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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

FRIEDA SCHWENKMEYER

Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America

by

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Program on Women and Work

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VITAE

FRIEDA SCHWENKMEYER

Frieda Schwenkmeyer's home town is Cincinnati, Ohio, and she was born on July 22, 1901. While attending the University of Cincinnati, she first became involved with the movement to change conditions for workers. Her involvement with the YWCA on campus developed her consciousness concerning the problems which afflicted working-class lives. Upon graduation from college, Schwenkmeyer worked full time for the YWCA as an industrial secretary, making contacts with various groups for the purpose of discussing and eliminating these problems.

From her work with the YWCA, Schwenkmeyer went on to full time organizing for the ACWA [Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America]. She worked in this capacity out of the ACWA National Headquarters in Troy, New York, for over sixteen years. During this period, Schwenkmeyer organized throughout the South. Her stories and experiences illuminate the struggles and rewards of organizing.

Schwenkmeyer later organized for the United Electrical Workers [UE], working primarily with the countless women employed in the electrical industry. After leaving the UE, Schwenkemeyer worked for the Henry Street Settlement House in New York as a registrar, coordinating people and activities.

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August 1976
New York City, New York

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INTERVIEWER: What was your first job?

SCHWENKMEYER: YWCA Industrial Secretary.

INTERVIEWER: What was that? What did you do?

SCHWENKMEYER: That really wasn't my first job, because I worked my way through the university.

INTERVIEWER: Start with that then.

SCHWENKMEYER: Took care of children. Typed in the library. Did any kind of job that I could get hold of, but I don't quite remember now, so that I could earn money. Tutored. And in those days, I got a dollar an hour for tutoring. This was back in the twenties.

INTERVIEWER: Extraordinary.

SCHWENKMEYER: It was.

INTERVIEWER: What subjects did you tutor?

SCHWENKMEYER: Don't ask me. I don't remember.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go to university?

SCHWENKMEYER: The University of Cincinnati.

INTERVIEWER: And is that where you were born?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: When did you go to school?

SCHWENKMEYER: From 1920 to 1924.

INTERVIEWER: And what were you studying?

SCHWENKMEYER: I majored in math.

INTERVIEWER: That must have been unusual for a woman at that time.

SCHWENKMEYER: There were maybe one or two others in the class. In the math classes.

INTERVIEWER: At this time were there many other women at the university, or were they a minority?

SCHWENKMEYER: No, no. There were many women.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say there was almost an equal number of men?

SCHWENKMEYER: Very close. It might have been very close. They had an engineering college and there were no women in the engineering college. And then there was a college for education--with teachers--and of course that was predominantly women. And a liberal arts college. And, I'd say, that was probably 50-50. Of course, we didn't get near the medical college or the law school, and I'm sure the law school had all men, and the medical college probably had all men, too.

INTERVIEWER: How did you happen to go to the university?

SCHWENKMEYER: Because it was in the city and it was free. No tuition. Just like it was here in [New York] City College until recently. And, it was a good school, and so I went.

INTERVIEWER: Was it difficult to get into?

SCHWENKEMEYER: No. There weren't any exams. It was open admission. We didn't call it that then. We just went.

INTERVIEWER: Had anybody in your family gone to a university before?

SCHWENKMEYER: No. No. But there had been other members, cousins that had gone. It was nothing unusual especially.

INTERVIEWER: What were your plans for after you got out of college?

SCHWENKMEYER: I was supposed to go on the college of education and learn to teach. But I found studying--you took some [education] courses when you were a senior--and I found studying these courses very uninteresting. And by this time, I was very involved with the Student Industrial Movement of the YWCA, and this seemed much more down to earth to me, much more exciting, and gave you more opportunities to develop your skills and use your imagination and your own creative ability, than to go to teach in school, where you had a certain ritual so to speak, and had to follow a pattern. So, I was offered a job as soon as I graduated with the local YWCA in Cincinnati and took it.

INTERVIEWER: What sorts of things had you been doing with the Student Industrial Movement of the YWCA that made them want to offer you a job?

SCHWENKMEYER: We met once a week with the industrial group in the heart of town. We had the advantage of being in the city where you don't get away from the actual life of the city. You realize that more exists than the educational community and the books. Although I read all the time, you still realized that there were people who worked, people who earned very little money. You really began to learn their problems, which I was more or less aware of, at any rate. But, we sat there and talked with them. We went home visiting with the organizers. That's how we got there in the beginning. Because an Amalgamated [Clothing Workers Union] organizer came to the university to talk to the Industrial YWCA Group and asked us to meet some of these workers. When she asked if we wanted to go home visiting with her, we did--I did. And, you went into their homes and you listened to the worker talk to the organizer, and you heard what the problem was, and what could be done about this. So that you were quite aware of what was going on in the industrial system. At that time, there were practically no unions that accepted women in membership, except the needle trades--the Amalgamated or the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union]. And that was all. The rest of the unions didn't care. So, that when you went to the city YWCA, you met people from other trades and you listened to their problems and there was nobody to do anything about them. You became very aware of the need for legislation. You became very aware, long before--this was in the 1920's--you became aware of the need for unemployment insurance, the need for old age pensions, long before the labor movement was ever interested in any way in any of this, because you saw the people who were very old and couldn't work anymore and had no means of support when they were laid off. And so you felt something ought to be done about this.

INTERVIEWER: Were the needle trades very important in Cincinnati?

SCHWENKMEYER: I wouldn't say so. But they were there. And they were the only unions that thought it was important that the students know something about it and asked if they could come. I don't know if they ever talked to a class, but they talked to the YWCA Industrial Group.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get involved with the YWCA Industrial Group?

SCHWENKMEYER: I was shocked when I went to the university to discover the lack of democracy that existed--that the sororities and fraternities controlled all student activities and that the emphasis was on belonging to something that had nothing to do with learning. It had to do only with social activity and prestige. And, so I looked for some organization that was on the campus that was a democratic organization that didn't depend on prestige, the organization you belonged to, the money that you had, and such things. And it was the YWCA that did this more than any other group. They weren't especially at this time a religious group. I suppose they prayed at meetings, I don't know. I don't remember. But, they became involved in causes, is the best thing I can say.

At that time the new City Charter was being promoted in Cincinnati to get rid of the corrupt government that existed there. And so there were these various commissions or committees--I don't know what we called them. Also, they were interested in justice for black people. And there was no other group on the campus that was interested in that. And so there was an interracial commission formed. And this, of course, was all women, because this is all that the YWCA took in in those days. And we were very upset by the general attitude toward black people in the University. We discussed this and included this in our conference. Now, these are the two things I remember. There probably were more things, but those were the two things that I was very much concerned with.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a parallel branch of the YMCA that had an industrial group?

SCHWENKMEYER: No, not at all. They were very much opposed to what we were doing and felt that we were completely out of place. And we were not catering to the large industries in Cincinnati that gave them money, and so we had no money. And we learned that very, very quickly.

INTERVIEWER: In your first job that you had with the YWCA, what did they hire you to do, what were your duties?

SCHWENKMEYER: I was an assistant--they called us secretaries--we were really what you would call subdirectors, or something like that--but they called all these people secretaries and I was an assistant to the person in charge. You worked with clubs; you tried to approach people at their understanding to explain other problems to them. It couldn't always be done directly. You had to use an approach, but you always have to use the interest of the people, the person. So, you established groups, whether it was a tap dancing group, or a sewing group, or what, that you started with, and then somehow tried to involve this group into discussions of one kind or another that they wanted, that took you to problems--the need for laws, the need for a better government, the need for unions, and such things.

INTERVIEWER: Were you working mainly with women?

SCHWENKMEYER: Always.

INTERVIEWER: Were they mostly young women?

SCHWENKMEYER: As I remember it--it was a long time ago--as I remember in Cincinnati they weren't so young. But then I worked in Hamilton, Ohio, and they were much younger. And, then I worked in Cleveland and they were teenagers, many of them without working permits. We formed a Household Employees Club, because this was just horrible--the exploitation of women. Then, it was the Italian women in housework. It was just horrible. You can't picture anything like it. The young girl would go to sleep in the attic. And pretty soon, the husband would come up to the attic. And this was one of the main problems we met in all of this. And you had to figure out how you were going to tackle it because the young girl had to have work. She was supporting her family with her lousy two dollars a week, or whatever it was that she was getting. And the wife would never believe that her husband would do anything like this. So, it was the same old question, in a way that exists today. You know, it was just that it was done to people with no way of defending themselves.

In this, we established all kinds of connections. In Cleveland, we established connections with psychiatrists, with medical doctors, birth control clinics, all kinds of groups like that that we could work with the women. And, this way you could reach them so that you were talking to

SCHWENKMEYER: them about problems like organizing or fighting for laws for their protection, but you couldn't ever start out that way. They were just so upset in Cleveland by that fact that, at that time, when I was in Cleveland (it was the beginning of the Depression) there was no work for men, and the women were the employees. They were supporting the family [by working] in shops, factories, where wages were terrible. You couldn't talk to them at all and I remember the time when there was nothing we could talk to them about because all they wanted to do was tell dirty jokes. And so, we discussed this with a psychiatrist, and he explained the reasons for it. And, he said, they've got to learn how to get sexual satisfaction, and at the same time know birth control. And those people that were in that group today will never forget that class I taught in "married love." But, at the same time I was doing it, I was also advising them to see someone from the birth control clinic. And, in spite of their religion, they went because their life at home with their husbands was just so terrible, because all the husband wanted to do was get them in bed. And, of course, they were terrified of becoming pregnant because they were supporting the family. There was no welfare. There was nothing then. So, that you see, it was a marvelous training school. There was nothing better.

And to do it we did plays, we got hold of a dancer--it was the beginning of the WPA--he was part of the WPA and he taught dancing. We took the ethnic groups as they were and put on a Czech play, in Czechoslovakian with a lot of songs and, of course, I didn't know a word. But that didn't make any difference. Neither did he, the dancer. We did the dances and we did the songs. And somebody else, one of the people--one of the young girls--did the coaching and told them how to say this and that in their language.

And then we started to take in men. When I was in Cleveland we discovered that the women really wanted men around. They didn't want to be isolated. And in the [YWCA] branch that I worked in, there was a YMCA across the street. Although they weren't anxious to cooperate, we got to know some of those young fellows, so that they came, and then we encouraged the women to bring their husbands and boyfriends. And we put on big dances where the boys would be there, and the boys were always part of what we call today a security group--you know, a group that went around to say

SCHWENKMEYER: that we don't drink here; you can't drink in this gym or something like that--so that we didn't ever have any trouble. The boys took care of it; the boys policed it--there was never a policeman around. The boys had their own group; these were all teenaged groups that we were working with. If it were adults, why, you had a smaller group. They never came in such large groups, because the men all liked to drink beer too much. We weren't about to furnish all that stuff.

But, this is the kind of thing we did. We had music groups where the people came around. The boyfriend of one of the young girls played a guitar and they had a group with an accordion and some more musical instruments, and they learned the folk songs of many, many European countries. And then we went into the folk songs of this country. And then we went into the folk dancing of this country. And wrote our own plays. They ended up by writing their own plays about what went on in the factory. So that you did all kinds of creative things.

INTERVIEWER: Do you happen to have any of the plays that they wrote?

SCHWENKMEYER: No. You know it all went by the wayside. You never thought that was important. But, when I was in Cleveland, I worked very closely with the ILG [International Ladies Garment Workers Union] and the Amalgamated. We picketed and there were tough picket lines in the Amalgamated and the ILG. The Amalgamated would never let us come around when the picket lines were tough. But in the ILG, they were very tough. I saw mounted cops ride right into a picket line to knock down the pickets, and they--union workers--always took care of us. We would bring these women, these young women from the YWCA, to the picket line at six o'clock in the morning and they would stay until whenever they had to leave for work, which might have been a quarter of eight, because most of them had to be at work at eight o'clock. And, in a large city at that time, you could do this very easily. We were supplementing the picket line to make it much bigger than it was. So, we would be there when these things happened and heads were bashed and all of that, and they would shove us out of the way. And they would come up to me. They knew I was the leader because I had talked with them about all of this. I had to make the arrangements when we came. We never went without getting

SCHWENKMEYER: permission from the union or they called us up. And they would come to us and ask us to call off the pickets if they thought it was going to get too rough because they didn't want our people to be arrested. I had to do this outside of my regular work because everybody in the YWCA didn't agree to this kind of activity at all. So, I was responsible to see that none of these young people was arrested and also see that I carried a full day's work when I got back to work. So, we were used to working long and hard, long hours.

INTERVIEWER: But they didn't stop you from doing it?

SCHWENKMEYER: We weren't about to be stopped. We ourselves were very well-organized--the YWCA industrial secretaries. In Cleveland, there must have been eight or ten of us across the city, and we were very well-organized. If anything happened to one, we would have been ready for joint action for all of us. In fact, in the country, the YWCA secretaries were very well-organized. I remember twice when the national industrial secretary flew to Cleveland (in the early days when flying was very rare) to save my job. I couldn't tell you now what it was about, but they were threatening me, and she came on to fight for me. So that you felt that you had an awful lot of protection.

And all over the country now, when we run into a [YWCA] industrial secretary from back during that period, up until the beginning of the NRA [National Recovery Act] when we all left, we have a bond, even if we've never seen each other before. We have a bond because we all went through the same thing all over the country. And we all knew Lucy Garner, who was the head of the [YWCA] Industrial Department. We knew how she fought for everybody. And we knew all these other people--we knew the reputations of everybody. All the good fighters. All the people who believed in fighting for working women. We knew this, and we went through the Depression in Cleveland--a depression before there was unemployment insurance and before there was welfare. And we knew what it was like when thousands and thousands of people gathered on the Square to demand bread. We were part of that group. We organized our people to join that group. If they had objected, if the YWCA hierarchy had objected to this, we would have all quit and made a national scandal of this--that people were starving, that they had to fight for bread.

