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United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America,
UAW

International Executive Board
Oral Histories

George Merrelli

Interviewed by Glenn Ruggles
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RUGGLES: This is an interview with George Merrelli in his home in St. Clair Shores. Mr. Merrelli, going over your earlier interview [with Jack Skeels in 1963], we did have a question about the intensive course in labor law and collective bargaining that you took. You'd begun work at Ford in 1928 and it wasn't clear as to when you took this extra educational stint.

MERRELLI: Well, the cram course that I took was in 1937-38. And the reason for that was we were having a political fight in the union and we were running up against some very clever people in local union meetings who knew parliamentary law, clever speakers, and were able to outmaneuver us despite the fact that we represented the majority, and it was necessary then for us to learn something about them.

At the same time, there was very little to call upon as far as experienced people in collective bargaining. So a program was devised in the fall of 1937-38 that ran for 10 months, which dealt with collective bargaining, principles of seniority, parliamentary law, elements of public speaking and the question of interpretation of contract provisions. We did this really in a self-defense transaction, to be able to compete with people who were trained.

RUGGLES: Who were these very clever people?

MERRELLI: These were members of the Communist Party. And the way they were identified at the time is that their line, as they preached it, usually was completely the same. And so, as we got acquainted with it and began to realize what we were up against, we could then tell who was who by how they were presenting the items. Fortunately for us, no matter where you went — and they were advocating the line of the Soviet Union, the

line as far as the union was concerned — they'd repeat exactly the same language and you could immediately spot this was one of those people.

When I say Communist Party, they were not all members of the Communist Party. There were young people who were dissatisfied in the early days following the Depression, and it was the only place to turn where some promise of alleviating the problems that we were faced with was being held out. Of course, underlying all this was their maneuvering us to really project the Soviet Union line. We just weren't trained to see through it. So this was a 10-month cram course. There were 44 of us. This was a union project.

A second project was developed by the Catholic archdiocese in Detroit that was called the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. And here again, we trained in parliamentary law to counteract the Communists, to show us how clever people could maneuver in the local union, particularly their methods of stalling. The average person will stay in a meeting an hour, hour and a half, two hours and then he's going to go home. And they were masters at stalling through parliamentary maneuvers so that by the end of two hours, the majority of the people would leave and then when they saw they had the majority of votes, immediately bang, bang, bang, there were four, five quick resolutions adopted, advocating the Soviet program.

RUGGLES: Can you give me an example of what they might have tried and how you would have counteracted it once you got the hang of parliamentary procedure?

MERRELLI: We used the same tactics.

RUGGLES: For example . . .

MERRELLI: We first would scatter people throughout the meeting place to make believe that we had a lot of support. Second, we exposed them for what they were and

what they were advocating. This happened in Plymouth Local 51. Now, the Communist cry in this country when Roosevelt decided to help the Allies by giving them war materials and so forth was that we should not be participating in the imperial blood bath. And they did many things that blocked the manufacturing of war materials. Whether this was by direction from outside agencies, I don't know, but the results were there were many unnecessary wildcat strikes, which had the same effect. And they were very vocal in the local unions to get resolutions passed. When France was overrun in 1940 and England was under attack, there was a move being made to try to get the United States to assist in the war against Hitler. And at that time, of course, Hitler and Stalin had a pact, a mutual support pact.

The Plymouth local membership, which was controlled by the left-wing people, met on a Saturday and passed a resolution to the effect that we should not supply the Allies with war materials. Secondly, we should not think about sending any of our young men and women over there to assist them.

