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THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
and
THE 20th CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview
with
NELLE WOODING
Communications Workers of America
by
John Schacht

Program on Women and Work
Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations
University of Michigan - Wayne State University
Ann Arbor, Michigan

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VITAE

Nelle Wooding was hired in 1914 by the telephone company in Dallas, Texas, to work as a student operator. After years of putting up with the telephone company's "employees' association," workers organized the Southwestern Telephone Workers Union (STWU). Wooding joined in October, 1937, and in December of that year she was elected chair of her local.

Wooding led the 1947 strike in Dallas against the telephone company, which lasted for six weeks. She points with pride to the fact that out of approximately 1000 operators, not more than fifteen crossed the picket line.

In November, 1947, Wooding was elected to the staff of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) in St. Louis, where she served on the bargaining committee. She moved to San Antonio as a field representative in 1950, where she serviced a four-hundred square mile territory. From 1951 until her retirement in 1961, Wooding served as one of two representatives from the traffic department on the negotiating committee.

Wooding was also active in the CWA education program, conducting schools all over Texas for local CWA officers and at the State University at Norman, Oklahoma. Wooding was on the CWA staff until she retired in 1961.

Oral History Interview

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NELLE WOODING

March 24, 1970
Dallas, Texas

by

John Schacht

INTERVIEWER: Why don't we start out by asking you a little bit about your background, and how you got into telephone work, and your impressions of telephone work in your early years?

WOODING: I was employed by the telephone company here in Dallas in 1914 as a student operator at a salary of twenty dollars a month. They did train well in those days. They needed to because everything was manual, and it was much more--well, I shouldn't say more complicated than it is now, but for one thing they paid more attention to the articulation of the operators. We had hours of drilling on how to pronounce the digits. They had a special way: you were to trill your "r" in the "three," and you were to say the figure two as though it was "tue," like t-u-e for Tuesday, and that sort of thing. So I was in training for three weeks. Then we had a huge manual of instructions that we had to read, some of which I can almost quote yet: "Skill is not mere speed, but rather the quiet, easy execution," and so on, which was all very good, but it took time. The fourth week we were in school--we were student operators, but we didn't operate alone--we were taken to the real switchboard. We had done the switchboards in the school room. We had quite a schoolroom: several rooms and dummy boards where the instructors could throw in calls and so on. But in the fourth week, we went to the real switchboard, and with an instructor listening in with us, we actually handled calls.

After one week of that we were transferred to the operating department and assigned hours. Of course, the new employees

WOODING: always got late hours, and mine were from one to ten thirty in the evening. We did have an hour for supper. When I was transferred, I got an increase of five dollars a month. I got an additional five dollars for working the late hours, so I was then making thirty dollars a month or a dollar a day and I worked that for one year. At the end of the year I got another five dollars, making it thirty-five dollars a month. About six months later I was promoted to what then they called supervisor--it wasn't a management position, and the title since has been changed to service assistant--and that gave me another five dollars. It seemed the company could never get their sights above five dollars. I don't know just how long I worked for that salary. Somewhere down the line, they switched over from monthly to weekly payroll, and I was making twelve dollars a week. Of course, wages were not high generally, but that was among the lowest wages paid anywhere other than laundry workers and dime store employees. But I was just a teenager and I didn't have an advanced education, and that was just about the best job I was able to find at that time. And once I got into it-- I had always had some family responsibilities. I was the last child in the family, and my parents were quite matured by the time I was grown, and it wasn't long till I was helping take care of them. So even though it wasn't much of a job, I needed to keep it. I can't say that I ever really enjoyed the work. I was always wanting to get into something else, but I stayed with it.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit about conditions, working conditions, in this early period?

WOODING: We worked longer hours, and, of course, the Sunday work was one thing that was objectionable. At one time Texas had a fifty-four hour law for women; women could not work over fifty-four hours a week. We usually worked every other Sunday. The force was divided just about half and half, and one week prior to the Sunday that we were to work we were given a weekday off. But then we got a mayor here in Dallas--later-- at that time he was an attorney for the telephone company. And he said, "You don't have to give those people a day off." Of course, I'm not quoting him verbatim, but this is what it resulted in. He said, "The law says you can't work over fifty-four hours in a calendar week, but Sunday's the beginning of a new week, so they can work Monday through Saturday, straight through Sunday, and on till Friday of the next week if necessary and still not violate the law." So that's what we began to do. We would work ten and twelve days without a day off. It was just another example of exploiting the workers it seemed to me. The telephone company was always smart enough to obey the letter of the law, but the spirit was mutilated many times.

WOODING: Of course, we worked late hours; that was understandable. It's the type of work that goes on around the clock seven days a week. We recognize that. But so many things, improvements that have come since we've had a union that we didn't have then at all. One thing I remember is the matter of carfare payments. For years now we've had it in our union contracts that when a person works divided hours--and that's necessary to maintain the work--they'll work the morning shift, be off all afternoon, and come back and work till maybe eight or nine at night. Many of the people like it. Personally I never did, but that's a matter of opinion. And hours were chosen in line of seniority. That was always observed. The newer people worked the later hours. Sometimes every three months, sometimes every six months, sometimes once a year--according to the office and requirements--whenever a new schedule was drawn we were asked if we wanted to keep the hours we had, or we were told what earlier hours were available. But these girls who worked the divided hours, for years under the union, get an extra carfare differential. You pay your way to work and home once. If the company needs to have you work a split tour and have two trips a day, they pay the second trip. But that wasn't done when I was working at first nor anytime before the union. When I was made a supervisor, as it was termed, the hours I worked were twelve o'clock to two o'clock at noon and five o'clock to ten o'clock in the evening, which meant that I had a three hour break in the afternoon. You either just sat around in the rest-room and crocheted or did something of that sort, which I never cared much for, or you went home, and when I went home it was double carfare. Although carfare was only five cents a ride then, four trips a day at twenty cents, when you weren't making but thirty-five dollars a month, wasn't easy. So I used to walk home. I lived some fifteen or eighteen blocks from the office and I'd walk there and back. And then, of course, I was on my feet seven hours a day on the job. So it wasn't easy by any means. I was young enough to take it, but it was kind of tough.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard people refer to the tremendous pressure that's on operators. I wonder if you could tell me your opinion of this pressure, both from the viewpoint of an operator and from the viewpoint of a supervisor.

WOODING: Well, one marked thing there: now the supervisors, or service assistants, as they're called, are provided with chairs, where they sit down back of the operator. We had no chairs. We were on our feet every minute and we were to watch those operators like a hawk and see that they did their work properly. The companies always had a procedure of making observations and they made what they called speed of answer tests. They'd have someone with a stopwatch throwing in calls, and if they weren't

WOODING: answered within ten seconds--that was the time allotted-- it was a slow answer. And if you had too many slow answers--each supervisor had what was termed a division; it was about twelve to fourteen operators--and if you had very many slow answers in your division you had to write a reason for it and send it to the district traffic superintendent. I was always inclined to say, "If I knew the reason, it wouldn't have happened." It seemed foolish to me to ask you why you did something wrong when no one was deliberately doing it. Usually the reason we had slow answers was because we had more signals than we could answer. And the pressure has not stopped. I understand it's still going, in different ways, but it's there.

INTERVIEWER: Did the company attempt during the twenties, which I guess is the period we've got into now, attempt to establish an employees' association or plan of representation or anything like that?

WOODING: That's a long story. I'd like to tell you about it. I understand they had them all over the country, but I know firsthand about the one here. I always felt that what started it was, in about 1917 they had a wildcat strike in one of the larger towns in Arkansas. There was no union, but just in desperation the girls walked off the job because of wages and working conditions. There was no protective law, of course, at that time, so the company just fired every one of them and brought in girls from all over the territory. We had a few people from Dallas who went. They were actually going in as strikebreakers, but they didn't think of it in those terms. They had to keep them there for weeks, even months, because they employed an entirely new force of operators and had to train them. It was a while for both local and long distance. As I said earlier, it required a longer training period than it does now. And also they had to gain some speed. After they could operate the board, speed comes gradually. So these girls were kept there--that went in from out of town--with all expenses paid and they got their hometown salary, which in most cases was better than the salary there. They also sent some management people, some men and women, to act as chaperones and escorts so those girls wouldn't get homesick and want to leave. They were just coddled and pampered. They had more fun than they'd probably ever had in their lives. Nothing improper, but they would play games in the evening. If there happened to be any entertainment in the city worth seeing, why, the men would have to escort them and, of course, buy their tickets. And it was just a ball.

It wasn't long after that happened--but let me say before I leave the subject: I think that's one of the most unjust things that I've ever known of. It's happened in other places, but the company spent probably ten times as much money on that thing as it would have cost them to give those girls a decent wage. But they knew if they gave a good wage rate there everybody

WOODING: else would clamor for it. So to keep wages down, and particularly to crush any idea of a union having any authority, the sky was the limit on expense. They'd pay anything to keep that under control. And it wasn't too long, a matter of a few months, I think, after that was over, when the company began organizing this employees' association.

I never did have any respect for it. I wasn't union-minded. I didn't have a union background. But I don't like hypocrisy, and I think that thing was just a farce. It was something that they were just throwing out to the people to make them think they had a union, but it was of, by, and for the telephone company. We had membership cards; we had elections and that kind of business. There were no dues, and it's a good thing there wasn't because it wasn't worth a red cent to the employee. At times, when they were going to elect officers--each chapter, they called it, elected their own officers--and I was asked if I would accept office, but I never did. I did join the thing because if you didn't you not only had to go to the district man but on up to the division superintendent, and explain why you didn't want to join. They were still on a witch hunt for union-minded people. So just to keep quiet, I'd sign the card. Once a year we'd sign a new card. They had the date on them; they were on a yearly basis. And every year we'd go up to the chief operator's desk and sign a new card, so you can see it was very much management operated. I carried the card; that's as far as I ever went in the whole thing. Although I wasn't an officer and didn't attend any of the meetings--which were just for the officers, there were never any general membership meetings--but I've been told by responsible people who were officers that if anyone did ask they'd make out a list of things they wanted to talk about. And if there was a broken window blind or some minor thing, why, yes, they took care of that, which they would have anyway, of course. But if you asked about wages they'd mark it off of the list: "Well, we can't talk about that."

So the thing was of no value, really, to the employees. And when the Wagner Act was passed in 1935, among other things, it made those sort of associations illegal. The company obeyed the letter of the law and told us they could no longer operate as they had in the past. We could continue the organization on our own, but we would have to finance it. So we began paying ten cents a month dues.

INTERVIEWER: May I interrupt you here to ask you if this was in 1935 when the Wagner Act was passed, or later, in 1937?

