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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

BONNIE SEGAL

International Ladies' Garments Workers Union

by

Alice M. Hoffman

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

University of Michigan - Wayne State University

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VITAE

BONNIE TAYLOR SEGAL

Bonnie Taylor Segal was born on June 1, 1916 in Santa Rosa, California, but grew up on a farm in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She loved the outdoors and working on the farm with her father. Her fondest dream was to attend Penn State after high school, but with her father unemployed and the family in need of money, she got a job in a garment shop. Segal received ten cents an hour for eighty hours of work per week and worked as a presser--an unusual job for a woman in those days. The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union soon organized her shop, and Segal found herself on strike. She became a leader in her local, starting with the elected position of chairman of the shop.

In 1940 Segal was given the opportunity to attend the Hudson Shore Labor School for eight weeks. This experience had a great influence on her trade union career. She returned to Easton, Pennsylvania, to work in the garment shop and to serve part-time as Education Director of her local. She joined the Women's Army Corps for a time and then attended the Harvard Business School on a trade-union fellowship in 1946. Following this, she went to the Workers' School at Ruskin College, Oxford University, England for one year. She had received a Fulbright Fellowship.

When she returned from England, Segal became ILG Education Director for the Allentown area and then moved to Harrisburg in the same capacity. She also served as an organizer throughout the state of Pennsylvania.

After a long illness, through which Bonnie Segal continued to dedicate herself to the trade union movement, she died in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in January of 1976.

Oral History Interview

with

BONNIE SEGAL

July 21 and December 12, 1975
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

by Alice M. Hoffman

SEGAL: My name is Bonnie Segal. I was born June 1, 1916 at Santa Rosa, California.

INTERVIEWER: That surprises me, Bonnie, because I have always associated you with Pennsylvania and until just this minute, I didn't realize you were born in California. How come your parents were in California?

SEGAL: My dad's health went bad so he took my mother and my older sister, sold out everything he had, and went to California for his health. He heard....that was, you know, like 1905 or earlier. He was a brave man for pickin' up stakes and going across country to something he didn't know. But he had heard the climate was fine and he did get his health back. He was a printer; he was a union man. He became a printer's devil and had to live in the plant, you know, slept up in the attic of the printing plant. He was not a big man, you know, built something like you; he was thin and everybody thought he had T.B. I guess he was on his way to having T.B. if he had stayed in the print shop. He just had to give up everything and sell out everything he had and go to California.

INTERVIEWER: What was his name and where were his people from?

SEGAL: Harvey Taylor. And they were from Quakertown.

INTERVIEWER: From Quakertown?

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But on your mother's side, your name was...?

SEGAL: Bogert. They were from Allentown.

INTERVIEWER: Right. I remember your telling me the story about a Bogert Bridge in Allentown?

SEGAL: Yes. Bogert's Bridge.

INTERVIEWER: Who were the Bogerts?

SEGAL: Well, they were my ancestors. I stayed there as a kid, down at the old farmhouse. I guess if you go back, they had as issue about the Bogert's Bridge and the whole history in the Allentown archives and the newspapers. My grandfather, like six times removed, was William Bogert, who dealt with the Indians and got a grant from William Penn. He had this side of the creek and the Indians were on the other side and he was called the "peacemaker." Whenever there were problems, he dealt with the Indians.

INTERVIEWER: Was he a Quaker? Or was he a Moravian?

SEGAL: No, he was just....well, my dad's people were Mennonites and Quakers, but my mother's people were just Lutherans, I guess. German on the father's side and English on the mother's side. Over in Washington, New Jersey, they have a church built that was dedicated to her grandmother, I think.

INTERVIEWER: So your mother's people were rather well-to-do?

SEGAL: No, I don't think any of them had anything. They were all poor, you know, and they had big families. Nothing was named after them except Bogert's Bridge. And they tried to tear that down and what a revolution! That was the amazing part when that by-pass that 309 by-pass came in. An engineer, you know, has the mind of an engineer and he drew a line. The line went right through Bogert's Bridge, up through the most beautiful part of the park system of Allentown, and that's where the highway run. When this started, the whole city of Allentown got upset, and everybody's coming around with petitions, [which said] "I'm a Bogert." You found that Mrs. Leh of H. Leh and Co., you know, the big department store, was a Bogert. There were so many generations in Allentown of the Bogerts that they infiltrated the whole city. So the whole place went up in smoke and they changed the highway!

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's interesting. So some of the Bogerts at any rate are still pretty influential.

SEGAL: Yes, yes. So they changed the road and the Bogert's Bridge is still there, you see. And the Zion Reformed Church is a national monument now. They have paintings and stuff in the basement. That's where the Liberty Bell was stored.

INTERVIEWER: Where the Liberty Bell was stored?