SCHWENKMEYER: During this time, we did things on our month's vacation. This was a good job. We all had a month's vacation with pay. And we were all paid at a rate that was much higher than working in an office or anything like that. And, I remember when A.J. Muste*--oh, we were very close to Brookwood Labor College and the Bryn Mawr Summer School [for Women Workers]--always sending people to either or both if we could afford it, always raising money for them. A.J. Muste's group decided, during the Depression, that they wanted to find out what the possibilities were for starting a Labor Party, and they came to Cleveland to ask if some of us would go into the field and work, and some other secretary and I--she had the car and I didn't--went into the mining areas and the farming areas of Ohio and we conducted what we called a two- or three-day Chataugua, where we borrowed from the Columbus YWCA bats and balls and a few other very simple things that you could put in a car, and started out.

The first place we went was The Plains, outside of Athens. We lived in the houses with the miners. They cleared out a room for us. In the morning, we started out with games for the children, the small children. In the afternoon, we had games and plays for the teenagers, and, in the evening, we had discussion groups and maybe at the end, we'd have the groups all put on a play or something for their parents to watch. We ate the food that they cooked for us because there were no restaurants there. And we learned about the miners. God, what we learned about the miners! And their wages. And what John L. Lewis hadn't done. And this was before the CIO.

INTERVIEWER: Very black days for the mine workers.

SCHWENKMEYER: Very, very. And we learned also that you didn't tell even kids that they couldn't smoke a cigarette. Because we told the kids this once and the fathers came to us and said, "We are the ones." So, we never did it again. We learned all of these things through the YWCA. We also learned that it was much better to be married than single to do this work. So, the other girl agreed that we would go in her car to Athens [Ohio] and she would buy a wedding ring. 'Cause the women wouldn't listen to us. So, she bought a wedding ring. She did it because she knew how to make jelly and preserves and I didn't. And so she talked with the groups of women about how to make jelly and how to preserve this and that. And that's how we approached them.

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* Director of Brookwood Labor College

SCHWENKMEYER: So, during the Depression we were convinced that there was nothing that could be done if women weren't organized. We sent delegation after delegation of unorganized women to the central [labor] body to plead for unions, and they wouldn't listen to us. Would have nothing to do with us.

INTERVIEWER: Was this in Cleveland?

SCHWENKMEYER: In Cleveland. We learned about industrial poisoning because there was a rayon factory. The young workers came to us and said that something had to be done because they were suffering from diseases. And we were able to do so much that the rayon factories sent a spy to the YWCA to find out what we were telling them [the young workers]. And I learned how to identify the spy immediately, so that we were not about to have her in any of those sessions where we were telling people what to do. But, by this time, I saw there was no use doing anything more for the YWCA. We were under constant attack for our interest in, I'd say, an active program. Where you were organizing people, where you were working for better laws, where you were exposing the hazards of disease, and the National YWCA was trying to get rid of the [Industrial] Department.

INTERVIEWER: When did it start?

SCHWENKMEYER: The Industrial Department must have started in the late teens by a person whose name was Sims. I've got her book here, but I forget. I'd have to look it up. It's not important. So, that I just felt it was time that I learnt more. I was interested in industrial hazards. I was interested in organizing unions, and I was interested also in laws. I had been reading what [Harold] Lasky* wrote and other people in England, and I had saved money and decided that I was going to England to study at the London School of Economics, where I would find out more about all of this so that I would know which seemed the most important to me. So, I found out that I wasn't going to learn very much about unions from England, although they were very well-organized. The unions didn't have to fight and suffer the way we had to against big business here, and so their whole method was entirely different. It was so quiet.

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* Economist at London School of Economics

SCHWENKMEYER: Also, all the while I was over there [in England], I had a group of household employees that they couldn't organize because they didn't realize that you had to approach it from the interests of these employees and then go on to talk union. But the union person whom I saw did realize this, and so she made arrangements for me to meet with them every Thursday night. And I did. And I found I learnt more from that than a lot of other things because Lasky's lectures were not all that great. Neither were the ones in workers' education, or neither were the ones on law. You suddenly realized that all of this depended upon pushing the laws, on pushing the workers' education. That it didn't develop on its own. It only developed if the people wanted it.

At this time, the NRA [National Recovery Administration] came into being in the United States, and all the people I worked with in Cleveland that could, joined unions. And all of the leaders of the [YWCA] clubs we had became union officers. And here I was in England! And I stuck it out for two terms and, by the middle of April, I decided I had to come back to the U.S. and I did. And then I decided I wouldn't accept any job with the YWCA. Of course, they were going to offer me the moon, stars, and skies, but I wouldn't accept any job with them, but I'd work for a union.

INTERVIEWER: Did the YWCA Industrial Department end at this time?

SCHWENKMEYER: We probably ended it, with them, all of us. Because we left, all of us going into unions. All of the active industrial secretaries left the YWCA, so that the power structure was in the position to say, "This is the time we'll end these activities, and we'll not have an Industrial Department anymore." So, we were instrumental in stopping it also, because we all poured out at the same time, not realizing what we were doing. So, when I came home I just went to the Amalgamated and the ILG.

INTERVIEWER: In Cleveland?

SCHWENKMEYER: No, no. In New York. I stayed here and hung around. The ILG offered me a job. The workers' education [program] in Bryn Mawr [Summer School for Women Workers] offered me a job for the summer, but none of this excited me. I said I'd do the workers' education bit, because I was waiting for a union job. I went back to Cleveland because I knew

SCHWENKMEYER: the union people in Cleveland so much better. I went there to see the Amalgamated people there, to see if there was any chance of getting a job with the Amalgamated. But I didn't even see them. By this time, a telegram came to me in Cincinnati that was forwarded to where I was staying in Cleveland: "Come on to Troy, N.Y. We have a job for you for twenty-five dollars a week." I had never worked for twenty-five dollars a week in my life--always more. I borrowed money so that I could get to Troy and took the job and worked organizing for the Amalgamated and did it for sixteen or seventeen years.

INTERVIEWER: And so you started about 1934 or '35? And how did you happen to come back to New York instead of Cincinnati?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, I'd grown out of Cincinnati a long time ago. In '49, in the midst of the cold war. Oh, it was awful living then. The McCarthy period was starting. I left the Amalgamated. I quit. I worked for five or six years with the UE [United Electrical Workers Union]. Then I had an accident, a car accident that meant it was much harder for me to do any of this kind of work, and I came to New York really to get advice. I knew all about HIP [Health Insurance Plan], and I really came to get advice on what I could do in the health business. And then I worked for the Henry Street Settlement House. It was time for me to get out of the Amalgamated anyway. You get sodden. You lose your perspective. You see, you're frustrated, because the organization became bigger. The unions were taking positions that they hadn't taken on before, not allowing people to be as free as they were before to do the things that they wanted to do before. After all, I left the YWCA. I just couldn't put up with, "Well, we have to do this and we have to do that," and all of this. You see, the whole business was conformity. Well, I'm just not a conformist, I guess. So, that was that.

But it was very exciting. I worked in Troy and I worked out of Troy and in all of the Southern states. I was sent down South after we organized Troy. Even before that, I was asked to go down to work on special projects in the South. I went through a lynch mob. I know what that is like. So, it was very exciting. And the women of Troy--old timers who were back biters, but knew the need to stand together. And the new people in the South. The excitement of taking people from Mississippi--white people--to a week-end conference at Highlander Folk School,* that's when it was still in Mounteagle [Tennessee].

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* An independent, unaffiliated residential center established in the thirties by Myles Horton and Don West to discuss problems of southern working people; Highlander Folk School trained community, union and civil rights activists.

SCHWENKMEYER: Do you know what Highlander is? It was at Mounteagle, Tennessee. You knew that there were going to be black workers there. And you took delegations there and you saw their reaction for the first time to black people because they didn't know black people. And they thanked you on the way home for giving them the opportunity to meet black people as their equals. And when I took a delegation, one person as a delegate from Mississippi, to the ACWA union convention at Atlantic City, and there was also a delegate from the same shop, the Reliance Shirt Shop from Montgomery, Alabama, but he was black; it was an all-black shop. Her shop was an all-white shop. And to see them get together at the table--forgetting all about their color--to compare wages and working conditions and what it was like to work in the Montgomery shop. This was still the time of Jim Crow train cars. I arranged for her return (I was not going back with her, but I was going back to Troy) and I got her ticket. And she came to me very upset and said, "I think, Frieda, there is something wrong with you. You bought a ticket that isn't on the same train that (whatever his name was, I'll call him Bill) that Bill is going back on. At least we could talk all the way going back. He'll get off at Montgomery, and I'd go on to Laurel." And I said, "Elsie, I'd love to do it. I'll take the ticket back. But you won't be able to talk unless you're willing to break the Jim Crow law." And she just collapsed. She hadn't realized that the Jim Crow law still existed.

Laurel [Mississippi] was a very interesting town, better organized than any town I've ever been in. Better organized than Troy, New York. We had a committee of twelve go to the head office in Chicago to help with the contract when we won the election. There were something like maybe three, four, five black people in the shop--they were cleaners. And we came back with a contract that all the committee decided that they could accept, because this was a chain factory. And, this was the first shop of the chain. You know, that's tough.

INTERVIEWER: Which one?

SCHWENKMEYER: Reliance. We raised the minimum wage. The legal minimum at that time was fifty cents an hour. We raised the legal minimum wage to sixty cents an hour, or maybe it was sixty-five cents, I don't quite remember. But practically everyone in the factory was on piece work, so the minimum

SCHWENKMEYER: wage meant nothing, except for the people who cleaned the toilets. And when we read this, a worker in the cutting room (you have to know that the workers in all cutting rooms--North, South, East, West--usually have a fine superiority complex), a member of the cutting room who was not a cutter but hoped to be some day, got up and said: "I move that we reject the contract. The people who do the cleaning of the washrooms need to earn as much as the shirt cutters because their work is much more miserable than the shirt cutters. We think you're prejudiced against black people, and we think that the people who are black deserve to earn as much as the people who are white." I tell you, we could have fallen through the floor! And then the discussion started on that point. Because, of course, this was impossible to do. It was comparable with the wages in the North and, for once, we equalized that wage. We couldn't get a sweeper who was white in the North the same wage as the cutters, and so we couldn't in the South, and so we had to discuss and discuss. But, I swear there were some people down there who always thought we were prejudiced because we said we couldn't do it.

And during that organizing campaign, we did our office work out of the Negro local, the Jim Crow [segregated] local of the Woodworkers, and nobody in that factory--the white shirt factory--thought this was strange. They didn't like the white local of the Woodworkers; they said they weren't fair people and they thought it was great to work out of the Jim Crow local. They didn't think there should be a Jim Crow local to begin with. And so, this is the kind of experience we had where we learned how to really appreciate that people were prejudiced because they just didn't know, they didn't understand.

Prior to that, we had been in a long, twelve-week strike in Andalusia, Alabama, and during that strike, they would bring in busloads of people from all the neighboring towns the way they do in all small cities. People come to work in factories from thirty, forty, even fifty miles away, in cars or busses, some means of transportation. There was a man driving the workers from a place called Brantley [Alabama] to Andalusia, and he had his bus load and he drove them to the picket line every morning. And, this bothered, I'm sure, the power structure of the boss. We could never prove it, but there was an accident on this bus one day. Although nobody was hurt seriously, the driver of the bus was hurt the worst. And, the bus, of course, was demolished. And that ended the bus coming in from Brantley.

SCHWENKMEYER: In this same town of Brantley, there was a pants factory of this shop that we were not trying to organize. We weren't trying to organize the pants factory because that wasn't giving us competition as far as the shirts were concerned. The Andalusia factory was the largest shirt factory in the South. I don't know if it had two thousand workers or a thousand workers, I don't remember. But that was very large for that time. And they were competitive and forcing down wages of other plants. So, that that was important that we organize.

After the driver was hurt, a local lad who was put on the payroll to help us find roads and all of that--because that was very difficult, to go to peoples' homes and see them; we went over all of these sleazy, red clay roads. And an old man went out to Brantley to see the bus driver who was injured when he was finally brought home from wherever--whether it was a hospital or not I don't remember. About three-thirty in the afternoon, we received a call that the house was being watched, that out on the road, cars--fifty cars--were stationed, that when these two men--the young man and the old man--left, they were going to lynch them. They were both white, would we send out reinforcements, men and guns.

I was in charge and I had to made the decision, and I decided that we were not sending up men and guns. We called our staff together--all of the strikers had left by this time and gone home, except for one woman who was a very religious woman who very frequently took over her church service in the little community where she lived, played and organ and all of that. The men, of course, on our staff, because you always have a lot of people around when there are strikes, said, Oh, they were all going out there. Of course, none of them had any guns or anything. I said, no, but we would take the best car that there was, and we would have four women in the car and the best driver that there was, and preferably there would be three Southerners, because there were a lot of Northerners on the staff (this factory was connected with Cluett's* in the North, and there were Cluett workers down there). And that we would take Southern workers and a good car and a good driver--a car that locked on the inside--and that I'd go. And, oh, the argument was heavy, but there wasn't time. And I said, "Who wants to go?" and every single organizer put up her hand, because the men

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* Cluett, Peabody and Co., Inc., a large manufacturer of men's apparel, with offices in Troy, N.Y. and factories throughout the South.

SCHWENKMEYER: were excluded. And I chose. They left it to me to choose. I chose two organizers--one who was a very good driver who had a very good car. Then I went out in the hall where the one woman striker was waiting for her husband to come, who was really the strike leader of the women. And I explained to her what had happened and asked her if she would want to go with us because she was a very religious women and she was a worker in the factory. If anything happened to her, there would have been bedlam. Where they didn't care about even these other Southern organizers from Atlanta, or me, they would care about her. So, she said, of course she'd go.

