: I belonged to the YWCA. I was active in their movement, but that was after I was in the union.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever go to any workers' education classes held by any of the political groups?

PETERSON: No, but I went to a great many workers' education classes sponsored by the unions.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of those classes?

PETERSON: Oh, they were the beginning of an education for me. I really began to learn.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start going to them? Do you remember?

PETERSON: About 1943, I think. We used to hold classes in the union hall. Sometimes they were taught by people from the university. I also went to the summer schools. I think '43 was the first union summer school that I attended. The people who taught them would be about half and half--about half of them would be people who came from the labor education movement, sometimes with a little formal education, but who often taught steward's training or union administration. In the beginning, I guess we had to supply most of our own

PETERSON: teachers. Then later, because of grants from universities, and relationships with the universities, and the development of workers' education programs in the universities, then we began to be able to get regular instructors for some of our sessions.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of the teachers in those summer schools and the classes?

PETERSON: Well, it varied. Sometimes you would find one that was very, very good, who would fire your imagination. Sometimes you would find one that was very, very dull. It just depended upon the person involved.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any who stand out?

PETERSON: Yes, I had one whose name was Sam Jacobs, who is now dead, who was an absolutely terrific guy, who could teach a class and make it live. Sam was a professor I believe. But he was so real. He understood so well everything he was doing. He was a favorite. And, of course, Brendan Sexton who was one time the director of the UAW Education Department. He was responsible for all the UAW summer school programs.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, do you know him?

PETERSON: Oh, do I know him! Do you know him?

INTERVIEWER: No, I'm going to look him up when I get back to the East in the fall, but he just sounded wonderful. Could you tell me something about him?

PETERSON: He is a terrific man. I really wouldn't know where to start. I haven't seen much of him in late years. For many years I knew him very well. He was one of my real inspirations when I got started in the labor movement. And I used to feel about Brendan, and I think I still would if I were still seeing him, that he was one person that never in my life have I talked to about anything without learning something.

INTERVIEWER: That's a real compliment.

PETERSON: I think I learned more from Brendan than from any other single individual.

INTERVIEWER: I read the pamphlet that he wrote on workers' education, which I found really helpful.

PETERSON: He would know his subject. He was very much a part of this transition period when we began to form alliances with the universities and began to get people from the universities to come into our programs. Brendan was a very large part of that.

INTERVIEWER: Was he a university person at the time or was he coming from the labor movement?

PETERSON: I don't think Brendan ever went to a university. I have a feeling he did not.

INTERVIEWER: I think he's a college professor now.

PETERSON: I think that he may have done it in later years. I would be doubtful if he had very much, but he may have had some formal education. But he came from the shop itself. We always teased him about being Irish, which he is very proud of. I can remember him hitting the table and swearing by God, his family was not lace curtain Irish, that they were the Irish that kept the pig in the parlor. This was his way then. Maybe he has rubbed off more of the rough edges and is much more circumspect now than he used to be. But when I used to know him, he was quite a guy. He was a real leader of the movement itself and very much an intellectual and I don't know how much of it was formal education. I never heard him say.

INTERVIEWER: He went to work with the farm workers this summer.

PETERSON: He would. It's the kind of thing he would do. I worked for him a long time.

INTERVIEWER: Did students ever talk about political events of the times among themselves?

PETERSON: Not very much. I don't remember it happening.

INTERVIEWER: Did you participate in any political discussions that you remember?

PETERSON: No. I remember none of that.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything special about your early schooling that might have contributed to your later union activism?

PETERSON: No. Nothing. I remember the impressions that we got when I was in high school. I remember all the horrible things that were said to us about the labor movement. I remember the cartoons about the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World]. I remember cartoons showing them with beards, and bombs sticking out of their pockets, and all the nasty things that were said.

INTERVIEWER: Was this around the first World War?

PETERSON: Yes, after the first World War.

INTERVIEWER: During the Red Scare?

PETERSON: Yes. You see, at that time there was not much of a labor movement in the United States. The IWWs came before the CIO. No, the AF of L was there, but it was a very quiet, respectable kind of thing. The IWW was when there began to be some consciousness on the part of the mass production industries. I guess the IWW started in the lumber industry and in agriculture. Frankly, I think they were terrific. They were the beginning of industrial unionism as opposed to craft unionism. They were very radical for their time. The people who feared them called them Bolsheviks because this was shortly after the Russian Revolution and it was the nastiest thing they could think of to say.

Brendan invited David Saposs, a famous labor historian, to talk at one of our summer schools. He spent two afternoons telling us the history of the American labor movement. The IWW would come in and organize. They would stir up the people and maybe call a quick strike. But they never formed permanent union structure or elected officers. I don't believe they ever attempted to get contracts. When the IWW leaders left to go somewhere else, only a loosely knit group was left. By stirring the people up they forced people to realize how overworked and underprivileged these workers were. They were a forerunner of what came later. In that sense I think they were necessary and made an important contribution to what happened in this nation.

INTERVIEWER: In the community in which you first lived, did neighbors get together informally?

PETERSON: When I was a little girl, the neighbors from down the road used to walk the quarter mile up the road at night carrying kerosene lanterns to see by so that they could sit in the kitchen with another kerosene lamp and play cards. That was about it. This was how people lived.

INTERVIEWER: Did they talk about their newspapers, the news?

PETERSON: I would think their conversation would be more likely to be about the weather, about the neighbor farmer's crop, the price of wheat, this kind of thing. This was an era of survival. You raised your own food. There wasn't much politics

PETERSON: involved. You survived because the weather and the elements determined to a large extent how you were going to get by through the winter, and what kind of seed you would have in the spring. These were topics of conversation. Or somebody bought a new team of horses. Or a new plow, the cost of the plow. But this was a very rural community. Then after I was in high school it was a little different.

INTERVIEWER: How big was the community in numbers?

PETERSON: Well, it wasn't really a community. You see, a half a mile in either direction from you there would be another farm house.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a grouping around the church, a number of families?

PETERSON: I never went to the church.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's right.

PETERSON: There were people that went to church. But I never went there. The only time that I remember the people coming together would be once a year at graduation, or twice a year, maybe at Christmas time when they put on a program.

INTERVIEWER: Did you belong to any religious, social, or political groups as a young girl?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: What about in later life?

PETERSON: Well, not really until I joined the labor movement.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me about the groups you were in in the labor movement and afterwards?

PETERSON: Well, I became active in the labor movement, and as a result of that I became active in the Democratic Party. I became active, to some extent, in the YWCA. I became involved in the Community Chest and their drives. I joined the NAACP.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the dates when you did these different things?

PETERSON: They would have all been in the late 1940's or very early in the fifties.

INTERVIEWER: Did you join the NAACP around that time too?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What other groups did you join?

PETERSON: I don't remember much of anything else, because if you were active in the labor movement in those years, the movement took your time. You worked during the day and went to meetings at night and weekends. Then, particularly as the movement became more involved in politics, between that and your political parties, there was no time for anything else.

INTERVIEWER: Were you aware of any splits in the political groups that you joined over different positions? Or splits within the labor movement?

PETERSON: Oh, there were splits in the labor movement, various ones.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe some of them that you remember?

PETERSON: Well, I got into the labor movement about the time of the UAW there was right and left wing factionalism that was going on.

INTERVIEWER: That's the Reuther versus Thomas-Addes?

PETERSON: The Reuther versus Addes, yes. I was in the movement through that. Then I remember the split in the Democratic Party over the Wallacites and the non-Wallacites, Henry Wallace, that is.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

PETERSON: Well, I went through the whole Communist thing in the CIO. I was involved in that.

INTERVIEWER: Could we go back and talk about each of these splits, about the issues you remember in the splits, and what position you took?

PETERSON: Well, I was a Reutherite, in the split between Reuther and Addes. Of course, in looking back I can see that a lot of it was a struggle for power. But some of it was very basic. As I recall, Reuther had not been too happy about the no-strike pledge during the second World War. One of the issues that divided them was the willingness of what we called the left-wing to go along with piece-work systems in our plant.

INTERVIEWER: Was the left-wing the Addes group?

PETERSON: When you are as new as I was then, you tend to go the way that the people go who are closest to your goals and whom you respect. For awhile I was kind of with the Addes group, but over a personal issue. I had been fired from my job. The union was unable to reinstate me. There were all kinds of political things going on and I felt I had been let down. Then I got over that.

INTERVIEWER: Was a reason given for firing you?

PETERSON: Oh, the company fired me because I was involved in a walkout.

INTERVIEWER: What was the walkout about?

PETERSON: It was a silly thing because I wasn't really involved in the damn walkout. I just got caught in it. I was on the plant committee then. It was a new plant. It started as Irwin Pederson Arms. I think this was in '42. I got a job there and this was my first experience in the union. Then General Motors took over the plant and the labor board, the War Labor Board, named an interim committee. This becomes very technical.

INTERVIEWER: That's OK, I know a lot of the technical stuff.

PETERSON: Alright. I had worked in factories a long time before that, off and on, but I got a job here that was just the beginning of the war hysteria. Irwin Pederson was a new factory here in Grand Rapids. They were going to make the M-1 carbine. They were already in production. I was in there a very short time. This was strange because I had given no thought to the labor movement. I knew that there had been an election there just before I got my job. I knew the union had won so there was kind of a union operating in the plant. We were doing some kind of inspection, as I recall, on long tables. They moved a group of us from one area to another one day. The light was very bad where all of us were standing. We couldn't see what we were doing. There was something else wrong there, I can't remember what it was, I can only remember the light. I know the foreman came through and I climbed all over him. I think that one of the reasons I did it was because I had worked in shops a lot before. Many of the people who came to work at Irwin Pederson in war time, the women especially--and this was almost all women--had never been in a shop before. Housewives began coming into the shops in droves when the war started and men were drafted. Women who

PETERSON: had never been outside of their homes before went to work in factories. It was more or less this kind of group with the exception of about three of us who were involved in this particular group. So I wasn't afraid to speak up. I was furious that they were asking us to work without lights. So I climbed all over the foreman when he came through. When he walked away after promising to do something, the group all turned to me and said, "You're our new shop steward." I guess I had signed a card at that time. I don't even remember for sure because the union election had been held a couple of weeks before and I hadn't come to work yet. Anyhow, that's how I started out being the shop steward.

Well, it wasn't too long after that that General Motors bought the plant. When they bought the plant, they refused to recognize the fact that there was a union there because at the time they bought it, the union had had an election and won but had not yet been certified by the National War Labor Board, although they had been certified by the Regional War Labor Board. GM seized on a technicality saying that because they had not been certified by the National War Labor Board, there was no union in the plant. The UAW was under the no-strike pledge. I remember, although many people would have denied it, but we certainly were given subtle encouragements to walk out, to bring things to a head. And that's precisely what we did. We walked out.

Immediately there was a big meeting in Detroit because they wanted the war production. The Board certified seven of us as an interim committee to function as a bargaining committee in the plant until such time as either one of two things happened: the National Board certified us, or we held another election and won the election. I remember there was a decision in the UAW to go for the election, to get it over with fast, and take it by a big majority. The plant was almost all women. I remember that we took it. I do not remember if it was 93 percent or 97 percent. We took the vote. It was big. You see, there was a period of two or three weeks in there when the seven of us were the leaders. And I was one of the seven. Most of the other seven had had experience in the union before. We went out to get that vote out. We wanted to make it clear we were strong. And we were. So, I really kind of started at the top there. Only during war time could this have happened. Normally, you go to work in a plant and you work awhile before you get elected even to shop steward or to a committee or something. But this just happened because it was war time. So, then, I guess it couldn't have been more than a year, a year-and-a-half later that there was constant trouble. GM was really a nasty corporation, very nasty.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe some of the bad things GM did? Some of the things that antagonized workers the most during the war?

PETERSON: I remember one of the rotten things they did and they knew full well what they were doing. People would be late. When you take a plant of two or three thousand people, some are going to be late every day. The law of averages is there are going to be a half a dozen late. I don't care what plant it is.

INTERVIEWER: Only a half dozen out of two or three thousand?

PETERSON: Well, today it would be more. But in those days it would be half a dozen, maybe a dozen, not any more than that. So they pulled a cute little trick. When a girl arrived they wouldn't let her punch in. She had to report to the personnel office. Then they would wait about fifteen or twenty minutes until everyone who was going to be late would get there. Then they would line them up as if they were prisoners, in single file, and march them all the way through the plant to the back of the plant where the time clocks were. We had girls break down and cry. It was humiliating. It was like prisoners being marched through where everyone could see them. This was a stupid thing to do. And they knew deliberately what they were doing. They knew they were doing it to punish them, to humiliate them. Very frankly, I think they were doing things deliberately to cause trouble. There was no question in my mind because they were on a cost plus.

Boy did they rook the government. Did they ever rook it! They hired three times the people they needed. They had more people than they could use. Sometimes they would have three or four people to a machine just sitting there. But the government was paying them for their wages plus costs. They were also doing everything in those years to discredit the union because this was when the unions were not solid as they are now. They hadn't been around that long. This was only in the early forties. The unions had only been organized. In the UAW, the big sit-down strikes were in '36, '37. 1939 was the tool-and-die strike. So this was not too far from then. Unions were still being tested.