SEGAL: Yes. During the Revolutionary War. It was brought up from Philadelphia to Allentown in a manure wagon. They covered it with manure and got it out of Philadelphia. And it was stored

SEGAL: until the war was over. Now they've restored this [the Zion church] and a kid that went to school with me did the murals. It's really beautiful.

INTERVIEWER: In the church?

SEGAL: Yes, in the church basement. They restored some of the old stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Well, how did your family get back from California then to the Bethlehem-Allentown [area]?

SEGAL: Well, after World War I, my dad's brother was killed and my grandparents and everybody lived here, you know, the whole relations, and they pleaded, he might as well be dead too, because they don't see him. Not like today; you couldn't fly. So he packed the family again, and this time he had three kids . . .

INTERVIEWER: Were they all girls?

SEGAL: No, a brother.

INTERVIEWER: Two girls and a brother?

SEGAL: Yes. My older sister was born here and then the two of us were born out there; my brother was two years older than I am. We came back, sold out again, and came back.

INTERVIEWER: Did he still work as a printer?

SEGAL: No. He helped his uncle who had a printing press once in a while. Then when he came back, he went as a carpenter, as a helper and learned the carpenter trade, because he wasn't going back to the print shop.

INTERVIEWER: Because of his health.

SEGAL: He felt that he had gained his health and he wasn't going back to this job.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, now tell me something about the schools in Bethlehem and about your life as a child in Bethlehem.

SEGAL: Well, we were living in the country. It wasn't very interesting. [We] just lived on the farm.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't like living on the farm as a young girl?

SEGAL: Yes, I did. I was the only farmer in the family. The rest of the kids didn't. If my dad stopped in the middle of the manure pile, I was in the middle of the manure pile, too. You know, my dad was my pride and joy.

INTERVIEWER: So you were a daddy's girl? Of the three, you were the daddy's girl?

SEGAL: I was the boy in the family! My brother hated the outside. My kid sister would get allergies and my older sister was too old for this stuff. Wherever my dad was, I was. Whenever he was home, I was with my dad.

INTERVIEWER: When it came time to go to high school, did you move in [to town] or how did you . . . ?

SEGAL: No. I had to walk a mile and a half to get a ride by a man. This is now all during the Depression, from '31 to '35 that I went to high school. That was really the Depression. I would walk about a mile and a half and then I got a ride with a man who worked at Bethlehem Steel, one of the few people who was still working. He was an engineer and very valuable to them evidently. He had nine kids and in exchange for my transportation--they were friends of the family, too--we gave them land to grow stuff, you know, to eat. He lived off the land, that's all. But he had a big patch of our farm. We had eighteen acres and about six of that was woods.

INTERVIEWER: So your family was living off the farm, too?

SEGAL: Yes. Dad was unemployed. Everybody was unemployed. We had our "everything" plot.

[There is some discussion about the chair Bonnie Segal is sitting on, which is falling apart or squeaking]

INTERVIEWER: We better explain that this used to be Mike Johnson's chair.

SEGAL: Yes. Oh, my gosh, that's right. That's going to be all over the tape.

INTERVIEWER: Right. The squeaking chair that used to be Mike Johnson's.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, when you graduated from high school....I'm trying to figure out....you're a person who all your life was anxious for more education....

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was that from your family influence? Or your school influence? Or just something inside you?

SEGAL: I guess inside me. Because at that point, you know, the philosophy was [that] you don't send women to college. My dad wanted my brother to go to college, but he didn't want to study and he dropped out of school. But I always thought that education....I wanted to go to Penn State. I was active in the

SEGAL: 4-H Club and I had gone to Penn State like for five years in a row with the leadership school. You know, if you were outstanding in your club you were selected to go to leadership school. They sent two. And I went five years in a row to Penn State. I wanted to go to Penn State. I was willing to do anything. You only needed four-hundred dollars at that point to go to Penn State, and I couldn't get four-hundred dollars. You couldn't beg, borrow or steal four-hundred dollars from anybody.

INTERVIEWER: What did you want to take up, Bonnie?

SEGAL: Well, then I thought physical education. I was interested in sports.

INTERVIEWER: So you wanted to be like a physical education teacher or something?

SEGAL: Yes. My physical education teacher in high school encouraged me. She was like my buddy.

INTERVIEWER: What sports did you play? Basketball?

SEGAL: Basketball, baseball, hockey . . .

INTERVIEWER: Field hockey?

SEGAL: Yeah. That was about it during high school.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So you couldn't manage to get to college so you got a job in a garment shop in Quakertown.

SEGAL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: A run-away garment shop? You better explain what a run-away garment shop is.