So we went. And when we got there, it was like this (she indicates with her hands), this was a little lane and this was a double highway that led to it, but ended right there. And here were all the cars parked this way with men galore. And we drove right through and we drove around, and they didn't know who we were. And we drove into the house of the injured bus driver, and we talked to them, found out how the bus driver was. Pretty soon somebody came from this gang, and the people in the house told us not to leave--the people at the house told us not to leave with the two men who were visiting there until they told us when to leave. They evidently had their little messengers going back and forth. And I agreed that I would drive the old car that had no locks of any kind and take the old man with me and that the other two would take the young man that they were particularly vicious against. They weren't vicious about the old man. The family told us all this as they were sitting there--that they had found this out. They finally gave us the signal to leave.

I went out and got into the old car with the old man. The other two women got out, sat in the front, put the young man in the back, the car windows were rolled up, and we started out. I started out first in the old car and, of course, the gang, they started to close in. But they were so shocked that they didn't close in fast enough. They thought if they'd stop me, that the other car would be right behind me and they could handle it. And they ran over to me, but the organizer in the good car started out around and they had to run after her. They stopped both cars. And, frankly, we literally talked for our lives. I saw the rope. The old man was just petrified, and I was holding on to him with my arms because they opened the

SCHWENKMEYER: door to pull him out. And I had my hand like this, you know (she indicates), across holding him and holding the door and literally yelling at them, "You believe in private property. This is a private car." You could only say what they understood. "You get your hands off this car, you goddamn son of a bitch!" You know, you used exactly the language they used. And this old man hanging on to me. And, from time to time, when they'd open the door, I'd have to hang on to him. We never knew how long we were there; not one of us knew. Because they had stopped the car ahead [with the woman strike leader and the young man], but there you had two Southerners who kept everything locked. And if they picked up a rock to hit the window, she was yelling exactly the same in her Southern brogue that they understood much better.

And, we had the agreement that if we didn't come back by eight o'clock, they [people in the office] were to call the Governor of the State, and he was the uncle of [George] Wallace's present wife, what in the world was his name? I don't remember! He was a good governor. He drank and drank and drank and ran around with women, but he was for unions; he was for organizing. And we knew that he would do something because he didn't want any scandal to happen in his state.

Finally, I saw Mary inch ahead in her car, and I said, "You get the hell out of my way. I'm inching!" And they were really terrified, they hadn't ever dealt with women before. And, of course, both of us using the women argument. "What are you trying to do? Hurt women?" This kind of stuff. And she was going faster, and I went faster. And I really would have hit them, and she, too. And we did it. And pretty soon they were standing there with their mouths open. And, here she was first. And we hurried down along the road. We had to go through a very, very desolate area, with nothing but trees on each side, because this was where they cut down the trees for turpentine. And we didn't know whether they were following us. And it was getting dark and we drove for our lives. And we got in just about half an hour before the deadline. And I tell you, the guys were sitting there, the perspiration was rolling down. Everybody was pacing, they were just so worried. And we did call the Governor; we got through and we let him know. And he sent the troopers out to disperse them and they did everything. Of course, we called our national [union] office and they called the

SCHWENKMEYER: Governor. So that by the next morning the newspaper headlines out of Montgomery [Alabama] had favorable "Governor Stops Mob Action." He didn't stop it, but he kept them from coming down.

You saw this kind of thing, and then you saw the women that we took, who we didn't know whether she would be against us or for us. And you saw how furious she was that this kind of thing could be done. That this would be done. She thought lynchings were only for black people. And she saw that lynchings could be for white people. And she hadn't ever realized the power of the politicians and of the employer. And she worked as she never worked before for the union. So, it was absolutely amazing.

In this, we also saw that these people didn't ever get to meet black people. One of the things we did when we were working in the South was to go out and organize the farmers. And there were black farmers and white farmers. And we let the Farmers Union use our [ACWA union] hall. And this leading woman had come to the [National] Farmers' Union meetings because her husband was a peanut farmer, and she saw these black farmers there, and she didn't think it was out of the way that they were there. So that she began to understand. The other people almost everybody farmed, too, and so they were coming to the farmers' union meetings, and they saw the black farmers there, and they felt that it was important that they get the right prices for fertilizer and they started a fertilizing factory. And there were blacks and whites who worked in the fertilizing factory.

This was a ten weeks' or twelve weeks' strike. In the end, we settled the strike by an election that we lost by something like twenty-three votes, which was just heartbreaking. This woman would never go back to work in the factory again. Well, she wouldn't have ever been acceptable, I imagine, because she was so dignified, and always was, always, but the employer couldn't stand her because of her terrible influence that she had. They never dreamed that anything like this could happen. Incidentally, that factory is organized today.

You saw these things. You saw the marvelous stamina of the people in the South. You understood the reasons for the race prejudice. They didn't have an opportunity ever to get to know the black people as equals. They didn't go to school with them. They didn't go to church with them.

SCHWENKMEYER: They didn't go anywhere with them, so they didn't know them. They were poor farmers. They never employed black people. But their feeling was that we're all workers. And this dumbfounded us so, because we always thought that we were so pure, and they were the ones that were wrong. And we understood the power structure of what happened and what the power structure was willing to do to keep out the more progressive elements like unions, or any movement that urged people to be together. So that we knew about all of this, but it was very difficult, it was awfully hard work.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the Sharecropper Union in Alabama?

SCHWENKMEYER: No, no, it was the National Farmers' Union. Of course, they had a hard time, too. And this same woman went to work for them. Worked with black organizers, went to their conferences that were held in Denver and places like that. But it [factory work] always affected the people's health. And I want to get back to the workers again. Because I want you to know that, I don't believe this woman could ever have worked again in a factory. Because of the tenseness of piece work or whatever is similar to piece work on quota systems and all, is so great that it causes all kinds of nervous diseases, physical diseases. This old man who was with me in the car lost his mind within a year's time. He was talking all kinds of gibberish because of tension. He was a weak person, but she was a strong person. And it was the frustration of not being able to accomplish something. Not seeing that other people saw what she saw. She and her husband left and they came up North and worked on a large estate outside of Newburgh, N.J., and when we came to New York we went up to see them. But, finally, they went back to their peanut farm. Things were better. And he was able to make out better and so they went back. But she never went back to the shop again, because I think that she wasn't able to go through the kind of regimentation that was necessary. She'd been out. She'd been working on her own. She'd been organizing farmers. She was educational director for the Farmers' Union for Alabama. And all of this folded up with the coming of the McCarthy period, and when this Governor was not reelected and when some of the bad governors went into Alabama. They weren't able to crush the corrupt political system that allowed all of the struggles to take place in the civil rights movement.

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, incidentially, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers people in Montgomery, in the Montgomery Reliance shop, were the leaders of the bus strike in Montgomery, Alabama. After Rosa Lee Parks came, those people just went right in to fight for that. Because they were well-organized. I'm sure that if somebody ever made a study--nobody knows now who they were because that became such a big thing. But, they were right in there to help in the bus strike when Rosa Lee Parks started it. But the politicians in the South saw what this was leading to and knew that their power was going to change eventually. So, they were fighting any way they could to stop these movements of the people. But we were there to see the people actually rise up and struggle against the oppression that existed and the low wages. It was probably the most exciting thing that I've ever seen in my life.

INTERVIEWER: It restores your faith.

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes it does, it does. Because this is what happened. And no matter how long it takes, if the people can't act, then there are always some of them that can hold firm and maybe they didn't stick out their necks so far, their pride wasn't so great that they could go back in and maintain a position so that they could come back again to fight in a new struggle. And you realize that. Because in Andalusia, the leader of the cutters was a man whose father had housed the organizers for the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World]. He was young and they showed us where that organizer, whoever he was, was taken out, tarred and feathered. And they showed us places where all of these things happened.

Just as in Laurel, Mississippi, they took us to the place where there was a guerilla army during the Civil War. The county was called the Free State of Jones County because they voted to stay with the Union and not go with the Confederacy. And when the soldiers were conscripted, they went, but they all applied for hospital jobs, the men. But when a law was passed that if a farmer owned something like twenty mules and ten slaves, or twenty slaves and ten mules--I'm not sure which--they decided that they were fighting for the rich, or they were not a part of the fight for the rich, and they just up and left and went back to Jones County. They took me to the places where Captain Newt Knight led this army. It was a guerilla army--they stole all of their ammunition and all of their arms from the Confederate Army. The Union army was never able to

SCHWENKMEYER: get a thing to them. They tried to catch the leaders and did catch some, and they were hanged. But, they showed me, "This is the battleground of So-So, where we fought the Confederate Army." And their whole position was that a poor man didn't fight in a rich man's army. They didn't have slaves. They wanted their farms. They didn't want slavery. They didn't think it was right, they said. Those were the people who started the union, and that's why Laurel [Mississippi] was so well-organized. And I said, "Well, how could it be that you had a Jim Crow local in the Woodworkers?" And they said because the AFL told us that's what we had to have. And then people started to think that way. But there were many people in the Woodworkers [Union] that didn't think that way. We never had an election where we won by such an overwhelming majority. It was something like four hundred-and-thirty to twelve or twenty, or something like that, who were against the union. Never, never did we have a score like that anywhere.

INTERVIEWER: When did they open this shirt shop?

SCHWENKMEYER: I couldn't tell you. All these shirt shops in Reliance... Reliance was actually a Chicago firm and it went out of the North. And when the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union started to try to organize the North, they [the company] established an identical factory in the South. Every factory in the North had an identical factory in the South so that if the North were organized they could send all their work to the South and they didn't have to care. So you had to organize both at the same time. And it was very difficult to organize in the South because of the political set-up as it still is today.

And we organized a men's sock factory in Ballston Spa. The old UTW--United Textile Workers--organizer pulled them out in strike. We weren't pulling them out too fast. Of course, the people all want to go; you don't pull people out until you know how you're going to settle the strike. You have to see some future in settling it. But he was an old UTW guy and that didn't bother him any; that was the way they did it in the UTW. And so he didn't consider the political set-up in the North, where Ballston Spa is in Saratoga County [New York] and Saratoga County is covered by the Republicans and the Saratoga races come in August and they weren't about to have any picket lines in August, and they got out an injunction against us. That we could only have six pickets or something like that. Not a mass picket line. Of course, that's when people pass out all kinds of literature saying that you're a Communist; you're this, you're that. And then people were more scared than they are today. People started to go back--eight people on a picketline.

SCHWENKMEYER: So they [anti-union forces] called a meeting at the high school and said, "We're going to force these union people to leave town," the organizers. And so I told the organizer that was on the picketline every day (I was too, but not as conspicuous because I had other things I had to do in other areas) that he couldn't go to the meeting. And I said to the strikers, "I'll just walk in with you." And I probably had one or two other women organizers with me. I walked into the meeting and they made the speeches against the union and they said, "Now we will open the floor for discussion." And I stood up and raised my hand, and they had never seen me before and they let me speak. They were going to run us out of town and here I am right in their meeting speaking. They didn't know what to do. I'm surrounded by strikers. They can't tell me to stop. They didn't boo. They didn't know what to do. I spoke just long enough so that was that and when I finished they adjourned the meeting and everybody walked out and the strikers surrounded me; nobody could do anything to me. And so, that was that. That ended running us out of town. But we lost the strike because we couldn't remove the injunction. We had all kinds of hearings, but the injunction stuck. And the people didn't. But you see the same thing happens in the North that happens in the South. I wasn't the only person that they tried to run out. I was just lucky. A friend of mine was run out of Indiana. Another friend of mine was run out of Maryland. Literally picked up and run out of town because they were union organizers. So that--here's Indiana, here's Maryland--you may say it was in the South but Indiana isn't in the South.

INTERVIEWER: Just like they used to do to Mother Jones. What was the best job you ever had?

SCHWENKMEYER: I couldn't say. I never worked on a job I didn't like. There may have been phases I didn't like, like Trenton. I hated the thought of going to Trenton.

INTERVIEWER: Was that for the Amalgamated?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes. And I don't know whether I would have liked staying there permanently, but I learned to like the people and so I can't say.

INTERVIEWER: What did you hate about Trenton?

SCHWENKMEYER: I didn't like Trenton because when I was hurrying through to go to Philly or Washington, D.C., probably for a week off or a weekend off, you had to go through Trenton in those days, and the traffic was terrible and it took you so long to get through the town, and it was dirty, and so I just didn't like it. You didn't know anybody and you hated the town. So that was really, I'd say, most of my prejudice about Trenton. But once I was sent there and I learned to know the people, they were like all the rest of the people--anxious to work out problems. And you learned to appreciate their concern and their generosity in spending so much time in trying to solve the problems they were facing, and to learn about them. So you forgot it. But I was anxious to leave.

INTERVIEWER: When you were growing up, did you expect that you would work when you finished school?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother work?

SCHWENKEMEYER: She always wanted to but that wasn't done in those days. You just didn't work. She learned how to sew and cook and dance and those things, and they went to the opera and music because Cincinnati was a very musical town. And as a child she sang in the May Festival Children's Chorus, and she always chided us that we didn't belong to the right kind of school or the right neighborhood because her school was chosen but ours wasn't . And so we learned to appreciate these things. But we just knew we had to work because my father had died when we were very young. And we started to figure out jobs when I was in grade school. When I was very young I was taking care of children who were two years younger than me because every little penny we made counted. And so, we just knew it.

INTERVIEWER: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

SCHWENKMEYER: I just have two sisters.

INTERVIEWER: Did they grow up to work, and did they expect to work?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes. In fact, they couldn't wait to work in order to try to get the things that they wanted. But, for some reason, I was never so concerned about the things that they wanted. I read an awful lot and that took up a lot of time. And that may have been because I was sick a lot. And so, I didn't run around and play and do the things that they did.

INTERVIEWER: Did you stop being sick after you got older?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, I don't know. I've been having all kinds of things all my life and that's it. You get kind of used to it.

INTERVIEWER: It didn't seem to stop you.

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, no. So, ask the next question.