WOODING: Well, I'm getting to that. In 1935, in that interim--you know the historical fact is that in 1935 the Wagner Act was passed,

WOODING: but there was immediately a hue and cry on the part of business that it was unconstitutional, and it was taken to the courts. Finally, in April of 1937, the Supreme Court of the United States declared it constitutional, and then this old employee's association had to be abolished completely. But in that interim, from 1935 to 1937, there was still some sort of little organization, but we paid for it. If we had a meeting room, we would have to pay for it ourselves, whereas before all expenses were borne by the company. But in 1937, when the Act was declared constitutional, then this was abolished entirely. But having existed as long as it did, it was unfortunate that many people in the labor movement generally thought the telephone union was a company-dominated union. Actually, after the union was organized in 1937, I believe in May--the Supreme Court declared the Wagner Act constitutional in April of 1937--in May of 1937 the Southwestern Telephone Workers Union was organized with eighty members. It was about the fastest growing thing we'd ever seen at that time, and they were paying dues of sorts. After that we were completely on our own.

Now, the company took the position sort of passively and they didn't say much, but now and then they'd say something to the effect--I can't quote--but the idea was, "Well, if you must have a union, we're so glad you're going to have an independent union. You're superior people." They always told us that except on our paychecks. "You're a special class, and we selected you out from among a wide force because of your particular qualities," and so on. "So don't get mixed up with all that rough, tough element in labor unions. Have your own union." But as time went on, every forward step that the union made, we encountered more opposition from the telephone company, of course. And finally in 1949, when CWA affiliated with CIO, the company reached the height of absurdity in this territory. Now, this wasn't done all over the country, I understand, but in Southwestern Bell Company they cancelled all of our contracts. By that time we had begun to negotiate system wide. They cancelled all contracts on the basis, very piously, that we were no longer the union that they had negotiated the contract with, and they just couldn't, in conscience, observe it. So we couldn't even have a grievance meeting. They would talk to us, but they wouldn't do anything about it.

INTERVIEWER: Their consciences compelled them to hold off dues, too, didn't they?

WOODING: Yes, they did. They held the dues in escrow, which made it very hard for us because we needed the money, of course.

INTERVIEWER: How did the Depression affect the attitudes of telephone operators? Did it have anything to do with making them more ready to join a real union?

WOODING:

I think it did because here in Dallas for more than two years we worked only three and four days a week. After we did have a union, the company would tell us how good they'd been to us, and one day I got enough of that. We were in a meeting with the Texas traffic area director. We'd headed up the grievance and gone on up the line, and he was arrogant by telling us how good they were and so on. I said, "I want to ask you something. Did it cost the company any more to keep a hundred people on the payroll working those three days a week than it would have cost them to lay off half of them and keep fifty at six days a week?" "Well, about the same." I said, "Of course, it was the same. The employees helped each other. It didn't cost the company a penny, and you had the advantage of keeping a trained force at your fingertips. And when the business picked up and you needed those people you didn't have to employ or train anyone. You just let them work more days." I said, "Now I don't want you to ever tell me again you helped us during the Depression. You didn't. We helped each other, and probably if we had to do it over we'd do the same thing. I agree that part-timing is better than layoffs, but don't tell me you did something wonderful. You didn't." And I still feel that way.

Then another very serious thing during the Depression, as bad a wage schedule as we had they did have certain progression schedules. You got so much when you started and so much a year later, and so on. Those progression increases were stopped completely for a period of three years, and the little girl that hadn't worked long and wasn't making but a pittance, just went into the deep freeze. And when those girls on the lower wages worked only three days a week or four days a week, there were many times when their take-home pay was only seven dollars a week. Even during a depression, you can't live on seven dollars a week. Of course, prices were lower. They had a company cafeteria. No, I believe ours was closed by that time; they still had one out at the toll office where they had more employees. But there was a cafeteria around the corner where you could get a simple but fair meal for fifteen cents. But there were days when we didn't have fifteen cents. So we either ate at home or didn't eat. And, of course, the city had grown then to where everybody couldn't go home for lunch. So times were very hard, and I think that helped people to see that they must do something to protect themselves in the future. Years later, after I went to San Antonio as a staff person, I met a girl there who had worked during the Depression and was one of those younger employees, and she said she worked sixteen years before she reached the maximum. The schedule was thirteen years long, and they added this three-year freeze. And when you came out of the freeze and they picked up progression increases, they didn't go back and make it retroactive. You just started fresh.

INTERVIEWER: At the time the genuine union, leading to the establishment of the Southwestern Telephone Workers Union, began to be established, did you then move in and start to play an active part in the union?

WOODING: Yes, I think I joined the union about October of 1937, because, as I said, it was organized in Oklahoma and kind of worked its way down through the other states. And in December of that year we had an election of officers, and they asked me to serve as chairman, [as] we called it then. Later we called the locals' leaders president and vice-president, but it was chairman then. The woman who had been chairman of this old employees' association was an intelligent person and she said she not only was tired because she'd worked with that other thing-- and she had tried. She couldn't do much, but she had tried to make it amount to something. But she felt that because we must make a clean break between the union and the old employees' association, it was better to have new officers. So I went in as chairman, and I often later told, when we were having the stewards' meetings and education schools and so on, and the new officers felt so insecure, I said, "I know what you mean because no one was ever more green than I was." I had no union background. I was raised in New Mexico and northwest Texas, and the only employee relation we ever had was the hired hand that worked for my dad on the farm, so I knew nothing about it. And as Will Rogers used to say, "All I know is what I read in the papers," and what we read in the papers about unions wasn't good then any more than it is now. But she answered my questions, this former officer, and convinced me that it was worth working with, so I tried it.

I did learn what the law was and knew that we were now protected, that the Wagner Act gave us the right to organize and participate in unions without fear of discharge or discrimination. And very soon after I was elected, and we had a local membership meeting, the girls came up with a long list of things that they wanted presented to management, grievances of various sorts, and things needed in the office. None of them too serious, but it was important to them. It wasn't wages it was just rather minor working conditions. So we listed them, sent a nice, formal, polite letter to the district traffic superintendent with whom we were to meet, and asked for a meeting on a certain day. I'm not sure we mentioned the date. We asked for a meeting. He didn't acknowledge the letter, didn't say anything about it, so finally I went to his office and asked him when we would meet. Well, he had to do this and that and he kept putting us off. I think we waited several weeks.

Finally, I approached him again, and he became rather insolent and he said, "Well, I've got something to do besides hold meet-

WOODING: ings." So I just got on the phone and called the division traffic superintendent, who was his boss, told him what had happened, and asked him who we could meet with and when. When I did that, my immediate supervisor was alarmed. She said, "Nelle, you'll get fired." I said, "No, I won't. I'm within the law. It's the company that's violating the law by refusing to meet with us." Well, the division man knew that, and I knew he would. He immediately, I know, got on the telephone and told this district man to get on the ball. In about thirty minutes here comes this district man sauntering down to my desk very nonchalantly and said, "Well, when would you like to hold that meeting?" I said, "We're ready any time." He said, "How about this afternoon?" "That's fine." So we had the meeting.

He never did again avoid having a meeting with us, but he thought up something new every day. We had more trouble with that man than you could imagine. He was almost a sadistic type. He made the remark one time that if people let themselves get run over they deserved it. So he tested us out every day. He never did run over us. I have gone to the division man's office and reported him until it seemed to me that he would have been embarrassed because he would refuse to grant--he didn't refuse to meet--but he did refuse to grant reasonable and permissible requests. So we had the right, in our union, of appealing at the different management levels. I'd go to the division man. He would call the district man up there, agree with me, and politely, of course, say to the district man, "Now, don't you think you can work that out?" He'd grunt, "Guess so." We'd get that settled, but maybe the next week we'd be right back on something else. It was a constant battle. Of course, I'm speaking just of this one office and this one man, but I know there were similar things.

Also in our set up, in the early days of the union, we were organized by departmental lines. We had local officers. We also had division offices, and the division covered the same territory as the company division. At that time in Texas there were four divisions: Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest. Dallas was in the Northeast Division, and I was elected chairman of the Northeast Division, which meant that I worked with the locals in that entire division. And on my day off--by that time we were on a five-day week--we had one weekday off, and I also was a clerk then and didn't work on Sunday, was not required to. So on my days off another member of this division group, which was also in Dallas, we'd take her car and drive to these surrounding towns until I had visited and become acquainted with the girls, at least the local officers in every office in the territory. Believe me, the conditions were appalling in many of them, and those little girls were heroines in standing up to management on grievances, because in small communities

WOODING: it's just almost a family relationship. Now, one of the big problems in the telephone industry was our scattered offices. We had traffic offices, particularly, with not more than ten people in them. They were too small to have a separate local, so they were combined in what we termed group locals. It would be sometimes as many as five or seven towns in one local in order to have enough members to operate. In those very small offices I've had the girls--the officer or the steward--say, "Well, I just can't talk back to this chief operator. Why, I've known her ever since I was a little girl." And we had to do a real education job to show them that, first of all, they were protected. They were not going to be discriminated against. If they were, we'd just have another grievance and settle that, which has been done. But they were the representatives of the employees, and if the employees had a grievance, their first responsibility was to present it. They should talk to the chief operator about it, and if she couldn't or wouldn't settle it, then they had the right of appeal on up the line of the union, and we could go to different levels of management. But it always had to start where the trouble was. And many of those stewards were actually frightened; they were tearful, but bless their hearts most of them did their share and helped build the union step by step. We don't have that problem today, because most of those small offices are now community dial. They work out of some larger office, and we don't have people working in those tiny little communities. But there was some real heroism in those early days getting legitimate grievances settled.

INTERVIEWER: You were a long time before formal written contracts still at this point?

WOODING: Yes, we were. We didn't have any written contracts until--1944 is when we first went into this territory, all departments and all areas, on general bargaining. The company had a terrible hodgepodge to start with, and we fell into it and had to just work out of it as best we could. I went in and negotiated and got a dollar increase for the girls here in the Dallas local in 1939. A dollar wasn't much, but it looked big to us because we got it ourselves. Then in less than a year we got another dollar, and in 1940 the traffic people met in September in St. Joseph, Missouri, at the home of Mrs. Nancy Franks, and we determined that we would all go in at one time and ask for a two-dollar-a-week increase. We felt very bold to ask for two dollars system wide, and it was quite a bold stroke in those days. But somewhere there'd been a leak, and while we were still in that meeting calls began coming in some from Texas and elsewhere, from the local officers, saying that the company had gone to them, asked for a meeting, and offered them a dollar-a-week increase, and what must they do? Well, bless their hearts, most of them rejected it in order to

WOODING: support our company wide demand for two dollars. However, they didn't all get two dollars. In the larger offices we did, but many of the small offices finally had to settle for their dollar. But that was another marked example of unselfish co-operation, of trying to work for the good of the whole. Because we'd had all these various agreements and sort of little semi-contracts on a departmental basis, with at least wage schedules. When it was determined to go in on a system wide basis of all departments, in 1944, some of the departments had to extend their contracts for three months, maybe more, in order to meet a common termination date. When the group that had the latest termination date of their contract could go in, then all the others went in together. That's when we first got a Southwestern Telephone Workers' group contract for all departments and we have negotiated on that basis ever since.