SEGAL: They left New York, left all the people sit. Of course, we didn't know this. There was no way of us knowing it. You know, we found out when the union started to organize. They caught up with them and told us that this was a run-away shop that had left New York and left all the workers stranded, didn't pay them.

INTERVIEWER: What was the name of the shop?

SEGAL: Bogert.

INTERVIEWER: Bogert? (laughter)

SEGAL: Bogert Dress Company.

INTERVIEWER: Were they related?

SEGAL: No.

INTERVIEWER: No.

SEGAL: They closed up and ran away from Quakertown. Just by accident, in the middle of the night, somebody who lived close enough to see, called people and they went out and blocked the trucks. Because they loaded up the trucks at night to beat us out of a month's pay. They'd hold two-weeks' pay, and then they didn't have pay and we'd wait. So the pay came in and now they were moving out in the middle of the night.

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

SEGAL: This was in 1937.

INTERVIEWER: So not too long after you went to work there? You went to work there in '35?

SEGAL: In the fall of '35. In November. I was there about a year.

INTERVIEWER: And you got a job as a presser. Now that was a pretty unusual job for a woman, right?

SEGAL: Yeah. You know, New York have no women pressers. Maybe now they do, I don't know, but they didn't then. They were all men. Whenever we'd have ILG conferences, the pressers were going to play volley-ball against anybody else. (laughter) So I'd always put myself on their side and get a big laugh, "I'm a presser!" They'd say, "Well, you look like one." You know, because I was big, strong. And that's the only reason I got the job to start with, I guess. They thought I was big and strong enough, and I made the grade.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me something about the presser's job. What did the presser's job entail?

SEGAL: Well, then it was much harder; now they have all kinds of springs and assists for the hands. Then I had a seventeen-pound iron with just heat. You'd pick up one seventeen-pound iron every day, you know. I developed a tremendous muscle on my right arm. But it gave you the weight, and you had to use brute force to press the seams open on the garments, and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Were these dresses that were being made?

SEGAL: Yes, it was a dress shop. Then the next three pressers they hired were men. The competition was keen. But I maintained as good as they did, and better in most cases. I'm not bragging....

INTERVIEWER: Did they pay you at a piece rate or did they pay you by the hour?

SEGAL: By the hour.

INTERVIEWER: By the hour.

SEGAL: Ten cents an hour.

INTERVIEWER: Ten cents an hour!!!

SEGAL: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: Oh boy, terrific!

SEGAL: And I worked eighty hours a week, and you figure when you work eighty hours a week....I went home . . .

INTERVIEWER: You got to be putting in a twelve-hour day, six days a week, or more.

SEGAL: They did you a favor to leave you go eat supper! You carried your lunch and they'd say, "Well, you have to work tonight." "How about eating?" "Well, take ten minutes." So we'd run over to the restaurant and get a bowl of soup or something, gulp it down, and come back and work until eleven o'clock at night. Then I had to take a trolley, you know, from Quakertown to Center Valley, which is a good fifteen miles. And then I had to walk from there a good two miles home. I had an uncle and aunt who lived in Quakertown and a lot of times I would stay at their place. I'd call them up. They were sort of instrumental in getting me the job in the first place. They lived in Quakertown; my uncle has a print shop.

INTERVIEWER: So not too long after you went to work there, I gather, the ILG sent an organizer in?

SEGAL: Yes. It wasn't too long. They started, I think in December, because we went on strike in February. It was the coldest year in thirty-five years; everybody almost froze to death, including me. But it was successful.

INTERVIEWER: Well, now, what was your reaction to this coming of the union, Bonnie? Because you hadn't had any experience with unions hardly up till now other than the fact than your father was a union printer.

SEGAL: Yeah. He never talked....you know, he wasn't union-oriented. Well, my reaction was, and this just shows you what education or lack of education--the only thing I remembered from high school in modern history was that my teacher said that he once worked as a lumber hand and that unions were bad and you