Sunday morning, the following day, Germany invaded Russia. Our Macomb County CIO Council was meeting on Monday night and they had a hurried meeting of the executive board of that local and they submitted a second telegram to the AFL council for consideration banning strikes and advocating an all-out effort to produce war material to fight the people's war. Tracy Knoll, who was president of the council then, cagey old fellow when it came to business, called upon the president of the Plymouth local to advise the council on which one of the two resolutions they wanted the council to act on, and he proceeded to read both of them. I don't have to tell you, all hell broke loose. It pointed out more clearly than anything we could have done that these people, who were advocating a

hard line, were really not interested in the United States or the people who worked in the plants here, but were more concerned about what was happening to the Soviet Union. It was the best weapon we had later on to handle them.

RUGGLES: You were one of 44 people you mentioned taking this cram course. Did you plan on becoming the union leader or did it just happen? Were you selected? How did that come about?

MERRELLI: Well, that's a very good question. I guess the only thing I can say is that I always was a little rebellious. I was always against the status quo and an advocate for the underdog.

I was anti-Communist, because I saw what it did to the coal miners in the coalfields. The coal mine union had been destroyed in a strike called by John L. Lewis in 1937, when economic conditions were against them completely, and the United Mine Workers were almost destroyed. The leaders were not members of the Communist Party, but they were dupes. They split the Mine Workers union wide open. I recall that. Then when we begin to organize, I was determined that that would not happen.

A number of those 44, four or five of them, became key people in the union. We knew absolutely nothing about how to combat the left wing in the union. We were just young and didn't like what was happening to us, so we decided to do something about it.

RUGGLES: You mentioned in an earlier interview that you led the fight to defeat Homer Martin. Could you tell me about that?

MERRELLI: Well, I was considered a Homer Martin supporter, because of the Communist thing. See, the fight that Homer Martin was trying to use and the issue he was trying to use was that the left wing, so-called, were all Communists and of course that

immediately drew me to him. I did not care for Homer Martin, because he let us down. I was not unhappy about him leaving, but I was also an anti-Communist.

There was a struggle in the particular plant that I worked in between a young Indian fellow, Clayton Fountain, who was discriminated against (he wrote a book on what happened to him), and me. He was leading the left wing in the plant and I was the leader of the right wing. When the split developed between the CIO and the AFL and local unions were voting as to which way they wanted to go, I think they were worried about me because I was an ardent so-called right-wing person. In the meeting in which the decision was made, Martin was there, Ed Hall, Walter Reuther, and I had my group there. And without saying anything to us at all, Homer Martin wound up his talk by saying, "Let's walk out on the meeting." His followers started to go. I got up and got the microphone and said "Stop, we aren't leaving the meeting. While we disagree with him, we aren't going to leave, we'll fight it out inside." And that's how the control of the plant developed. The decision to do that was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I would not walk out of the union. I was going to battle it out inside. I was always convinced that you don't settle things by running away from them. So he wanted us to pull out and walk out. I got up and asked the people to remain.

There were about 100 or so that walked out. Somebody ran out and said, "Come on back. George wants us back in." And they came back into the meeting. We stayed there and I told them we would fight it out on the floor and in the plants, but not walk out. We would remain in the CIO. That's what that story's all about.

RUGGLES: So you're the kind of a person that takes the initiative. Someone needed to be the spokesman or to say things in those days and you're that kind of a person.

MERRELLI: I'm not sure about that, but I guess you're right. I don't know why. When I was a young man, I was a manager of baseball teams. I took a bunch of girls and trained them to play baseball and so forth. Yes, I think there were leadership qualities in me from way back. How it came about, I really don't know.

RUGGLES: Along the same line, let's talk about that tool and die strike of '39, where you had a hand in the strategy. Could you explain the strategy of that strike?

MERRELLI: Yes. This was immediately following the reorganization of the UAW, where we had a 13-day convention in Cleveland at the CIO branch and we wrote a new constitution. I was involved in that because in 1938, Homer Martin, without authorization (although the constitution gave him that right), went in and signed a one-page contract with General Motors that just cut the guts out of Local 235's collective bargaining agreement. It took full-time representatives away, placed us on the basis of collective bargaining with two hours a day, total, no carryovers for 500 people. That was impossible. He was able to do this because the constitution was lax.