INTERVIEWER: OK. What kinds of things did you like to read when you were young? Do you feel you were influenced a lot by certain things you read?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yeah. Well, you start with Louisa Allcott and all of that. I read it eight times when I was ten. You get on to very much more serious things. My mother liked poetry, but I didn't. But there were always books around the house. And I just haunted the library in our area. And because we were a family of all women, we couldn't vote when I was a child. There was nobody in our house who could vote. But we were very conscious of the tax rates and things like that because we did what no other family I ever knew did. Suppertime, which was our big meal-time, was the time that we all got together around the table and all talked about what we did during the day and decided upon the problems that we had to meet and how we were going to meet them. And so, it was a much more democratic process than exists in most families, where you're aware of the problems that exist and you are a part of solving those problems and what you do. And so, when sums of money would have to be raised for taxes we would figure out what we could do. And I would say, "Oh, I'll take care of Mrs. Jones' children. That'll mean that I can make fifty cents, or something." And I learned to sew very early. Because my mother took in homework, I got to know the problems of homework. She was never successful about it. But I learned to do hand stitching because I was trained to help her do that, while my other sisters were learning to do something that was more fruitful, shall I say. But in this I learned to sew and pretty soon, as a youngster before I was a teenager, I was fixing hems for the neighbors. I think it was because they felt sorry for us and they pulled down their hems so that we could lengthen or shorten them or something, or I could. And so I did all of this. But it was a different kind of childhood. And we could do many things that other children couldn't do.

SCHWENKMEYER: I remember when they were trying to change the city charter because it was a very, very gangster-ridden town. And the New Charter people came to our house to talk to my older sister, six years older than I, and asked her if she would help canvass. And I was probably a freshman in the university, and she listened and I was very excited. And my mother said, "I don't see why you wouldn't do it. Take Frieda along with you. And so we went in the neighborhood, me with braids down my back, and talked to people all around, about why we needed a city charter with proportional representation and what the present government was doing that was wrong. And I tell you, everybody listened to us. They'd send out for ice cream and we'd sit there and talk. Well, you see things like that were the things that we had done.

INTERVIEWER: Was that your first organizing activity?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, I don't know. I don't remember because we discussed so much. My mother had always objected to the attitude against black people and we'd have long discussions about that. When my father was still alive and I was very young, I remember that always when a black man who worked with him came to our house to do work, the black man always brought his daughter with him and my other sister, three years older than I, always played with her and so did I. And the neighbors came up the house and said that they didn't like this. And my mother said, "I guess you're going to have to decide whether you want to play with my girls or not because they're still going to play with this other young girl." So, you see, she was a very quiet-spoken woman, my mother, but very firm. And here we were, discussing this and the unfairness of it and she told us so often that it's just because your parents have white skins that you have white skins, but if your parents were dark, why, you'd be dark and people are just the same no matter what the color of their skin.

In the university I really was instrumental in organizing a protest movement that had the same repercussions that it did some years ago. Where we felt that we wanted to talk for racial equality, for economic opportunity by joining unions, and for peace. And two weeks before this took place I was called into the university president's office, and I was told that J. Edgar Hoover was sending men to follow me, and this was 1924. And at that time the president said to me, "Little girl, don't ever let anybody stop you if you believe you are right about something. You go on and fight, and I will guarantee you that at convocation I will have every

SCHWENKMEYER: professor of every department in the liberal arts college sitting on the stage to back you up and someone will point out who the FBI people are so that you'll know what they look like." And he did.

At the time, I was studying Einstein's Theory of Relativity and it seemed so inconsequential as far as I was concerned. And the professor who was teaching it was a Canadian. And here I was going to all of the meetings to prepare for this general convocation that we students took over because we were tired of hearing people that the faculty chose, and I said, "I don't know what's going to happen to me because I'm never going to be able to pass this exam. I'm not coming to your class." He said, "Don't come. What you're doing is so much more important than learning Einstein's Theory of Relativity." But I said, "I'll flunk the exam!" He said, "I told you you wouldn't, and you won't." And to this day when I have a nightmare it's because I think I'm going to flunk that exam. But you see, this happened all through my life, where you talked things over and you tried to figure out ways that you were going to handle a situation and always it was to find out more. And when I talked about how I could learn more about a different kind of society--I never studied economics at the university, I was too busy with Latin, God knows, and Einstein's Theory of Relativity -- they said, "Why don't you read Shaw's Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism." And so I started to read that. Well, you see these things are the things that make you think and, really, I learned an awful lot from just being with the working people.

And then my sister, my oldest sister, in order to go through high school, worked in my uncle's factory. They were very wealthy. And she came home looking so peaked and so tired--this was in summer--and I just couldn't understand this. And much younger than she, I asked my mother why it was that my aunt and my uncle had so much money and we had so little. And my mother said, "Well, you just have to know this, Frieda. You can't make money in great hordes honestly. You only do it by making people work very hard or by manipulation, which is just the same as stealing." And this is the way it is, and you know that, and you learn more about it as you grow older, and I never forgot it, as you see. So you can't be brought up like this and not have thoughts that make you think very seriously about different things.

INTERVIEWER: How did your mother get to be the woman she was?

SCHWENKMEYER: I don't know. Her parents came as teenagers to this country. And, oh, my grandfather must have had a lot of real common-sense. When he came here, he worked for a medical doctor about five miles from the city. He used to tell me this when I sat on the floor next to his chair. And he couldn't see his friends in the city. He, of course, was a German boy, and his friends were people who spoke the German language. And he had a day off and he wanted to go into town to see them. But there was no form of transportation of any kind from where he was. He'd walk in and he'd have to walk back and he had so little time to spend with his friends. And he said, "Don't ever believe any of the bad stories they tell you about Indians. When I was talking back and walking to town, an Indian, or many of them, might have been watching me, and one day one of them came as I was leaving and said, "You don't walk the right way. I'll show you how to run." And so he ran with me in town and waited and ran back with me, so that I learned how to run so that I could spend more time with my friends. And he did that and that shows you what kind of people the Indians are." And so, always, we had the most warm feeling about Indians and so my mother must have too, about people. And although my grandfather didn't fight in the Civil War, my grandmother's brothers did and, naturally, they fought on the side of the Union because they just said no men should be slaves. And when we were brought up, we went just to see Lane's Seminary, which was part of the Underground Railroad and we went to churches that were part of the Underground Railroad. And we saw these churches and were so proud of them because it was a part of freeing a people. So that you, well that's it, you begin thinking that way. And, evidently, my grandfather must have been like that. I just don't remember my father, so I can't tell you how he was.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when he died?

SCHWENKMEYER: About six years old. And I just don't remember. But, that was my mother. A woman with common-sense and who was very well-balanced and very well-liked. OK, let's have the next question.

INTERVIEWER: OK. By the way, how much education did your mother have?

SCHWENKMEYER: She went through grade school, and this always made her very upset because she felt that she wanted to be a teacher. And she wanted to go to high school and she wanted to go to college. But her mother didn't feel that way. Her mother said a woman in those days didn't have to have a college education and didn't have to be a teacher. She had to be a housewife. That was why she urged us so to study, to read, to learn, and to do what we wanted to do and not what she wanted us to do.

INTERVIEWER: Did she grow up in Cincinnati too?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So, your grandfather came to Cincinnati?

SCHWENKMEYER: So did my grandmother. So did all of my grandparents come. And they came around--oh, I guess my father's people must have been here in the late 1840's, and my mother's father came in the early fifty's, and her mother came shortly after that, came before the Civil War.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of work did they do?

SCHWENKMEYER: My father's father was in the business to make candles at first. And then he learned to be a cooper. A cooper is a man that puts something around the beer barrel, and Cincinnati was a brewery town. And then he had a cooperage. My father went through high school and he didn't ever want to be a cooper. All I remember is that he had a spice mill, and roasted coffee and blended teas and had a fleet of horses and wagons where they went out to sell. And when he, or anyone else, went on a fifty-mile trip, they thought they were going to China. But he was approached by one of the leading chain stores in the Middle West. They were then thinking of chain stores and they wanted him to take over all of the coffee and the tea and the spice business of the chain stores and they'd handle all the rest. And he said, "But this will put the little grocer out of business." And they said, "What do you care about the little grocer." And he said, "Well, that isn't right. He has to live, too. And he is something in his neighborhood. He understands the problems of his neighborhood." This is what my mother tells me. So, he wouldn't do it. And, of course, they were furious and so, before he died, he failed in business. And that probably brought on his death because he wouldn't be a part of the schemes of big business that were taking place at that time.

Well, you grew up with this and you questioned the whole business of big business. We never entered a supermarket until we were, well, until the last twenty years. This was all part of what we were taught. Just like I would argue with the principal of my grade school about why women didn't vote. That we were a family where nobody voted and the taxes were increased and we didn't even have a chance to say anything about it. We had a revolution about taxation without representation. Oh, that's what

SCHWENKMEYER: I said. And he'd [the principal] egg me on. He seemed to walk home with me so that we could carry on all these arguments. So there were a lot of people in my life who egged me on when I started questioning and this started in grade school. Next question.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been married?

SCHWENKMEYER: No. I never had time for it. People say, "Why weren't you?" If you're really in a job doing the kind of work I did, whether it was for the YWCA, which was very exciting at that time, or with the union, you couldn't bother about whether or not you were going home at a certain hour at night or bother about keeping a date that you had because you knew that, in order to complete your organizing job, you had to be at a certain spot at a certain time or you might miss the whole opportunity. And so, you just didn't have time for that. It isn't that you didn't enjoy men and like to be with them, but it had to be strictly on your terms. Which weren't the terms that most men appreciated in those days. Maybe they don't now, I'm not sure. And then you get used to the freedom that you have, and then it becomes very much harder to think that you're going to have to give up freedom, that you can work anyplace in the country where you want to, if you're asked to, and do the kind of job you want to do.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get any pressure from your family or friends to get married?

SCHWENKMEYER: No. My mother never... This was strictly our own problem, to do as we wanted with it. And I think really she was so hurt by the death of my father that she didn't want us to be hurt the way she was. Because not only was she hurt financially, and unprepared for it, which didn't bother her much, but she was only married maybe ten or fifteen years when he died, and that seemed too short to her, I guess. And it was very painful. So painful that we never had a picture of him in our house. She had pictures of him but they were never hung up in the house because she didn't want to remind herself of that. And yet, we know that she cared. We know how deeply she cared. It took her years to laugh again. So she wasn't about to urge us to do anything that didn't happen. All right, go on.

INTERVIEWER: You've worked for women as well as men, haven't you?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: How did you find it? Or what differences did you find?

SCHWENKMEYER: It was always easier to work for men. They have a weakness of, you can kid them and you can get around them. But you have to be on the level also. Women, on the other hand, can be very demanding. I wouldn't say they might be now, but very tense. I know when I was in charge of a situation, I was demanding and tense. But you had to think clearly when you were with a man. You had to realize that when you were going to differ, you had to differ on very good principles. The women were never as high up in authority to really, ah, they had to listen to someone else. Even in the YW, there were some very high caliber people in the YW, but usually they went on to something else, to do some other kind of work, or were drafted in some other kind of position because there was such a scarcity of women. And we, ourselves, could have done anything. We were offered all kinds of jobs. So that I wouldn't want to say that, you have to remember that women weren't so, there weren't as many of them, and they didn't have the opportunities that they have today, and I just know I was hard on anybody that worked with me. They had to produce. They had to work hard because the job had to be done, and it was always a tough job. Once you succeed in tough jobs, you're given more and more. OK.

INTERVIEWER: It seems there are very few easy-going women around. You know, women who take life very easily and...

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, it still isn't real equality. We learned long ago to fight for equality. I listen to these women today and have to laugh. We were fighting for equality for working women. And we considered ourselves working women. And they weren't put in many supervisory positions. There was one woman who was a college professor who was great. But I think she was so good with us, when I was with this group that was working on this convocation that created such bedlam, I think the reason she was good with us was because she wasn't treated so well by her fellow professors. And we must have been a great experience for her, and a great enjoyment for her because she was the one who was working with us. There always had to be some kind of a faculty advisor. And she never stopped us; she egged us on to do the things we were doing. And she was great. But, you see, there she was a professor and had the hardships from the attitudes of the other professors.

SCHWENKMEYER: Incidentally, what we found out--I found out much later--was that, at the time I was there, there were excellent professors, well-known. They were professor who had been in the East, at the big Eastern colleges, and when there was some kind of national or international upheaval many years before, they were in sympathy with who created the upheaval and as a result lost their jobs and were taken by city universities--there weren't many--or colleges that didn't have much money, and they worked for much less money. But they still had their old feelings of, I don't know what to call it, of belief in people thinking, studying to think no matter where it led you. That you thought and talked things over. And they were all renowned in their fields. The head of the mathematics department was very renowned in his field. And the president of the university had been a historian. And these were the kinds of people they were. And so, I was a product of some of their thinking. And let me tell you, they had waited a long time for the upheaval that came that year. And they were about to support it because they were almost finished and retiring very shortly, and nothing had happened for such a long time. So, we got full support from them.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever done any teaching?

SCHWENKMEYER: I'd say you can't do the kind of work I did without teaching, but you're not doing formal classwork teaching. But you're constantly teaching. You have groups that you have to explain things to, that they have to understand. And so, you have to speak in terms that they understand and you have to know what you're talking about. And so I'd say from the very beginning I was teaching. But I was teaching in a different way because I started from where the people were, to try to interest them to study further, and that's why I was interested in drama, labor drama, skits, singing, anything that involved people in, that maybe they would have to look things up and study it a little bit. We knew all about the beginning of the Cornell Labor School because as YWCA secretaries we had been very interested in the University of Wisconsin Labor School, the summer labor schools, we had always been sending people there and to other schools.

INTERVIEWER: Are there jobs that you haven't been able to do that you'd like to do?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, I don't know. No, nothing I longed to do that I couldn't do.

INTERVIEWER: What year was it that you moved back to New York?

SCHWENKMEYER: Must have been the early fifties. Must have been the middle fifties. I must be here about twenty years.

INTERVIEWER: Was that after or before you worked for the UE [United Electrical Workers Union]?

SCHWENKMEYER: After. I had had a very serious accident. Automobile accident in a small town, and it permanently injured me so that it made it practically impossible for me to do that kind of work anymore. And I really came here because I knew about HIP, and I wanted expert medical advice. And I would only take a job with any agency that had HIP, so that I could benefit from their kind of medicine.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do for the Henry Street Settlement?