SEGAL: should never go on strike, because if you do, scabs come in and take your jobs. Now this may have been his experience. Scabs come in and take your jobs and you lose out. And this is the only education in labor management I got in high school. And I remembered that; that made an impact. This is what I thought of. So when the union organizer came, I wasn't interested. It so happened the presser that stood aside of me was the main guy for the union. But he wasn't smart, you know, he wasn't convincing at all. He had no convincement for me; he certainly couldn't convince me of anything. When they decided to strike the plant, they left me alone in there. I guess they just figured, you know, they weren't going to antagonize me. But the morning of the strike, the big Amalgamated plant up the street came over and helped the pickets. You know, it looked like a million people. They were blocking....and I wanted to go in. Now, the organizer for the union was good-looking to start with; [that] may have helped! (laughter) A really handsome guy, but he was smart. He'd talk to you. He said, "Let's just walk around the block; I want to talk to you." I said, "Okay." And he saw that I had just graduated from high school and I had my pin--and I never forgot this and I've used this on people and it worked--he said, "I see you went to school. You're intelligent. So you can think things out. You are not just the normal person." Of course, this appeals to your vanity. And I thought: Boy, he's pretty smart to recognize this. I was smart, because I had just graduated from high school, and you think you know everything. (laughter) And I thought I did know everything. So here he's telling me this. So then he said, "Look, we're going to have a meeting." He explained what the union was about, explained what the run-away shop was, how they left and that it wasn't true that they were going to take it back. You see, the rumor was that it's a run-away shop and so, as soon as they organize it, they're going to take it back to New York and we won't have a job. Well, this was crushing! He said, "This isn't true. They aren't going to take it back. It's going to stay here. We don't want it back in New York; we just want to organize it and get you people some decent wages. We're going to strike; we are striking. We're asking for piecework and decent conditions. That's what the union's about!" This was the first lecture I had on union. He made sense. He said, "Now you can come to the meeting, listen, and if you don't agree with what happens at the meeting, you can come back and be a scab." Now this didn't sound very appetizing to me, you know, to be a scab. So I said, "Okay, I'll go along." So I went, I sat, I listened, I signed the card, and I was in the union. From then on I was leader! This is the chain.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Right. Who was this guy who was the organizer? Do you remember his name?

SEGAL: Leo Berezin.

INTERVIEWER: Did he continue to play an active role in the union?

SEGAL: He was manager of the Allentown local for quite a few years. And the rest shouldn't go on the tape! (laughter) [It] broke my heart. They didn't pay much, and he took graft and got caught at it and got fired. Just that simple. He probably took less than many people who are still vice presidents and presidents today.

INTERVIEWER: Right. But he just got caught at it.

SEGAL: He got caught at it. You know, he took stuff like liquor or stuff like money.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So what was your first job with the union?

SEGAL: Of the elected officers, I was secretary of the shop--chairman.

INTERVIEWER: Chairman! (laughter) They didn't talk about chairpersons in those days.

SEGAL: There were two girls and then we hired finally another girl. It was all men.

INTERVIEWER: In the pressing division?

SEGAL: In the pressing division.

INTERVIEWER: Yet all these men elected you chairman.

SEGAL: Yeah. There were four guys and two gals. And only one scab, and that was the other gal.

INTERVIEWER: How many were in the shop altogether?

SEGAL: About eighty people.

INTERVIEWER: So it was a big dress shop, really.

SEGAL: Yeah. And interesting. This was the biggest lesson; I've told this to a million people that I organize: "Don't tell me you're satisfied because I've been through this bit myself." They came, and I said, "I'm satisfied." I was satisfied I had a job, because I didn't have a job before this, but that was the only thing. You certainly can't be satisfied with ten cents an hour working eighty hours and working until eleven o'clock at night, or working Saturdays and working on Sundays. Or working, comes Thanksgiving. I was right out of high school, you know, like in June, so I'm a sports fan and I have football tickets that were so hard to get. The boss says, "You work!" I said, "It's a holiday. What do you mean we work!" Now we didn't have union or anything, but already my mouth was running.

SEGAL: He said, "If you don't like it here, you don't have to work here." Well, that put me out of business, because I was desperate for a job and he knew it.

INTERVIEWER: You were supporting your whole family at that time, right?

SEGAL: The whole family. Nobody else. And he knew it. I had begged for the job to start with. So he knew. But what had happened.... I don't know whether it was six or eight weeks we were on strike; I think it was six weeks. In the bitter of winter, but it was a union town and the cops were decent. [They] used to turn their backs and say, "Kick the hell out of them." Because they were tired of it, too. We did, too, every morning and every night, the scabs that went in. There were maybe twenty or thirty people that went in every day. We just abused the heck out of them, terrible! They wouldn't come out for lunch; they wouldn't come out until they needed to. We would just, you know, they had to run a gauntlet, really. Finally,... I had taken typing in school and stuff....and we'd go down to the union hall and warm up and have sandwiches and soup. I played around with the typewriter and I typed a letter to the boss, just like, you know, doing nothin', but I left it in the typewriter: "Dear Boss: I'm pleading our cause...." I forget now even what I put in. The organizers saw it, took it back to the boss and said, "Here, this is the consensus of opinion." I didn't know this. When it settled, he said, "I want to come down and talk to the strikers." So the boss came down and here, after we kicked the hell out of these people for six weeks, because they were loyal to him, he comes down and says to us, "Look, I've learned a lesson." And he summarizes and he pulls out this paper and he reads this letter. And it was from the heart, evidently, you know. "Here we are, good workers, outside. How can he ever be a success with his good workers outside?" He says, "This summarizes me. I want to tell you, you can....I want all of you back to work. You can do with the scabs what you want to do." He called them scabs. "Because," he said, "I've learned that only the people that weren't competent--the old, the crippled, the non-productive workers--are my scabs." (laughter) "And I can't produce anything. You are my good workers, and you had the guts to go out and stand your ground and I respect you. I want you all back to work, and you can do what you want with the scabs." Because we were going to kill each one of them individually when we got them. "You can do with those scabs whatever you want to do."