INTERVIEWER: As the chairman of traffic of one of the four divisions in Texas, were you in a position then to play a prominent part, or see what was going on in the Southwestern Telephone Workers' Union?

WOODING: Yes, that enabled me to go to the conventions. They didn't call them conventions, but they had meetings once a year, at least, of the officers of the Southwestern Telephone Workers' Union. Usually they were held in Oklahoma City, because that was the most centrally located place for people to go to. No one had any excessive travel distance. I was considered a member of the Texas Area Council, an officer. Later I was also elected vice-chairman. I was asked to run for chairman, but I never did because of some internal things and I thought it would make more stir than it was worth. I was not ambitious. I never campaigned for an office in my life. The jobs were there begging for somebody to take them. But I did attend these meetings and had a part--I had a voice if not always a vote--at these meetings and I think I had a part in helping the union to go into CWA for this old.... The Southwestern Telephone Workers' Union was one of the affiliates of the National Federation of Telephone Workers, which was organized in 1939. Then later it became the Communications Workers of America, and each of these member groups had to vote. And I felt it was a step forward and a good thing.

In Dallas and in Fort Worth and in some of the larger places, prior to the meeting at which we would vote on that, we polled our membership and explained to them what the situation was--the advantages that it probably would include.... Well, we knew it would include a dues increase. For us, I think it was about eighty cents a month because we had gradually increased our dues through the years. And we got a majority vote that they would support it. So we felt we could speak for our people, which I always felt was right. And I am convinced that that

WOODING: helped sway--most other departments were in favor of CWA, but some of the leaders of the traffic groups at that time were not in favor of it. But when we were able to speak and show that we had the support of our members in some of the larger cities that wiped out the opposition, and it did pass. And we were among those affiliated with the CWA.

Then I think in 1943, I attended the first meeting of the old NFTW* and I attended most of them after that. In 1947, in November--now, as I said earlier I believe, the old Southwestern Telephone Workers Union was organized in Oklahoma and was chartered under the state of Oklahoma. And because of that charter, we could not disband until November of 1947. The NFTW ended, and CWA was officially adopted at the convention in Miami in June of 1947, but we could not disband as Southwestern Telephone Workers Union until November of that same year because of this restriction that we had under the law of Oklahoma. So at our convention, our division convention in November of 1947, I was elected by the delegates present to what they then called "assistant to the president," the president in our territory was Mr. McCowen. But the titles were different and the organization was a little different, and I went there to assist him in any way he could use me, education director and several other activities. From then on, of course, I did attend and I was on the staff from then until the time I retired in 1961.

INTERVIEWER: If I could ask you to bounce back to the NFTW conventions, before it became CWA, from 1943 on: could I just sort of ask you what your impression was at those conventions on the matter of whether traffic people, women, were dealt with fairly or were they in competition with the men, mostly plant? Were they tricked in any way? Was there any kind of struggle going on?

WOODING: I never felt any personal distrust, possibly because I trusted the people I worked with in this territory. There was that opinion. Traffic felt that plant was almost public enemy number one and that was one of the objections to affiliating with CWA, because they would lose their departmental status. And there were some traffic groups that withdrew. We today have got some independent traffic groups, as you probably know, I believe in California, and we might have had it in Texas if we hadn't had some opposition to it. But I never felt mistreated. There were times when you had to present your side and your story. Of course, every department knows its own problems better than anyone else, and there were times when we did have to explain our problems and our needs for certain things. But I never felt the distrust that was manifested. But the thing that often distressed me was the deep rancor

*National Federation of Telephone Workers

WOODING: and, of course, the weakness of the old National Federation was that it was just a federation, no all-member organization. They gloated over the fact that in the constitution it said every affiliate would, "Forever be free and autonomous." Well, that's just like having every state in the union to be completely free of the federal government: if war is declared and Texas decides not to go to war, we don't go, and you just can't have a nationwide thing without some centralized point of authority. But I have attended conventions where some of these member unions withdrew, because the person they wanted elected as an officer was not elected or for some very minor, to me, very minor cause. In any group, any time you work from two people on together, you're going to have to make some compromises. There's got to be some loss as well as gain perhaps. Someone has said the only way to have absolute freedom is to live alone on the stars, and we weren't doing that, so we had to have some give and take. If I thought we were not getting a fair deal, I'd certainly say so. But I never saw or felt that we really suffered at the hands of the organization.

INTERVIEWER: It's my understanding--correct me if I'm wrong--that long about 1944 there was in many parts of the country, and perhaps including Dallas or other Texas traffic groups, a walkout, a nationwide meeting in connection with a strike in Dayton, Ohio, among traffic operators. Do you have any recollection of that?

WOODING: Yes, I think that strike was in 1944, at the time they had the War Labor Board set up. The strike didn't come to Texas. There were some: there was Detroit and I believe Dayton and several other places that it spread to. It didn't spread nationwide. That, again, was brought about by the company refusing to give the needed wage increases. During the war, of course, the labor market became tight. They couldn't hire people locally at the wages they paid, so they were bringing in operators from other locations and keeping them there on an all-expenses basis, which made a very unfair arrangement. And that was what the strike was about. Well, of course, immediately there was the hue and cry that, "There's a war on. You're killing your brothers and fathers and husbands on the battlefield. You should get back on that switchboard." But they knew that once they went back, conditions would not change. And finally the War Labor Board went in and there was an acceptable adjustment made. But during the time they were out, there were violent editorials in the papers, including the Dallas Morning News, about how awful those people were. And it was so unjust and biased and lacking in facts that a group here asked me to write a letter to the Dallas News for their readers' column, and it was published, correcting some of the mistaken statements that they had made and explaining what the real problem was. But the strike itself didn't spread to Texas at that time.

WOODING: Now, about 1945, I believe--and I think this was in Western Electric--there was some problem that came up, and we were all asked to leave our jobs for a period of four hours, which we did. And believe me, some of the people had to be almost carried out. They wanted to go with the union, but the idea of walking off their switchboard was just appalling to them. But they went, and after four hours we came back and we didn't have much repercussion from the company on that. They knew we had been asked to do it, and it was of short duration, and the whole cause was something they weren't too much out of sympathy with. So we squeaked through that one pretty good.

INTERVIEWER: This must have been a rather emotional experience to watch people going out for the first time.

WOODING: It was. It was. I've had them come and almost weep on my shoulder, but, of course, the real test was in 1947 when we were actually out for six weeks. But I still feel a great sense of pride that in Dallas, where we at that time had approximately a thousand operators, not more than fifteen, so far as I ever knew, crossed the picket lines.

INTERVIEWER: You're talking about 1947 now?

WOODING: I'm talking about the 1947 strike that lasted for six weeks.

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask you about the 1947 strike.

WOODING: Well, you want to know something more about it? It's hard to follow an exactly chronological vein because it overlaps: one thing reminds you of another. I will digress a minute and go to 1946. We thought we were going to have a nationwide strike then, and it was averted because for the first, last, and only time AT&T* really lived up to their name and negotiated with us. And we reached a settlement that averted the strike. But we were always carefully told, "Don't go by the newspapers. Don't go by the radio. Don't go back to work unless your local officer tells you to." Well, I was a local officer at that time, and we were all set to go out at six o'clock on a certain morning in 1946. One of the men who was in the plant department at that time had been assigned picket duty. And sure enough the strike was settled, but with the time difference in Washington and so on we didn't get the word right away. Before I could get down to the office and remove the pickets they were waiting for me to tell them. I've always been amused at this young fellow and that was another example of his loyalty; he was picketing away in front of the building shortly after 6:00 a.m. and a policeman came by, and in a very friendly manner said, "Well, buddy, the strike's been settled. The radio said you don't need to picket." And he said, "My union officer told me to picket, and I'll be here till my union officer tells me to

* American Telephone and Telegraph

WOODING: leave!" The policeman said, "More power to you, buddy!" and he picketed until I got there and told him it really was settled. Of course, very few people lost any time then, because it was so early in the morning that most of them hadn't come on.

But in 1947 we went out. And very naively, we in traffic thought they could not get along without us. We had dial service locally in Dallas at that time, a hundred percent, but toll was still manual, and that was, of course, the revenue bearing place and much the largest office. Now, at that time, and for many years before and after, all of the toll or long distance operating was in a separate building from the local. Therefore, we had two traffic locals, the local traffic and the toll traffic. I was chairman only of the local traffic, but as division chairman I was closely associated, and we always worked together with the toll people. So that toll traffic chairman and myself, I well remember standing out on Akard Street in front of the downtown building consoling each other, and we said, "Well, it couldn't last over forty-eight hours. They just couldn't possibly operate that board without us." But they did. Of course, they brought in people. As I said, our girls, bless their hearts, didn't go in. We were pretty nearly a hundred percent organized. But it's an interesting thing that when a strike comes most non-members won't cross the picket lines and many of them will join the union then. We always sign up new members when we go on strike. It's a strange thing. I can't completely explain it myself, but perhaps they think that they'd better go with the majority when there's trouble brewing. Of course the company patted them on the back, those few who did work. But they don't really respect them because if you're not loyal to your group, whether it's the union or whatever, you're not going to be loyal anywhere else.

The people who worked on the switchboards--of course, they had as many management men as they could get, but that was limited. But as the work decreased in commercial and accounting, their departments were not well organized and many of those people did work, but as their work drained off because of the business shortage, they were told they'd either have to go down and work on the switchboards or be dismissed. Well, most of them went down and worked on switchboards. They didn't know anything about it. They had to be taught. They couldn't half do it, but they at least filled up a chair. And we had a dear chief operator at that time. Of course, she was management and had to be loyal, but she loved us and she told me herself that one day during the strike the district man came in and said something to her about "your girls" there on the board. She said, "They are not my girls. My girls are outside." We loved her; she was loyal. She had to be in there or lose her job. We had no ill feeling toward her, because she was on that side of the fence and had no recourse, but her heart was with us, and

WOODING: we appreciated it.

We stayed out for six weeks. We had no defense fund. We scrounged around every way under the sun. I don't remember now where we got the money. Finally somebody went to the AFL locals and they contributed some. We did have a union hall, a building, where the area plant men--that was Ray Hackney and Eddie Webb--and in the same building just across the hall from their office, we had a union meeting hall in which all the telephone unions in the city held their meetings, so that was our strike headquarters.