I think that there was literally a feeling on the part of General Motors that if they could discredit the union enough during these years they would not grow as strong as they would otherwise. So, people turned against the unions as hurting the war effort and this was played to the hilt. So there could be a lot said about the fact that a dozen women were late to work. It would be played up as workers who didn't care and unions who supported them. But nothing was ever said that there were five times as many workers in the plant as there were machines. And that the taxpayers were paying it.

PETERSON: Then we got into another hassle with them. They were trying to force some people to pass bad parts on guns. I remember one case of a man who was working on a firing range, testing guns and laying aside the ones that wouldn't fire properly. The foreman came back and tried to force him to put those guns back on the rack with an OK tag on them. I remember the man throwing his gun down and walking off the job crying because he had a son on the front line. I remember a few months later when a group of us who were on the committee made an appointment with the FBI, after Truman's committee was established to re-evaluate the war contracts. We had been running defective firing pins. Every night they would be set out and every night be rejected, and every day there would be some more of them on the floor. Then one day they were all gone. Then there was a pile of bolts, trays of bolts that we knew hadn't been run in that plant. We didn't know where they were from. We were in contact with the union in the Saginaw plant, which was another division making the same gun. We found out that a load of their bolts was no longer there. We thought they had exchanged them to run them through these two plants to get past inspection. So we formally made a complaint about that. All these kinds of things went on.

INTERVIEWER: Was anything ever done to resolve the complaints? Were the companies prevented from passing defective parts?

PETERSON: Whatever was done we never would have known about. It went to the government. It went to the FBI and, hopefully, it would have gone from there to Truman's committee. Whatever steps were taken would never have been made public. So we never knew. We just know the bolts disappeared off the floor. We checked with Saginaw and they were not taken back there. That's all we knew.

INTERVIEWER: In your experience, did people find it upsetting to be pressured to pass defective parts?

PETERSON: Oh, of course. World War II was not like Vietnam or Korea. World War II, everybody was involved. And it was difficult to find a family that didn't have a relative in somewhere, either overseas or about to go over. So people were terribly upset about that. A lot of young women had husbands who were either overseas or about to go over, brothers or a son. We had a lot of hassling on that. And, of course, we made a fuss about it. This was the only time we officially complained. But then other things would happen. I'm trying to remember now what some of the aggravations were. The business of marching the girls through the plant was one of them. But much of it was just a general attitude--a kind of shoving you around,

PETERSON: of being nasty. "Get over there and do that!" Never, "Would you mind going over there and doing that?" I mean, it was a toughness, a nastiness. It's a hard thing to explain if you haven't been there.

INTERVIEWER: I've read a lot about it.

PETERSON: Bearing in mind that they were dealing not with regular factory workers, but with many who were working for their first time. And they would lie to us. You could not depend upon anything they told us. We became more sophisticated and we had a good teacher teaching us how to handle it.

INTERVIEWER: You mean a union person teaching you how to handle it?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Who was the person?

PETERSON: Well, the person who was our leader during this period with GM was Leonard Woodcock, who was just a regional staff member at that time.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting.

PETERSON: And Brendan Sexton was around a lot, too. I had been on some picket lines with Brendan. So we had the best teaching. I remember another instance after we won the election we got a contract. We came under the GM master agreement. One of the things you always had to fight about was your right to represent your people. I was a committee woman and I had a district, and the district would consist of several adjacent departments, usually maybe 250 people, 300, something like that. You were supposed to handle any grievances they had. If they had a question about the contract or a complaint, if you were the policeman of the contract, it was up to you to find out from them what it was about, to take the matter up with the foreman. If you didn't get anywhere, to reduce it to writing and start it through the process to wherever it goes to the plant committee, to the personnel meeting, etc.

What they did in those years was to do everything that they could to tie the representative down so he or she couldn't get around, couldn't talk to people. If you wanted your union representative you had to ask your foreman to get them. The foreman would go to the foreman of the union representative who wasn't out full time as most of them are not, but had to work on their job, and tell that person that they were needed

PETERSON: over in the next department where some employee had a grievance or something. Then they checked the representative off the job. You would go over there and take care of your business and come back. GM kept getting more and more technical. There were more and more delays. There were little rules put in. So when you reached the other department, even if the person was standing right aside of you, you had to go find that person's supervisor and have him sign you in. You might be there five minutes and you would have to find him again and have him sign you out. Then you'd go back to your own supervisor and have him sign you in etc., etc., etc. Hassling is what it was. The kind of hassling that drove you crazy.

Then you supposedly couldn't go unless they actually had a grievance. Or they would hassle the person who asked for a union representative. They'd try to find out what they wanted and give them a hard time over it. Then there was an understanding that a grievance that was already in existence could be investigated, which meant that you could go into that department and notify the foreman that you were going to talk to this, this, this, and this person in the investigation of this grievance. They hassled us so that we were unable to really function. You see, we didn't have a union shop yet. If your people got fed up, they could leave the union. So you had to service them if you wanted to keep them as members.

Our leaders told us how to do it. And all we had to do was line our people up to call for us. I know I had it organized in my district. A couple of my departments were on one floor, and a couple on the other. I came down the stairs, I had people planted. They'd see me come down, come up to the foreman, see me go back, and give me time to get back upstairs. Then the next person would call the foreman and tell him they wanted to see me immediately because they had a grievance and they wouldn't discuss it until I was there. They would see me come in, see me check in, see me check out. The moment I was gone the next person was lined up to tell them they wanted me. So this went on for two days. The foreman couldn't get any work done. And I was tired from going up and down stairs because actually the grievances weren't there. We had learned how to hassle back. And that's what we were doing. So then we would come in and say we were going to investigate a grievance for so and so. And you were going to get the foreman to check you in to investigate it with him. You spent five minutes there. You go on to the foreman again; you were going over there to investigate it with so and so. So that foreman spent all of his time walking, signing

PETERSON: in, signing out. He had work of his own to do. He'd no more than get on the phone or reach for the phone, and I'd be there again to be signed in, to be signed out. The same thing was going on in all the departments. Then we wrote a lot of grievances. We wrote grievances on everything. We wrote a grievance for unsafe working conditions. We finally ended up in a meeting with the plant manager with the grievances piled up on the table to where they were falling off on the floor. It was complete pandemonium. And they began to yield.

INTERVIEWER: What happened in this walkout when you got fired?

PETERSON: Oh, that came some time later. There was a production standard on another shift. They were fighting over it. The company had raised the number of pieces. The committee person in that department had pulled a fast one. This was on the day shift. I worked the midnight shift, and got off work at seven o'clock in the morning. A group of us from that shift went up the hill to a coffee shop and had some coffee and talked before we went home. We did that quite often. When we went home, we had to come back down the hill past the plant. All these people were on the street. Most of them were temporary employees, and temporary employees could be fired without any recourse at all under the contract. This whole department was out and part of another department. We hadn't known anything about it. This gal was a committee woman in there. She and one of the others, I think it was another committee person, had cooked this up. They had been smart enough to go out on a pass, so they weren't caught in it. But they had all their people out on the sidewalk. All we could think about is, if it stays like this, most of these people will get fired. We've either got to get the whole plant out so that they think they've got a real crisis and then we can bargain, or else these people would have to go back and they were not about to go back. They probably would have been fired if they had gone back. So we started to try to get the rest of the plant out from the outside 'cause we couldn't get back in.

I looked up in the window where my department was. They were no longer my people because I was on the third shift. But a lot of them knew me, and I knew a lot of them because I had been on the shift before. I was trying to motion to them to come out. Then there was one other committee man doing the same thing. The corporation got pictures of us doing it. We got fired and made into examples. The discharge stuck because the theory was we should have known better, we were leaders.

INTERVIEWER: Why couldn't the union get you reinstated?

PETERSON: They went to arbitration and lost the case.

INTERVIEWER: And how does this fit into your perception of the Reuther-Thomas Addes split?

PETERSON: What happened then--I was very angry. Some of the Addes people came to town from the other side of the state and began telling me . . .

INTERVIEWER: Where is the other side of the state?

PETERSON: Saginaw, Saginaw area. Because that was part of the region. And they started explaining to me, and a bunch of my followers, that the case had been mishandled, that it shouldn't have been presented the way it was etc. We were very angry. There was a faction in our local between the people that followed me and the people that followed the people that had caused the walkout in the first place. For awhile I considered myself part of the Addes group--maybe a month or two. But I got over that.

INTERVIEWER: Was it specifically on a tactical issue?

PETERSON: You see, what happened was that you heard so much and you were torn both ways and almost everybody you talked to was split. One person you knew and liked would be talking for one group. Another person would be talking for somebody else. It was very hard, if you were new and not at all sophisticated in the forms of the organization. And I was furious at what happened to me.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think at the time that the Thomas Addes group stood for?

PETERSON: Not having any background in the labor movement, not doing very much, not knowing very much about the whole thing, it was hard to know what to think. At one moment you would be angry at your employer and feel, "I don't want any of that no-strike pledge." The next day you pick up the newspaper and read about casualties overseas. So you're saying to yourself, if it's war production, maybe there should be a no-strike pledge. That was a big issue. But I think the piece work thing got me. I had put in so many years of piece work and suffered from it before there was a union involved. The idea that at any point unions would encourage piece work or institute piece work in the plant where there wasn't any was enough to make me furious. You have to understand what's happening in a nation at a time like this. A nation that is totally mobilized for war. And you would not remember that.

INTERVIEWER: No, I was born right after.

PETERSON: That's right. You see there is no, really there is no comparison. Twice now I've lived in a nation that was totally mobilized for war, and the war in Vietnam did not touch most people until later when the demonstrations came. The war in Korea only touched the lives of those people who had people over there, except you'd see it on television. They would all be disturbed by it in a rather objective way. But if you live in a nation that is totally mobilized for war, it affects the clothes you wear, the food you eat, your way of life. You can't travel. Your gasoline is rationed. You cannot buy tires. You can't buy sugar without a coupon. You cannot buy meat without a coupon. You could not buy silk hose or nylon hose because there wasn't any nylon. You could not buy cigarettes, not cigarettes as we know them. So, you see, every facet of your life is affected. You are living in a context that is totally different. Everything relates to the war effort. That's all there is in the news.

When you talk about war production and unions and no-strike clauses, and piece work and second fronts, it's an entirely different situation. If I had been a person with a labor background there wouldn't have been any question. I would have just automatically been on the side of the labor force. But we were very new in the whole thing. We had to learn about unions not as something we had learned as children from our parents, but as first hand experience in a time when you didn't know what to think.

INTERVIEWER: When did you become a Reutherite?

PETERSON: I think right afterwards. The people I really knew the best were people like Sexton and Woodcock and a guy by the name of Patterson, different ones all of whom were Reutherites. My anger at the discharge was short-lived. Then I had to find another job. In the meantime, I had become active in the CIO County Council, and was working in the political field. I became really active there in '44, during the Roosevelt campaign. I guess I was always a Reutherite to the extent that I ever became anything except for the period I was furious over what happened to me at the discharge.

INTERVIEWER: What role do you think the Communists played in the union?

PETERSON: I saw it first hand.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe that to me?

PETERSON: Yes. I've had a checkered career. After I was discharged from GM, I was still married then. My son was drafted and was about to go overseas. While I was working at this plant he was in the army. He wasn't overseas yet. I got a job in a plant I had worked in many years before, a very small plant, the Grand Rapids Brass Plant. This plant was already organized and belonged to the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, which was one of the communist unions. This was really weird because all the people that I knew were UAW people, and I was still active in the county council with all the UAW people and in the political programs there. Then I went to work in this plant. And again in a very short time, the guy who was president of the union, who was having some trouble with the international, resigned. So the people in the plant elected me president. So I turned up as president of a local in the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Well, it was at this time that there was a big fight in the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. There was an anti-communist faction trying to oust the communist leaders. Most of the leaders were communists. In the group there were some very staunch party members. The president of the international union was a man by the name of Reid Robinson. I don't know if he was a card-carrying member, but the communists who were in the union were keeping him in office. He had just gotten into a big scandal for trying to shake down one of the employers in the Doehler Jarvis Corporation. Their convention was coming up shortly.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean, "shake him down"?

PETERSON: He went in and asked him for five thousand dollars because he was short of cash. Told him he'd like the money, but he wouldn't have any way of paying it back.

INTERVIEWER: Did he threaten him with disruption?

PETERSON: Well, sure. When you say that to an employer you know what you're doing. If the employer gives it to you, you know that he's not expecting the five thousand back. I don't remember now if it was five thousand or twenty-five thousand. I just know this had happened. Their convention was coming up and there was a group, a group of Mine-Mill workers in the East who were anti-communist, anti-Robinson. They had lined up with a group from the Mines. These were copper refineries or copper plants, or copper and brass. These people lined up with some of the union leaders from, I think the copper

PETERSON: mines out in Montana, to try to oust Robinson and his cohorts at the convention. So every vote counted. When I got elected president in this little local, there was a gal there who also hadn't been part of the labor movement, who was elected chief steward. The two of us were really running the outfit and doing very well. Two international representatives for the Mine-Mill union came to town and took us out to dinner. Oh, this was afterwards. In fact, as soon as we got into that plant and were elected officers in there, I was talking to a man by the name of Bill Kemsley. Bill is now out in Vermont. At that time, he was from the UAW in Detroit.