INTERVIEWER: So what did you do with them?

SEGAL: We put them on probation. You know, we felt sorry for them. I sat there; I was dumbfounded. You know, I always felt you had to have loyalty to the employer. I don't care who you work for. If you don't have loyalty, what do you have? And here he came, and he was the employer and the people who were loyal he called scabs and turned them over to us to do what we wanted to do. At this point we said, "No way!"

INTERVIEWER: You could then say to them, "See how he rewarded your loyalty?"

SEGAL: Well, we did, Then he left. We said, "Now, you see what reward you get. You see the reward we get. We're not going to kill you each one individually like we were going to. We feel that you're human beings and you need a job just as much as we do and the shop should unite, but you're on probation for a year.

INTERVIEWER: [mid-sentence]....things I want to ask you. I know it's getting late. But I did want to ask you, how much of an increase did you get as a result of the strike?

SEGAL: About a 400 percent increase. Because we started on twenty-five or twenty-six dollars and went on piecework, you know, from eight dollars. And the hours went down, you know. It's hard to figure out, but it must have been....

INTERVIEWER: But you got decreased hours, you went on piecework and, therefore, were able to earn more?

SEGAL: Much more.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

SEGAL: Because from eight dollars and eighty hours we went into like fifty hours for twenty-five dollars. It was right after the NRA [National Recovery Act] was declared unconstitutional, so we weren't under any laws or anything, you know. And that's why these guys ran out of New York, see, because they were under the NRA. Then it was hard to take the money away from the people once you were under the NRA. I think you had to pay them fourteen dollars a week or something like this. It was hard to take anything back, so they just ran away from New York and started all over again.

INTERVIEWER: Bogert was a New Yorker?

SEGAL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: So he really didn't understand Pennsylvanians in terms of how to talk to them or how to deal with them either. Did he sign a contract then?

SEGAL: Yes, he signed a contract. He was a good boss, you know, for about a year. Then in the middle of the night he started to move out.

INTERVIEWER: Where was he going to move to, do you know?

SEGAL: His brother was in Texas and had a big optical company and I guess was making good money. So he [Bogert] decided to go out of business, he'd go out, he'd beat the people. He didn't really go into another place and open another factory.

INTERVIEWER: Well, maybe this is a good place for us to stop "Chapter One."

December 12, 1975

INTERVIEWER: What I'd like to know is, did you go to the Hudson Shore School before you went to England?

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get to go to the Hudson Shore School?

SEGAL: I was at the 1940 ILG [International Ladies Garment Workers Union] convention in New York City, and I was angry . . .

INTERVIEWER: Why were you angry?

SEGAL: Because they wanted to go back into the AFL-CIO. So I went out and sat in the hall. I wouldn't sit in and vote. They told us how to vote. I figured they're not going to tell me, because my members told me how to vote. We wanted to go in the CIO; and if I couldn't go in the CIO, I wasn't going anywhere. Esther Peterson came along and sat down beside me, and we started to talk. She said, "How would you like to go to Hudson Shore Labor School?"

INTERVIEWER: Now, was Esther Peterson in the union at that time?

SEGAL: She belonged to the Amalgamated [Clothing Workers Union] at that time, and she was on the staff of the Hudson Shore Labor School.

INTERVIEWER: I see. Okay, so how did you feel about going to the Hudson Shore Labor School?

SEGAL: Well, I was all excited. One thing I had wanted to do--I had graduated from high school--I wanted to go to Penn State. But we had the Depression at that time, and I had to work to support the family. It was an eight week course [Hudson Shore Labor School]. So I dragged her in the booth where the manager was and said, "Is it okay? Can I go?" She said, "Yes." So I finished the convention, came home, packed my bag, and went to the Hudson Shore Labor School for eight weeks.

INTERVIEWER: What did you study at the Hudson Shore Labor School?

SEGAL: It was all labor, dramatics, biology, things I had never learned in high school.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have economics?

SEGAL: Economics.

INTERVIEWER: Who were the teachers?

SEGAL: Well, Esther [Peterson] was one, and Jill Rotundo was the economics, and Carey White from Philly at Temple was the philosophy, I think. Esther was dramatics and literature. We put on plays and skits.

INTERVIEWER: You had a good time?