The employees who had some other wage earner in their family and were not as hard up as some of the people--every day we had food at least at noon. They would bake cakes and pies, and cook hams and roast chickens, and make salad and all this and that, and people that were hurting most were the young girls who were living away from home and had to pay room and board. And that one meal a day at the union headquarters was about all the meal they had. We didn't have much money to give them. We tried to take care of real hardship cases. After we'd been out on strike several weeks, we did see one girl go in, one of my girls, so we called her that night, and her story was really pathetic. She was a widow. She lived with her sister. She and her sister both worked for the company and were both out on strike. The one in my local had two children. They had cut her water off. They'd cut her lights off, because she hadn't been able to pay her bill. She said, "I had to go to work to feed my children." So we didn't have any bitterness toward her, but we got enough money to get her utilities paid and see that she had food, and she came out again. She only worked about two days. You don't resent people when they're in that kind of trouble, and they'll respond when you help them. We just didn't have the means to help people like we wanted to, so there was a tremendous amount of individual sacrifice and effort made. And that's why I think it's commendable and really quite remarkable that such a large majority of them did honor the picket lines for the six weeks. (end of tape)

WOODING: During the 1947 strike they used in toll, among other people, the engineers and various management people who were technically familiar with the equipment. But it takes experience to get the speed and skill of operating the switchboard. And we had many businessmen as customers who would place what we termed-- I believe we called it group calls. No, they call a list, that was the term. The businessman would get the long distance operator on the line and say, "Operator, I want to call a list," and he'd give the names of anywhere from one to a dozen people in various towns that he wanted to talk with. They didn't usually give the number in those days; the operator had to call the distant town and get the number. So when the strike was

WOODING: over and one of our good members went back to work, she got a customer that she had often served. When he recognized her voice he said, "Operator, I do thank God you're back." He said, "I have certainly missed you. I have not gotten good service while you were gone," because those group calls just baffled those inexperienced engineers. They were technicians, but they weren't switchboard operators.

INTERVIEWER: What was your relations with the local public authorities, police and so on, like during the strike? Were they hostile to you?

WOODING: No, in general they were not discourteous or hostile. The city had the requirement at that time that we could picket two abreast, but we must be so many feet away from the building and so much distance away from the edge of the sidewalk. And from time to time they'd come by and see that we were observing that, and if we were not--I wasn't the picket captain--but they learned that I was an officer and they would come and tell me very politely, "Now, they mustn't do this or they mustn't do that." But they would usually ask me to correct whatever was wrong rather than going and roughly accosting the people themselves. We had no violence in Dallas as such. I think out from town somewhere there was a cable cut or something of the sort, but for all we knew the company cut it and blamed it on the union. That has happened in some locations we know. But in general there was no violence and nothing worse than starvation.

INTERVIEWER: Well, we've already talked a little about the movement from NFTW to CWA. I guess things were coming kind of fast and furious in those years so far as organizational changes. What were your feelings and experiences in the next big organizational steps, the TWOC-CWA fight and the movement into CIO? *

WOODING: Well, I felt that was regrettable. I always thought we should pull together. We were working against a giant in the industry, and I thought we should work together. The TWOC thing had never touched us down this way, but we knew about it. I think it just weakened us and delayed things. Maybe it helped to make them see the need for affiliation. Even at the time we finally affiliated with CIO--and that was done in a democratic manner. The members, all members, were given an opportunity to vote on whether we should affiliate with AFL, with CIO, or continue as an independent. And the majority vote was to affiliate with CIO, and we did.

I was still working in the St. Louis office at that time, and very soon one of the CIO education schools was held in Kimswick, Missouri, which is just a short distance from St. Louis--I don't remember exactly--in a YWCA camp and it was rugged, I

* TWOC, Telephone Workers' Organizing Committee (?)

WOODING:

can tell you. It was in dormitories and upstairs and not very convenient, but I went. They had a week-long school there, and I found that those CIO officials--I mean the education people that were there; it wasn't top officers, of course--but the education branch of CIO conducting the school were nice people. I liked them. They seemed to like us. But they still had the impression that the telephone union had been a company-dominated unit, controlled union. I think that stemmed from these old employee associations, but we made a clean break. Southwestern Telephone Workers Union was never company-dominated. When we got away from that employees' association, that was the end of that. Of course, we had to learn to be union people. Most of our people didn't know much about the union, and it was a tremendous education job. But the needs were so great that it helped us to finally make these other steps.

Again, to digress for a moment, in 1938, when the Fair Labor Standards Act, I believe it was called, which was the Wage and Hour Law, first went into effect--which established a minimum wage rate nationwide for all interstate commerce and, of course, the telephone company was certainly interstate--there were eighty-six towns in Texas where they had to increase the starting rate for operators in order to reach that minimum wage. We had towns where the starting rate was nine dollars a week, and I heard a division man, a division superintendent, groaning and taking on about what all this was going to cost them to do that. But he said, "I didn't know we had so many towns where that had to be done," which verified what we had learned: the telephone company management people didn't really have much authority. All of them had to call upstairs for somebody to get an answer for everything. They were just sort of messenger boys. Some of them were pretty good guys and probably would have given us better treatment if they could, but they couldn't. This man told me himself about--in fact, everything that I have told you, I have tried to verify and be sure that it's correct. I think it's important that it be factual. You have to go back. It's easy, as the years go along, to forget some of these things, but I always liked statistics and records, and part of my work in the union was to compile those things, so there is verification on record for these dates and so on. In those same eighty-six towns where they had to raise the minimum--there was that same number of towns where the maximum for an operator was only fifteen dollars a week. If she lived long enough to work fifty years, she'd still just be making fifteen dollars a week, and it took her anywhere from ten to thirteen years to reach it. Of course, that's one of the big things the union has done, not only increase wages but shorten the schedules. They need shortening still further, because any operator that would take thirteen years to learn how to operate a board had no business being an operator in the first place; she'd have to be a moron. And it certainly didn't take them that long. They were skilled within

WOODING: a year. If they were ever going to be good operators, they were good within a year.

To go back to affiliating with CIO, those people were really astonished at some of the things that these CWA people could tell them about the early experiences we had had. They felt that we had just sort of had it easy, but sometimes at lunch break or something of that sort I would mention some experience that I had had. One of them in particular said, "I want you to repeat that to the class and let them know what you people went through." So there was education both ways. They got better acquainted with us, and we learned more about good unionism, no doubt. Then, we've always been in the forefront. When AFL and CIO merged, we were active in that. I attended those conventions and meetings as well as the ones in our own particular organization.

INTERVIEWER: This is a question that maybe I should have asked you earlier. Do you think the 1947 strike had a large effect on members' attitudes? I believe you already said that this helped convince people that one national union was a good idea. Do you think it in any way made people readier for CIO affiliation, the 1947 strike?

WOODING: I think we grew up during the 1947 strike. I know I did. A picket line means something very much different to me now from what it did before. I had never crossed a picket line, but I would no more cross a picket line now than I would shoot somebody. It's awful to me. One time by mistake in St. Louis they had put up a picket line; they put them up just sporadically around a restaurant that I sometimes went into, and they had put them up early one morning when I was going over there for breakfast. But the picket was way down away from the entrance, and I didn't see him. I went in there and ate and when I came out I apologized to the man for going in. I told him I didn't see him. I wouldn't have gone in for anything in the world. He accepted it; that was all right. But I feel very strongly about it, because when you stand on a picket line for six weeks and see people crossing the lines--and so many of them who did go in were not really loyal to the company. They just wanted the extra money. We had one woman who worked up in the traffic area office. I don't know whether she'd ever been an operator or not. If she had, it had been many years. That woman was the worst loafer in the company. They used our restroom, and she would always take a thirty-minute relief period, morning and afternoon. She would take about two hours for lunch. She would go in about an hour late every morning, and the girls that worked in the office with her verified this. We would see her in the restroom. I came to work then at nine o'clock and I would often eat my breakfast in a little restaurant around the corner

WOODING: before I came to work. She was supposed to go to work at 8:00 a.m., but she'd be in there having her breakfast at 8:30 a.m., too. So, she had no real loyalty to the company, but she worked diligently every day on that switchboard.

We had one plant man who went in. Of course, we weren't supposed to say anything to them, but once in a while I couldn't resist. In the work I did for the company, as a clerk, I would frequently go to the plant switchroom to read certain meters and switches and things of that sort to get certain information that we used in traffic. And the door into the plant switchroom had half glass; you could see through. But one Saturday morning I went over there as usual and I couldn't get in. The door was locked. I knocked and pushed and worked on the door and I could see one of the plant men peeping through some of the equipment. I could just see his eyes. But he saw who I was, so he came and opened the door. I went on and read the meters and did what I was supposed to. When I started out I went by the desk, and they had a game of dominoes spread out. So I said to the fellow that was there, "What would you have done if I had been the boss?" He said, "That's why we had the door locked and we would have just raked them in the drawer." So that guy crossed the picket line. So when he started in one day, I called him by name. He was working on the switchboard. That's what made me mad. They were in there taking my girls' jobs. I said, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself going in there and taking the job of those girls that are trying to get better wages for you and everybody else." He said, "Well, I've got to be loyal to the company." I said, "You didn't worry about being loyal to the company that day I caught you playing dominoes on the job." Well, that burned him up. He had red hair, and his face got as red as his hair. I don't think he ever liked me much after that, but I couldn't resist it. It was so ridiculous. That claim of loyalty when they were just loyal to their pocketbooks. I can't go for that double crossing business.

Now, we did lose some members after the 1947 strike. As I said, the people stayed out. Some of them came to me and quite frankly said, "I can never do that again." One woman, another widow with children--so many women do have a responsibility and families to support. The idea that women just work for pin money is a terrible mistake because most of them work because they either must be self-supporting or many of them have to; if they don't have to support children, they have to support some parent or something of the sort. She owned her home, but she ran out of money to eat and she had french doors in her home. She took them down and sold them to get food for her children. She said, "If I belong to the union I'll support it, but I can't ever go through that again, so I just can't be a member." And we lost some members. Some of them, of course, reached re-

WOODING: tirement age and never did come back. Most of them, I think, did. It wasn't very long--you see, the strike was in 1947. We went back to work in May. In November that same year I was elected to this position in St. Louis and I left and went to work in St. Louis in January of 1948. And I haven't been active in this local since then. But I think most of them came back unless, as I said, they retired. But it really took some explaining, some talking, some persuasion. We didn't threaten anybody, but we did try to make them realize that it would be the wrong thing to do to go back, and very few of them ever did.

So it took us awhile to regain our membership, but I do think it helped the union to grow up. It helped us to gain prestige in the eyes of both the company and other unions. They saw that we'd had our baptism in fire, and we had more respect from them.

INTERVIEWER: Would it be following in sequence for me to ask you at this point about your education work, development of an education program, in Division 20 and District 6, and the actual work itself, the kind of work you were doing?