SCHWENKMEYER: I was a registrar. It was much more fun than social work because I got to know all of the families and all the kids very well, and today when I walk the streets or get on the subway, just like a week ago I sat down next to a woman that I didn't remember at all, and she looked at me and said, "Why Frieda, how are you?" And I didn't know who she was until the very end. I couldn't say, "Well, I don't know who you are." But this is true, a boy will stop me on the street and he's a grown man and say, "Frieda, how are you?" But, it was a fun job. It wasn't a job where you made a lot of money.

INTERVIEWER: Was this for the classes, or for everything at Henry Street?

SCHWENKMEYER: It was for the neighborhood people, the activities they have for neighborhood children and teenagers in the afternoons and evenings, after school, for the camps in the summer. They also run busses. They don't have a girls' camp anymore, and they didn't during the time I was there. They ran busses to the girls' camp on sort of a day-camp arrangement for families, and boy that was fun. You just registered them, but you got to know them. You know, you had to work things out. And then we managed to get a very exciting program going. The person who did the dramatics over at the Playhouse just couldn't stand it because that was sophisticated stuff over there and

SCHWENKMEYER: they wouldn't have anything to do with the neighborhood. They appealed to all the "elite." And they would come down to see Alwin Nikolais' dancing and so forth. And the guy that was doing the dramatics, who was in charge of it, just couldn't stand it anymore and came over to our division and asked if he could put on shows in the summer and, before you know it, we were doing just great work with all the neighborhood kids. And we got in the Playhouse, and they were just furious because they thought we would spoil their plush seats or something. And I did all the publicity for that and got the young kids who hung around my office all the time to give out leaflets at subways and everything. We filled every house when those young people played, and that was fun.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it seems as though they are continuing that tradition, you know, the arts programs, they do seem to be very involved with the community.

SCHWENKMEYER: Arts for Living Program. The name of it originated when we were there and they took it from this whole thing that we were doing. And we also started, we had somebody who started good music for children, the Orff* business, you know, for emotionally-disturbed children, and all of this kind of thing. I don't think they do it as much now in that respect. Then you watched all of the whites of this neighborhood leave the Settlement [house] because the blacks and Puerto Ricans were there. You saw it happen.

INTERVIEWER: Henry Street [Settlement House] is concerned about this now.

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, they should have been then.

INTERVIEWER: What could they have done?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, there was a lot they could of done but they didn't do it. Some of us made suggestions and we had a strike there that we lost. It wasn't for money. It was because the program people wanted a chance to saying something about what the program would be, that it would include more people, so that you could break it. Oh, it could have been great. How many times I made the suggestion that they cooperate. At that time there were some whites going to public school--that they cooperate and have ethnic affairs.

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* Composer Carl Orff.

SCHWENKMEYER: Here, we have this marvelous amphitheatre down by the river, you know, and that they could have singing from all the different groups and dances from all the different groups that would be worked up during the year, so that you'd have them all together, you'd appreciate each other's cultures. It wasn't ever done. The person who ran the music school wasn't interested in this kind of thing. He was interested in giving lessons to people, and not in this kind of group thing. And the rest of them all had ideas like this, that we hoped we could bring together the different groups, the various ethnic groups, but nobody took it seriously. And so they brought in these people and already all of the white people were gone.

INTERVIEWER: Did they just stop coming all of a sudden, or was it gradual?

SCHWENKMEYER: It was gradual, so that if when some of us were first there, things had been done, but you see, this was women leadership. They didn't understand. This is hard work. Real hard work to do this. But they didn't understand is the best I can say. They looked on it as the old settlement kind of thing, and not an entirely different--there had to be a new outlook--that a settlement is something also to bring people together from various ethnic groups to understand each other. But this didn't sink in.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there is something they could do now to encourage some of the people to come back?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, they are. They're trying to but it's much harder when you once have that break. Oh, you should hear the people in these houses.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I've heard them because we rehearse over there. And I know that people tend to stay away from Henry Street Settlement House.

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, now they're putting on some Jewish plays. And these people who don't know what I am, say, "But you ought to come, they're good Jewish plays. You ought to come. And that place is so beautiful. We ought to use it, too." And I say, by all means, use it. So they're trying, but it's tough.

INTERVIEWER: As a matter of fact, we're doing a play there in January.

SCHWENKMEYER: I hope they come. I hope everybody comes, but we'll see.

INTERVIEWER: When you were working for unions did you get regular increases in pay?

SCHWENKMEYER: Of course we didn't. That's one reason why, in the Amalgamated, we tried to form a union. Because we wanted regular increases. We wanted the pay structure to be regular, and not something that you had to please about or cotton up to a superior male board member to see that you got something. So, it didn't happen at first. But when we rebelled they started to do something about it. I don't know whether they're still doing it or not. I would say it was much fairer in that respect as far as UE was concerned, except they didn't have any money. There you worked for much less money.

INTERVIEWER: At the UE?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yeah. If anybody got a raise, everybody got a raise, women and men, so you didn't have that problem.

INTERVIEWER: Were the people that you were organizing, working at the UE, were they mainly women?

SCHWENKMEYER: Mostly women. The electrical industry is, except for the very skilled jobs. So many of the jobs are done by women. Putting parts together. Oh, I would think that there were two-thirds women, and one-third men. The men did the heavy work and they did the skilled work. The women did all the rest of the work.

On my first job with UE, in 1950, I was assigned to a very small Pennsylvania town in the heart of the mountains where 2500 employees worked for one plant in a large electrical chain. Most of the workers were women, many married, who commuted over mountain roads from an area as far as forty miles in distance.

A witty young Irish woman was the president of this local union. She had real leadership ability and was able to guide the planning and program without imposing her views, but giving positive and constructive direction. She gave the members a feeling of strength and fairness. Her leadership equaled that of any man, the very best of them. She was respected by men as well as women in the local, by management and by community. She spent any amount of

SCHWENKMEYER: time outside of work with member or with committees planning programs or with individuals explaining problems or programs that would help build a strong union. As a miner's daughter, she understood the labor movement beyond this one local union. Since her father and a brother had turned farmer, she was close to those problems. This exceptionally-good leader would have little or nothing to do with the District Union leadership. She was not interested in going to their meetings or having them visit the local union.

It took me some months to find out the reasons for this. Among other things, she felt the men were not interested in the problems of women workers, they were primarily interested in the women after the meetings were over. There were no women as officers of the district. They agreed that this was a subtle kind of discrimination against women. It was then that I learned there were some electrical firms that had two wage schedules for identical jobs, one for men and a lower pay schedule for women. Obviously something had to be done about all of this.

The leaders discussed this problem at great length once it was aired. They worked out a plan that included the active participation of our young Irish president in the District and on the national union level. She was elected as delegate to the National Convention where she already knew some delegates from previous conventions. She learned to know more women and talked to them about problems that interested them. She challenged some of the men who were leaders who thought if they "allowed" a woman to be an officer that they had fulfilled their duty. How puzzled they were when she said they did not want to be "allowed," they wanted to be heard and elected on their own qualifications. Soon they began to talk of the value of having a weekend conference for women.

There were no women officers on the General Executive Board, as well as none on the District Council. Our young Irish friend decided to run for the secretary-treasurer of the District and this would automatically put her on the National General Executive Board of the union. She would not give up her job in the shop nor the presidency of the local union. It was at the District Council meeting as secretary-treasurer that she first proposed a weekend National Women Conference for women of UE. They backed the idea after thorough discussion and she was now

SCHWENKMEYER: on the road to bring this idea before the General Executive Board. There was already a grass-roots movement when it came up for discussion and action there. The Board agreed to a "small conference." That was all that was needed.

Already this Pennsylvania local had started all kinds of activity along this line to make suggestions for a program and to raise money to send delegates. Once a week there was a fabulous home-cooked luncheon. There were bake sales and many other money raising activities. This local planned to send at least thirty women to the conference so they had to raise quite a lot of money. They let many other local unions know what they were doing. Then they met at noon on the day shift and at supper time on the afternoon shift to talk about what they thought should be in that conference program. Besides straight trade union problems, they wanted someone from the government to hear what they had to say on prices, on health for themselves and their entire families, on childcare, on education. These women mostly held two jobs, one at home as housekeeper and one in the shop. The suggestions came pouring in to the National Planning Committee, as well as the reservations. The women were not satisfied to have a conference of fifty, as the General Executive Board had thought, they wanted a conference of 500. The national officers were worried. Were the women side-tracking trade union questions? Were they starting a dual union movement? The officers fussed and stewed. Why did these women insist on running everything themselves?

The conference weekend opened with more than 500 delegates. The male officers of the union opened the conference and welcomed the delegates. They wanted to make long speeches but the women took over. They politely explained to the men that this was a women's conference and they wanted the men to stay and listen but the women wanted to talk. And they did. They talked of the filthy washrooms, of not getting a chance to speak at meetings, the need to have meetings start on time and move along with snap because they had to get home. They talked of all the things that had been on their minds for a long time--their double jobs and their dual pay schedules.

The men listened in utter amazement. They found these women different from what they had imagined them to be. The men talked to each other: "They are putting a new spirit in the union...They are making it alive... Where have we been that we couldn't see what these women are doing for the union..."

SCHWENKMEYER: I will never forget that first school bus trip home, 325 miles over mountain roads. The bus was made for children, not big, wide and tall women whose knees hit the seat in front and who kept falling off those tiny seats. They laughingly complained about the seats and their cramped positions and how flat their pocketbooks would be for quite awhile. They talked with excitement of the new ideas they heard, the new ways they would work to interest other women, how they could build their union for all. It was as if they were organizing for the first time, such was the genuine enthusiasm.

It was organizing again! By the time the second Women's Annual Conference came around the next year, those dual pay schedules had been eliminated, without one work stoppage, too. The employers heard the power of these women. Other unions heard about this conference. They tried it, too.

Two or three conferences were held after that first conference. Our Irish president married and moved away. Many of the rest of us left but the union was never the same. The men respected the women's ability as never before and the women gained confidence in themselves that they were not aware they possessed. The women understood the union as they never before understood it. Yes, that really was a good idea that our young, Irish, local union president had back in that tiny town in the Pennsylvania mountains.

INTERVIEWER: At the time that you were there, let's see, you left in 195--?

SCHWENKMEYER: Fifty-something. '55, maybe.

INTERVIEWER: Were there opportunities for women members of the UE who worked in these factories to have a chance to do more skilled jobs?

SCHWENKMEYER: That was one of the things we took up in those women's conferences. The men in the factories were not too excited about that. You were fighting really big business in UE. General Electric, Westinghouse, Sylvania, these are big, powerful companies. And they opened and closed factories at the drop of a hat. So, you were always aware that you couldn't have unfruitful agitation, so to speak, that was going to close up a factory. They

SCHWENKMEYER: were always going to locations where they could get cheaper taxes, cheaper this and that, labor and everything else. This was one of the things that they had to meet. So, some of these things couldn't be hit head-on. Where in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, the boss was only too glad to take on some women as cutters in the South, just because he knew that the cutters in the North would be made. And so the women got in. Although I don't think too many of them. I don't know, it's a hard job. You know, they're great, big, electric cutters, it's a hard job. I don't know what's done now, they may be using a laser beam. But then you had, oh, I don't remember now, 250 layers of cloth that this electric knife had to go through. Well, you had to push that through. I happened to work in most of the places where they used a short knife. By a short knife I mean a knife that wasn't even this long, and the cutter put his hand on the blade and cut through the thicknesses. I can't remember now how much it was, but maybe twenty-five or fifty layers at the most, and this was a very sharp edge, and he had to push down on that.

INTERVIEWER: Was this in a shirt shop?

SCHWENKMEYER: Shirt, not clothing. And those guys, so many of them died of heart trouble. I couldn't tell you whether it was because they drank a lot or whether it was because of the pressure they had to use in doing this. I knew more of the short knife cutters than I did of the machine cutters, because that was what was done in the area then. I worked, you know, you work in a certain competitive area, and once you get the good shirts that were short knife cut in those days, you were sent to other places where they did it to try to get them. But, I would say in the shirt industry, there had been men in some of those jobs, but they were all women in all of the stitching, all the pressing except the dress shirt pressing because that was originally with an old hot iron. But when I was there it was changed after some years. In the necktie industry, which was a large, probably the largest one was in Cluett's, and they were all women pressers in that line. Only the cutters, and they were machine cutters, were still men. And in the shipping industry, where women tallied and did all of that, that was one thing but where they had to work very fast packing and things like that, they were men because it was physically hard. Maybe women could do it but they didn't want to do it. And there were certain jobs, like plumbers and all that, and

SCHWENKMEYER: they never wanted to bother about that either. They might now, but they didn't then. They weren't interested in those jobs. So, they worked much harder to pull up their own wages rather than going on to something else. They had made certain changes, like pressing, that formerly was an all-man's job, and they were all women when I went in.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you go after Troy?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, I worked all over when I was working in Troy. I worked in the South.

INTERVIEWER: You were working under the Southern Department?

SCHWENKMEYER: No. I was working out of Troy.

INTERVIEWER: Out of the ACWA Troy Joint Board?

SCHWENKMEYER: I was working for the ACWA National Office out of Troy.

When I was in Andalusia, Alabama, we lived in a horrible hotel twenty miles away, so that we wouldn't be followed all the time. Came in town in various ways. Many times I lived quite a distance from a place that I was working on, so that you could go in and out without being watched every minute that you would be there, or make a phone call. Because we couldn't make a phone call. We had to go 100 miles to make a phone call when we were working in Andalusia.

INTERVIEWER: And it wouldn't be listened to.

SCHWENKMEYER: That's right. And right off the bat, when we'd go into some of these towns, an operator would tell us that we were being listened to by agents of the boss and she wanted us to know. We even knew in Andalusia that they were copying the name and address of every letter we sent out. A post office person told us that. And we knew that our mail was being opened. They told us that. So you expect it to be true in every small town you work in. And you have to figure out the best place to work. Sometimes you stayed with people but sometimes you couldn't trust the people you stayed with and you had to figure out what you were going to do. But most of the time in the last eight years or so that I worked for ACWA I had an apartment in Troy that I kept all of the time. And the union paid the rent for it, which wasn't much, but they did it, so that I always had a place to come back to.