INTERVIEWER: Was he married to a woman named Backy Kemsley?

PETERSON: No, I don't know. He had a first wife. He finally married a gal by the name of Ann some time ago. Bill was education director for the state CIO at the time and he was out of Local 174 in Detroit. He was very close with Brendan and Walter and Woodcock and all the rest of them. One day he sat down and told us about what was going on in Mine-Mill. He told us about the anti-communist group that was trying to oust the communist leadership. And the convention was coming up in a few months. It would be in Ohio. We said, "Oh boy, Bill, we'll get into it, you know, we'll join the fight." He said, "OK. I'll tell Johnny Driscoll to look you up when you get to the convention."

INTERVIEWER: Which year was this?

PETERSON: This would have been '45 maybe, '46. This convention was in Cleveland. It was a big hassle at the time. Anyhow, this guy representing the international Mine-Mill union, representing Reid Robinson, came to town and took us women out for dinner. He said to us, "Now don't get involved, there's going to be some fussing going on." He didn't know how much we knew. But he said, "Just be nice girls and come down and have a good time at the convention and cast your votes the right way." You know, at the right time, etc. So we listened to the whole thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think he would have done that to a group of men?

PETERSON: No, he wouldn't have. Because what he was really promising us was some fun, some evenings and some good dinners, and just be nice girls and enjoy yourselves, do a lot of partying and stuff. But stay out of this political hassle that's going on and when the time comes, cast your vote the right way. Well,

PETERSON: when we went to the convention, within about four hours after we were there, John Driscoll and his group made contact with us because Bill Kemsley had called him and told him there were going to be a couple of women there from this little plant in Grand Rapids; they were absolutely solid and they'd help him out in the fight, etc. So he looked us up immediately. Within the first twelve hours, we were on the top steering committee of the anti-Robinson caucus. We went through a very rough convention. They do not elect their officers at the convention. They have a referendum vote. Their plants are scattered all over the country, up into British Columbia and every place. In our meetings and our caucus meetings, I explained that I came from UAW, and that I knew some of the people who were in the UAW, and so they ended up electing me executive secretary of their caucus and giving me the money they had raised for the campaign to bring back to a Grand Rapids bank and to pay the bills from it. In return, I was supposed to see what influence I could use with Walter Reuther to help them in their referendum and election. By this time, Leonard Woodcock had gone to Detroit and was Walter's administrative assistant. When I got back, I called him and told him what happened. He said, "Come down to Detroit." We had a meeting with Walter and one of the candidates running on the right-wing ticket on Walter's back porch, the same old house he was shot from later. The UAW did help because this was a fight to the finish. One union was not supposed to be messing around in another. But the anti-communist fight, and the CIO as a whole, was so rough then that anything could happen. This was not too long before the expulsion of some of the unions from the CIO.

INTERVIEWER: What was more important to you in the way you took sides, the fact that the Robinson people were corrupt, or Robinson himself was corrupt, or that he was connected to the communists or was a communist?

PETERSON: I think both. By this time I was very disillusioned with the left-wing group.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

PETERSON: I think most of all because it was so obvious. When we tried to talk to them about our problems in the plant, and representing the workers in the plant, they weren't very much damn interested. They literally were more interested, for the same reason they were interested in the piece work thing, in the second front proposals, etc. to help Russia, far more than they were interested in what happened to the American worker. Their

PETERSON: first allegiance was not the labor movement, and ours was. This was a lot of it. Plus in the meantime there was Sexton, there was Kemsley, there was Woodcock. Oh, there were dozens of people I could name whom I respected as labor leaders, all of whom were on the anti-communist side. And these people were on the other side. And what they said and did, did not impress me.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't want to interrupt but I wasn't clear about that, when....you also mentioned in the beginning a division over Wallace.

PETERSON: Oh, this came in the '48 convention when Wallace formed his own party.

INTERVIEWER: The Progressive Party?

PETERSON: Yes, when Truman did not select him for Vice-President.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember some of the divisions on that and why you chose the side you did?

PETERSON: I would have been with Truman and the Democrats. I don't know. Those people had become a dirty word then.

INTERVIEWER: Wallace and the Progressive Party?

PETERSON: The communists had become a dirty word then. Wallace was not a communist but, for instance, locally all the people who were on the bulk of his support. And I would not have been. I was very, very much a Roosevelt person.

INTERVIEWER: Did you carry the same sort of feelings for Truman? Because in '48 it was Truman who was running as the Democratic presidential candidate.

PETERSON: No, wait a minute. Wallace was Vice-President under Roosevelt.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Then when Truman runs in '48, Wallace is not selected to run with him and he sets up a separate party.

PETERSON: Oh, I see what you mean. This was '48, wasn't it? No, it would have been the same thing. It would not have been a great philosophical thing. I mean, my allegiance would just not have been with him.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other political splits within the union that you remember, and in which you took sides?

PETERSON: Not really. No, the big one was then between Reuther and Addes, and it tore the union apart so that it would have been very difficult. Many of the people involved in it, the last thing in the world that they wanted to see was another split or division.

INTERVIEWER: What happened during the McCarthy era when Communist Party members, or people considered to be communists, were expelled from the union? Some individuals in Detroit were walked out of the plants. Did that happen here?

PETERSON: No. There wasn't any of that here. The unions were expelled. A bunch of the international unions were expelled from the CIO. That was how I got back in the UAW. Because Reid Robinson and his people won the election in spite of all the help the UAW and other people tried to give them. They won. They were re-elected. Then the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers were expelled from the CIO. Before, no, right after they were expelled--I can't remember--we took our plant out of the international and went independent. Our local was later put in the Shipbuilder's International by the national CIO. Later we went from the Shipbuilder's International to the UAW. We practically had to buy our way out. The Shipbuilders charged us a helluva lot of back dues to get out. But we did it because we wanted to be in the UAW. They let us out because there weren't any Shipbuilder's locals around here and they would have had a hard time servicing us.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a big fight to take your local out of Mine, Mill and Smelter, and make it independent?

PETERSON: The international union fought us tooth and nail. But the people in the plant were with us. All those people in the plant swore by us. We did what many other unions did. You wanted to take your plant out, so you held an election. Of course, you couldn't get an election under the auspices of the Labor Board for that purpose. So you went and got some local citizens whose reputations were above reproach, and set up your own election. The people voted by secret ballot whether they wanted to get out or stay in. It was unorthodox. There was no provision for it legally, but you did it.

INTERVIEWER: You mean there was no provision for it under the NLRB?

PETERSON: Yes, the National Labor Relations Board.

INTERVIEWER: I remember reading that workers could ask for a decertification election.

PETERSON: But it took a long time. We just took the bull by the horns. We got a local minister and a couple of other people--a minister, a rabbi, and a priest I guess it was--to come in and count the votes and we did it with a lot of publicity, and our people were something like ninety-nine percent. We informed the company we were no longer part of that union, that we were independent. We were expecting to operate as an independent union. Then later we came into the UAW, as soon as we could get in. But anyhow where were we?

INTERVIEWER: I was asking about the effect of the McCarthy period in this area. Like whether communists in the locals were expelled from their plants or from the unions.

PETERSON: No, I don't recall any of that. Not really. I guess there was some of it in Detroit. But I don't recall any of it here.

INTERVIEWER: OK. How did your political views change over the years?

PETERSON: I don't think they've changed much. I just think there's been an increased awareness. I mean, I started out from where I had not been political at all and became a Democrat. I'm still a Democrat. I still am. I think I have a greater understanding of why I am from this awareness. And I think that my being anti-communist when all of the cussing and furor was going on, was more by instinct than anything else. I'm still anti-communist and now I know why I am. So I haven't really changed.

INTERVIEWER: Could you put into words why you're anti-communist today?

PETERSON: Yes. But I ought to preface that by saying that I think there are many things that are good in Russia. I went there on a trip awhile back and I saw some things that I liked very much, and wish we had here. Children's day care centers were one thing and there were some others. However, I would not like to be part of that totalitarian society. I appreciate the privilege of being able to stand up on a street corner, if need be, and say, "In my opinion, the President of the United States is a son of a bitch." I don't want to give that privilege up. And it's just about that simple. I could not live with that kind of curtailment on what I think and feel. I would not want to be part of a totalitarian society. I couldn't stand it.

INTERVIEWER: What about if it was possible to have a democratic communist or libertarian society, with the kinds of civil liberties, freedom of speech and criticism that we have?

PETERSON: Well, let me say this. I think that Sweden is in pretty good shape because they have a democratic society with a kind of socialistic distrubtion of goods. And this is what I was getting at, the distribution of goods, the distribution of wealth. And I think the Russians have done some very fine things. I think that they have children's day care centers. I think they treat their children much better than we treat ours.

INTERVIEWER: Could you tell me about that?

PETERSON: Well, to start with the day care centers. We visited some of them. They were lovely. And children at the age of three were being taught ballet. Not only were they being taught to dance, but children three and four years old would be asked the name of the composer of the piece of music the teacher was about to play. And they knew. And their youth centers, aside from the brainwashing part of it, when you think in terms of the physical part of it, the training that they receive, the children are beautifully behaved, very intelligent. I like their approach to higher education. In Russia, parents don't have to have a lot of money for a kid to go to the university. But he has to have good grades. He gets a small allowance while he's there. And the only way he can increase it is to improve his grades. So I think these things are good. I think that they're doing things much better in that respect than we are. God knows the medical care....we had people in our group who were ill and needed medical care and it cost them nothing. One woman spent a week or ten days in the hospital and it cost her nothing. Of course, their equipment is not as good as ours, but the fact is you can afford to do it. So I think that we have much to learn in how we care for our children, and how we care for our aged and how we provide medical care for our people. I think it's a horrible thing to have the huge fortunes in this nation that we have, and also to have the poverty that we have. I think it's a terrible thing. I mean, we have much to learn. And we had better start learning it, or maybe what Kruschev said may come true, that we will be buried. And he wasn't talking about it being done literally, but economically. You do something to a nation when you let people leave high school without knowing how to read and write as we have been doing. So there's much that we can do here that we're not doing. But still, I think we ought to be able to have some of those things and also retain our freedom.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Let's continue to discuss your experiences in the plant during the war. Do you have any idea of the percentage of women workers in the plant?

PETERSON: Well, during the war that plant was probably eighty or ninety percent. You have to understand something here. Previously the plant had been a plating plant. It wasn't that during the war. It was completely different. They didn't even use the tanks. They made little things called trigger housings, which was a fine assembly job. There wasn't any polishing or buffing in it. This was just an assembly of small parts. When the war ended, the people who owned the plant sold out and other people bought it and went back to plating and polishing and buffing. It was a natural transition. And then it became about three quarters men and more. And there wouldn't have been really anything you could have done about it because I don't think they could have hired women polishers and buffers if they wanted to. There weren't any. Or women platers.

INTERVIEWER: Are those skilled jobs? Are plating, polishing and buffing skilled jobs?

PETERSON: Semi-, semi-. They really are.

INTERVIEWER: How much training would you need to do that?

PETERSON: To be a good polisher or buffer, to be a good one you would need three to six months to really get good at it in those days. Now they've got the automatic machines. This was all hand buffing. There is a difference. Plus the fact that some of it is very heavy. All the hours plus the fact that.... I'm not saying that women couldn't do it, but I'm saying that in terms of hiring, even if the company advertised for experienced polishers or buffers, they just wouldn't get any women. Same way with plating. The issue had not arisen at that time. The issue arose on jobs where it was the same company and there was just a changeover in the plant.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Do you think your work experiences would have been different if you were a man?

PETERSON: Oh, I would have made more money all the time. There's no question about that. I wouldn't have worked any harder. I probably would have had less work during the Depression because there were less men working.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you would have worked less hard if you were a man?

PETERSON: Probably, yes. I would think so. Because so-called light jobs for women are for the birds. Women aren't given any light jobs in the plants. All these protective laws for women, ninety percent of them act to the woman's detriment.

PETERSON: They're used as an excuse to keep you off a half-way decent job. I think it's possible that it would have been easier.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever refused a job or a promotion because you weren't friendly enough to a male boss?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: OK. If you had a choice of all the jobs in the world and could get the right training, when you look back, what kind of work would you choose to do?

PETERSON: I think I'd want to be in the labor movement. I think it's been as a rewarding place to be as anything else I can think of.

INTERVIEWER: This next section of questions is on union activism. Where were you working when you got involved in union activities?

PETERSON: At this Irwin Pederson Arms plant, here in Grand Rapids.

INTERVIEWER: How did you first get involved?