WOODING: While I was in St. Louis, I prepared an outline, we called it. It wasn't all original. It was based on things we'd gotten from CIO, but there was a lot of personal experience that went into it, and it was adapted to the requirements of telephone people. My experience there in St. Louis got me better acquainted with other departments. Until I went to St. Louis I had worked only in the traffic department, either in the company or the union, and it was the traffic people who elected me to go, because they still had this idea of sort of departmental lines: there was no traffic representative at the top level, and they should have one. I learned more about the other departments working there and was better qualified to prepare an outline which did apply to all departments. Then at a division convention that we had in 1949, I believe, the copies were presented to all local representatives present, and I talked with them. We had a little education meeting and reviewed it briefly, of course, as to how it could be used. We didn't follow through; I didn't. How much it was used, I don't know, but at least I still have a copy of it whether anybody else does or not. Later the person who was then the education director for CWA--no longer with us--he asked all of the districts to furnish him any information that we had developed along educational lines. The person who was in the St. Louis office--by that time I had gone to San Antonio as a field representative. There'd been some reorganization in the St. Louis office, but the person who was handling the educational work in St. Louis then furnished this information, and part of it, not all of it, came out in the guides that were given to the

WOODING: staff people to use. Of course, I recognized it, and some of my people did. But that's all right. It was not copyrighted; it was perfectly all right to use it if it was useful.

Then CWA developed these two-day schools for officers, and Paul Gray, who is now Mr. McCowen's assistant--you probably met him in St. Louis--he was the staff man in Fort Worth, and I was the staff person in San Antonio, both for our particular territory. It wasn't limited to one city. But he and I were appointed to conduct those schools for a period; sometimes they'd run as much as six weeks. It varied as to how many schools they had. I guess for approximately five years we went all over the state and conducted those two-day schools. I'll say in passing that Paul was a fine person to work with, and we had the same ideas about unionism. We'd alternate. We were in the classroom together, and I'd jump on one subject, and he another. I listened to him for five years, and I never did get tired of hearing him, because he could present it in a way that made it live. Whether he could say the same about me or not I couldn't say, although he never complained.

Then in addition to that we also taught every year, for a number of years, up in Oklahoma at Norman, where they had the schools at the State University at Norman, Oklahoma. They were conducted out of the St. Louis office, but they took principally the people who had been instructors in their territory, and Paul and I were there for a number of years teaching in those week-long schools. There, of course, I became acquainted with people from all over the division.

I left the St. Louis office and went to San Antonio in 1950 and serviced all the territory. It was about a four-hundred square mile territory. It went from the town of Temple, Texas, which is about a hundred and thirty-five miles from Dallas, south from there to the border at Brownsville and Laredo and those towns. Then in 1951 I was elected to the negotiating committee and was one of two representatives from the traffic department on the negotiating committee until I retired in 1961.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned in passing Paul Gray's abilities as a teacher, which makes me want to ask you kind of a general question. Do you think that CWA, because of the somewhat selective nature of its membership, is blessed with more talented people coming up to become staff and local officers than most other unions?

WOODING: I can't make comparisons because I don't know the personnel in the other unions too well. I met people who would come to conventions and the schools and such as that. I think the rank-and-file people that were in the union and became local officers were not college graduates. We wouldn't have been working on

WOODING:

those peanut salaries if we had been. But they had potential; they had latent ability. I have had many people who attended his classes say, "Well, Paul is a college graduate, isn't he?" because Paul has a good mind and he has always read a good deal and he could express himself well. And I think our people were sincere and they were honest and they really believed in what they were doing and wanted to do it. Now, that probably is true of all other unions. I don't know. I can't really answer that question on a comparative basis. I have known some very fine people in other unions, but I don't know their membership rank-and-file like I know ours. And I don't know too much about ours that's coming up now because, of course, I have been out of touch to a great extent. I haven't attended conventions and things of that sort since I retired, and that's where you get acquainted with the people, of course, on a broad scale.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you have any explanation for why CWA has seemed more interested in education programs than most other unions over the years?

WOODING:

That must be top leadership. I think Joe Beirne [former CWA president] is a fine person and I think he recognizes what unions need. He's always supported the idea of education, although we had education in our territory. We saw the need of it; our people -- they just didn't know. They were just babes in the woods when we first organized the union. They didn't know what to do. They did things they shouldn't have done, because they didn't know any better. There's a crying need for education in the telephone unions, and I think it was recognized. It proved effective and gave us results. Of course, we had those staff schools for a number of years at Front Royal, Virginia. I went there several times and then, two different summers, I went to the University of Chicago for a week and then at the University of Oklahoma where we were teaching. We always had one or more of the college professors to come in in the evening and talk to us about various subjects. So, it's given us all a broader outlook, I think, than we might have had otherwise.

One year we had quite an important arbitration case in San Antonio, when I was the staff person there and the man who was the arbitrator was one of the professors at the University of Oklahoma. And the next year, when we went there to hold our regular week-long CWA school, he had been assigned to teach a class all one day on arbitration. Of course, we recognized each other and it was interesting. Incidentally, we won the case. I enjoyed those arbitration classes. Bob Eckhardt, who is now in Congress, as you know, in Washington, a representative from Houston, was our -- well, he was on the staff of CWA as attorney for a number of years and he was very capable in my opinion. I enjoyed the arbitration cases that he conducted, because he was so skilled, always soft-spoken, and I have seen him just tie those management people up in knots. He'd ask them questions in such a nice manner, they'd just say "Yes, sir; yes, sir," and tell him exactly what he needed to know to win the case. And I wanted to smile but, of course, didn't dare. But he was very kind. He used to say that he liked to have

WOODING: Paul and I as witnesses in the arbitration cases because he felt we stuck to the facts and had our information organized and could be helpful. I have testified in a number of arbitration cases for him and I think we had and still have, from what I read recently in a report, a good batting average in winning our arbitration cases.

INTERVIEWER: This might be a good point to ask you about something that we were talking about earlier, which is your judgement on why this district, formerly SWTU and formerly Division 20, has historically been one of the stronger units in terms of membership and fulfillment of other programs.

WOODING: I believe it goes basically to our early leadership. The people trusted them. They didn't know which way to go, but they did trust the leader and follow him, and we were guided in the right direction in most cases. As I mentioned, too, we had gone through so much at the hands of the telephone company. I think the telephone company made union members of us to start with. They brought us so low we saw we had to do something. Then we had good sound leadership. Everett Cotter, our attorney, probably was the only college graduate in the group and he didn't work for the telephone company, of course. But, the people, as I mentioned earlier, had latent ability and had potential. And this gave them an outlet. I have often, when I've sat in conventions, looked over the group and listened to the intelligent presentation of subject matter and thought, "The company sure missed the boat that they didn't make management people out of a lot of these people," because they just had what it took.

INTERVIEWER: We had been talking about the series of organizational changes. We talked about the movement into CIO. I guess shortly thereafter, about 1950 or 1951, there was this change in structure from three-level to two-level. What were your experiences and thoughts concerning that change?

WOODING: I had no objection to it. It seemed desirable to me. That's another thing we had to sell. We had to go out and meet with the members and explain to them. But we're a democratic organization; people should know. The only time you can properly keep anything from a member is when you're in negotiations. You can't always tip your hand and say, "Now, tomorrow morning we're going in and propose this," because that would be just like a general in the army telling the enemy lines to come around on my south flank because of what we're going to do. There are temporary periods when your strategy has to be kept quiet, but, in general, all the cards should be laid on the table, and that's what, for the most part, I think we have tried to do insofar as I've had any experience, at least in this territory.

We have tried to tell the people, keep them informed, and I think that has been a factor. They felt like they knew the reasons

WOODING: for things, and the ones that didn't agree we could usually-- and I have spent untold hours-- I remember when we raised the dues from ten cents to twenty-five cents, you had to talk by the hour. The people were saying, "Now, what in the world," and, of course, we were still on low wages in the early days of the union, and even twenty-five cents was something they didn't want to give up. "Well, what will I get out of it? What in the world will you do with the money?" And you had to patiently explain and talk and talk and talk, but usually, and I've always said, "If you've got voluntary support that's the only thing that will hold up in an emergency." You can't police people. Maybe you can shame them or pressure them or something and then get them to join the union or pay more dues, but if you haven't sold them on it, they'll desert you when the trouble comes. We tried to sell them as we went along to make them--I think I mentioned that Mr. McCowen has often used the expression, "he was jealous for the union." He wanted the union to be respected and appreciated and understood, and I had exactly the same feeling. And nobody's worked any longer or any harder than he. I'm not saying that he's the only one that worked, but I've seen McCowen work till he was to the point of dropping almost. And Frank Lonergan, too, in bargaining. The company never settled a contract until we'd had an all-night session. We'd work forty-eight hours on the stretch when we got down to the line, but we didn't stop till we got through.

INTERVIEWER: About this period of the early 1950's, it's my understanding-- and again, correct me if I'm wrong--that there were a sizable number of walkouts among locals in that period. Is that right, and if so, did you have experiences with them?

WOODING: As far as I know, we had no walkouts as a result of the change in structure. It was along about that time, as I recall it, that we had these wildcat strikes in Western Electric, and that was fun. Of course, the company got injunctions and finally outlawed that. Of course, Western Electric can only strike where they've got workers. Our people were well trained on that. Some of them almost stood at the window and watched, and if they saw picket lines out they'd go, and maybe they wouldn't be there but an hour or something, but you can see how that disrupted service. It must have been a nightmare for the company because they couldn't send recruits fast enough from town to town. But those are the only strikes that I recall, and I don't recall any strikes resulting from the two-level structure.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't mean to connect that with what we were talking about earlier. Were there any walkouts among traffic people in this period not connected with Western Electric?

WOODING: Oh, yes. That was where it was most effective. Traffic would walk out at the drop of the hat, and I tell you a lot of strikes that we had, they were wildcats, but you couldn't blame them, and they accomplished something. Along about that time, it was

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because of the--in this part of the country particularly-- the excessive heat during the summer. We did not have air-conditioned buildings. Now, you may hear or have heard that in the Southwestern Territory was the first air-conditioned building in the telephone industry. It was an independent company up in Kansas that Southwestern Bell bought. One very small building was air-conditioned. But we had gone in and negotiated with the company for air-conditioning. First they said they couldn't possibly: it would ruin the automatic equipment, the dial switching. Then it was too expensive. Well, it can get beastly hot in Texas, and those girls sitting side by side not six inches apart and doing manual labor, reaching and stretching and all that an operator has to do, some of them would faint, and the ones that didn't, wished they could probably. So we had negotiated, we had bargained, had grievances at top level; we had done everything we could to try to get air-conditioning, and not any promise, not any relief at all. So the girls just got enough of it, and they'd just walk off the job. And the company, of course, was dancing around and trying to get us to get them back, and we said, "We didn't call them out so they'll have to decide when they want to go back." It became ludicrous. Of course, they couldn't air-condition those buildings overnight, we knew that. So for temporary relief, to get them back on the job, they brought in huge tubs that would hold a hundred or more pounds of ice. Of course, they had electric fans, but when the temperature gets a hundred degrees, all a fan does is just stir up hot air. So they'd set these fans behind these tubs of ice, and put them just as close to the switchboard as they could not to interfere with people getting in and out of the chairs, and that did cool the temperature some.