When the union reorganized in the 1939 convention, we did two things. We were determined, first of all, that the constitution was going to be pretty tight so that nobody could misinterpret the authority of the officers or anyone else. Secondly, Ernie Bennett and I from Local 235 and some others from Detroit were determined that what Homer Martin did to us was not going to happen again. Out of this came this brainchild of the General Motors Council. I was given the assignment by the GM people to guide the council thing through the convention, because we had quite a disagreement with the UAW leadership on that rank-and-file committee.

Everything revolved around General Motors then. When Homer Martin, who was in the AFL group now, found out that he was on the short end of the votes (he had 4 or 5 GM plants and we had about 40) he would submit to GM the names of some of his supporters as committeemen in those plants that voted to stay with the CIO. GM then seized the opportunity, saying they couldn't tell who was in the majority, so they didn't have to bargain with anybody.

Well Walter, being the planner that he was, realized that something had to be done, because if this had continued, they would have us wiped out of every plant as far as official representation is concerned. So he came up with the strategy of having tool and die makers strike, which would threaten the company's 1940 models, but not production workers, who would be eligible for unemployment compensation if the strike continued after production had finished on the 1939 model. It wasn't easy to sell this in the plants, because such a thing was unheard of. But we did some educational work with the leaders and they agreed to go ahead.

The biggest issue in that strike was the short work year of the skilled trades people; Walter said that there was no need for that except that management just didn't want to plan their work better. That was the major concession that we got from GM and it worked out very well. In fact, it went way beyond our wildest expectations. But the real underlying issue was to save our union. The tactic worked very well. Our troops were well-disciplined. Our backbone, though, was Fisher 23 and Fisher 21, which made the roof dies and so forth. Without them, that model didn't come out. They were our backbone. The others were backup. Gear and Axle was one of them.

The second thing that came out of the strike, of course, were the negotiations of the 1940 agreement. It was a yearly contract. Jack Livingston and I were on the staff then (I was the secretary of the Bargaining Committee at that time). Jack, who came out of the St. Louis assembly plant, was very familiar with the assembly end of the operations. I was very familiar with the manufacturing end. Walter assigned us to work on seniority and other working conditions.

RUGGLES: Tell me how you first met Walter Reuther and how you became such a close associate of his.

MERRELLI: I first met Walter Reuther in the latter part of 1937, right after the convention in South Bend where they had the big fight. Walter came from Wheeling, West Virginia. I came from Ohio, which was about 15 miles away. In fact, most of us came from down through the coalfields. I don't recall where we were at the place that I met him. He was being painted as a big old ogre, Joe Stalin in disguise and everything else. I listened to him talk and I liked what he was advocating. That's how we got acquainted, just one of those things at a meeting.

I then really got acquainted with him right after the membership meeting I talked about, where I urged everyone to stay in the CIO and fight it out, although I disagreed with the left-wing faction. He was there at the time. I think it was a philosophical thing. We were coming from different ends for the same objective.

The chairman of the Constitution Committee was George Edwards, who recently retired from the U.S. Sixth Court of Appeals. They were advocating that the Bargaining Committee be made up of international representatives. We were determined that it be rank and file. And I had the job of guiding it through the convention. I guess that's how the

recognition came about. I called a four o'clock meeting in the morning, just prior to the time they were going to submit the constitutional change to the GM people, because they were going to submit their proposal. So we advised Edwards that we were going to fight it on the floor. They didn't want that. Well, they would have lost it.

RUGGLES: When Walter became president of the UAW in '46, most of the right wing followed him and by '47, he had pretty much everyone on the executive board.

MERRELLI: We had all but four, I think. Just the reversal of what it was. The turnaround in '47 was 18-4 or 17-5. Just a reversal of what it was.

RUGGLES: Did the Thomas-Addes faction have a change of heart and swing over? Some of them stayed on the board for quite a while, George Burt in Canada, for instance.