PETERSON: Oh, I told you. I first got involved because they put a bunch of us to work in a room where there wasn't sufficient lighting. And I told the foreman off, and everybody said, "You be our shop steward."

INTERVIEWER: Was the union already organized in that plant?

PETERSON: It was organized but it had just been formed and they had officers. That happened before I went to work there. They had it organized.

INTERVIEWER: Was going to union meetings a source of conflict in your family?

PETERSON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: What happened?

PETERSON: This was one of the reasons that things came to a head between my husband and me. He practically named the labor movement as the co-respondent in our divorce papers. In fact, literally. But that was rather meaningless because we would have separated anyhow. I was sick of the marriage for many years, and stayed only because in those years there was nothing else a woman could do unless she had a family and could take her kids and go home. Or unless she was willing to give up her children, which I wasn't. So I stayed.

INTERVIEWER: Why would you have had to give up your children?

PETERSON: Because I couldn't have supported them.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

PETERSON: There was no such thing as equal pay for equal work in those years. There's no way on the salary a woman made that she could keep up a family, no way.

INTERVIEWER: When you first got involved, were many other women active in the union?

PETERSON: Yes, because I was in a war plant and there were mostly women in there. In terms of women being involved and active in the labor movement, no. Beyond your own local union there wasn't many women active. I think I was the first woman delegate to the local CIO county council.

INTERVIEWER: Who was your first union connection, the first person you knew who was involved in the union?

PETERSON: Woodcock.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of him?

PETERSON: Well, I thought he was very abrupt when he spoke at a couple of meetings. He was very sharp and abrupt at times.

INTERVIEWER: Sharp? Like smart?

PETERSON: Just abrupt. The first time I ever spoke to him, I expected him to snap my head off. I was all set to tell him off the way I had told the foreman off. I suddenly felt, this was after a meeting or a recess or a meeting or something, I wanted to go up and ask him a question and if he gave me a short and abrupt answer, I was just going to say to him, "Don't be quite so snippity. After all, nobody's paying me to do this, you know." I was really expecting this but he didn't. He was very nice and answered me in a very nice way. I decided he wasn't so abrupt after all. He was the first union representative that I ever talked to. After that there was Pat Patterson who was with the GM department.

INTERVIEWER: Was Woodcock from Detroit at the time?

PETERSON: At the time he was the local person here.

INTERVIEWER: So he's a Grand Rapids person?

PETERSON: Well, he was originally from Detroit. But this was before I came on the scene. At this time he was working in Grand Rapids and servicing this area. He had been organizing. I guess he had organized this plant.

INTERVIEWER: How popular were unions in your neighborhood, in the newspapers when they first got started?

PETERSON: They weren't! They were a dirty word.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember cartoons or editorials? What did they say?

PETERSON: Unions were almost considered to be un-American. And radical. Selfish. It was socially unacceptable.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever feel any social pressures when you started to get involved in the unions?

PETERSON: I used to feel it when it came from my friends, people who had been my friends. But I was sold on it from the beginning. I had a lot of discussions and arguments which I usually won. I think I brought a lot of my friends around to look at it differently.

INTERVIEWER: Why were you sold on the union?

PETERSON: Why? Because I had gone through so much hell working for a living. The union to me went beyond the fact that it would enable me to make more money. What it really meant to me was that it enabled you to have some self respect. The biggest thing the union meant to me was the fact that I didn't have to stand there anymore and let somebody make me feel this high. The union always meant more, in that respect, to me than anything else. It was a matter of self respect. I've seen it happen. It never happened to me as much because I always worked pretty hard and stayed out of the way of trouble. I didn't take too much. But I have seen men who had children, who were desperate for work, who happened to work for a sadistic foreman. That foreman would stand that man in front of a group of people and strip him of every shred of dignity, you know, verbally abusive. It's hard to describe.

INTERVIEWER: What did the foreman say?

PETERSON: Well, it isn't always what you say, as how you say it. He could call somebody a dumb, stupid ass and tell him one more false move and he's out the door, etc., etc. You do it in a loud voice in front of a group of people, what do you think it does to the guy?

INTERVIEWER: Makes him feel small.

PETERSON: That's right. And there were many foremen in the plants before unions who delighted in doing that sort of thing. The people went around ashamed with their heads down when they took it.

INTERVIEWER: What about women? How did the foremen try to humiliate women?

PETERSON: Well, they would do the same thing to women. Of course, you always had the thing where you had this prissy young foreman and the pretty girl. She might get the breaks and she might not, depending on how she responded. I mean that was prevalent as much then as it is in Congress now. There's no difference.

INTERVIEWER: How did the other women feel about that?

PETERSON: Oh, they were furious, obviously. The women who were older and who had to work for a living used to get very angry. Sometimes very jealous. That part of it never really got to me as much. I don't know why. Maybe I never had a foreman whom I liked and who liked me. I just never happened to run into that kind of thing in the places I worked. But I know that it happened. I'd see it in other departments. Sometimes I'd see it in my own department where the foreman had a girl friend. But it never really bothered me that much unless I got the business and she got the breaks. It usually happened to somebody else. I don't know why except I was always a hard worker. I put out the work, and I didn't take too much. And I think that if you're like that, people sense it and don't push you too hard. I don't recall ever being pushed real hard by a foreman.

INTERVIEWER: Were you active in the union right from the beginning?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What was your first official position?

PETERSON: Steward.

INTERVIEWER: You were elected steward or appointed?

PETERSON: Appointed. They appointed me because I had spoken up. It was a new group where they weren't holding formal elections as they do now. As I explained, it was an unusual situation in which the Labor Board appointed seven representatives for an interim period until the Board certified the election or until another election was held. Then when the other election was held, election for representation, the local was immediately reformed and elected officers. I was elected to the committee and continued to be elected.

INTERVIEWER: Who encouraged you to become more active?

PETERSON: I think everyone did. It wasn't any particular person I can think of. It's just that I was involved and I liked it. I just kept at it.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever discouraged because you were a woman?

PETERSON: Oh, heavens yes! I was discouraged much of the time.

INTERVIEWER: Well, what kinds of things did people do or say?

PETERSON: Well, I didn't feel the biggest discouragement for a long time, until I went to Detroit. I felt like a person here. After I went to work at Solidarity House, I began to understand what it means. I learned about sex discrimination at Solidarity House itself. You get discouraged by the fact that you're not treated the same, that there's another standard. You feel it the most on job assignments. You know, jobs come up to do this or to do that, and they're simply handed to somebody else. Any woman who has worked for the union has to fight to avoid being tied to the desk because, at least in those years, that was the appropriate place. They made you more like a secretary so that you got all of the desk work or paper work and other stuff just didn't open up.

INTERVIEWER: Could you give me specific examples of things the men would do?

PETERSON: Well, the men would go out and teach classes. The men would go out and set up conferences. The men would meet with various groups around the city. The gals sat at the desk. You have to know the kind of projects the department would be involved in. You just didn't get the good assignments. I'd imagine it's the same kind of thinking that would cause people in the newspaper office to send the woman down to do the society column while the man covers the fire or the murder or the political campaign. You know, these things are changing now. Frankly, as far as I'm concerned, from everything I can see they're changing everywhere else faster than they're changing in the labor movement. I think the labor movement is going to be one of the last groups in the country to accept women.

INTERVIEWER: And universities.

PETERSON: Is it true there too?

INTERVIEWER: Yes!

PETERSON: I can believe it.

INTERVIEWER: How did being part of the union affect your private life at first?

PETERSON: Well, it changes your private life entirely. And I think for the better. You form many friendships. You become involved in many activities. You acquire interests you never had before. I had never been to a political meeting before. All at once I found myself sitting down and planning them. I had never been to Washington. I was in awe of a congressman or a senator. All at once I found myself calling them by their first name. It's entirely different. And you find yourself engrossed in something that takes all of your time. But you work in the plants in the day time and do your union meetings at night. You go on the staff and do some of your desk work, part of it anyways in the day time, and you're still at meetings at night.

INTERVIEWER: Did your sense of yourself as a person change?

PETERSON: Oh yes, yes. It really did. I liked myself a whole lot better. There was a lot of personal pride in it that wasn't there before. Very much so.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to the schools and conventions?

PETERSON: Oh yes, all of them. All of the conventions and many of the schools. First as a student and then as an instructor.

INTERVIEWER: What were your first responsibilities in the first year, in your position as steward?

PETERSON: Well, the normal steward responsibilities. In this case when I started, there wasn't enough light on the job. It could be somebody was getting picked on by the foreman. Somebody wasn't getting their stock there on time. Somebody had something that was too heavy to lift. It could be anything, anything that happened on the job.

INTERVIEWER: Were any of the grievances or problems that came up particular to women?

PETERSON: Well, it's hard to answer. In those years it was almost all women in those plants. Unless it would be that even then women might get treated a little different than the men were as far as the foreman was concerned. There was a tendency to reprimand her for something that the man had done and hadn't raised attention to, you know. A lot of the male foremen kind of turned their backs when the man came back from the washroom a little late, but would dig into a gal, especially if it was a gal who cried easily. It depended. It depended upon the people or the circumstances. But I can't really think of any at that time that were peculiar to the women.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any experiences where women were laid off out of line with seniority or weren't rehired?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. We had those. Of course, we straightened it out in our plant.

INTERVIEWER: How did you do that?

PETERSON: Well, this was in Grand Rapids Brass. We were very strong as a union and we were two women who were in control of the local union, and so we insisted that women have the right to bump into departments that had only men in them, providing they could do the job. We had an assembly department and there was never anyone in it except young men. There was a lay off and we insisted that women have the right to bump in. Some of our own members were angry at us. Some of them had less seniority and were laid off. We had a little hassling going on with the men who were left. They would not lift the trays for the women. So we had a few rough days. Some of the trays were very heavy. The men would help each other lift them, but they were not about to help the women lift them. So we got two women in at the same time, and told them to help each other and not to complain. They were going to bump into the department, under existing circumstances, which mean they didn't have a lugger. And they did it. They were a couple of good gals who understood the situation.

It wasn't long before we had a lugger in the department because the men were asking for it too. When they found out that this was not a way to keep the women out, that the women were going to grit their teeth and do it, pretty soon everybody became friends and they all decided together that the trays were too heavy for all of them to lift. So they got the lugger. But then, a month later, we had the opposite situation in the plant. Women were in the punch presses department, and there were lay offs in the buffing department. The men wanted to go down and bump into the department where the women press operators were. So we said, absolutely, they had the right to, the same as the gals that bumped into assembly. Then we had all the women angry at us.

INTERVIEWER: So you stuck to the principle of seniority?

PETERSON: Absolutely. And we never did deviate. We never played favorites. In fact, we used to get elected in those years by telling our opposition they could say anything they wanted to about us but we never wanted to hear one crack out of them to the effect that

PETERSON: we were women. If they wanted to attack us as union leaders on the ground that we didn't handle our problems or grievances, OK. But we didn't want to hear anything about the fact that we were women.

INTERVIEWER: Was the whole union slate women?

PETERSON: No. Just the top spots. The men went along with it. They were our staunchest supporters.

INTERVIEWER: You were the president and another woman was vice-president?

PETERSON: Well, she was chief steward. Under that contract the chief steward and the president did the union business and handled the grievances together. We ran a good sharp ship. It was a tight ship in those years. We leveled with them and had strong support from the men, strong support.

INTERVIEWER: Did women go to union meetings?

PETERSON: Yes. They did to ours because we were women and their leaders. And we ran better meetings. They had an equal voice. A lot of places women don't go to meetings because they're outnumbered and they find out that what they say is not listened to very much. I think this discourages them.

INTERVIEWER: When you worked in the brass plant, and when it became more male, did the percentage of women going to meetings change?

PETERSON: No. I think the percentage of women going to meetings was about the same as the percentage of men. This is a strange thing. There was a myth in the union for years that women didn't go to meetings. In some cases it's true. But mostly because they had been frozen out. I worked in organizing off and on, even when I was on the other staff. Occasionally I would have an organizing assignment. A strange thing happened: You go into a town. Usually some of us women would get sent in at the end of a drive when we were approaching an election. They'd send us in to encourage the women. We'd go into a plant that's got five hundred people in it, maybe forty of them women. We'd go to a meeting with a hundred men and twenty women. The male organizer is sure to be raving like hell, "There's forty women at that plant and only twenty of them were at the meeting. You've got to do something about these women," never figuring out that percentage-wise there were more women in there than there were men.

INTERVIEWER: Did you try to approach the women differently when you had organizing assignments?

PETERSON: I don't think so. I think I talked to the women about the union, job security, dignity on the job. In fact, I didn't know what I could say to them that I wouldn't say to the men. In an organizing situation, I don't recall that I did. I talked differently to the ones that were organized and had contracts, who were getting the business from some of the male leadership.

INTERVIEWER: Did you try to get women more involved in the union?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. I sure tried to do that.

INTERVIEWER: And how did you try to do that?

PETERSON: Well, just telling them that it was their union and if they wanted to be heard they had to be involved. They had to be at the meeting and speak up, and protect their rights. Although, when you had a woman as an international representative, the women come around. It's not that big a problem. There weren't any plants in our local that didn't have active women involved. It was just a kind of natural thing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get support from ministers and community leaders?