We worked for several summers with tubs of ice. But anybody working in an air-conditioned telephone building today can thank the operators for having it because they got it. They walked off the job in every major town and a lot of the small ones. Of course, the company was just having fits, but they just had to have it. The girls had enough, and I never told them not to. I said, "Now, I can't authorize you to go. It's a wildcat strike. I can't tell you to go. All I can tell you is, if you get out there, I'll help you out of any trouble you get into."

They got in no trouble. Nobody was ever penalized in any way. There were too many. As Everett Cotter, our attorney that I mentioned earlier--in the early days, one of the first things I remember him telling us about unions--emphasizing the strength in numbers he said, "If there is one ditchdigger and he asks for a raise the boss can fire him, but if there are eleven hundred ditchdiggers who ask for a raise he can't fire them all. He'll have to do something about it." At that time we had

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about eleven hundred operators in the particular territory he was talking about, so that's why he'd use that figure. I've never forgotten that thought of strength in unity and the need for solidarity. In fact, we carried it out even during the 1947 strike, along with this information that we were always given, "Don't go back to work after a strike unless you know it's official. Don't go by radios," and so on. So all during the 1947 strike, we had meetings at frequent intervals in an old auditorium building out there. It was a mess, but it was available and not too far out and it was large enough, so we told the people [to] wait until they heard from us. So when we found that the strike was ended, we called the people out there [and] told them it was officially ended and they could go back to work.

It was on a Saturday, and very few people except the traffic would be working, so most of them just went on fishing for the rest of the day--whatever you wanted to do. But the traffic people, which was in my local, of course, went back to work. I said--or maybe it was their idea--they said, "We went out together. Let's go in together." And I said, "All right." So we were all out there at that one big place. We had to get cabs and this and that, those that didn't have private cars, and get back to the main telephone building over here on Akard--it's still there. And we just waited outside until they had all come. The general traffic superintendent was quite disturbed about the whole business and he came down and very haughtily said to me, "Well, are you people going in or not?" I said, "We're going in when we all get here." I said, "We went out together. We'll go in together." And we did. And we had passed the word around so when we went into the building, we began singing "Solidarity Forever" at the top of our voices. Well, the management was disgusted beyond words. The operating room was on the sixth floor; we had to take the elevators. And there was some little elevator girl who worked during the strike, and I'll never forget the look on that girl's face. There's only one working on Saturday. When she opened the door, and there was this mob of people singing "Solidarity Forever" she was frightened to death. I guess she thought we were going to mob her or something. We didn't, but we went up.

We stayed in the hall upstairs. We didn't go in the operating room until everybody got up there. Then when they were finally there and the chief operator, bless her heart, and she was our friend and she was just as nervous--her hands were just trembling--she was trying to assign the girls' positions. "You go here and you go there." Well, the board was manned with people that had worked and I said, "You get those girls off the board and mine will go in." I said, "There's a lot of strong feelings against those people who have taken their jobs for six weeks. I can't be responsible if you force those girls to go in there." And see, on each operating position, there's a double set of jacks. The girls

WOODING: have to wear headsets and they've got a cord that they plug in. The operators that were there were already plugged in. The girl relieving her would have to plug in right beside her. Of course, probably nothing too serious would have happened, but some of them were very upset. I said, "You get those scabs out of here, and those operators will go back to work." Well, the district man was so angry he could hardly see straight. He was the guy that wouldn't meet with me originally back in 1937. He was still there. And he couldn't do anything of the kind. I said, "Well, I'm not going to tell them to go in there and plug in on the vacant positions." So that's what we did, but none of the girls plugged in with the people that had worked.

Of course, I wasn't going to work. I was a clerk and I didn't have to work that day. I told the management that I couldn't stay in. I had to stay out and call the people and tell them, the ones that didn't come to the meeting, the ones that didn't go to work Saturday. I had to see that everybody knew they could come in the following Monday morning. So they were all agreeable to that. They counted it as strike time against me, although I was staying out really to get their employees back on the job. But I had two more days of strike time deducted from my service--which they [the management] did--more than anybody else even though they knew and agreed to my staying out in order to get the people back. But that was typical. So, I didn't have to go back to the board and I took my stand at the door by the set rack. The girls that had been on the board during the strike came out, wrapped their headsets, put them up, and went out the door. And I stood there with my arms folded just, I guess, glaring at every one of them. I didn't say a word. I just gave them good, hard looks so I'd recognize them if nothing else. So one of them, I understand, went out and cried and said I looked at her so mean. But that didn't hurt my conscience a bit.

INTERVIEWER: What was your experience in the short 1953 strike?

WOODING: Well, I was on the bargaining committee then, and that was in St. Louis. Of course, when I went to St. Louis each year in bargaining, no one took my place out of the Dallas office. At that time, we just had the one area, and San Antonio worked out of the Dallas office. If anything serious came up on the handling of a field grievance or something of that sort, they would send somebody from Dallas down there. But just the stenographer in my office was all that was there. I think they sent somebody from Dallas down there part of the time. Our bargaining committee had to remain in St. Louis, because we were hoping every day that through mediation and conciliation and so on we would get it settled. Then, if we did, the committee had to be there, so they couldn't keep sending us back and bringing us in again.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about this modified no-strike clause that came out of 1953?

WOODING: It's been a handicap and it ought not to be there. But, of course, the company loves it. Every year that I was on the committee and maybe every year since, as far as I know, we tried to get it out, but they [management] are happy to have it. But again, all you can say is, "It's unauthorized; I can't tell you to go. It'll have to be your decision." But if they went, we never failed to try to help them out of whatever predicament they might get into. And again, due to Mr. McCowen-- not only his leadership but his integrity through the years-- the company has learned that he tried to--I'm not saying that he plays up to the company, but he is a man who will keep his word, and they know it. And we've had several very serious situations as a result of these wildcat strikes, since that clause went in there, that the company withheld any serious action simply because Mr. McCowen said, "I'll go down and talk to them and we will work it out," and he always did. So that's another example of how we profitted by the integrity of the leaders that we have always had. I have a great deal of respect for Joe Beirne, McCowen, Frank Lonergan, Paul Gray, Eddie Webb, Tony Sykora--we've got now. I've never worked with Tony, because he's much younger and came in later. I knew him. I'd see him at the schools and such as that. He's a very dependable person too.

INTERVIEWER: After 1953 was there an increased number of cases taken to arbitration and a reduced number of walkouts?

WOODING: Yes, I guess there were. I suppose it's helped the company some is the reason they want to keep it. Of course, they'll always hold you responsible for a strike, but I used to use this example when I was in negotiations. Sometimes, of course, you get into discussions and so on, and they would say, "Well, you people, the union, expect us to be responsible for every chief operator and wire chief in the field, and yet you top union officers don't control your local presidents." I said, "There's one big difference. You hire that chief operator or that wire chief. You pay them their salary." I said, "You can fire them if you want to. You're the boss. A union representative is hired by the members. They can fire us if they want to. So there's all the difference in the world in the responsibility of a management person and a union rep. Of course, we should exercise leadership and guidance, and I think that has to be done. But we can't dictate to them, because they're paying us. We're working for them." And I think that's the part even unions sometimes overlook; I mean the rank-and-file membership does. It's just like in political action. You can advocate candidates, but you can't make people vote for them.

INTERVIEWER: Have you seen changes in the kind of people who were your members? Is there a contrast, let's say, between the thirties as compared with the latter part of your active union career? Have there been differences in the attitudes of union members? Differences in their racial or ethnic makeup? Have there been differences in proportions of men and women?

WOODING: Well, as time goes on, people have less realization of the hardship that we went through. For a number of years after the union was organized we had a large group of people who had lived through the Depression, for example, and they could make an intelligent and a knowledgeable comparison between conditions before a union and after a union, whereas people coming in now just can't realize what things were like. They take it for granted, and I've heard them say, "Well, wages are better everywhere. The company would have given a raise anyway." But that information you have there that I gave you proves that they didn't. In fact, this famous or infamous district man that I have quoted before that I worked with here so many unpleasant years made the statement to me one time he said, "Now, you know the company doesn't pay what they could pay. They don't pay what they should pay. They pay only what they have to pay." That is still true. I've never heard anybody else express it as honestly as he did, but it's true. They don't pay what they can pay or what they should pay, but only what they have to pay. And they'll tell you that. This community wage theory that the company banks on so: "We pay what we have to pay to attract and hold the kind of people we need in that community." It's just as simple as that, and they're not about to give you a wage increase if they can get by without it.

It's hard for the people of today or even maybe ten years ago to realize. I noticed the change beginning when I was still active. As time went on, of course, we had more and more people in, people working, that hadn't even been born during the Depression, and they just didn't realize it. I heard the statement recently that to talk to people today about the Depression, you might as well talk about the War of the Roses because it seems just as far back in history to them. And that's, I suppose, inevitable because as time goes on and more and more benefits are secured by the union, people come in who never knew anything else. Even people who go to work today are benefitted by the union because the starting rate is so much better than it used to be. And then, of course, the fact that other unions were organized helps even unorganized workers today. All employers have to observe community wage rates to some degree. If the going rate in a town is seventy-five dollars a week, they can't get people to work for fifty, of course. So even the unorganized are benefitted indirectly by the going rates established by unions. So the people coming to work today are reaping benefits that they don't even recognize as benefits. They just take it for granted. I suppose every generation does that to some degree.

WOODING: We take electric lights for granted and don't realize how hard it was to burn candles at one time.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the highlights of your career in San Antonio in the latter part of the fifties and getting into the sixties?

WOODING: Well, I worked there nine years and the last year I worked I went to Houston. The company divided the state into two areas, and Paul Gray was made area director for the union because the union divided on the same lines--not that we had to be patterned by the company, but it's practical to be at the headquarters where you have to go to handle your field grievances and things of that sort. So Paul asked me to go down there with him and help him set up the office, even though he knew I would be retiring within a year, and I did. But in San Antonio we just made gradual progress. I think I had twenty-one locals when I went down there, and we had less than half that number when I left because they had formed locals of all departments. Instead of having so many: we had traffic locals, and we had plant locals, and we had everything separate, but they became industrial locals where all the people in all departments--they had them all on an industrial level. That's how a great many of them did it, and I helped them, of course. That, again, was left to them. I didn't pressure them to do it or not to do it. If they wanted it and began asking about it, then I told them how it could be done and helped them do it. You had to get jurisdiction changed. It was out of Washington and all that, and I would help them with the paperwork because I was full-time. I had an office; I had a stenographer. And they were working forty hours a week for the telephone company, and it was hard. There were no full-time local officers at that time, and they needed somebody to help them on those things. We reduced the number of locals. At one time I was told that Southwest Texas Division, as it was called originally when I went down there, was one of the best organized in Southwestern Territory. We were about eighty-five percent organized, and that isn't bad. It should be a hundred percent, of course, but that's utopia, and we haven't reached that yet. [tape ends]

INTERVIEWER: Before the thing ran out, you had mentioned the efforts where you were working to bring locals together into larger industrial locals. And this reminded me of a question that I probably should have asked you earlier. It might be a fair statement to say that Southwestern has had a larger number of women like yourself become active in the union and take staff positions, more so than most other units around the country. I'm kind of curious as to why this is so. One person who I asked this question to said, "Well, it might have something to do with the fact that there were not industrial locals for the most part in this part of the country and that

INTERVIEWER: there were large traffic locals with women leaders coming out of them"--like yourself.