SEGAL: Very nice.

INTERVIEWER: There were both men and women students? Or just women?

SEGAL: Women in industry.

INTERVIEWER: Were they from all over? Or mostly from the East?

SEGAL: Mostly from the East and mostly from shops. There were some from YW's [YWCA], industrial secretaries, but on the whole mostly from the shops.

INTERVIEWER: Now, is this where you met Hilda Smith?

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: She was there at the school?

SEGAL: Yes. She owned the place.

INTERVIEWER: Was she teaching at the school at the time, Bonnie?

SEGAL: No, but she would have a special session. She would talk to us or read poetry. We had John Beecher . . .

INTERVIEWER: Oh, yes, right.

SEGAL: He taught us literature, poetry. Had us all budding poets! (laughter) He really did. He could inspire you to do anything.

INTERVIEWER: There's a lot of quotes by him in this new book of Studs Terkel's, you know. He apparently interviewed him the way I'm interviewing you.

SEGAL: Really?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

SEGAL: I'd like to see him again.

INTERVIEWER: I guess he's living some place in the South.

SEGAL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: He was from the South, wasn't he?

SEGAL: Well, I think they [the Beechers] sort of followed these camps, migratory camps. I once stayed with them. I have one of his first-issue books of poetry that he wrote, autographed. He used to call me "Butch".

INTERVIEWER: Called you what?

SEGAL: Butch! (laughter)

INTERVIEWER: What do you think going to the Hudson Shore School did for you as far as your trade union career?

SEGAL: Well, it gave me a broader perspective. I didn't have much confidence in myself; but when I got there, they made sure, you know, they sort of used you and put you in positions with people who were much smarter than you and then proceeded to show how much smarter you were than they were!

INTERVIEWER: (laughing) Right.

SEGAL: And this isn't easy to do, but the purpose was to show you that you were just as good as anybody in this world no matter what your background is, what your education is, that you don't have to take a back seat for nobody.

INTERVIEWER: That's the whole purpose of worker's education, isn't it, Bonnie?

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: You said it very, very well. Well, now, when the Hudson Shore School was over, you came back to Allentown?

SEGAL: Back to Easton.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, to Easton. And what was your job with the union when you came back?

SEGAL: I came back as education director part-time.

INTERVIEWER: What was the other part of your time. Servicing locals?

SEGAL: No, I worked in the shop.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, you worked in the shop.

SEGAL: Then I went into the service.

INTERVIEWER: As a W.A.C. [Women's Army Corps]?

SEGAL: Yeah. Then I came out of the service and went to Harvard, and then I came back home.

INTERVIEWER: Now, how did you get a chance to go to the Harvard School?

SEGAL: Mark Starr.

INTERVIEWER: Mark Starr? You had met him through the union, not at the Hudson Shore?

SEGAL: Well, actually it was through Hudson Shore that I first met him, at one of the institutes. We used to have institutes; the ILG used to have institutes. And I met him there. But I really met him while I was at the eight-week institute and got to know him, and I became his protegee. From then on anything I got, it was through Mark Starr.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think about his philosophy of workers education?

SEGAL: I thought he was great. A lot of people didn't. You know, they thought he was too stuffy, but I thought he was the greatest.

INTERVIEWER: You really understood him, right? Things he used to say to me like: "We teach workers not what to think but how to think." Remember that?

SEGAL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: A very simple statement but a very important concept. What kind of programs did you run as education director in Easton?

SEGAL: Well, we had choral classes, we had language classes. We had a lot of Italian members, and we started Italian classes. We put out a bulletin, and we'd get speakers in and have one session of education programs.

INTERVIEWER: So when was it that you went to Harvard then? In 1946? About then?

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How long a program was that?

SEGAL: A whole year.

INTERVIEWER: A whole year you stayed!!

SEGAL: That was the trade union fellowship.

INTERVIEWER: Right. And you took courses at Harvard?

SEGAL: Yeah. At the Business School.

INTERVIEWER: Like Clint Golden used to say, he didn't have a good enough school education to go to Harvard, but the labor movement gave him an education so he could go to Harvard.

SEGAL: It exactly applied to me, too.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So how did you come to go to England, then, on the Fulbright Fellowship?

SEGAL: Well, Mark Starr used to say to me when I would meet him in the elevator or something....you know, Ford had an ad, "There's a Ford in your future.", and every time Mark wouldn't say "Hello," he'd say, "There's a Fulbright in your future." (laughter) After a while I felt like a heel for not applying. So I didn't have courage to apply; I didn't think I was qualified; but if he thought I was, then I felt like I had to apply. I applied and I got it. I went to Oxford for a year.

INTERVIEWER: Now, you had already met Mannie [Segal] then?

SEGAL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: But you decided to wait to get married?