INTERVIEWER: When you were sent out, were you usually sent out by yourself, or along with another person?

SCHWENKMEYER: I usually went by myself but I'd meet people where I was going. I was meeting a group of organizers, or there was a situation like at New Albany, Mississippi, where I was writing a newspaper, or Dixon, where I was going to actually see what happened on this Replevin order, in case we had to have help, I would get out and call the New York office to see what could be done because it was a dangerous situation; we didn't know what would happen. And sometimes I was in a town all by myself, and you had something to worry about when that happened because you didn't know whether they could come after you in those towns. You just got up and left and went somewhere else.

INTERVIEWER: What usually had been happening in a town before you got sent there?

SCHWENKMEYER: Sometimes the people asked for an organizer to come in, that they wanted a union, and I was sent in to find out if it was possible or not, and what I thought would be needed. You know, sort of scouting what would be needed there. That kind of thing. Then you either write a report or send it [the report] back.

INTERVIEWER: What did you look for as far as whether or not you thought it would be possible to organize?

SCHWENKMEYER: You usually had a contact, the person who wrote. And that person had you talk to other people, lined up these people that you talked to. But you went around that town. You went in the five-and-ten cent store, and other stores; you seemed to be a tourist or somebody just passing through, asking people questions, the gas station man. You were just passing through and you were tired and you wanted a place to live, where would he suggest? You know, you just had to pick your people and you had to learn to trust people. You had to learn to read people's faces and see what you thought of them. Sometimes you made mistakes and you learned. You learned the way they shifted their eyes or the way they looked at you. But you didn't tell anyone you were a union organizer until you had found out enough that you could do that. But that didn't happen until you were pretty sure.

INTERVIEWER: And so you made your decision just based on the number of people you talked to who seemed dissatisfied or seemed as though they were willing to fight to have a union?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, you found out how many people actually worked in the plant, how many were men, how many were women, how many were young women, how many were old women, how many were married women, but you didn't ask it like that. It took a while for you to find out all this. What the cutters were like. Did they cut their own work? Because what could you do without the cutters, you know? They just bring in the other people. How skilled their work was. There were times when I was sent into New Jersey and I said there's no chance of doing a thing here. Anybody can do this work. You know, you talk to a few people and you discover that it was so easy for them to do the kind of work that these people had to do that they would just shift it. It was done in a garage kind of arrangement. They would just take the machines out overnight and move them someplace else. How many times I stood before people at meetings where we had the majority organized and said what was going to happen and the people gave us the decision of whether they wanted us to go ahead and organize. And they took the risk that the company might move out when we told them that that was what might be done. Because you had to be honest with the people.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever gone back to a place twice, where it was unsuccessful or the time wasn't right the first time but later on it was possible?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yeah. In Troy, I was originally hired to work on Cluett's. It was a hard job. They were a paternalistic outfit. I'd be sent out to work in Newburgh [New York] for two years, but always going into Troy to maintain the contacts and going back to see what happened. You did that many times. And then you could tell when you thought there was going to be a break, and you called for more organizers and started to work. But you maintained your break and you kept your contact with these people. All these over periods of years.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things make a place ready to be organized?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, the people have to want it because the conditions are bad. If the people don't want a union there's very little you can do about it except work on a long-time plan if it's necessary for competition for example. I'll never forget when I went to El Paso, Texas. We had a place in El Paso, I don't even remember the name of it, that was ready to be organized, but the main factory was

SCHWENKMEYER: in Los Angeles. I knew the organizer very well in Los Angeles, that was working on the main factory. She couldn't budge it. The boss was giving them everything. They were all Spanish-speaking Americans, both places. But the boss gave them everything in Los Angeles and he was not doing this in El Paso. And so I had to say, we had to tell the people that we couldn't strike. They were ready to strike but I told the people that it couldn't be done because they'd have all the work done in Los Angeles. And the union wasn't ready for a long strike like the Farah strike. If they had been it could have been done because we had all the preparatory work done in Juarez, where I spoke innumerable times at their central body, went to their union meetings over there, so that we could expect their help if there was a strike. But the union wasn't ready to go on a long, expensive strike the way it would have been.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think it would take to organize the South, as everybody has been talking about doing for years?

SCHWENKMEYER: It takes courageous organizers. People who understand the South and who are willing to build a nucleus in the various places that they want to build in. They want to organize. And it means that it takes a lot of money, there's no question about the money that it takes. But it's a long, fundamental campaign with people who are strong and courageous and have imagination to build and aren't trying to feather their own nests. The trouble with so many union people is that they want the power of being an area supervisor, or director, or something like that. And so while they're doing this work, they're always thinking of how they can build their political domain. It has to be cohesive, that you all want to work together. That's why Ed Blair* was never a director of a large force, because he wasn't interested in building a domain and being a czar over the organizers in that domain. He saw a need of getting a cohesive group to work together to build, not for an empire, but for the people. It takes people with some idealism and some feeling to do this.

INTERVIEWER: You know, I have met Amalgamated members at schools and things, there have always been some very exceptional, good people there who, it would seem if they had the proper training could be excellent organizers.

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* ACWA Assistant Southern Organizing Director.

SCHWENKMEYER: Sure they could. And you find them still working in the shops and not being given an opportunity to go out and do something because they probably don't want to be a part of this political setup that grows. It isn't only the Amalgamated.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sure it's not.

SCHWENKMEYER: It's worse in many other unions. But, this is the thing that happens. And then, the life is very hard. An organizer's life is very hard. You really give up your personal life in order to do this. And it's hard, but again I say, Ed [Blair] thought that these people who are running the Amalgamated now saw this much better than other people. Except I'd say that in the beginning, the Amalgamated had a very hard time during the Depression. And people like [ACWA President Jacob] Potofsky went out into the field to work. And when he did it, he saw this, and many of the people put on were people from the shops. Julia Maietta,* for example, was a pocketmaker in a shirt shop and they recognized her ability. But then later on they forgot this. And they were taking the people that may not have been the best organizers, but for political reasons they were giving them jobs so that that a person could hold his empire together. And this is true all over. This is the fault that I see in the labor movement. There isn't enough of a real feeling of the people running the union. However, it was truer in the UE than it was in the Amalgamated. We could go ahead and plan a women's conference but we couldn't do it in the Amalgamated. I was given a lot of freedom, but not that. It was in the UE, where they thought at first we were planning a dual union movement. All these guys are so scared of their jobs, you know. They thought we were starting to do a dual union movement, women only, dividing the women against the men. So, this wasn't what was happening at all. And they saw it when they were at the conference. They saw what it was doing and they were dumfounded. But the Amalgamated was so blamed scared, they never even got that far. I wouldn't say [Sidney] Hillman was scared, and I wouldn't say [ACWA Secretary-Treasurer] Frank Rosenblum was scared. But eventually Potofsky became scared. He got far from the people. You can never get far from the people. Once you get removed from the people you lose your perspective and you build your kingdom. I never wanted to do it. And there wasn't any place, really, if you did want to do it. It was tough.

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* ACWA staff organizer, also interviewed for this oral history project.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think if the union had enough money to hire and train a sufficient number of good organizers, that it could be done? That it's just a question of people and money?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yeah. And not being afraid of what the people say, so that they don't always have to toe the mark, so to speak. That there's a give and take, they can express their own opinions. I'll never forget when a business agent in Kingston, New York, sent a telegram saying that Harry Bridges* should be deported. The Amalgamated had sent out letters that he shouldn't be. Well, they couldn't see the sense of sending anybody there to explain what the circumstances were, so they just voted to send them out. Then, of course, there was hell to pay for it. But, another time, there was a question of ratifying an agreement in Kingston. This is a very isolated community. I was in the first strike that ever took place in Kingston. We didn't win that strike but it broke the ice so that we got other strikes and won them. But there was a union agreement, there was a shop in Albany, one in Troy, and one in Kingston. And we had to see that Kingston OK'd this agreement. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. The Kingston people weren't about to be pushed. And I had a hard time explaining to the National Office that they had to send up somebody from New York who was going to let these people talk and not force this agreement down their throats, and that they were allowed to have a secret ballot. If they wanted a secret ballot to vote on, whether or not they wanted this agreement or not, that they had a right to have that, and that was the only way this would go through. Oh wow, we were jeopardizing the whole thing, the chain of how many thousand workers we were jeopardizing, but somehow that got through. I'll never forget that meeting. I was there, an old guy was there; we answered the questions, we let all the adverse things come up that they had to say. They were answered by some of their own people or they turned to us; we didn't force anything on them. And then somebody moved that there be a secret ballot. Somebody seconded it and it was taken to a vote and it won. And we didn't open our mouths. And they took the secret ballot, and I tell you, I sweated. But they voted to accept. They would never have voted to accept, they would have stormed out of the place if we had forced them. But this is the kind of thing that has to be done and not be shocked by some of the things that the people say on the floor. Those people that say it on the floor don't

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* President of the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's union, headquartered in San Francisco. Starting in 1934-35, there were several attempts by the U.S. government to deport him for his political activities.

SCHWENKMEYER: understand the situation the way we understood it. We were living it. They weren't living it. They hadn't been in the union a long time. They'd just been on strike maybe fourteen days. And that was their intensive study of the union. Maybe it took something like two months beforehand to sign up the majority of those people. But, you see, those are the things, there has to be more faith in the people. And the acceptance that the people know, and know how to handle something and trust in them.

So what if they lose? When we sat on the grass in Dixon, Tennessee, the second election took place. We didn't know whether they'd win or lose. And we waited out there, nobody said anything. We didn't talk. We didn't say anything. Except they said, "If we lose, Ed [Blair], you'll be around to help us next year, won't you?" He said, "Yes." The company wouldn't let Ed into that election, you know, to watch. Always an official goes in but Ed couldn't go in. They had to take some numbskull to go in. So here we were. And when the guy came out he just went like that with his hand. And the watchers came out, and they went like that, and nobody said a word. We won. Nobody yelled and carried on. "Now," they said, "we have to build, we have to build a union so he can't do this again to us." You know, it was that kind of thing, you just got to trust them and keep at it and never stop. The way we did at Cluett's. We never stopped. When I got there the cutters were organized and it wasn't long before the shirt ironers and the others were, and we talked to them until they got their department 100 percent. And then Gladys Dickason* had the bright idea that they pay dues, and they did by handing in the money. But they were a handful, and that's all. And you had something like 1,500 women that you had to organize, that the boss was catering to. Maybe it was 2,000 women, I don't know. But we kept after them and built little pockets of organized people here and there, and built them until we knew absolutely what was going on in that shop every day. We had a report that when we saw we were making progress, we knew absolutely what was going on. And the next morning we could have a leaflet out saying in such-and-such a place, but they never knew who told us, who we saw. We'd go blocks out of our way to make our contact with the person who was giving us the information. Or they made it within the shop and we got it in roundabout, but we had to be right. In everything we said, we had to be right. No boasting, it had to be facts.

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* ACWA Research Director and director of southern organizing for the union.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you work on that Cluett campaign, in all different places?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, a different person was working in Atlanta. So often you can't trust the organizer you work with, but before we ever met we could trust each other. We knew. And she was making more progress than we were because we were the important shop.

INTERVIEWER: Who else was working with you?

SCHWENKMEYER: Julia Maietta and I don't know who else. But we had these men. Every single night we went out with groups of shirt ironers, it was the shirt ironers really. We went out and over weekends. Friday and Saturday nights were the nights we regularly spent with these men in all the different grills in that area, where we talked with people while they were drinking beer and dancing. We hated it. Julia doesn't drink and she'd have a glass of water, and they didn't know what it was, with ice in it. And I would drink, but you had to keep your head all the time. And the men would bring these people over to our table and we would talk, and we did that night after night after night. All those guys are dead now that did it. And young, younger than we were. But they lived the union the way we lived it. And so, that was it. I was brought there in 1934 to work on Cluett's but I didn't get started because there were other shops where they needed someone who was soft-spoken, and not Italian or, you know, American, so to speak. So I was always sent in that area to those locations so that we sewed up every shop but Cluett's.

I was head of the district, the small sub-district for textiles during the organizing campaign there. Somewhere along the line, I forget before or after, I was put in a campaign in Newburgh, New York, when the NRA went out and we had to organize without a law, and we really had to think of how we were doing it. And we formed these little pockets in every department. And we had people in departments who would put leaflets in the garments so somebody would open up a garment and find a leaflet. But, oh boy, you had to be careful. Because if they were caught they'd be fired. And that plant was controlled by gangsters. That was the time that LaGuardia had chased all of the gangsters out of New York up to Newburgh. And the first question they asked me when they sent me down there was if I was afraid of gangsters. And I said, "Why should I be? If they touch a woman, you will have the shop."

SCHWENKMEYER: But the men were. And they probably had reason to be. They were Italian men and they knew what it was like. But we women--I had two women working with me--we didn't have anything to worry about. We could go anywhere and do anything because those men weren't going to bother about the women. I got to know who the gangsters were, what they looked like. But you had to learn to be fearless in everything. You couldn't be squeamish about a thing--the food you ate. I'll never forget when a family offered me snails. I went to this Italian home in Marlborough. And I had been to one and they had eel but it was dipped in something and sauteed or something, and that was good after I once got over it. But the next place, they were eating snails, and you picked up the shell and you went (sucking in noise), and I just could not do it. I had to figure a way out. But those are the easy things.

INTERVIEWER: During the war, women were often encouraged to work and then discouraged after the soldiers came home. Do you think this was true of the garment industry?