WOODING: That might have some bearing, but I think one thing, it's sort of interrelated. This territory of Southwestern Bell and the Southwestern Telephone Workers Union was much larger than some of the units in the NFTW. We had more traffic people because in those days, as I think I have mentioned, the offices were so scattered, every town where the Southwestern Bell Telephone Company had an exchange, they had to have some traffic operators. If you had anything in the world, you had some traffic operators. So we had a large number of traffic people, and they were well organized. And, of course, those people had votes when they went to conventions and so on, and it's just perfectly natural that you're going to have to give some attention to any large group or segment of people. Our very size had something to do with our representation. And we did feel like we wanted traffic people on the bargaining committee, for example, because you do need to do any job, I think, to thoroughly understand it--and we still negotiate along departmental lines. The people themselves-- at our conventions plant group elects representatives and so does accounting and commercial; traffic has two, always has had to start with. Maybe with all the dial conversions we aren't the largest department now, but we still have those two people, and I think it's the geographical size of it, maybe, has something to do with it.

INTERVIEWER: Your work in bargaining --was the kind of problems you were dealing with and the kind of work you were doing changed by the establishment, about 1957, of the Collective Bargaining Policy Committee?

WOODING: We had to work a little more closely with the International. Of course, we didn't just sign contracts on our own. They were all approved by the International office, which I didn't resent. Sometimes it might cramp your wings a little, but you've got to think of the overall picture always, just as individual locals had to work together with other locals. Now, I think we had leadership in our territory that never would have agreed to anything that would hurt anybody else, but that wasn't universally the case. Joe Beirne, once I heard him say, "A leader has to lead," and I agreed. Whoever is president of CWA has got to keep his finger on what's going on. I don't mean every single town or local, but through the--they're now called vice-presidents, but they've been district directors, they've been division presidents, and this and that. They've had all sorts of titles, but whatever the title was, McCowen had it and was out there doing it. And a person in his position, of course, has got to keep closely

WOODING: in touch. Those people are also members of the CWA executive board, and they have to work together and coordinate their plans so that somebody doesn't go off the deep end and agree to something because although the company keeps up the fiction that each of their operating companies is entirely independent they watch each other like hawks. And I have heard the management people at the top level, when we were in negotiations, say that when they had their meetings and conferences nationwide that they were often kidded about the union bargaining committee that Southwestern had to deal with. He said, "You people are recognized throughout the Bell System as a tough committee," which we took to be a compliment.

INTERVIEWER: With the perspective of thirty years, or a little more than thirty years, what would you say should be the direction CWA--and for that matter, the labor movement in general--takes in the future?

WOODING: From what I know of your present programs, they are headed in the right direction. They do keep staff informed of general things. Most of the general mail that goes out--copies of it are sent to the retired staff, and every year after the CWA convention we get all the convention material, the day's proceedings and things of that sort, which I appreciate, because it not only keeps you informed, but makes you feel you're still part of the team, which I would want to be because I believe in the union. I had to be sold on it, but once I was sold, I bought it, and I'm still sold on it. I think the steps they are taking--there's always been so much to do and still is. You have to be somewhat selective. It's like going in on negotiations. We have in our territory gone in with as many as two hundred and fifty demands from the field. We knew that it would be impossible to get that many things at one time, and, of course, whoever doesn't get what they want feels disappointed, let down. You have to go back with the education and explain how come.

Trying to put first things first and getting the major objectives, I think, of course, political action is very important. Someone has very well said, "You can lose at the ballot box what you gained on the picket line," and we made our first gain, of course, through legislation. Without the Wagner Act we probably wouldn't have much of union yet if something similar hadn't come up, and the Taft-Hartley and the Landrum-Griffin tended to weaken the union. We've survived in spite of it. These right-to-work laws and things of that sort--you've got to be everlastingly vigilant--and we've got it, unfortunately, in Texas. So that's one big objective, and I think the community activities are important. That helps to let the public know that we're their friends and neighbors and

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good guys and gals that will help out where it's needed. Now, you used to call them Community Chests. They have different names for them in different cities, but it's the community drives every year that are held in every major city for funds for the needs of those in need. For many years, many years, even when I was still a local officer, we worked those out jointly between company and management. And at least in Dallas I think the reason we were so emphatic about working together -- in the depths of the Depression we were making--well, I had worked about seventeen years when the Depression hit. Most of that time I had been on the wage rate of a supervisor, service assistant, and so on, and a clerk, and that rate was above an operator. But even with a better rate during the Depression, my salary was less than fifteen dollars a week for more than two years. So we felt like we ought to be helped by the Community Chests if anything. But one of the company officials was made chairman of the Community Chest Drive that year, and it was called Community Chest at that time. So they put the most terrific pressure on us for every employee to give. Well, how can a girl getting seven dollars a week give very much? So for the first time in history, in our history at least, they permitted us to make payments on a payroll deduction, or we could make it in cash on a weekly basis. They were so intent on having this man, who was chairman of it, make a good showing for the telephone company and say that we'd responded a hundred percent they practically forced everybody to contribute at least five dollars apiece and told us we could pay it off ten cents a week. And that was the most fantastic thing you ever heard of. The people, to get the company off their back, they said, "All right, I'll give." They signed a card. But most of them couldn't pay it. And the collecting was just impossible, and I'm sure many of them never paid it.

So after we got a union organization, we said, "Unh unh, no more of that." We're civic minded. We want to help. We are going to give the people an opportunity, but nobody's going to be pressured." So I, as local chairman for several years, was the one selected to contact all the people. They just took me off my job for several days. I sat at a specially assigned desk, and the girls were relieved one by one off the switchboard and came over, and I said, "Here it is. It's handled this way. What would you like to give?" If they said, "I just can't give anything," I'd say, "Thank you." That was it. Most of them did give, some of them very generously. We had one particular operator that gave twenty dollars, and this old district man that was a thorn in our side waited till the last day of the drive and gave five dollars. So that's just a comparison of the difference in people.

WOODING: They have worked together on that now. The company then for a long time--and this happened later--they would solicit us, but they'd always give it in the name of Southwestern Bell Telephone Company. So we said, "Uh, uh, you've got to say 'Communications Workers of America.'" Well, that nearly killed them, just nearly killed them to have to even admit that we existed, but it's standard practice now. And when they have these dinners following the drive, and everybody's honored that's made their quota--and we always make it--they've got a CWA representative and a management representative at the dinner and they say, "The Southwestern Bell Telephone Company and Communications Workers of America reached their goal and exceeded it," or whatever. That has helped and then of course there are many, many other projects that individual locals--they've all had ball teams; they've contributed labor during times of disaster; and done everything that most locals do to help in community needs. And I think that's important. It has made the union better acquainted to the community and favorably acquainted. They see that we are trying to be good citizens.

INTERVIEWER: With all the other things to take up your time, did you have time to develop political contacts in San Antonio and elsewhere?

WOODING: Oh, yes. I attended all the meetings that I possibly could. Where they had more than one CWA local, we had a council, and then members of that council joined the AFL-CIO Council, and they would have meetings once a month. I was acquainted with and worked with the people in other unions as much as my time permitted, but I had a large territory. At one time I had about thirty-five hundred people in my assigned territory, and sometimes it seemed like every one of them had problems at once. You were on call constantly. Your phone would ring anywhere from 5:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. the next morning, and so I couldn't devote a whole lot of time, but I did participate as much as I could and tried to see that the locals participated.

One time the man that, as I recall it, was president of the labor group there in San Antonio wanted us to help address envelopes for some political campaign coming up, so I offered to help. I said we'd take five hundred. He brought me a thousand and that was just my office, not the locals. They were all doing something else. I couldn't have my stenographer work overtime; I wasn't authorized to pay her overtime, and she was busy most of her time on something else. Whatever time she had she worked on them, but most of those thousand envelopes got addressed by me on Saturday and Sunday. I just went to the office and stayed all day long to do it. So I used to tell this fellow--one thing about him, he never asked you to do more than he'd do himself, but if

WOODING: you gave him an inch he'd take a mile, and I've often kidded him about that five hundred envelopes I offered to address and he gave me a thousand. But we got through. Of course, that's a very minor thing. But we participated in the meetings and tried to see that our locals kept it up.

All of the locals assigned to me, I made up a chart showing each of them who their representative was. Of course, you had to take the map that AFL-CIO prepared showing the districts--the representational districts in the state--and then I'd have to find out where all these locals were and I made a chart saying, "Your local--you're in District 3 and your representative is so-and-so and his address at home and in Washington is thus-and-so." So that whenever we had a letter-writing campaign or some special piece of legislation, they couldn't say, "I didn't know who to write to," because they did. That was just one of the little gimmicks that we developed to stimulate them. And often, in our schools, if there was some hot issue pending, why, we'd have all the students at the school write a letter. We'd give them some examples, several different examples. Of course, we'd have to tell them the name of the bill and the number and all of that and, "You can say it this way or that way or the other," and give them several examples and let them come up with their own words. We didn't dictate the letter we just told them what the issue was and what we needed to write about.

INTERVIEWER: Are there particular people or factions in Texas politics that, over the years, you see as having been more friendly to telephone workers' interests--CWA?

WOODING: Some have been friendly towards labor. I can't at the moment think of anyone who has exactly picked us out. Of course our good senator, Ralph Yarborough, has been a great friend of labor. And many of the CWA people--he lived in Austin, and our Austin local was very active politically--and a lot of them he knows them on a first name basis. But he may have the same contacts with other locals; I'm not sure about that.

INTERVIEWER: I'm kind of running out of questions here, but I do have a couple of questions. Let me ask you both of them, so you may choose to answer one of them or maybe both or neither. First question is: what do you see as having been, over the years, the most satisfying thing--either a short-term experience or a long-term--most satisfying experience you've got out of being connected with telephone unions? Second question: what do you see as having been a dissatisfying or disillusioning experience, if any, again either short-term or

INTERVIEWER: long-term?