SEGAL: Until I came home, because of political ramifications.

INTERVIEWER: Right, in being Bonnie Segal, right.

SEGAL: Because Fulbright was under attack then.

INTERVIEWER: And had Mannie been involved in the Fur and Leather Workers?

SEGAL: Not really. He just was involved in anything that came down the pike.

INTERVIEWER: Right, this was the McCarthy era when there were lists being kept.

SEGAL: Yeah, he was progressive.

INTERVIEWER: Well, tell me something about....I've always wanted myself to go to the Workers' School at Ruskin College at Oxford. Imagine that, Bonnie! You went to Harvard, you went to Oxford! It's incredible. Tell me about being at the Ruskin School.

SEGAL: Well, that was an experience in itself. These kids that went there, a lot of them were married. The first opportunity they ever had to go to college was after the war, and they were on scholarships from their locals.

INTERVIEWER: Their locals in England, you mean?

SEGAL: Yes. And the state paid them money, paid the family money so they could afford to go. Of course, it wasn't much. Nothing was much. It was a two-year course for them; and if they passed that, they had an opportunity to go on to university. Some did and became college professors with a Cockney accent. (laughter) And this was unheard of, you know! England still had the caste system, and you were qualified by your accent. If you and I had the same brainpower and qualifications, if I had a Cockney accent and you had a proper British accent, you got the job. But that ceased; it took the war.

INTERVIEWER: It would be fun to go back now and see what the open university in England has done to Ruskin College and how it's changed.

SEGAL: They still have a program going.

INTERVIEWER: What was the program like?

SEGAL: It was very academic. It was economics and theory and political theory.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to write papers?

SEGAL: Yes, we tutored. They had a tutoring system there. You were assigned to a professor and you'd meet with him each week. He'd give you an assignment and you wrote your paper and then you'd discuss it with him, person to person. You'd have to be prepared to argue your . . .

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember the titles of some of your papers?

SEGAL: No. The first half of the year I took labor history because I wanted to learn about British history. The second was with collective bargaining by Allen Flanders, who was the great.... he was head of the department and had never had time to finish college.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really.

SEGAL: While I was there, he was given his doctorate. That's the difference in the educational systems. He wrote books and did all sorts of things. There you'd go to college for a hundred years and not get a doctorate. You don't have to graduate from college to get a doctorate.

INTERVIEWER: It's based on . . .

SEGAL: Performance.

INTERVIEWER: Performance.

SEGAL: Which I think is great. I always think of Elwood Kepley. If he would have been there, he would have been professor.

INTERVIEWER: Right, he did wonderful things for education in Pennsylvania. Well, what do you think you got out of going to Ruskin College?

SEGAL: Well, I gained a wide spectrum of knowledge. It's hard to . . .

INTERVIEWER: It's hard to say.

SEGAL: ....put something like this into a nutshell. It's something you live for the rest of your life.

INTERVIEWER: I was talking to someone not too long ago--I can't remember who it was--who said they were in Ruskin College on a Fulbright the year after you were there. All they heard from everybody was "Bonnie Segal, Bonnie Segal".

SEGAL: Bonnie Taylor!

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, right, right. Who went there after you? From the labor movement?

SEGAL: I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: I was trying to think of who it was I was talking to. Anyway, she said she had a very hard reputation to live up to! Apparently you were very popular with all the other students. You must have been feeding them, Bonnie!

SEGAL: I did!!

INTERVIEWER: (laughing) That's what I figured!

SEGAL: My roommate was starving to death. Mannie would send me stuff, and then we'd have parties.

INTERVIEWER: [Are] any of the people that you were students with active in the labor movement in England today that you know of?

SEGAL: Yes. I wouldn't know offhand their names any more, but every now and then you get a report. Some are heads of unbelievable stuff.

INTERVIEWER: Active in government as well as in the labor movement?

SEGAL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, well, when you came back from England, you and Mannie got married, right?

SEGAL: Right away.

INTERVIEWER: Right away?

SEGAL: Oh, within a month, you know, a couple of months. December.

INTERVIEWER: And you went back to working in Easton?

SEGAL: No, I was working then in Allentown.

INTERVIEWER: And you worked in the education department.

SEGAL: I was a business agent in Allentown for a while, and then Elwood Kepley left and I took over his job.

INTERVIEWER: As education director for the Northeast Department?

SEGAL: No, just for Allentown.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, just for Allentown. How did you move from Allentown to Harrisburg?

SEGAL: You'll have to turn the tape off for that. (laughter)

INTERVIEWER: (after interruption in tape) Okay, well, when you came down to Harrisburg, what was your job? When did you come to Harrisburg?