PETERSON: You mean in relation to the union?

INTERVIEWER: Yes. And when you were trying to organize.

PETERSON: I was never in it at that level, because usually when I would get into an organizing situation it would have been well under way and all the initial contacts had been made. Usually I came in the last three weeks of the drive. Sometimes there was support. But I would not have been involved in any community long enough to be in it at that level.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to conferences of women in the labor movement that included women from other unions?

PETERSON: Nothing.

INTERVIEWER: What about conferences called by the women's department?

PETERSON: No, they didn't invite me very often. I was not a feminist in those years. We didn't have many women's conferences in those days and when there was I didn't go. I have seen the value of it in years since.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you change your mind?

PETERSON: Well, it was a strange thing. When I was here I thought I was one of the boys, and it took me awhile to find out I wasn't. There have been so many people in the labor movement for whom I had such great respect. They talked about equality and civil rights and dignity of the human being. It took me a long time before I realized some of my very good and best respected friends were not talking about me. What they were telling me was that a black woman was equal to a white woman and a black man was equal to a white man, but under no circumstances was a woman, either black or white, equal to a man, either black or white. It took me a long time before I realized that's what the leadership of the UAW was really saying. They're still saying that to a large extent.

INTERVIEWER: Did you come to understand that before the feminist movement?

PETERSON: No, I don't think I did. I think that the feminist movement opened up my eyes.

INTERVIEWER: So, when the feminist movement started talking about this, did it help explain a lot of the experience you had?

PETERSON: It opened my eyes. I think I had an inkling before but it was the kind of thing you didn't talk about. It opened my eyes to a lot. I really began thinking, and looking and seeing things that I hadn't seen before. It was almost like what the statement, "black is beautiful," did for black people. Women are people. The fact that the feminists are saying, "women are people", I think did the same thing for us.

INTERVIEWER: Did you expect to continue to be active in union work when you first got started?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. There never was a time when I wasn't active in the union. It became a way of life. I loved it and I still do.

INTERVIEWER: And were there any other things that competed for your time?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: When you first got involved in the union and became a leader, did you think that being a woman would make any difference in your ability to have a leadership role?

PETERSON: Well, I don't think that I did. I felt that being a woman made it more difficult. But I was also convinced that if a woman would just do a really good job and not talk about the fact

PETERSON: that she was a woman, that she would make it. It took me a long time to change my mind about that.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been discouraged from running for a union office?

PETERSON: Not really. Because after you go on the staff you don't run for union office, unless you run for board member or something. So I don't think I ever have. I ran while I was in the local. I found less discrimination in the local union by far, than I found in the international union. I found the most discrimination in the international union and at the international headquarters. But when you're in those positions, you don't run for office.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do much traveling in your union work?

PETERSON: Yes, I did for a long time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you travel alone or with groups?

PETERSON: Alone.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever travel with men?

PETERSON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever a problem?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: Did hotels ever refuse to put you on the same floor with the men you worked with?

PETERSON: I don't think they ever made any point of it. I don't recall ever, that it made any difference. You just went in and got a room. That was it. I don't recall there ever being any time I felt I had a less desirable room or anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did wives ever object to you ever traveling with their husbands?

PETERSON: No. As a matter of fact, I got along pretty well with union wives. I always made it a point to. In Detroit, it's very impersonal. You don't see the wives as often. In Grand Rapids, it was a closer knit group. As a matter of fact, the wives and the gals of guys always liked me. I don't know of any instances or ever observed any.

INTERVIEWER: Was your personal life ever criticized?

PETERSON: Oh yes, from the beginning when we started out here. It was part of politics. We had everybody sleeping with everybody else.

INTERVIEWER: Who did that?

PETERSON: Oh, the political opposition. You never knew who did it. But this was a part of politics. When women first started coming to the unions, you don't know who starts it. You just know there's some kind of a story going around. That happened to everybody. It happened all over when when you're young.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think back to women in your local who were active and then dropped out. Why did they drop out?

PETERSON: Well, I don't know of any. You see, my circumstances are so different because my local a few years back went out of existence. The plant went out. There's no longer a charter there from the plant that I was in. And as near as I can remember, at the time that it was still going, the gals that had been there, most of them still seemed to be there unless they retired.

INTERVIEWER: Did the women who were active, like the woman who was chief steward with you, stay active in the union?

PETERSON: Oh yes, she stayed active. I don't recall many of them dropping. Some of those women from some of the other local unions that were here in the 1950's, when I was here and working with them, are still here. I see a lot of them when I go to retiree meetings. They come up to talk to me. I have a hard time remembering their names. Now they too are retired.

INTERVIEWER: What were the formal and informal lines of power in your local?

PETERSON: Well, our local was small. But I would say that, any local union or any group, there's going to be some informal lines of power. That's human nature.

INTERVIEWER: Were women excluded from informal power, even if they had formal power?

PETERSON: I would not say so. Not in our local, because we were the leaders. But once you get out of a situation where your leaders are women, you're going to get into that. I've talked to people from other locals. In fact, I had a cute experience years ago. I was out in some summer school and some of the

PETERSON: women from one of the plants down there told us that they had opposing political caucuses in their local, and the caucus they belonged to didn't let them come to the caucus meetings where the slate was picked.

INTERVIEWER: Because they were women?

PETERSON: Because they were women. Because only men went there. But after the slate was picked the men came back and gave them the slate and expected them to support it. It was a large local with a lot of voting. I remember us telling those women that we were horrified, that they ought to tell those fellows to go to hell, that they were not going to be bound to support any slate which they did not have a voice in selecting. It must have been four or five years later that I ran into these women at Black Lake. They told me two of them hold office in the local now. They had gone back and told the fellows that. And the fellows had still said, "You can't come into the caucus and we're not going to listen to you." And they went out and ran a couple of women on an independent slate and won. And they've been coming back and winning again.

INTERVIEWER: Terrific, that's wonderful!

PETERSON: And a lot of times these kind of things came up.

INTERVIEWER: But this happened very recently. This was in the 1970's.

PETERSON: Except that it's been at least five years and probably longer since we saw them down there. I've been retired going on two years now. So this was some time back. They had done this not long after we talked to them. They continued to remain in power. That was why they were up there. So every now and then you ran into these kinds of thing. But I really didn't have them in my local that much. I think you are less likely to get these problems in a local that has women in the top leadership.

INTERVIEWER: What about at Solidarity House?

PETERSON: At Solidarity House women are second class citizens, period.

INTERVIEWER: What about the Women's Department? Does the Women's Department have power? Does it have access to power?

PETERSON: No, it does not. It never has. Let me say this, I was never a part of the women's committees set up by the Women's Department of the UAW, but I jumped on the bandwagon when CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women] came along. A lot of people who knew how I felt before didn't understand the transition. My reasoning is very simple: the Women's Department was created by men. The Women's Department is controlled by men. And, for the most part, the Women's Department benefits men more than it does women. It is an excuse. I have seen staff boys who didn't want to live up to a contract, who wanted to close their eyes to the fact that layoffs were taking place outside of seniority, who were getting the heat from the male local union leadership, who had every obligation in the world to stand up to that leadership and say, "Now look, this contract says thus and so. You're going to abide by it!" And they didn't do it. You know what they did? They referred it to the Women's Department!

INTERVIEWER: What happened in the Women's Department?

PETERSON: Nothing. Because how can that Women's Department do anything? The only way the Women's Department can get anything done is by going back to the regional directors, and to the male leaders of the locals who probably chose not to enforce the contract in the first place. The regional director most likely supported the local president's decision. The only recourse for the Women's Department was to bring the case back and attempt to get the people who had already made this decision to reverse themselves. Considering that the only power the Women's Department had was the power of moral persuasion, a reversal did not often take place. It was an impossible situation. If I had been Caroline Davis, I think I would have wanted to go out and shoot myself. Things are better now, not because of the Women's Department of the UAW, but because of the feminist movement in the nation. And because of the changes in the laws. Now it's no longer a moral issue. Now it's the law. The UAW has to live up to it because it's the law.

INTERVIEWER: We were discussing why you felt the Women's Department wasn't very effective.

PETERSON: I think it wanted to be effective. But the cards were stacked against it because it had no real power. And I never felt it was the answer. The fact it was there may have helped bring about the feminist movement. I don't know. I think that would have occurred anyhow. I think the Women's Department was used as an excuse by the men for a long time. Any time a

PETERSON: woman got a job on the UAW staff it was thought the Woman's Department was the only place she could go. It was a segregated thing. I don't think it accomplished much. Well, it accomplished what the men wanted.

INTERVIEWER: Which was?

PETERSON: To separate the women from the men. And to give them an excuse not to give women recognition anyplace else in the union.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the Women's Department was designed to appease women?

PETERSON: I think that was the purpose.

INTERVIEWER: To pretend the union was recognizing women?

PETERSON: Definitely. That went on for years. All the talk about it being a wonderful thing for the UAW to have a Women's Department, all the talk about equality, and all the time that was going on there weren't any women being hired on the staff except in the Women's Department. And the hassle went on. Women were losing their jobs in the plants. You see, once you have only one seniority list the contract is clear on layoffs. These guys know what they're supposed to be doing. The whole union leadership knows what it's supposed to be doing. The staff knows what it's supposed to be doing. They just didn't do it in many instances.

INTERVIEWER: Have you gotten involved with any of the feminist groups?

PETERSON: Yes. I belong to CLUW. CLUW is the Coalition of Labor Union Women. It's very new.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever get involved with the National Organization for Women?

PETERSON: No. And only because I neglected to sign a membership card. If they send me one again I'm going to sign it. You see, I haven't sought anything out. I'll try and explain this. My life was kind of rough from the time I was a kid. I've put in an awful lot of years at some awfully hard factory work. This personal experience was one of the things that made me the strong union person that I was. I've worked for years in shops where I came home at night and my hands were covered with blood, so tired and literally dragged out. And I was making so little money I could barely eat. I had been through all of it. I've worked punch presses, drill presses. I've

PETERSON: done all of it, ten and twelve hours a day sometimes, because they didn't always observe the laws they were supposed to in terms of how many hours you could work. I worked before there was overtime, or holiday pay, or vacation pay. Those things were unheard of. I even worked before the wage and hour laws went in, when you could spend eight or ten hours in a plant and be paid only for the actual hours you were working, which might be only an hour or an hour-and-a-half all day. But you had to be there all day. I've drawn paychecks of less than two dollars for a full week during the Depression. So I've been through all of it and I've seen what the unions did. So, you see, this has made me a union person. But it was also a hard life and I've spent a lot of years. Then I became involved in the union and finally was fortunate enough to have the job on the staff. Although I enjoyed my work, it was a lot of traveling, a lot of hours that I put in, many years when....well, all my life I wanted to raise some flowers and I never had time. And I never really had much time to do any housework or anything. And so when I retired I wasn't looking for anything. I said that I've earned it. I'm sixty-five and I want to retire to the fireside with the dog and my family. So I haven't really gone out to look for anything. I belong to a few things. I'm on the board of the UAW Retired Workers Advisory Committee, and also on the Board of the National Council of Senior Citizens. And I help out my congressman whom I'm crazy about.

INTERVIEWER: Who's your congressman?

PETERSON: Vanderveen. And that's about it. And I joined CLUW because of Olga Madar whom I greatly respect. And because I felt that there was a place for a coalition of labor union women. And we have a small local chapter that's struggling to get started. And so these kind of things, you know, I only do what pops up in front of me or what somebody asks me to do. I don't seek anything.

INTERVIEWER: The next group of questions is about your work history. How did you get your first job?

PETERSON: Oh, my God, I just went into the factory and asked for it.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you?

PETERSON: Probably seventeen or so.

INTERVIEWER: Was that 1927?

PETERSON: Well, I did some work....what did I do? I guess I washed dishes. I guess I worked in a restaurant before that. But I know I was working when you had to lie about your age. Yes, it would have been back there.

INTERVIEWER: What did the work involve in the factory?

PETERSON: I think the first factory I worked in was McInerevy Wire Company. I was putting hog rings in automobile seats.

INTERVIEWER: Hog rings?

PETERSON: Yes, they're wire rings you put in with pliers. Hog rings they call them.

INTERVIEWER: Was that an assembly line job?

PETERSON: Yes, and I worked on a punch press with a brass company for awhile, too.

INTERVIEWER: Was this before or after the hog ring job?

PETERSON: I don't remember. It's been so long ago.

INTERVIEWER: Did you expect to keep your job for a long time?

PETERSON: I don't think I did.

INTERVIEWER: Were you married when you were working?

PETERSON: I was married. Let me see, I can't remember if I worked on one of those before I was married or shortly afterwards.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any ideas at the time that you wouldn't have to work because you were married?

PETERSON: I think all women thought that. I think just about all women thought it was temporary. Working was not something women did in their youth. You'd work a little while to help out, but you had a man. Because women didn't really come into the plants in great numbers to stay until the second World War.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember how much you earned?