MERRELLI: Well, there's quite a history on how that whole fight developed. Reuther, Addes and Thomas wore the same cap in the '37 convention in Milwaukee; they were anti-Martin. The 1939 convention split over the question of what direction do we take. I think there were ambitions involved, also. That convention, the two forces split. I was part of the Reuther forces then. In spite of the fact that we were on the short end of the delegate count, through Walter's leadership and the determination of his people we were able to maintain some semblance of democracy in the union. We didn't let them rout us and we fought to the very end. And we were fortunate in having people who were able by that time to get up on the floor and make sound arguments. We didn't have that in '37. Walter got elected regional director as he did in '37. But he was really a regional director and GM director almost without portfolio. That's when myself and Bill Stevenson, who

was president of Local 157, and the fellow from Flint were given part-time representative cards. Our locals paid whatever lost time was involved. From there is where it developed.

In 1947 the whole philosophy of the union was completely reversed. But when I say that prior to that time we were under the left wing group, I don't mean that they were Communists. I think in the whole history of UAW officialdom there were two people who were Communists: one was Wyndham Mortimer, who got elected vice president in 1937, and the other one, although they deny it, was a fellow out in California. They played a clever trick on a third person: once he got elected, they sicked the woman onto him. And he went along with them.

RUGGLES: They did what? I didn't hear what you said.

MERRELLI: They — well, how do you prove it? Suddenly a female, very active in the Communist front, hung around. The guy fell for it and married her and then she dictated what he did. He later got wise.

Well, the others that were in opposition, the so-called left wing — and I'm talking now about '39 and after that — Thomas, I don't know what his religion was, but he was no more a Communist than I was. Ed Hall was no Communist. Regional directors like Mel Bishop weren't Communists. I think there was Charlie Kerrigan, a very devout Catholic, but part of the left wing, because in his youth, that's where he went.

While they painted Walter during the factional fight as a ruthless, no good SOB, Walter's philosophy was we had to bring the union together and his theory was that there had to be unity in the leadership and loyalty in the rank and file. And when Walter got elected president, he was on the short end. He wasn't able to do much. In fact most of his things were vetoed by the board.

When he got elected in '47, the staff reps were all told that there's a place for you in this union, but your time has to be devoted to the service of the membership, not to politics, that's out. And there were only four who left — two because they had business opportunities and two just wouldn't accept the terms. Everybody else stayed on, but they had to work on behalf of the union.

RUGGLES: There must have been a lot of behind-the-scenes maneuvering in that one short year from '46 to '47 where the board did a complete . . .

MERRELLI: The maneuvering started in '39. We had caucuses every night for 13 solid days at that convention. And the fight kept on and the organizational work kept on. '47 was the culmination of eight years' work. Walter was almost defeated in 1941 as the regional director. In '46 he got elected by 124 votes. And while we lost the two regional directors on the west side, which was Walter's stronghold, we picked up two on the east side. Knowing that we would get the west side back again, plus the east side, the fellows in the left wing decided they had to take some steps for the '47 convention.

Well, they came up with a merger proposal with FE, Farm Equipment Workers, which was completely dominated by the Communists. And they had about 60,000 members, which would give 600 votes under our format at the convention, which could have made a difference in '47. Well, that issue of the merger was put to the vote of the local unions prior to the convention. We were able to get across our message of what the issue was all about, and pointed out to the people that this was a smokescreen to protect the left-wing officers. And it failed. That's how we turned it around.

This all came out through eight years of exposure. In 1940 when the Plymouth local sent those two resolutions, it was that type of exposure in which people began to

realize that some of the people working in the left-wing group were not interested in the workers' problems, but more interested in what happened to the policy and philosophy of the Soviet Union. These were good people. They'd made a mistake in our eyes, but there was nothing wrong with their philosophy; it was the same as ours. The tactics were just different. When we solidified Region 1, two-thirds of the leadership were former left-wing people, very solid people.