SCHWENKMEYER: No, not in my experience. They started out with women workers, basically because they could get them cheaper.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that your work experience would have been different if you had been a man? Do you think being a woman organizer was different?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, in a way it was. I may never have been sent to the South as a man. Because the women were sent there because they were able to do more and exist in a community longer than a man because the Southern vigilante groups didn't mind what they did to men, but they were taken aback when they had to deal with women. And so, it may have been different. At that time, there weren't too many Northern men who went down, or wanted to go down to the South, because it was dangerous. But the women didn't have to worry because they weren't touched. That was also true when I worked in the North. Any plant that was part of a gangster situation, where the New York gangs went in to take over a plant. You know, I mean they were employed by the employer. The men had to worry but the women didn't. The gangsters wouldn't touch the women. So we got into much more dangerous situations in a way. They weren't dangerous for us but they were dangerous for men, and we were able to do them and break ground really. Where it was much harder for a man to break the ground.

INTERVIEWER: In the case of gangster situations, were there a lot of those?

SCHWENKMEYER: When LaGuardia cleared New York of the gangs they went upstate and they lodged, especially in Newburgh. And I was sent in to work in Newburgh and told that there were gangsters working in the plant there and was asked if I was afraid. And I said, no, I wasn't. And so, you got to be quite aware of them and you learned that the gangsters were respecting you because you weren't a bit afraid of them. But we could be that way, where the men had to worry about it. While I was there, a very honest Teamster [Union] organizer, this was way back in the thirties, was killed. They said he had run into a train. But everybody was absolutely convinced that he was killed and thrown on the railroad track. So that this was a, still is, a very bad town to work in. But we didn't have to worry one bit, physically, about our position as women.

INTERVIEWER: How about advancement opportunities? Or were you interested in advancing in the union hierarchy?

SCHWENKMEYER: I would say I really wasn't. I didn't ever want to be away from the rank and file because you see what happens to people when they spend most of their time in offices and get to the field rarely. So it didn't bother me very much, I didn't want to. I would say it was harder, generally speaking, for a woman to get on to the General Executive Board. There had to be special reasons why. I remember very well when I was part of a movement to get Gladys Dickason on the General Executive Board of the Amalgamated, because the kind of people who were on were either wives or older people, like Dorothy Bellanca, who had a right to be on the Board but she was married to August Bellanca who had been on the Board. Or Bessie Hillman, who was [Sidney] Hillman's wife, who had no special reason at that time to be on the Board, but there wasn't anybody from any other group and Gladys Dickason at that time was heading the [ACWA] Research Department and was bright so a group of us felt that we ought to do what we could to push her, to see that she was on the Board. And she finally did get on it. But it was difficult.

INTERVIEWER: Was Bessie Hillman playing a very active role in the union when you were working there?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, I worked with her in Albany and she drove us crazy.

INTERVIEWER: What did she do?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, she talked too much. And she thought because of her long experience in the union that she knew the right answers. And she was from a very different group, ethnic group, from what the people were who were in the shirt industry, and she also was from a very different generation, and we were much younger than Bessie and we resented her actions of superiority where she said, "Well, I'll just call Sidney." So, we weren't too excited about her activities, I'd say.

INTERVIEWER: Was she assigned there to work as an organizer?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes indeed. Yes indeed. I don't know, maybe she was a help, but she certainly was a thorn in the side of the organizers.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been refused a job because you weren't friendly enough to a male boss?

SCHWENKMEYER: No. I really haven't worked many places where there were male bosses. You just have to know that in the YWCA, they were all female bosses. At the union, you just didn't, you weren't advanced in types like that. You were sent at critical moments to all kinds of places. And, actually, I was in charge of a lot of situations and the men resented it. But the unions put me in charge. When I was lent to Textiles in the TWOC (Textile Workers Organizing Committee), I was put in charge of an area and I was working with male ex-organizers from the textile union and they resented it very much. You had to learn to work with such finesse so that you could get something done.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever consider running for union office?

SCHWENKMEYER: No, I wasn't a worker. I felt that people who worked in the shop ought to be people who took those jobs, and I had never worked in a shop so I really never gave it any consideration.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about traveling? You did a lot of traveling?

SCHWENKMEYER: Loved it. Loved it.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the difficulties of being on the road a lot? As a woman in particular?

SCHWENKMEYER: I never found any. It may sound crazy, but I didn't find any. You were respected and, again, you might have a few advantages. I can remember many times when I had a flat tire, if I'd been a man I would have had to fix it myself, but a truck came along or somebody else came along and fixed it. So that, really, you had advantages. You didn't have to worry. If you minded your own business when you were in hotels, you didn't have anything to worry about. Or if you knew how to take care of yourself. It's no different from anyplace else.

INTERVIEWER: Did you usually travel by yourself or with another organizer?

SCHWENKMEYER: Mostly by myself.

INTERVIEWER: And as far as that went, did people sometimes work in teams or groups?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, I'd be working with people. I worked alone also. But if you were on any kind of a job you would have somebody else with you. Because if you had, well, it wasn't too safe to work in a community alone, whether you were a man or a woman. But if you were there investigating or just starting up the project, you worked along because, you know, that was it. But when you started to go out way out in rural communities at night, you'd want somebody to check in, so that they knew you were there. You needed them anyway. You needed them because the faster you did a job the better it was going to be. You knew that pretty soon you'd have to come out in the open and you wanted as many people with you when you came out into the open as possible. I mean as many workers in the shop. So, you worked. You wanted several people working with you so that you could all work nights, not together, but covering areas because there were long distances to cover.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever use women's issues at all when you were organizing? You know, like women should be paid as much as men?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, we didn't have that problem in the cotton garment industry. If there was a man, he didn't get more, he got the same.

INTERVIEWER: Unless he had a different job.

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes, if he had a different job. But even then, it fit into that category because there were so many women that God help a man that might have an advantage. However, if I were in an industry where it had been, like the electrical industry, if I had been in that situation I'm sure I would have used it. I just didn't happen to have to use it because, by that time, it didn't exist in the plants that I worked at. With UE. But I know I would have used it in those situations. I was shocked to realize that it did exist, so I certainly would have in any instance like that.

INTERVIEWER: Were you ever involved in any protective legislation for women in the organizations you worked for?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, my word. I worked very hard for it in the YWCA, all kinds of laws protecting women and children. Then, in the unions, there were certain health hazards that women had to watch out for more than men. And you were very aware of this. On the other hand, there were certain health hazards that men met because they wouldn't put women on the job because they knew it was that dangerous. You had to be aware of the differences. And that men might be subjected to poisonous fumes and women wouldn't. I worked for, oh, so many laws, I couldn't remember them all.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel when the agitation began for the Equal Rights Amendment?

SCHWENKMEYER: It was very hard, very hard to make that adjustment because you saw the need for it all these years. But you still didn't trust the employers enough that they would carry out the spirit of the law without having the law applied to them. And it's made a big difference. To men and women, to workers. I'd say, in a way, it had a backward movement. As long as we were pushing for women's legislation or children's legislation, there was this legislative movement to change things legally for all workers. And now that movement isn't nearly as strong. They're trying to work up, for example, the various fumes or chemicals that are being used, are very dangerous to both men and women. But the impetus seemed to be lost after the fight was for the rights of women, and those very same people, you see, went over to the rights of women that had been the ones to fight for some of these legislative laws that should have also included men.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that if the emphasis sort of shifted over to that direction that it would help to pass the Equal Rights Amendment? In states where it hasn't? You know, if people were saying, "We're not saying that women shouldn't have these protections, we want to work for getting them for men,"?

SCHWENKMEYER: I don't know. I wouldn't say. I haven't been close enough to the movement to fight for it to say whether it would or not. I certainly think it ought to be considered. Because we've lost the impetus to fight for some of this and the dangers are so great in a very different way. The old workmen's compensation was if your finger was cut off or your arm was cut off, and now it's what it's doing to your lungs or your eyes or the other organs in your body, men and women. And maybe it would help, I don't know. I just haven't given it that much thought.

INTERVIEWER: What was the effect of the Depression on the clothing industry?

SCHWENKMEYER: Which Depression?

INTERVIEWER: Well, you're right there. Let's start with the one in the 1930's.

SCHWENKMEYER: It was terrible. It almost broke the unions. The unions went on half pay--all the officers. They borrowed money so they could organize. Because, back in those days, I'm speaking of the Amalgamated especially, they felt that they had to organize if they were going to exist. Because they had lost so many members, the members were laid off, there was so little money left in the treasury, and so some of them weren't paid for months. They just existed in order to build the union again. And, at that time, there were real sacrifices made and so when they go into organizing, they really did a job. All of these old-timers went to work to fight as they fought originally and there were good fights--in Pennsylvania, in upstate New York, all over where the shirt factories were. They really worked. They worked seven days a week, twelve or eighteen hours a day, in order to build the union. And that was done by the old leadership, as well as the new. We went to work with these people who did this, and that includes Bessie Hillman. They worked these long hours, along with the rest of us. It was done generally all over, where you just didn't stop. You were excited and wanted to finish the job.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do when you weren't doing union work? Did you ever have any time left over to do anything else?

SCHWENKMEYER: Not often, really. If we were near New York, like when I was in Troy, I would come down to watch a Martha Graham dance, or whatever we were interested in. Or maybe a weekend for, I remember going to two shows in one night so that we could see good theatre. Very seldom could we get good concert tickets but if we could, but this wasn't often. This was a great rarity when we took these weekends off. But that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have any time for reading or just things like that?

SCHWENKMEYER: You didn't read nearly as much as you wanted to. But you did read. If you could get hold of a good newspaper, you read it. And at that time there were radios, but you were listening to the local radio, which wasn't good. You didn't trust the news on a local radio. So it was difficult to get the real news. That's why we wanted an organizers' bulletin, so that we would be able to get facts that we could trust.

INTERVIEWER: And you said that you were never able to get that?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, not in our time. They have it today. But then we didn't.

INTERVIEWER: What happened after the Depression was phasing out and war production was starting? You were still there then, right?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, I didn't come until, when it was 1934, and you see, then [President] Roosevelt had been in office a year and things were building up a little bit. But they kept on building. They slowed a bit sometimes during the thirties but they kept on, employment kept on growing and you kept on organizing. There was just the whole world to organize.

INTERVIEWER: Did it get a lot easier after the CIO was formed, then when the Wagner Act came in, did it get easier?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, the Wagner Act was great. Then there was the time when we didn't have a Wagner Act. The NRA [National Recovery Act] was declared unconstitutional. The period between that and the Wagner Act was bad. You had to form a whole different procedure in organizing because you knew the workers had no protection, so you had to use different methods. Well, it

SCHWENKMEYER: was always exciting, so far as I was concerned, to try something new. And so you were building on a much more fundamental basis because you had to build your groups together carefully, with sections working together so that you had everybody in the section, and learning how to identify the people you could trust and those you couldn't trust. And you learned it very quickly really. We'd make a mistake sometimes that was bad, but you learned.

INTERVIEWER: Did it start to get easier now after...?

SCHWENKMEYER: Depending on where you organized, because then you started to move to areas like the South, where you were just going through all of it again. It was like beginning all over again in the old methods. And in some of those places you had to use the methods as though you didn't have a law to protect you because the law was unable to protect you, as it still is today. And so you had to use entirely different methods, and you just had to know what your situation was.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any women from the South who were organizing?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did they find it easier or harder than you did, I mean than you did, working in the South and being from a different part of the country?

SCHWENKMEYER: I don't think it made too much difference. I remember when we were working in Andalusia and the people we had to bring in who were Southerners were from Virginia, Atlanta, Georgia, and they weren't acceptable to the people in Alabama any more than I was. They thought the people from Virginia were Northerners. So that it was almost the same here. Where you might have been coming from the big city of Troy to the little city of Ballston Spa, and you just were an outsider, period. You had to learn to assimilate with the group you were working with, not to lord it over them.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of support did you get from community groups, like churches and so forth?

SCHWENKMEYER: In the South, very little. And this was true in the northern little towns you worked in. The churches were taking care of their parish and the rich people in the little town were the ones that contributed to the church, and the poor people didn't, and so, of course, the minister, as a rule, listened. We would hunt for ministers from other communities that we would bring in so that they would know there were ministers who believed in unions. So when I worked in Stottville, I brought a minister from Albany who spoke. And when we were in Andalusia, we brought Don West from Georgia who came over to speak, and then we also got Rev. Turnipseed from Montgomery, Alabama. He was the man that finally had to leave Montgomery. But you tried to bring in the church people because that was about all there was there in the small towns. In the big cities you could use others; you used what ever group you could use, any kind of group you found out existed that would give you a hearing.

INTERVIEWER: Ethnic associations?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, not in the South. But in the North there would be and there were certain ethnic groups that certainly listened. And the Catholic Church was more, much more interested in unions than the Protestant Church. It was very interesting. You could usually count on the Catholic Church to come forward and say this was a good thing.

INTERVIEWER: When workers were being laid off during the Depression, what position did the union take on it?

SCHWENKMEYER: I didn't happen to be working with the union when the big layoffs were taking place in the early thirties. Shops had to be closed in Troy because they were not financially sound. And the union then gave those workers jobs in such factories as were employing people and they got the first jobs. But you couldn't stop layoffs. You might say you'd work shorter hours but you couldn't keep that forever. You have to figure out, there was no unemployment insurance then, so in those days you had to think of the best thing to do, and you did share the work with other workers. So that I sometimes think we've done the wrong thing on unemployment insurance. Because sharing the work gave a feeling to people of much more unity than laying them off. You know, "Lay-em off, so that they can have full time and the others can collect." But there ought to be a better setup than that because that means then that hundreds and hundreds of workers are out of work forever in that particular industry. And I don't think any of us did too well in thinking that through.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's true of any of the other programs that we got during the Depression, too?

SCHWENKMEYER: Like what?

INTERVIEWER: Oh, let's see, like social security, or...

SCHWENKMEYER: No, social security, you mean old age pensions.

INTERVIEWER: And the other things that it covers, like disability.

SCHWENKMEYER: No, I don't think that applies at all.

INTERVIEWER: I guess unemployment insurance was the big buffer that was supposed to help.

SCHWENKMEYER: And still is. I should know. That's what I've been living on.