PETERSON: I earned fifteen cents an hour.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a piece rate on it?

PETERSON: Not on that one. But then I worked for eighteen cents an hour during the Depression and that was piece rate.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do with the money?

PETERSON: Bought food. What little there was.

INTERVIEWER: Did you work among women or with men and women?

PETERSON: Both.

INTERVIEWER: Were your bosses women or men?

PETERSON: Men, almost invariably.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have a woman foreman?

PETERSON: Yes, I had a woman foreman. It was in the wire plant after I got off the hog rings and got on the sewing machine.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any difference?

PETERSON: No, not that I can say.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of your co-workers?

PETERSON: There was a friendliness in many instances in those years that isn't here now. I don't know how to explain it. Of course, it's been many years now since I've been in a factory. But we were friendly with each other.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see each other after work?

PETERSON: You usually made a friendship of one or two out of a whole group whom you might see. I've still got friends. I've got one friend that I met working in a factory, and we're still friends after all these years.

INTERVIEWER: Did you talk to each other about personal problems on the job?

PETERSON: Oh yes, whenever you could talk. It depended on the job you were on. Sometimes it was so noisy and you were so busy that there was little chance to talk while you were actually working. You couldn't talk without shouting. We didn't have rest periods in the beginning. We had lunch time. Or walking to the bus together after work because you usually rode a bus.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of your bosses?

PETERSON: Oh, it varied. Sometimes you had some you thought were nice people. Sometimes you had some you hated. It just depended.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you stop working at the first factory?

PETERSON: Oh, probably ran out of work and got laid off which is about the only reason you ever stopped. There wouldn't be any more work and you'd be let out. You didn't have seniority.

INTERVIEWER: Did you look for other jobs as soon as you were let out?

PETERSON: Yes, sometimes. Of course that depended. It changed after I was married. I had a couple of children. So I had time off for that. But, as the usual thing, I tried to get another job in a short time.

INTERVIEWER: What was the worst thing about that first job?

PETERSON: I think going in among a bunch of strangers. That's always hard on a new job. Because you don't know what you're supposed to do, and everybody there is strange.

INTERVIEWER: What about the work itself and the working conditions?

PETERSON: Oh, the working conditions were all horrible then.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe them?

PETERSON: In the hog ringing department there wasn't any ventilation. You worked like hell because the stuff came at you so fast. And the springs are encased in burlap. Burlap has fuzz on it. The air would be full of fuzz. It was probably a good thing I got let out. I may have been there six months, I don't know. But anybody who had worked there for years, their lungs would have to go. We used to chew gum as a defense against the fuzz. At the end of a few hours you take your gum out of your mouth and it would be this big, round, mess, full of fuzz. Then I worked in a plating department. That's really what I did more years of than anything else. And small coloring on a buffing wheel.

INTERVIEWER: Plating?

PETERSON: No, we polished the stuff after it had been plated. But we were in the same rooms as the tanks, and the fumes from the tanks were terrible. They were not required to have ventilation on the way they have now. Chrome fumes burned your lungs. Again, probably I was lucky I got laid off in the winter time, when you had to have the windows closed. And punch presses. I did quite a bit of punch press work. A punch press is just a huge machine that cuts metal. Your hands are cut to ribbons because even wearing gloves doesn't prevent the cuts.

INTERVIEWER: You mean cuts from metal?

PETERSON: Yes, from the metal.

INTERVIEWER: What about the dangers?

PETERSON: Oh well, I was just lucky, I always got my hands out in time. A lot of people didn't.

INTERVIEWER: Did you remember if the punch presses had guards on them?

PETERSON: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. They didn't always have guards. They were supposed to have them.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard so much about them. I've seen so many people who've lost fingers.

PETERSON: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: This year one of my students was working on a punch press and lost a finger.

PETERSON: Oh heavens, people have lost their whole hand. They're horrible things really. And they didn't always used to have guards. Plus very often when you worked on them it was piece work. The rates would be low. You'd take all kinds of chances in order to make a few dollars. Working conditions were terrible. I mean today there is just no comparison to what it used to be.

INTERVIEWER: After your first job, did you ever plan about future jobs?

PETERSON: No, I just took what I could get, when I needed a job. I didn't plan anything.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get your next job?

PETERSON: I looked at the papers to see if there were any ads. There were rumors if you knew somebody who worked there, and they told me if the plant would be hiring. Sometimes I just started going from place to place asking.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have a job where it was possible to move up to more money or more interesting work?

PETERSON: Well, I was very happy to get off the hog ringing and onto the sewing machines. But actually, no. To get more money or better work, sometimes meant getting into another department, which is not easy to do. Because in those days there was no such

PETERSON: thing as anybody progressing. Now on the basis of seniority there are bids for jobs, etc. we didn't laugh about but.... we were well aware of the fact that if a fellow went to work someplace as a janitor he was torn two ways, whether to be a good janitor and keep his job and not get laid off, or be a good janitor and have the company decide that was was such a damn good janitor that they could never let him do anything else for the next twenty years. Because this is what happened. And so he'd be the janitor. And they'd need somebody on a machine, so they'd hire a man off the street at much more money than he was making, and maybe he'd been there five years. There wasn't much difference with the women because the women didn't make much anyhow.

INTERVIEWER: What was the best job you ever had?

PETERSON: In terms of money, the best job would have been at General Motors, at the time of the war I guess. Or else maybe at the brass plant, at the time I left to go on the staff. You see, wages were coming up in those years and so each year I'd probably be making more than the year before.

INTERVIEWER: What was the worst job?

PETERSON: I guess the worst jobs were probably the hog rings and the punch presses.

INTERVIEWER OK. Could you construct your job history, which jobs you had in what years?

PETERSON: It would be difficult. I'd <u>really</u> have to go back and think about it.

INTERVIEWER: Could you try? It doesn't matter if you miss a couple.

PETERSON: Let me see. I went on the staff in '52....I'll go backwards. At this time I was at Grand Rapids Brass and I had been there, I guess, three or four years.

INTERVIEWER: What was your job there?

PETERSON: Well, the last couple of years I didn't work too hard there. I was a union officer and spent most of my time doing union business. But when I did work I was on racking and plating.

INTERVIEWER: What's that?

PETERSON: Well, they make hardware, refrigerator hardware and automobile hardware. The racks come out of the tanks, and the hardware is on the racks and you pull them off and put them in boxes.

INTERVIEWER: Is that a dangerous job?

PETERSON: No. It's all manual labor. There's no machinery involved. There was no danger. Before I went to the Brass, I was at General Motors. Oh, I worked on a lot of different jobs there. They moved you from machine to machine, from drill presses and small punch presses to various cutting machines, etc.

INTERVIEWER: So you worked at General Motors from the time during the war till 1948?

PETERSON: Yes. I went to GM now wait a minute, it couldn't have been that long, it couldn't have been till '48. I was out of work for a long time in there. I was probably at the Brass longer than that. I can't remember. But I went to GM in '42 or '43. I was at the Brass already in '45. I know I had eight years at the Brass because I had eight years on their pension credits. So it would have been '44 or '45 to '52.

INTERVIEWER: Were you laid off at GM?

PETERSON: I got fired from the wildcat strike. I wasn't at the Brass plant all that time, when I come to think about it. Because I was president of the local union, not just of the Brass. See, I was president of the little brass plant, which was a brass local. When we came into the UAW we joined an amalgamated local. I was elected president of that amalgamated local and it had about twenty plants in it. Then I went on the staff in '52 when I was still president of the amalgamated and I had a part-time job with the international for a year, a year-and-a-half.

INTERVIEWER: What was your job with the international?

PETERSON: Well, international representative. And I was servicing. I was doing political work and I also serviced the plants in my local.

INTERVIEWER: What was your job history within the union?

PETERSON: I started in the union in '52. For about a year-and-a-half I did servicing work, political action work with my local.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the local?

PETERSON: At that time it was Local 19. Then I went on the Education staff. This is when I had dual responsibilities. I worked half for Education and half for Political Action. So I had

PETERSON: two department heads, one was Brendan Sexton and the other was Roy Reuther. I did that until about 1960. Then I was transferred down to Battle Creek for awhile, still on Education. Then I came back to Grand Rapids. I got into a fight with the International, and I came back to Grand Rapids and went back into the plant for six months.

INTERVIEWER: The brass company?

PETERSON: Yes. And, let me talk about women in the labor movement. I was angry because I was transferred out of Grand Rapids. I had no question in my mind that I was transferred out because they wanted a man on the job. At that time I was the only woman on the Education staff. It was just a question of the boys all getting together and deciding to take me off and put a guy on. They would never admit it. They had all the big stories about cut backs in staff and reassignments, etc. But I know that's why it was. I felt because I was a female I was going to be kicked around a lot, and that it was time to stand up and fight back. So I stood up and fought back. I went back to my plant for six months and calmly announced that I was going to start running for office in the council and every place else. Around here I knew a lot of people and had a lot of friends, and I could have been elected. So then we had a compromise, and I went to Detroit in the Education Department there. I was one of the few international representatives who ever voluntarily told them to go to hell, and went back and took a job in the plant. I had to. I had to because I was a female. After that, they weren't exactly gracious to me but they quit shoving me around. I probably had as much independence as any staff representative had.

INTERVIEWER: What were your responsibilities in the Education Department?

PETERSON: Oh, the normal things. You taught some classes, you organized the student's week-end conferences.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of classes did you teach?

PETERSON: I used to teach union administration. I used to teach steward training, labor history, and then their CORE program, which includes a little bit of everything they put in their summer schools. I did a lot of UAW summer school work. The outlines might vary from department to department, depending on who put together the outline and the material. A little politics, a little economics.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get to pick the materials yourself?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: What about political action? What were your responsibilities there?

PETERSON: Work for the Democratic Party, get people to join it, get people to be active. Work on registration drives. Work on "get-out-the-vote drives," get out crowds for labor-endorsed candidates. I was vice-chairman of the Democratic Party here for a long time. I was a convention delegate to two national Democratic conventions, '52 and '56. Just general political work.

INTERVIEWER: How successful were you in getting people to join the Democratic Party and be active?

PETERSON: Pretty good. I had a good following.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe what you did?

PETERSON: How do you describe it?

INTERVIEWER: What would you say to someone you wanted to be active?

PETERSON: You did a lot of it at meetings. You talked to a union meeting. You talk about the things that interest them. This is a mistake speakers make sometimes. They don't do that. If I talked to a local union that had layoffs in the plant, I talked about unemployment insurance and I talked about what happened to the last bill when we didn't get what we wanted. Or I talked about some bill that was pending in Congress and who was doing what about it. Or if it was some other issue, I talked about that. I think any time you're going to talk to people, to influence people, the first thing you need to do is decide where they're at and what they're thinking about.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the other issues that you used to encourage people to become active?

PETERSON: If they were good union people, I talked to them about the record of the candidate. Where he stood on labor legislation. And now, of course, consumer issues are extremely important. For instance, right now if I were talking for a Democratic candidate for governor, I would be quoting some of the things the Public Service Commission has done on utility rates--and that the Republican governor appointed them. I don't think there is any set pattern. I think that you take the current issue and adapt it. Just recently, on the issue of the bills

PETERSON: to provide jobs, my congressman voted to override. But there were some other congressmen who didn't, who voted not to override the President's veto. I don't think you can just stand up and say that people be Democrats or be Republicans without a reason. I think you have to give them a reason that relates to them. The same thing with the union member.

INTERVIEWER: I was thinking about encouraging people to write letters or canvass.

PETERSON: If you want them to write letters, the best place to do it is at a meeting, and to have the materials there.

INTERVIEWER: Lots of paper and pens.

PETERSON: Yes. Then you have to inspire them to do it. For instance, if you were supporting a ticket and a candidate was coming to town, you wanted a crowd. There are things to do to get a crowd. I always pick up the phone and call a dozen key people, all of them leaders whom I knew had the ability to get out more people. So you inspire the group that's closest to you.

INTERVIEWER: Like a telephone chain.

PETERSON: Right. Then figure they'll do it from there. I called the various locals I could depend on and I asked if they could get me "X" number of cars, or "X" number of people. I'd call back the next day to see how they made out on it. Then if you have time, you set up a night to make plans and call your volunteers, and get them to work on signs. See that your supplies are there and food and coffee and pop. Get a hold of somebody else to see the signs are delivered. It's this kind of thing. It's so varied. When I was still working, someone would come in and say, "Describe your job to me." So I would pick up my appointment book. I'd go through the next two days with them and tell them why I was involved in each one of those things. And it would be a dozen different things.

INTERVIEWER: Could you make up two days for me?