RUGGLES: As long as they were willing to give up the political fighting.

MERRELLI: Well, no. Not the local union leadership in the plants. The political fighting was among international representatives. Good local union leaders had got caught up in the left-wing thing. Their pride, you know, they weren't going to denounce anybody or anything like that. And then the question became how do you forge the two groups together with dignity and their heads held high? This was Walter's position.

RUGGLES: You've already mentioned a few, but could you recall a few examples of behind-the-scenes maneuvering used to bring about this unity?

MERRELLI: Oh, yes. One of the biggest maneuvers — and it was a maneuver — was in the 1946 convention. Roy Reuther and I counted votes as the delegates were elected. When we went into the convention, we were pretty sure of how many votes we had. Well, there were two types: the real solid votes and then those that just go along because they like what you're talking about, but they're not going to stick their necks out or anything like that.

Going into the '46 convention, we had come up with approximately a margin of 700 votes. That was a take on R. J. Thomas. We didn't think we could defeat Addes. We just took on the presidency for Walter. Well, the CIO didn't want anybody rocking the boat, so

they sent in Phil Murray to try to keep this from happening. R. J. Thomas had been a compromise candidate in the '39 convention. They begin to siphon off some of the lukewarm people. Finally, the most damaging blow to us came when at one of the meetings, Phil Murray spoke and he gave a very laudatory talk about the leadership and put his arm around Thomas. There went 400 votes. It was getting too close and we had to devise something. Here again, the mind of Walter is working.

We had been trying to get Thomas to debate Walter. We knew that Walter would make mincemeat of him. He never would. So we devised a scene, and there was only a small handful of us in on it, but we had to do something to get that crowd to force them into debate.

There was a very thin person, active in the right-wing force, but not too well known to the left wing in Local 3, which was our big local union, by the name of Murphy, Emma Murphy — innocent looking little thing. A five-mile gust of wind would knock her over, she's so small. I talked to her and she agreed to speak during one of the openings at the convention. She got up and said, "I've been hearing all this business of both caucuses. I've attended both caucuses and heard the speakers speak, but I'm confused. I think the only solution to this whole thing is that we have a debate. And I move a motion that we have a debate between Walter Reuther and R. J. Thomas." That knocked the convention sky high. They couldn't get out of it. But it saved the day. And it was that little maneuver of this innocent-looking little girl making that motion.

There were many other battles inside of local unions. During the FE merger thing, the Addes forces had gone through the whole Local 3 plant (one of our biggest locals) telling everybody to vote yes on the merger. But the president of the local union, Mike

Novak, was on our side. We devised a motion with the wording such that if you voted yes, you voted against the merger. We kept it secret and then sprung the motion real quick. And we also had a damn quick vote. Well, when the Addes forces realized what was happening, they began to run around telling their people to vote no, but that just got them confused and we carried the day with that simple change.

I don't recall the exact language. We stuck two words in there. Do you favor the rejection of the FE? This is the kind of maneuvering that went on in local union halls. Both sides did it. They got caught with their breeches down. It's a very interesting political activity of how things could happen behind the scenes.

There were many other things. Of course the fight was still going on, on the gains that were made under the right wing. They always opposed, as Pete Kelly does now. No matter what it is, he's opposed to it. If he had listened to those people, we'd still be talking about the first week's vacation, because they had opposed it. All our gains would be the same. We'd still be talking about it in the initial stages.

The political maneuvering was very intense. Battle for delegates in that eight years was intense at every convention. In 1941 Walter almost got defeated as a regional director. At that time, the regional directors in Michigan were elected as a whole. They were not divided as they are now. There were seven directors in Michigan.

RUGGLES: What are some of the other methods you used to win delegates or some of the techniques?