SEGAL: It must be about twelve years. I came because it was more of a challenge, the seat of the government. Education being my job, it was really a good move, an inspiration.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you....I don't want to get you too tired out here or I'll be in trouble with Mannie....but there is one question I'd like to ask you. I've heard you talk about being a woman leader in the trade union movement, and I was wondering if you could say something to the younger women coming along about how to assume leadership and what you think the problems were for you.

SEGAL: Well, I never considered it a problem. I just saw what I believed and believed what I thought; and in spite of bits of discrimination that we were all subjected to from time to time, I never felt that I was anything else but part of the labor movement. This was my job, and nobody else bothered me. Of course, I had stars in my eyes, too, and young people should have stars in their eyes, should like to be an inspiration. But you have to work at it. You can't sit back and feel sorry for yourself and think that the world's against you. I had all sorts of, you know, funny experiences as an organizer. I organized for about a year or more than a year around the state for the Organization Department when I left Easton. And we had all kinds of people that looked at you out of the side of their head. You know, it was always me with a half a dozen guys.

INTERVIEWER: They wondered what was going on!

SEGAL: Hotels would put me on a different floor and all kinds of stuff. I never let this bother me. I figured: let them feel what they want to feel. It didn't bother me at all. Before long they'd put us in suites so we were in the next room to each other. You know, they saw that it was legitimate. But you had to win your way.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it's still that way. You still have to contend with what people are going to think. You know, if you go and have coffee with somebody, they don't necessarily think you're talking about union business. People come to all kinds of weird conclusions.

SEGAL: I imagine. But it was much worse. You know, I stuck out like a sore thumb.

INTERVIEWER: Right, because there were so few women.

SEGAL: Six organizers come into town. It was like the kiss of death; everybody saying they'd like to run you out on the next broom! But it always worked out.

INTERVIEWER: Where did you organize in particular?

SEGAL: Well, I was pretty well around the state. I spent a lot of time in Carbondale and in Lebanon.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-um, up in the Poconos.

SEGAL: Yeah. Then here in Lebanon, Harrisburg, this area. I worked for a long time, so it wasn't a new area. When I came back as the educational director, people knew me then.

INTERVIEWER: So they accepted you here in Harrisburg pretty well.

SEGAL: Oh, great!

INTERVIEWER: Elwood Kepley was the education director for the state, right?

SEGAL: Yes, he was with the AFL-CIO then.

INTERVIEWER: Was that before merger?

SEGAL: Oh, after merger.

INTERVIEWER: After merger. When did he die? It's been since before I came on the staff, I know that.

SEGAL: Twelve years ago. Yes, he died, he died shortly after I got here.

INTERVIEWER: Right. He wasn't in that position very long unfortunately. Labor education in this state would be a different story if he had been.

SEGAL: It sure would.

INTERVIEWER: Well, let's quit for the time being, okay? (Talks about being tired, etc.) For years I thought if I could just follow Bonnie Segal around, I'd be doing all right!!

SEGAL: That's what a lot of people thought. Now look at me.

INTERVIEWER: Well, it took quite a bit to get you down. And here you're still sitting here getting out the doggoned paper.

SEGAL: Well, it's one of those things. Nobody else took an interest in it, or knows how to do it. You hate to stick them. So this is the second one I've put out practically in the hospital.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I remember you were telling me you did this last year, too. Well, what do you think we ought to say about a career in workers' education? Would you recommend it to a young woman?

SEGAL: I sure would! I think it's a very stimulating job. You know, it isn't monotonous.

INTERVIEWER: Never boring.

SEGAL: I never found it boring or monotonous. If you have the inclination for it....it's good for anybody who's imaginative and full of ideas.

INTERVIEWER: And wants to do something for people.

SEGAL: And likes to help people. Because a lot of people can't help themselves and still today it takes other people to help. In people there's always leaders and there's followers. You need leaders. We've always tried to develop leaders. Most of our staff are from the shops. Right?

INTERVIEWER: You yourself are from the shops. Brook Landis was telling me that Harrisburg class has about fifty or sixty people this year.

SEGAL: HACC? [Harrisburg Area Community College]

INTERVIEWER: Right. That's incredible, too, You know, it takes a lot of seed work to develop a center that's that active. You had to have really worked on it.

SEGAL: I'm going to turn it over to somebody else because you got to stay on top of them and water them. It didn't pay this last time, I know. They just take advantage of it, and I haven't had the

SEGAL: time or the energy to go through the list and compile it and see who paid and who didn't pay. So they'll get away with it.

INTERVIEWER: Right. (laughing) There's a lot of AFSCME people in that class, aren't there? I've found you have to watch them pretty closely.

SEGAL: You do.

INTERVIEWER: Well, visiting hours are just about over, and I promised Mannie I wouldn't stay past....

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