WOODING: I don't know that I could name any one incident that was most satisfying above others, but the most satisfying general thing was the knowledge that you'd been able to help people, especially when people were unjustly dismissed. We had a colored girl, a Negro girl in Austin; a Latin American girl in Laredo; and, of course, a number of people of our race everywhere who were unfairly dismissed. And if we were able to present their case and get justice restored I think sometimes that's even better than a general wage increase, because if you're fired a wage increase doesn't do you any good, but if you've lost your job unfairly and get it back.... Injustice riles me up, always has and still does. I told Tony, I think, the other day, I said, "Sometimes I'm sorry they took away my brass knuckles, because there's times when I want to go out and use them." Whenever there is deep injustice it just really gets under my skin, and to know that I've been able to help people is the one most satisfying thing.

Now the thing that was, I guess, generally most distasteful were the disappointments when we didn't win an arbitration case or some of the things that we knew it was right for us to have, but circumstances were such that we didn't achieve them. I have no great disappointment with the union as a whole, but in the union work I suppose not being able to get what we knew was just and right for us to have would be one of the most disappointing things.

For a long time things did go surprisingly smooth. When I first went to San Antonio as a staff representative three of the departmental heads down there--the man in traffic, in plant, and in commercial--were men that I had known when I worked in Dallas. They had worked here too. I hadn't dealt with them in union grievances, but I knew them, and they knew me. They knew I was a veteran employee, and that carried a little weight with them. We hardly had to have--well I don't think we had any appealed grievances for the first year or two that I was down there. For one thing, they didn't rile us up as much as they did later. They were going along. They kind of wanted to get along if they could. And many, many grievances have been handled on the telephone. Just get the right man on the line and say, "It's been reported to me that so-and-so happened at such a place. Will you look into it?" And they did and adjusted it; called me back; gave me a report; I called the local; that was

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it. Or if we did need to go into a meeting I always tried to be very sure of the facts and not tell them anything that could be disproved. And that means you've got to talk with and question your local people very carefully. They don't mean to be dishonest, but to quote Paul Gray again--in our schools he'd say--"Now, don't run in and tell the boss that the foreman hit John, because maybe John hit the foreman." You've got to be sure, and I tried to be, and the company realized that. In fact, some of them have told me and told others that they didn't always agree with me by any means, but they did respect my position and felt that what I was telling them was true, or that I thought it was true or I wouldn't have told them.

So we were able to get along much better than we did until the company started just a definite harassment program. They would have management refuse to settle things that it would have really been to their advantage to settle. Some of the local people did it reluctantly. You could see that; I mean local management. I think I had good relationships with management by and large, most of the time. And by that I certainly don't mean I sold out to them. I tried to treat them with decency, and if we won a grievance I didn't gloat over it. I let them save face, if they could, because I like to do that too. The man who was full-time secretary in Texas for the state CIO--after we affiliated, the first time I saw him for any conversation, I knew he was trying to just feel me out, so he said, "When you go into a grievance meeting how do you approach management?" And I said, "Well Jeff, I try to begin like a lady." Well, I never got any further. He was just hilarious from then on. And I did. I tried to approach them courteously and in the right way, but if we couldn't play without getting rough we just had to get rough, because my job was to represent those people. Another thing that you have to remind your local officers of: sometimes a member is definitely in the wrong. They have done something that you know they shouldn't have done. But if they insist that you have a grievance under the law we've got to represent people, even non-members. And I said, "You'll have to take the position like a defense lawyer. No matter how great the criminal, under our type of law, a defense lawyer can be appointed and it's his job to defend the man the best he can, or the woman." And I've had a few cases like that. I knew were--they were completely in the wrong, but we would ask for the meeting. We'd go in and present the case and say, "Now, this has happened. This man's dismissed, or this, or that. He feels it was unjust. I want him,"--of course, he was there--"I want him to tell

WOODING: you just what happened." So in a way I kind of put the responsibility on him, but I did give him representation, which I think we definitely have to do, and most of the time you can certainly find some point of defense.

INTERVIEWER: Sometimes the union wins one they don't expect to win, too, by accident?

WOODING: Yes, some technicality. It's just like cases in court, I suppose. Sometimes a criminal is cleared because of a technicality, and I'm not saying that our members were ever guilty of any criminal acts. I don't know of any who were. Some of them did maybe merit the discipline that was given them because they hadn't carried their part of the load and so on. I used to tell the members, I said, "Now, we signed a contract at this rate of pay and these number of hours. Now, you go in there and give them a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. You don't have to give two day's work for one day's pay. You don't have to accept pressure or tension or any of that. Give a fair day's work, and I'll be constantly working to get more money for you." And it seemed to me that was a reasonable approach, and the people would usually buy it. I think you can work things out with the company better if they know you're going to try. We have a responsibility to live up to our part of the contract, too. Of course, it's signed by both parties, and even though it's tough sometimes, you do have to live with it until such time as you can properly change it.

One thing came to my mind a minute ago when we were talking about negotiating with management. I actually worked thirty-three years and ten months for the company, but we had a contract with them that the first two years that you were on leave for union business was credited service as far as pension rights. You could have a total of only four years leave. I was in the fortunate position, that few people were in, where that four years and my birthdays coincided. So before I had to terminate my service with the company, I became eligible for a pension because women in the telephone company under their pension plan can retire much earlier than the men and ten years earlier than the normal retirement age. So I was credited for pension purposes with thirty-five years' service, and they gave me my thirty-five year service pin. And about the only time I ever wore it was when I was going in to hold a grievance meeting with some young whippersnapper that probably wasn't even thirty-five years old, but he just thought the company was it, and anybody that dared question them, it was treason. And their eyes would really pop when they knew I had been around and knew the ropes. And it made it a whole lot easier lots of times because they'd begin

WOODING: telling you some big, pompous something; it didn't take you long to puncture their balloon, and they couldn't say much about it. I told the traffic man at bargaining one time, just informal conversation, that I used to do that, and it appealed to him a lot because they have their problems with some of these young fellows that think that way. Everybody has to learn. I had to learn. I made mistakes, too, and everybody does. We learn by experience.

INTERVIEWER: The material you've given me has reminded me of a question which I maybe should have asked you about before. Can I ask you to comment on the paternalism--or maybe it might better be called maternalism--of the phone company in these early years when you were working for them?

WOODING: It was very evident. We were taught to think of the company almost as a benefactor for even letting us work for them, and that they were just unquestioned in their integrity. We just followed them blindly; anything they told us to do, it never entered our minds, I don't suppose, to protest. We might have protested inwardly or privately, but nobody ever talked back to the boss that I know of. Then years later, I don't know really the origin of it, but in the union we now refer to the telephone company from time to time as Ma Bell. But it's at least a semi-defensive term, I think. We are implying that she tries to be a mother to all--I mean wants to give that impression--but really doesn't take care of the people very well.

INTERVIEWER: Again, in the material you've given me, you mention a story, something that happened to you which might be characteristic of some of the kinds of problems that union people ran into in the early days. May I ask you to tell me the story?

WOODING: You mean in regard to when I ran out of money? Well, we didn't have too much money, and at one time about 1942 or 1943, somewhere in there, when we were still organized on a departmental area basis--that is Texas traffic financed its own affairs, collected its own dues. We paid a portion of it into the Southwestern Telephone Workers Union. They in turn paid something into the National Federation, but all that stayed in our immediate territory--was in the Texas traffic area. And that group determined that we would have some education classes held throughout the state, primarily for traffic people, although people in other departments were not barred, and in some locations the plant men and others did attend. But it was primarily for traffic. We had enough funds at that time to have paid for the trip, but there was some delay, for some reason I don't recall now, in

WOODING: getting the cash advance to me for this trip. So I used my own funds. But the mistake was that I didn't have enough reserve. There was nothing I could do about it if I had known it because I took all I had at the time. I went to several locations, and there were some expenses that were greater than I had anticipated, hotel rooms, meeting rooms, things of that sort.

So I finally got to Huntsville, which incidentally is where the state penitentiary for Texas is located. When I got in I knew my money was running short, but I thought I was all right until I got there and found that they were going to charge us a good deal more for the meeting room than I had expected. Usually we paid about two dollars for a meeting room in a hotel. Even in a town no larger than that they charged five dollars. So I paid for the room as soon as I got there, the meeting room. I got in in the afternoon. The meeting was to be that night. I paid for that in advance and went over to the bus station then, which, of course, was easy walking distance because it's a small community, and bought a ticket back to Dallas for the next day, which didn't leave me much money, not enough to buy a normal meal in the hotel. So I just snacked on fruit and cookies and candy or something like that for evening meal. We had the meeting, and I didn't want to explain to those people there, for several reasons, what my plight was. They were strangers to me. I had never been there before. I knew it was the day before the traffic pay day, and I didn't want to embarrass any of those girls by asking for a loan, which probably they didn't have the money to pay. And they were affiliated with another town as a local, so they didn't have local funds available. It was after five o'clock by that time, and the telegraph office was closed and wouldn't be open until after I had left the next morning, so I couldn't wire home or anybody for funds. I couldn't write a check because I didn't have a checking account. So I was trying to figure out how I'd get home, get out of the hotel. I knew I couldn't just walk out with my bags in my hand without being stopped, so I decided to just put essential things in my briefcase, which I did take out with me. Left everything else locked in my suitcase. I was wondering what I would say to the desk clerk. Of course, going out before seven o'clock in the morning, there was no one in the lobby, and I certainly couldn't get out without the desk clerk seeing me, but as I started out of the door of my room, the lock clung some way, and I wasn't able to lock the door, so I very nonchalantly went by the desk and told the clerk at the desk that the door would not lock, and I had luggage in there, and would he please see it was locked. He said, "Yes," he would. Of course, he didn't know I was checking out on a deferred payment plan, but that's exactly what I was doing.

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I walked again to the bus station. It was barely daylight, and I felt so guilty I could almost hear the gates of the state prison clanging behind me. I felt that I'd really done something pretty bad, but I didn't know what else to do. So after I got home, I went by the telephone building, picked up my own paycheck, cashed it, went to a telegraph office, and wired the hotel in Huntsville, stating that I had been called out of town and wiring them money for my room and what I supposed would be the fare to ship me my bag. And the bag came in due time and good condition, so I got off the hook all right on that.

Incidentally, I was pretty hungry when I got back to Dallas, because after a light dinner I had a dish of oatmeal at fifteen cents for breakfast, and that was it. If I hadn't had a paycheck to pick up myself when I got here I wouldn't have had busfare to get home probably. I don't know what I'd have done, but I didn't have to face that.

That's probably just one of innumerable cases where people had problems to meet and made all sorts of sacrifices to handle the union work. We had plant men who--we were on a six-day week, of course, in the early days of organizing the union. And they'd work six days for the company, including Saturday, travel Saturday night to some distant town, have a meeting Sunday, travel home Sunday night, and go to work Monday morning. So there's been a lot of effort put into the union, and it means more to us because we did put something into it. I suppose it's just part of ourselves. It's something that we have helped build, and those of us who did those things will probably never lose our loyalty for it. Without doubt most people who worked during that time would tell you the same or maybe even more harrowing tales than we could.

(end of interview)

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