MERRELLI: Primarily, it was exposure of phony issues and phony questions. You had to work all year round getting people acquainted with it, bringing a message to them, pointing out immediately when something phony came up. That was the biggest

thing that I think turned the tide. Most of their reps spent all their time politicking and service was lacking. The most formidable weapon we had was good service

RUGGLES: Good service in what way?

MERRELLI: Handling grievances, negotiating contracts, doing good work, goodwill work, attending meetings with them. Despite our disagreements politically, keep it on a friendly basis. Keep politics outside. Let them handle their problems internally.

RUGGLES: I want to ask you a question about religion, if I might. It may be a question about justice, I'm not sure, but you mentioned Addes's religion and I noticed that in reading about Walter Reuther and Leonard Woodcock and others, there's a set of humanitarian principles that seemed to be at work there. I noticed in '63, when the pope's encyclical came out, Peace on Earth, Walter sent a copy around to all of the International Executive Board members. Would you comment on that? Is there an underlying religious feeling in the union?

MERRELLI: No.

RUGGLES: Not a formal religious affiliation, but is there a set of ethics or a point of justice that resembles religion?

MERRELLI: The encyclical was the pope's justice. Walter was not a religious man by any stretch of the imagination. I doubt whether he had any religion at all, but he agreed with the principle and the justice. It just fit right in with what he was doing. He got a lot of criticism for it, but it didn't deter him, because he thought it was right. This is what we were after. You see, Walter, almost got defeated over the black question in '43. The blacks were insisting that they get special treatment. Now, Walter was a strong advocate

of justice for the blacks, but he was not prepared to hand anything to anybody on a platter. He said you had to work for it.

The blacks had X number of votes and he would not make a deal with them to give special privileges to a small minority, so they went with the other forces who almost defeated Walter. But this was a matter of principle with him. He did more to wipe out discrimination in the auto industry than any one individual, way back before it became popular. But he was also a principled man who said that, by golly, you didn't get anything just because you were a Catholic or an agnostic or black or yellow or anything else. You had to earn it. But he made damn sure you got that opportunity to earn it. And he fought very hard on that, and his record will show that. Who else would go down in the South in 1941 and say you had to discontinue your separate toilet and drinking fountains, your separate seniority and so forth?

RUGGLES: That was a dangerous thing to do back then.

MERRELLI: You're damn right it was dangerous. But he did it and his staff members did it. I happened to be the first one to break the color line at GM in the machine shops in 1941. Because I lived with blacks in the coalfield, I came to the conclusion that they were just like anybody else. And at the same time, I had the same principles as Walter — I was not going to hand it to anybody because his color was black or yellow, but I made damn sure he got the opportunity. We broke the color line in 1941. Of 7,000 employees, there were 248 blacks, all on brooms.

How did that happen? In '37, when we had nothing to fall back on or no philosophy at all — we were all green — the company convinced us to set up two bargaining units. Put all the chippers and sweepers in one unit and the rest of the plants in another. Simple

thing. Happened so easily in many plants. I broke it in '41. I did the same thing in Toledo, under Walter's direction.

RUGGLES: There were some internal problems in the union, as far as a black becoming a director, weren't there?

MERRELLI: Oh, yes. Our union had two glaring weaknesses. We had no female and we had no black elected officers and no hope of that ever happening under the system in place. While we prided ourselves on not being prejudiced, prejudice was there. So we had to work, we had to educate, we had to recognize that these were problems. It took a long time. The breaking of the color line in Chevy Gear and Axle didn't come overnight. There were three years of educational work going on prior to when we felt we were ready to do it. And when we did it, we still had problems.

And this was the same thing as far as the leadership was concerned. We recognized, what with the changing philosophies in the country and the world, that we should have a woman representative on the highest body and we should have a black. But if they were to try to get elected based on their own initiative, no matter how talented they were, the core was against them. So we had to take that on. Yes, there was some opposition, but we had done an educational job on the position so it was very small and short-lived.