PETERSON: Let me see. I have to think about it. My last job was with the retiree's and I did the same thing for them. It would have been different. Well, I'll try to think what a couple of days might have been. Maybe there would be an appointment on it when I was an officer of the Democratic Party here. Maybe there would have been an appointment for a meeting of the executive officers of the local committee. Maybe they had been

PETERSON: asked to make a recommendation for some appointment, so you have a luncheon meeting with them and you talk about who the good people are that might be recommended. Maybe the next thing would be in the afternoon, when the local union president or the chairman of an education committee wants to come down and talk to you because he wants to set up classes in his local. So you spend an hour with him and you draft an agenda of what you're going to do. Then you make some notes that you have to make some calls for him the next day to Detroit to get instructors in. The next thing might be the staff would sit down to plan a session for something the following month. Maybe, oh dear, I'm trying to think what some of the things might have been. Maybe there's some kind of picketing going on. So you spend some time on the phone calling up some people. Or maybe you call in some key people who the local should sit down and talk to about getting pickets out at a certain time. If there's a Community Chest or a United Fund drive going on you might end up meeting with some of the people from the drive and meeting with some of the officers of the local. If there's an area leadership conference coming up, you might put together material to be used at that conference for your director. Maybe someone from the local union called you. He's got a membership meeting this afternoon. He wants you to come and speak on some issue or some bill. So you do that. Maybe someone else has called and wants some material to distribute. You jump in your car and take it out. It is so varied. There are so many things you do when you're working in those two fields.

INTERVIEWER: What about when you worked with the retirees?

PETERSON: Oh, the retired people. It was mostly the same kind of things. You might be meeting with the Citizens for Better Care, which is a group that fights the issues for better nursing homes. You might be meeting with the Retiree Executive Board from some chapter. To plan some programs for them. You might be organizing working with the bus company to charter buses for a trip. You might help one of them draft material if he's going to testify before a legislative committee in Lansing. You might organize two or three carloads to go to Lansing to talk with some of the legislators. You might call up or meet with some of the state legislators to find out what's happening to some bill that's of particular interest to them. Of course I worked with the retirees in the Detroit area where they had four regional councils plus an area council. If it's around election time, you would meet with them to start lining their people up for work in their congressional districts. You might be having a group of volunteers working up on the second floor

PETERSON: breaking down membership files, card files of the membership, looking at telephone numbers on them. You might be having a candidate come to town, or you're calling them up to get a crowd out for them. In a sense it's the same kind of thing. You might be getting ready to take a group to Black Lake and digging up films to use for their program. And picking material for leaflets. I used to write a lot of material there that made up the leaflets. And getting it over to clerical at Solidarity House to have it run off, maybe twenty, thirty thousand; then calling to see how it will get distributed over the city. It's just so varied.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever stopped working since you began?

PETERSON: Do you mean for the union or altogether?

INTERVIEWER: Altogether.

PETERSON: Well, altogether I stopped when I got laid off. I'd be laid off for periods of time. And of course I had two children. So there were times when I stopped.

INTERVIEWER: How much time did you take off when you had your children?

PETERSON: I think that my children were born back when times were slow and I don't remember deliberately taking time off. You see, in those years if you quit because you were pregnant you didn't go back to the same job. When you were ready to go back to work, you started out all over again. There was no seniority or call back rights. So I don't remember exactly how old my children were, maybe a year, a year-and-a-half when I'd start looking for work again. Because it wasn't that I wanted to take three months leave or six months leave. If you were pregnant, you quit.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of chores or domestic responsibilities did you have when you came home from work?

PETERSON: I did all the housework and childcare. Cooked the meals, cleaned the house, washed the kids.

INTERVIEWER: How did your husband feel about you working?

PETERSON: He was glad to see me work because in those years it was harder for a man to get a job than for a woman. And during the Depression, a lot of men stayed home while the women worked.

INTERVIEWER: Was he unemployed during the Depression?

PETERSON: Off and on. He'd get some work and then he wouldn't have any.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of work did he do?

PETERSON: Electrician. We didn't get along. We separated after my children were gone.

INTERVIEWER: You mean gone to school?

PETERSON: No. One died and the other went into the army. That was about 1945. I left and got a divorce.

INTERVIEWER: How long were you married?

PETERSON: Twenty years.

INTERVIEWER: How old was your child when she died?

PETERSON: Seventeen.

INTERVIEWER: Was it an accident?

PETERSON: No, a ruptured appendix. This was before penicillin. Then my boy went into the army. So I didn't see any reason to continue to stay married.

INTERVIEWER: When your children were young, what kind of childcare arrangements did you make?

PETERSON: Anything that I could. I got a girl to stay with them or members of the family. Students, if they were old enough. My husband's aunt used to babysit for them. Probably by eight or ten years old they stayed by themselves after school. Nothing else I could do.

INTERVIEWER: Did someone else besides your husband's aunt stay with your children?

PETERSON: Oh yes, different times, different girls. I don't even remember them all anymore. Sometimes I had a neighbor that would watch them after they were school age. Because it was just a question of watching them after school.

INTERVIEWER: During the war, women were often encouraged to work and then encouraged to leave the labor force after the soldiers came home, did you feel any pressure to stop working?

PETERSON: No, because I was already a union officer. Of course, the plant that we were in made a totally different product after the war because it changed hands. So we didn't have what some of the people in other plants had, where jobs changed and the company got rid of the women. I think that we kept, well we didn't have as many people working after the war ended. The people that owned the plant sold it.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Let's talk about your experiences as a union activist. In what period of your life was union responsibility heaviest?

PETERSON: When I worked here in Grand Rapids. Right after I went on the staff.

INTERVIEWER: How did you juggle the rest of your life at those times?

PETERSON: I didn't. It was the only life I had.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the sacrifices you made in order to be active?

PETERSON: I don't really feel that I made any sacrifices because I did not become active until my children were grown. The only child I had left was grown and was gone away from home. My marriage would have broken up anyhow. So I didn't make any sacrifices, really.

INTERVIEWER: What is the highest position a woman ever reached in the union?

PETERSON: In my own local?

INTERVIEWER: Well, in your local you were the president.

PETERSON: Yes, that's the highest position there is in the local.

INTERVIEWER: What about in the region?

PETERSON: I was the only woman they ever had on the staff in the region. And they threw me out because they wanted a man in the job.

INTERVIEWER: And that was as an international representative?

PETERSON: That's right! There's never been one since. One of the few regions where there aren't any. Most regions have a token one now. This one doesn't even have a token.

INTERVIEWER: When were you fired as an international representative?

PETERSON: I wasn't fired, I was just transferred.

INTERVIEWER: Transferred?

PETERSON: It would have been in 1960.

INTERVIEWER: I forget, where were you transferred at that time?

PETERSON: I went to Battle Creek for awhile. Then I came back here and went back to the plant.

INTERVIEWER: When you were most active, did you devote much energy to women's issues?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

PETERSON: Well, because at that time, to me, union issues were union issues. We didn't see any need, for instance, of a women's committee in our local, because we followed the contract right to the letter just as I told you, making the bumping privileges in the departments according to the seniority lists. Actually, women were doing better here then, I think, than they have done since. I think those were the years when I felt that if you acted as a union person and left sex out of it, and worked hard, that was all that was necessary.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever get interested in planning any special programs for women workers?

PETERSON: No. We took a position against it, even though we were asked to. We felt that if we were going to sit down and discuss union business, that men and women ought to be there together. I can see now that we probably should have, although I'm not sure that it would have done much good at that time. I think that when the feminist movement started in the nation it became a different ball of wax.

INTERVIEWER: Were you involved with protective legislation?

PETERSON: No. Because I was very much opposed to the so-called protective legislation. I saw it hurt in our plant. There were times when we wanted to establish the right of a woman to move into a classification. The company would give us the excuse that it required lifting more than thirty-five pounds of weight, or it might require women to work more than ten hours on a shift. We were hard put to achieve what we were after because we were up against the so-called protective legislation. Very often it was an excuse. But it was still on the books.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever see protective legislation used as a way to fire women?

PETERSON: I've never seen it, but I'm sure it happened. It's a question of layoffs. So women aren't getting laid off and the only jobs in the plant are jobs which by tradition there is more there to lift, or longer hours occasionally required. How do you answer the company? Legislation is a bar.

INTERVIEWER: How was your union and industry affected by national issues such as price and wage controls?

PETERSON: Well, obviously we were affected. There were times when it was difficult to negotiate in certain wage freezes. I imagine all industries would have been affected. But I wouldn't be able to say precisely how our industry was affected. I was not at a level where I would have the answer to that.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to your industry during and after the war?

PETERSON: Well, during the war we went into war production. The men were gone. The women came into the plants. We had the wage freeze. And then after the war, of course, there were great layoffs for a period until the war plants were changed back to civilian production. And then we had this great need for cars so we had a lot of work. And a lot of overtime. We were affected in the same way that many other industries were.

INTERVIEWER: What stand did the union take on workers being laid off?

PETERSON: I guess if we took a stand it had to be by seniority.

INTERVIEWER: What was the effect of the Depression and then the New Deal on your industry?

PETERSON: I wasn't in the industry then. I wouldn't know.

INTERVIEWER: What types of community support did you receive in the twenties, thirties and forties from groups such as the National Consumers League, the Y[WCA], the churches, the settlement houses?

PETERSON: I don't recall any. I mean I wasn't involved in any movement then.

INTERVIEWER: What about during the '46 strike?

PETERSON: Oh! There we had some support. We had support from a very liberal Catholic bishop. I remember him speaking at the auditorium here on behalf of the GM strikers. His name was

PETERSON: Bishop Haas. And we had some community leaders that joined with us. I would say that for a conservative community, which this is, we probably had as much support as any conservative community would be likely to get. I don't recall a lot about it, but I know there was some support then.

INTERVIEWER: While you were active in the union, were you ever active in any community or political group?

PETERSON: Just the Democratic Party.

INTERVIEWER: Are you active in CLUW now?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What are your hopes for CLUW?

PETERSON: What do I hope for it? I hope it grows and gets stronger. I think it can fulfill a real function. I've already seen it happen in terms of just our little chapter here and the discussions that we have. I've seen women from some of the locals come in, complaining about things they felt were unfair, either on their job or in their locals. And I've seen them go out, determined to speak up instead of just sitting still for it. So I think that CLUW can perform a real function.

INTERVIEWER: What was the relationship between your union activities and Democratic Party activities?

PETERSON: They were all intermingled really. Most of the time I was recruiting union people to give time, money, and effort to support the Democratic program and the Democratic candidate.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a special kind of camaraderie the developed among union activists?

PETERSON: Oh yes, definitely.

INTERVIEWER: Was it strong during certain time periods?

PETERSON: Well, it would always be stronger during a strike or times of stress. There was a feeling of us against the world. We were rather like a closely knit family.

INTERVIEWER: Was this camaraderie usually among men and women or among same sex groups?

PETERSON: I think that most of the time it was among men and women, here at least. But there were not many women involved here in top leadership roles at staff level or the local union officer level. For instance, if there was a meeting of local union presidents, I would be the only woman. If it was a staff meeting, I would be the only woman. If it went down to the second level of leadership, of delegates to the council or something like that, there would be a smattering of women. But I think we were a fairly closely knit group.

INTERVIEWER: Have you stayed in touch with some of these people?

PETERSON: Well, not too much. A number of the people who were staff people then are now dead. Some of them no longer live here. Of course, I was gone from here for thirteen years, fourteen years. I haven't had much contact with too many since I've been back.

INTERVIEWER: Who were you closest to during your active union years?

PETERSON: Well, probably the gal from my own plant. And beyond that the people on the staff.

INTERVIEWER: What was involved in being a steward and then a union president? First we'll take a steward.

PETERSON: Well, you worry about the problems of the people that you service. Sometimes you go to bed at night wondering how the hell you're going to get them out of some screwy thing or mess they got themselves into. You get to the point where you begin to think of them sometimes as children who are their own worst enemies because they can do some awfully dumb things. And most of the time you're worrying about how you can help them out in some way. Trying to figure an angle.

There's an old saying amongst international representatives--when some worker does something absolutely asinine, as they often do, and gets into a mess that you're probably not going to be able to get him out of. There's an old saying, "Tomorrow I put on my knee-pads." That means you go into the company and beg because you don't have a legal argument under the contract. The first thing you do is, you go to bed and you think and you think and think, and say to yourself, "What kind of an argument can I develop that ties into the contract? What can I say that puts the company on the defensive a little bit? How can I defend this guy?" Sometimes it's not like that. Sometimes the company is so blatantly wrong that you go to bed chuckling to yourself, thinking that "I got them. Wait till I get in there tomorrow. I've found it. How are they going to answer this?" Really, this is what you do when you're steward.

INTERVIEWER: What about when you were union president. What was involved there?

PETERSON: Many more things become involved. You have the problem of administration; Your room rentals, your office rentals, your salaries if you have secretaries, your committees that are supposed to be working. Of course, my local was small, but any man or woman who has been a good president of a large local union is trained for a good administrative job. He could be an administrator over a great many things in many fields if he's done a good job with the union. There's a lot to it from the standpoint of administration. There are papers to be filed, books to be kept, records to be kept, people to direct, people to lead, people to be encouraged, programs to be developed. It's a big job.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a lot of autonomy to develop programs?

PETERSON: Oh yes, we had a lot of autonomy.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things did you try to do as president?