INTERVIEWER: What were the lifestyles of the women in the factories, what sorts of lives did they lead, were they different than yours?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, well, I was devoting all my time to the union and I was alone, and they were family people. They either were wives or sisters, supporting their families and their money was needed to support the family and needed very badly. So, I'd say there was a big different and they had to do all the work in the house and do all the cooking, and I went to a restaurant and ate and I didn't bother about cleaning, even when I should have probably, but there was only me, so why bother.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any women you worked with who were organizers who also had families? Were there any who were able to do both?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, there were people who had families, who had to leave their families. They weren't wives, but they were an integral part of that family and the money they earned had to go back to that family, so that they cared much more about returning home than I did. Those people had to return home once a month to see their families because they were worried about them. There weren't many of the people who were permanent organizers who were from the community where we worked at the time because you couldn't take people out of the shop, unless the shop was organized. And then you had to have the kind of agreement that they could go back

SCHWENKMEYER: again when the organization was over if they didn't like the job. So the people who came to work for us who were from the factories were not usually from the factories of that town, but many, many of them worked with us after work. They'd meet us after they grabbed a bite to eat and we'd go calling in my car or somebody else's car, and they would make the break to go in this house and say, "I want to talk to you." There were times I sat out in the car and they'd come out and get me after they made the break. They weren't paid. They did this because they believed in the union and they wanted the union to come in the shop. They were extremely important and they contributed heavily to the advancing of the program. And it's those unsung heroes that I think did the job. All we did was organize their work. So, we'd get people together and we'd get in there and we'd listen to them or they'd come out and get us to provide a point where they weren't making much headway, but those people were great and they existed everywhere where I ever worked. You didn't bring them in if you knew you were going to call on a stooge. But that's the judgment you had to make. But, oh baby, those people worked. And they worked on Saturday and Sunday and that meant you worked on Saturday and Sunday.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see that working in the union, organizing and everything, really made a difference in their lives? That they learned something and felt differently about themselves after that had been involved in an organizing campaign?

SCHWENKMEYER: They loved organizing and after a plant was organized they felt let down. It was a very strange thing. You had a very hard time because then you were solidifying the organization. You couldn't get everything, you know, the moon, stars, and sky. That was the most difficult period in organizing. After you once got it, you were solidifying the organization. And these people who had worked so hard, were not working as hard, because the kind of thing you had to do after that was a day-by-day plodding business. And that's why it was so important that you build inside the factory so you'd have the groups there where they could do something. They had to learn to think things through, I guess, is the best way to say it. It's not an easy job at all. It can be very hard and some of the best people I ever worked with turned quite bitter because they felt there should have been a more progressive position by the union leaders. And it was hard for them sometimes to see that it couldn't be, because you might have organized the whole shop, but you had to organize the competitors, too.

SCHWENKMEYER: And an educational program should have gone along with it. But the union always said they didn't have enough money to have people there to follow through on the educational position. But it should have been done, because these people had so much to contribute. And, most of the time the organizers were pulled out once the shop was organized. And the people were left there without the contact that they had before. I was one of the few organizers that was left in after a situation was completed, to see that it worked well. But, that, I think, is the failing, the need to continue the work of these marvelous groups who really have pushed through, to make other people see that the union isn't used for other purposes. To pick up on law, to see that there are laws, to see that the complexion of the government of the city is changed so that it's more honest. None of that is done, where it should be done, and could be done, in my opinion, in order to make the union stronger and make it a much more positive thing as far as the lasting values are concerned. But you just talk to any of the big union people and they never have money to spend, really, on education. Always it's the same thing. I still see, I get the [ACWA] Advance, and I still see the same old names that have been there for ages. And for a long time, Mrs. Hillman was doing this. Well, you just have to have people that understand what has to be done. And maybe they don't know at the beginning, but they'll learn as they go along.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you usually stay in a place after a campaign was over?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, I stayed a long time, but I was an exception. Usually, they're pulled out a couple of weeks after the plant is organized.

INTERVIEWER: And you stayed sometimes a few months?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, I stayed years.

INTERVIEWER: Well, you stayed in upstate New York, right?

SCHWENKMEYER: It was very different. I had advantages other people didn't have because I must have been doing something that was considered vital.

INTERVIEWER: Did other people ever express to the union that they wanted to stay in a place?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes, but they didn't get to stay.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever get to stay in any of the other places, or was it mainly upstate New York?

SCHWENKMEYER: Well, I didn't ever get to go back to the places in Mississippi that I thought were so good, and I think it was because I disagreed on what was happening there where they were bringing in the Ku Kluxers and were breaking up Mine, Mill and Smelter Union. And I said this very clearly. So, nothing was ever said to me about they disagreed with me, in fact, they agreed with me, but then I was sent someplace else. When I quit, Frank Rosenblum said to me, "Frieda, if you don't quit I'll send you anyplace you want to go and you can stay as long as you want, and you can be in charge of any chain you name, if you want to stay. You'll have to work in my region." See, they have regions. "You'll have to work in my region." I just thought I'd stayed at the Amalgamated long enough. But I can't say that this would not have been allowed to me because Frank was a very unusual person and I think if he said I could do that, I could have done it. But it was hard work and it took an awful lot out of you. And the chains I was interested in were in the South, where it was very hard work.

INTERVIEWER: These were the shirt chains?

SCHWENKMEYER: Yes. Washington Manufacturing Company and Henry I. Siegel and Salant & Salant were the big chains down there. And they had used all kinds of methods.

INTERVIEWER: Of all the jobs you've had, what was the thing that you liked best?

SCHWENKMEYER: Working with people. Loved working with people.

INTERVIEWER: You always worked with people.

SCHWENKMEYER: I would say I liked the union job the best. It was more exciting than the YWCA, and in the YWCA, we had to finagle to work with men and women. But in the union, we were working with men and women and the whole community. It was a challenge. You really worked and you had to think and it was really fun.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see many young people doing what you were doing, or do you think there aren't as many doing that kind of work? Are young people going in a different direction?

SCHWENKMEYER: I don't know. Unfortunately, the old people hang on to their jobs. And they aren't always productive in thinking after they're growing older. You've got to work hard. You've got to be able to move fast and think fast and never stop. There comes a time when you can't do it physically and those people who stay on are staying on and not doing the job as it should be done, in my opinion. And that's where young people can come in. And young people have to learn. And the only way they're going to learn is if they get in when they are young. Then they can get in, they can find out, they don't have set ways, they're willing to figure things out. And their opinions are listened to, and I'm not too sure they are. I don't know. But I do think that the unions would be better if they did take on young people.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to be very difficult, really, to get a job in a union, unless you happen to luck on in some way.

SCHWENKMEYER: Union people are very skeptical of people who haven't had experience in the shop. And I can see where they are. But I think that there are people that have had other experiences that are just as good. I think the experiences I had in the YWCA are about the best preparation that there was for something like this. But I can see where they don't trust the non-worker, but I think you have to accept the enthusiasm and the determination and the courage that young people have.

INTERVIEWER: Back to women again, do you think that organized labor is responding to women more now than they used to?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, a little bit more. That's the best I can say. Men are going to give up this fight very grudgingly, especially union men. And so it's done by the bureaucrats very grudgingly. Just look at the boards. Somebody sends me the CIO News when it comes out. And to find a picture of a woman, just a woman is just something.

INTERVIEWER: I know. You always see eight or nine men in a group. A group of them.

SCHWENKMEYER: Always. And I even see the UE News, and I'm busy looking for women. And they ought to be there more than anywhere else, but you still have to look. And in the Amalgamated, because they have such a preponderance of women membership, they can't take a picture of their membership without taking women, and the same way with the ILG Justice, their paper. You know, they're there. But when it comes down to brass tacks, there are not too many more women leaders than there were before. You can count them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see a definite change come over the labor movement during the time you were working within it? And when did it happen and how?

SCHWENKMEYER: Oh, yeah. The CIO. Because it became such a spontaneous movement that took in all workers with such enthusiasm, and then there was no thought about men or women or anything. You were breaking into a new field, you know. A field where the people wanted to be organized and hadn't been organized, and so they took everybody in, and everybody who wanted to work was hired. And there was an entirely different atmosphere of a great change taking place. It was really a marvelous time to be in it because it was so filled with enthusiasm and issues and activity that it was great. And I'd say that was the time when it broadened out and these big leaders like John L. Lewis and [Sidney] Hillman were willing to break away and really fight and to put everything in it that the union had, and they did. They went all kinds of places. That enthusiasm hasn't existed since then. It was wonderful.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think anything could cause a fresh outbreak of enthusiasm?

SCHWENKMEYER: If an issue came along, if the situation warranted it, I think the people would sort of break through. As bad as unemployment has been, there has been unemployment insurance. The employers have learned that they can go to a certain point or the workers will break away from them. And this is what happens in the South with the big textile mills, where they just grant enough so they are able to make it difficult. But it can come, and when it comes, really, the people force it because that's what happened at the beginning of the CIO. They forced it in Cleveland, in Detroit, in Flint. They just organized. And that's what'll happen. And they did it in the mills in the South. But then it's to stay organized that's the big problem. They may have been organized once, but you have to stay organized. And keep up the enthusiasm and see that you build.

ADDENDUM TO TAPE RECORDING MADE BY FRIEDA SCHWENKMEYER
September 22, 1976

I am adding this material because I was dissatisfied with the tape recording which I gave and later read as it was typed.

In my many years working with the YWCA and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and United Electrical Workers Union, I was privileged to watch many workers on the job in their factories. YWCA Industrial Secretaries had easy access to factories by taking high school students through factories, or women's groups or church groups. As a union representative, I had access to factories with union contracts to learn more about grievances that were turned in to be settled. I had been in auto, steel, textile, electrical equipment, food and clothing factories, as well as others. I felt the heat, heard the noise, saw the speed and the atmosphere, smelt the odors in the work areas where these workers spent eight hours a day. I watched some jobs that were so monotonous that they brought on mental problems for some workers, some who worked in such polluted atmosphere that it caused industrial diseases, some where the fumes where so terrible that they caused weaknesses of various kinds that could lead to serious results. And I saw speed so intense that workers rarely looked up. The worst, as I remember, was the sewing [stitching] rooms in shirt factories.

In a shirt factory, there was a wide gap between the wages of the cutters and the machine operators and the pressers. The cutters were men at that time. They either used a short knife or an electric machine cutter. Both types were considered skilled. Machine operating (stitching) was not considered skilled, nor pressing. Cutters were far fewer in numbers so that management listened to their complaints and granted many requests to keep them satisfied. The cutters had no trouble talking while they worked so that they were a unified group. Pressers handled hot irons all day, standing on the job. They could talk to their neighbors while they worked and usually were a unified group. They could work out their procedures so they could settle their grievances without too much fuss. They figured out how they could take shortcuts at their work so they worked fast but not at a tremendous speed-up rate.

This was not true of machine operators (stitchers) who probably were one-half or more of the workers in the factory. They worked at break-neck speed under terrific noise, never taking their eyes from work until the power was turned off at rest periods, lunch or at the end of the day. They had no opportunity to talk to their fellow workers unless the power was off and then they were so tired that they frequently just sat for the ten or fifteen minutes rest period to

relax before the next stretch of work. The machines were set to operate fast, often they were regulated for fifteen to twenty stitches to the inch. The operator had to guide that garment correctly under high speed. The texture of material made a difference in the speed and the quality.

All "oxford" cloth frayed and slid. The introduction of synthetic material caused many difficulties. The operator was not making what she or the company considered her quota for the day on such materials.

Then these jobs were all piece work. She was paid by the dozen. Some operations had twelve to a dozen, some had twenty-four to a dozen, for example, sleeves and cuffs. If there were difficulties with the material, her pay could suffer seriously. The employers couldn't, or wouldn't, seem to understand these problems, nor could they understand that some workers suffered from the lint they were inhaling or from skin infections. An operator was constantly driving herself to make her quota (that she may have set for herself)or to make more. It seemed to me as we settle for raises and transferred that raise to piece rates, it never worked out. There was always new material that complicated the matter. As a result, there was constant dissatisfaction in the stitching room because of the speed, the noise, the piece work and the changing materials or thread. I wish I could remember the hundreds of dozens an operator had to do to make a fairly decent day's pay.

As a result, most operators were nervous, tired, sharp-tongued and developed innumerable nervous diseases. There were unusual complaints during the menstrual period and the menopause. Women would have to take time from work. At no time was the union or any government agency really interested in these problems concerning nerves, or health or noise, or speed, or piece work. They had always existed and "competition was so keen that nothing really could be done," I was told. Officials listened when I talked but never took it too seriously. In this country there is no real movement to study the effect of noise, speed, etc., in the factories. I felt frustrated because it seemed we were doing so little.

I knew the lives of these operators and the pressers. They had two jobs besides the one in the factory--the housekeeping job and rearing the children. They hurried to work, leaving young children at day care centers if there was no older person to care for them. They hurried home, picking up the children on the way, then cooking, washing, ironing. They were dead tired always. Life with their husbands was not too successful. He often went to his club, or bar, or whatever. The machine operator had little time for union meetings.

Section meetings had to be held near the factory or after work and not leisurely but hurried under stress. This was not as true for pressers. They were not as tired. They were more aggressive, both at home and work. Their very jobs where they could talk with each other gave them a feeling of security. Machine operators rarely had this feeling of comradeship that pressers frequently had.

I admit I do not know today what is going on in these factories. I knew where I worked for UE that the noise and speed were not nearly as bad and that the women who lived long distances from their work would stay after their shifts for meetings which were run in a businesslike manner concerning problems they felt were important. They were not under the same pressures that piece work sewing machine operators worked under. Maybe today the setup may be different in shirt factories, but I doubt it. There is still speedup, still noise, still piece work. I read the union papers--I haven't seen any discussion of these problems. It seems to me thay are fundamental to all of us--that we have workers who are able to make real contributions to all phases of our life, and not work and just exist under such tensions. This should be a primary problem of unions as well as settling day-to-day increases and working for wage increases. These tensions caused by work are part of their working condition.

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