RUGGLES: Did you have a little trouble in your region? I'm thinking about an organization called the Citywide Caucus. Does that ring a bell?

MERRELLI: There were 100 of those.

RUGGLES: Something called the Citywide Caucus, and it appears to be a black group that made the suggestion that you become a vice president or a board member-at -

large, so they could run somebody of their group for regional director, around 1970. Does that sound familiar?

MERRELLI: Yes, it's familiar, but that's not quite the way it was. I've never told anybody this, so I want to be very careful how I say it.

There was a group of people who didn't like me. They weren't only black. In fact, there were very few blacks from the region. Outside, there was others who thought they were kingmakers. They thought that they could get a foothold by working with some other people in the region. I'm assuming this now; I have nothing to base it on, except two and two comes out four in the political arena.

I had an ambitious person on the staff; in fact there were several. One was a black fellow. I put the first black servicing rep on in Region 1. There were others on the staff in other places, one handling grievances at GM. I had the first one. Well, there were a number of people in the union, particularly at Solidarity House, who were always maneuvering around, trying to create a situation. Unfortunately, they convinced him that he ought to lead the charge. Of course, they were giving him a lot of bad advice, and he got hurt.

There was another fellow who was very ambitious and wanted to become regional director. Prior to '70, when Walter got killed, they had made a move. Three or four guys got in a race to run against me. One was a black. Now, they say that his candidacy was put up by people in the black caucus. The caucus was not that potent. I don't know if he was part of that or not, because he was one of my strongest boosters when the blacks took me on. See, I was a leading fighter against the Communist branch. Unfortunately, they were all in Region 1 and I had that job of fighting them. So I was not their favorite. Your

university paper [The South End] used to write me up quite often as a dictator and everything else. For a while there, I guess I was their favorite subject.

By the time Walter got killed, I had been on the board a number of years and had many fine acquaintances there and we worked together very closely. Well, one individual thought he had an opportunity to move up. Before that, he had been in bed with these guys. This guy came to me and talked to me about it and said he had a decision to make that afternoon about being a candidate against me at a convention and he wanted my advice. I told him that this was a decision he'd have to make. Well, he got cold feet and backed out. Other guys ran.

Then when Walter got killed, he thought this was an opportunity to move. And he and one of the blacks thought that I should become vice president. I had the votes. Fourteen had talked to me about becoming a candidate. This was during the transition period. But I had had nine years of traveling, which was enough for me. This guy was pressing it. He even talked to my wife about putting the pressure on me. They thought they could get rid of me by kicking me upstairs. But I didn't want it. I didn't want to live out of a suitcase, because I think those guys lead a bad life.

And I was very much supportive of Bluestone. I met Irving Bluestone in the early 1940's when he was chairman of the Bargaining Committee at GM Hyatt Bearing. I was servicing it. I had a high regard for his abilities. And in talking about it to Leonard, I found out he wanted to keep the post open even though it was a violation of our constitution. I called a meeting of local union leaders to put it before them. Leonard was a little apprehensive about doing it, but I said, "Don't worry about it. Why don't you tell them the truth. Let's not hide the fact that we want this post kept open." I had both Irving and

Leonard there to speak about why we did it and they accepted it unanimously. There are a number of blacks who tried to maneuver in the UAW. Now, the blacks who were heading up the leadership in '43, who were trying to work that deal out were not the same ones as in '70. They were on the opposite side of the political sphere. Then there would be little groups that would spring up every so often, but they didn't have the mass control that you need.

RUGGLES: Do you recall a fellow named Allen Tuck?

MERRELLI: Yeah. He was one of them at that time when four of them ran.

RUGGLES: He made a stab at the regional director, didn't he?