PETERSON: I had a good education program going, lots of classes. We bought some new office equipment. We had a number of picnics and parties and morale raising things. And I prided myself on always having good representation in every cause that came along in the community that we supported. It was understood that we were there. If they were looking for a crowd of people it was always the Local 19 group that was there. And you work at it, in order to get the group there. You have to convince people to give up their evening and come.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of educational programs did you encourage?

PETERSON: Stewards' training, union administration, studying the contract, labor history. We got involved with whatever was coming along in the current legislature. For instance, right now, if we were there we would be taking a look at what's in the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, the full employment bill. You tried to get an understanding of whatever was current.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of turnout did you get at union meetings?

PETERSON: Well, ours was an amalgamated local, which means that you did not have a general membership meeting. Maybe you might have it once a year. Each plant holds it own meetings. Then there was a council, which is a delegate body. But the turnouts from the different plants depended on the plant. Some would be pretty good. Some would not be good. But, generally speaking, I think most of them in those days were better than they are today.

INTERVIEWER: While you were president, were there opposition groups to you?

PETERSON: Oh, sure.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of issues did they stress in contrast to your own programs?

PETERSON: Often money. Money was often spent from the local union treasury. Sometimes some of the people felt we spent too much on education classes, or sent too many people to conferences. Either we were too progressive, or we were trying to do too much. We were always criticized for having the local union involved in too many community projects. Sometimes we were criticized for spending too much time and money on political action. However, it was always a minority in the local that held these opinions. When these issues were debated at membership meetings, we were always able to get our ideas across. We were seldom criticized for the way we handled grievances because the union was very strong and we had a good relationship with the company. Most grievances were settled on the floor without being reduced to writing.

INTERVIEWER: What about when you got on to the international staff? What kind of autonomy did you have?

PETERSON: It was very limited there. When you're on staff you follow international union policy. You don't make your own. That's as it should be. I would never dispute that. An organization couldn't function without that. There's a great difference between an elected leader and standing for election every year or two, and being a paid staff person working for someone who has to stand election. So you follow the policy set down by the board. This region was a good region. The staff did not make policy for the region. Unlike many of the regions, there was always a place here where we could get opinions heard because we had regular staff meetings, and the director would ask for opinions. Very often a lot of opinions would be expressed. They were not always democratically acted upon. But often a consensus was arrived at after a discussion. So you had an input. But many staff people don't at all. It depends on the department. I've been in departments and I've seen regions where you had none at all. I think that today the international union is probably tighter than it was years gone by, and probably not quite as flexible. But it's pretty well understood that if a policy was handed down that you didn't agree with, at least under the old school on the staff, you kept your mouth shut about disagreeing. You carried it out. I don't disagree with that at all.

INTERVIEWER: Which work did you find more personally satisfying? Being president of the local or working on the staff?

PETERSON: I think I liked the staff work. I liked the work in the Education Department. I liked everything here. In Detroit it was different, much different, because you became more or less a figure head there. I liked it better when I went to work with the retirees.

INTERVIEWER: How many of the employees in the plants that you worked with were women?

PETERSON: Well, I guess in my last plant there were more than twenty percent. Of course, this varied. Back during the war, and at General Motors, there was, I think, about eighty or eighty-five percent women for a long time.

INTERVIEWER: What were the life styles of the women you organized or represented?

PETERSON: Well, not any different than anyone else's. They worked. They had families. They kept house. Few were involved in anything beyond maybe the union. A lot of them came to union meetings. But they didn't do much to my knowledge beyond that.

INTERVIEWER: Were you asked or did you ever help with community or family-related problems?

PETERSON: Yes. We had a community services committee in our local. We got involved in many of the family-related problems, except I didn't handle them. We had a staff person who did. Then I did special things. For instance, when the tornado was here, I worked with the civil defense and the Red Cross, in relation to our people whose homes were destroyed by the tornado. We also worked with them in relation to all the people, not just our members, but with people who needed food and clothing and stuff. They did the same thing in Detroit after the riots. But those were specialized things. They were not a regular activity. With the retirees I did a lot of work on the nursing bill issue.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do on that issue?

PETERSON: Carried on some battles with some of the bad homes, worked with some of the legislators for better legislation, screened some individual cases of abuses and referred them to a place where the person could get help. It was mostly a referral thing.

INTERVIEWER: How different was your life from the lives of the women you worked with, in regards to marriage, or children, or living alone?

PETERSON: My life before I became involved in the union was no different really. It was very similar to theirs. After I became involved in the union, and was giving all my time to the union, and was no longer married, it became entirely different. They went home to their families at night and I went to union meetings.

INTERVIEWER: How did the various strikes and organizing campaigns affect the women workers?

PETERSON: Well, not any different than it did the men. If the woman is working she is working for a paycheck. She may have a husband who is not on strike and so they have one paycheck left. But the same thing is true with a man who is working and is on strike. He may have a wife working somewhere else. So I don't think that it affected them any different. I would say that women, by and large by God, supported the strikes. And we had strong support from the women.

INTERVIEWER: You don't think you got that kind of strong support from the men?

PETERSON: Oh, we had strong support from the men. But I said that because some people tend to think that women, the wives often don't support strikes when the men are on strike. Many times we got wives to come out on the picket lines.

INTERVIEWER: Did you notice whether the women's self images changed or their sense of competence or importance?

PETERSON: Now you mean?

INTERVIEWER: No, during the strikes.

PETERSON: Yes, I think it did. I think they felt more equality because they were out there doing the same thing the men were doing and making their contracts.

INTERVIEWER: Do you notice women's self images changing now?

PETERSON: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me about that?

PETERSON: It's a feeling more than anything else. I think that there is a real awareness. I see it among some of my friends who have no involvement whatsoever in the women's movement. But they're much more conscious about the fact that they're women. They are much more proud of it. And it comes out in little ways.

PETERSON: Sometimes when you're kidding, when you're with a group of men, and a man begins to make a particularly sexist remark, and you say, "Wait a minute." Very often his wife, who a year or two ago would have said nothing, will speak up and say, "That's right, wait a minute. Be careful, we've got you outnumbered." This would not have happened five to ten years ago. There is a great deal more awareness.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any special barriers to women participating in the strikes and organizing campaigns?

PETERSON: In a strike, if a woman had children, I suppose she picketed at one time and her husband at another. You know, in organizing campaigns there are some problems because it's usually conceded that the woman is responsible for the children. Very often she stays home with them, and he goes. So in that sense there are problems. But I don't feel there are in other ways.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any issues in particular campaigns that were of special interest to the women?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. Equal seniority is a big interest, and equal pay is a big interest. That's a big selling point when you go out and organize a UAW plant. You make the point that you have a provision for equal pay for equal work. Because usually in unorganized plants you'd find ten or fifteen cents an hour less in the same jobs for women in years gone by. Now they get around it in many ways by having different job classifications. The very fact that the equal pay issue is there is very important.

INTERVIEWER: I forgot to ask you this early. When you were married, and both you and your husband were working, did you share housework or childcare?

PETERSON: No.

INTERVIEWER: You did it all?

PETERSON: Yes. Most women did.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember resenting that?

PETERSON: A little bit I think. Except I resented it and felt it was unfair. But I always thought that's the way life was.

INTERVIEWER: What was the most exciting part of your life?

PETERSON: Probably those early years in the union. I had a very good time.

INTERVIEWER: If you could relive any part of it, when would it be?

PETERSON: I do not think that I would want to relive any part of it. I am a strange person that way. I've always felt that the person who wanted to be something they were not missed a lot in life. I made up my mind a long time ago that I was going to live each portion of my life to its fullest for what I wanted then. And without regrets and without wanting to go back, wanting to go ahead. I had a very good time and I see people now sometimes doing a lot of the things I used to do and I think that's nice and they're having fun. But I don't really want to go back to it. My feeling at the same time is, "I had it, I'm glad I had it, and I like what I have now." Maybe I'm just lucky that I feel that way, I don't know. But now the most exciting part of my life is to get up in the morning and sit out there with the flowers and a cup of coffee and read the morning newspaper. Once I would have been very bored doing that, but now I'm not bored at all. This may be a feeling that there's a time for everything, and that this is a time for these things.

INTERVIEWER: If you had a daughter, would you want her to live through your experiences?

PETERSON: I would not wish on her living through the Depression, nor the hard, horrible, terrible work that I did in the early years in the plant. But if she were able to live through the rest of it, the involvement and the excitement and the satisfaction of being involved in something that you really loved doing, yes I would.

INTERVIEWER: Have you been generally more comfortable working with women or with men?

PETERSON: I think I used to be more comfortable working with men. In recent years, since the feminist movement started, I enjoy working with women.

INTERVIEWER: Which have you worked with most?

PETERSON: Oh, in the past I worked with men the most because I spent years being the only woman around.

INTERVIEWER: Were you active in any nonunion feminist issues?

PETERSON: No. I haven't been active.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember reading anything or seeing a movie or meeting someone special who influenced your life dramatically?

PETERSON: I would think that it would be more likely to be books that I have read probably. I think Eleanor Roosevelt and books--reading about her. Brendan [Sexton] influenced me a lot.

INTERVIEWER: What about people in the union? Woodcock or Reuther?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. Leonard influenced my life. Brendan did, as I said. Probably Brendan did as much as anyone, really. They influenced me a great deal at the time. Since I've become aware of feminist issues, and since I understood more of what happened to me, they've lost some of their glamour. It took me a long time to realize that, to really accept the fact that when they were talking about equality, they were not talking about me. It took me a long time to learn that. But they did influence me, there's no question about that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you support the Equal Rights Amendment?

PETERSON: Oh, yes. You better believe I do.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think organized labor responds to womens' needs?

PETERSON: No. Only when they have to, and then they respond slowly and reluctantly. As I said a little while ago, I think we'll be one of the last segments in society to really accept equality. Oh, they respond and give a lot of lip service, and they respond in terms of equal pay to a great extent. But let's not kid ourselves, when the labor movement instituted equal pay for equal work, they weren't protecting the women. They were protecting the men. The big argument we used to use with men when we had to sell equal pay to the men, and I sold it to a lot of them, and I've heard a lot of other union leaders sell it. You sell it on the grounds that if your boss can hire some woman to do your job cheaper than you're doing it, don't you think he's going to hire her? We remind him about the Depression when women had jobs and men didn't because women worked cheaper. As much as I love the union, I really do feel that management, that business, certainly the media, have done far more to give women opportunities today than the labor movement has. I don't see much of an increase in numbers of women on the staff in my union. I look at the list of new employees month after month when they come on, because people are retiring and new people are coming on. I don't see very many women. Only once in a great while. And we got a token woman on the board who's a very beautiful gal. But it will still be one hell of a long time before another woman makes that board.

INTERVIEWER: You mean Odessa Komer?

PETERSON: Yes. And so my feeling is that, to quote Adlai Stevenson when he talked about the Republican Party, "They are going to have to be dragged, kicking and screaming into the twentieth century." That's the way I feel about the labor movement and women. The men will come in, but they're going to be dragged in or pushed in.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that women working within the labor movement were more or less effective because they were female?

PETERSON: They were less effective, because they were downgraded. They were pushed out. How can anyone hear what you're saying if they won't listen to you in the first place? I think the labor movement has lost a tremendous amount of talent because they have pushed the women out. You know, I think CLUW is the best damn thing that could have happened to the labor movement, if through CLUW women get the inspiration to stand up and demand the right to be part of it. I think the movement would be a much better movement if there were more women involved in it. I think the United States Congress would be a better Congress if there were more women there too.

INTERVIEWER: What was the most frustrating part of your work within the unions?

PETERSON: I think sitting around and tearing my heart out for job assignments I couldn't get that I knew I was able to do. And very often seeing them handed to somebody that I knew damn well wouldn't do any better job than I did, and in quite a few instances, wouldn't do as good a job as I could have. I also knew the reason I didn't get it was because I was female.

INTERVIEWER: What was the most satisfying work?

PETERSON: The years when I was able to work as an equal with the fellows doing the same work. And I did do the same work here. Those were the years when you were just a human being.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever feel that it wasn't worth it?

PETERSON: No, never.

INTERVIEWER: If you could be sixteen years old again, how would you relive your life?

PETERSON: I think I'd want to go to college. I sure as hell wouldn't get married as young as I did. Probably wouldn't get married at all.

INTERVIEWER: Why not?

PETERSON: I don't know. If I did it would be because I really cared about somebody. I wouldn't be doing it because it was the thing women were supposed to do and there didn't seem to be anything else to do. And if I met somebody I cared for a great deal, then I'm not even sure I'd want to marry him. I think that I would want children again. But I wouldn't want them so young. And I would want some life for myself. I think the world will be a much better place for women now. Much, much better.

INTERVIEWER: Hope so.

PETERSON: I have a granddaughter who's a feminist in some ways. She was married and had a youngster, and couldn't get along and got a divorce. She is working and supporting herself with her child support. Very happy. Every now and then I say to her "You got to have a man to take care of you. You're working so hard." And she says, "You're so old-fashioned. I don't want to."

INTERVIEWER: OK, that's it. Thank you very much.

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