MERRELLI: He and Harold Adams and George Robinson went at me that year. That's the year I'm talking about where another guy backed off. Allen Tuck spent a lot of money. There was a guy who was doing some pretty nice maneuvering during that whole period, who claimed to have been a public relations expert. I won't give you his name. Claimed he learned his public relations work in prison. He got money for all four candidates. He came out of that convention with a half a dozen new suits and a couple thousand dollars in his pocket. Tuck spent a lot of money. I think he got 10 votes. He got fewer votes than Robinson got.

RUGGLES: Describe your region for me. Region 1 is a very large region, covering a lot of area, a farm area.

MERRELLI: It was. Originally there were seven directors in Michigan. They were elected at-large and then they would be placed in one of the regional offices: Saginaw, which covered Saginaw, Bay City and over to Grand Rapids; Flint, which was

Flint, Jackson and so forth; Pontiac; and two on the west side of Detroit and two on the east side.

In 1942, we divided them into five regions: Region 1 on the east side of Detroit; Region 1A on the west side; Pontiac was 1;, Flint became 1C; and northern Michigan 1D. And so, Ken Morris and I got elected as directors in '55. Before that it was Norm Matthews and Emil Mazey. I think in 1967 or '68 we separated the two Detroit regions. Before that, when McAulay retired, we eliminated 1B. Ken and I got all the thumb area stuff and Pontiac. At one time, he got some of the west side part of that region and 1A got some of it. Then later after that, we split the regions up in 1 and 1B. So I became Region 1 director and Ken 1B, and 1A and 1E were on the west side. The areas' boundary lines overlapped, so we divided on the basis of the jurisdiction that we had.

RUGGLES: You and Ken, you mean?

MERRELLI: Yeah. Our jurisdictional geographic line remained the same, although we split on the basis of local unions. That's how it still is.

RUGGLES: It goes up into the thumb area. You're in a lot of small farm communities. There were some mobile home plants around Marlette. Did you run into any resistance to organizing in those small, traditionally non-union types of towns?

MERRELLI: Well, the chamber of commerce always resisted. I had four or five plants there. Apache Trailer was a big plant. We finally got it after four or five years' effort. That was in Lapeer. I had two plants in Lapeer, one in Millington, another in Bad Axe and so forth. So I say geographically we were together. I took over Harbor Beach, a couple plants in Cass City. Ken had plants scattered throughout the area also.

RUGGLES: I have 101 questions, just trying to figure out which way we should head here.

The union seems to have been, over the years, somewhat pragmatic. That is, their goals switched a lot of times, depending I suppose, on the economic conditions. I recall in '58, the goal was a shorter work week for a long while, but as you went toward the convention, they dropped that and all of a sudden switched to profit sharing. Do you recall that situation or were you involved in that negotiation?

MERRELLI: In '58?

RUGGLES: Yeah.

MERRELLI: Oh, yeah, I was on the board, yes. Well, to really understand the UAW, you have to understand the political makeup. Right from the inception of the union, it's always been people advocating things, people who'd advocate far-out ideas for political purposes, and there's nothing wrong with that. These are really dreams, and all gains come out of dreams.

In 1938, during the Depression, GM particularly, because I'm more familiar with GM at that time at my home plant and others, wouldn't lay anybody off who worked four hours a week. If you got eight hours you were lucky. We had unemployment compensation, which would have paid $13 more than what we were making. My home local, Gear and Axle, passed a resolution asking the company to lay people off so that we could all at least get enough money to survive. There were several weeks you only worked four hours. Never more than eight a week. But they wouldn't lay people off.

I was the architect of the first short week in the industry and I think it was 1941. We finally worked out an agreement that the corporation would not work the employees

less than 24 hours any two consecutive weeks or less than an average of 32 hours over four consecutive weeks. Some historians asked me how this came about. It was just simply two guys who happened to be on that GM negotiating committee saying to Walter, "Damn it, we got to get some language here." So that's how this plant transfer business, this new job transfer came about. Jack Livingston and I worked it out.

GM opened a plant in Buffalo in '37, took 3,000 jobs from Gear and Axle. GM opened an assembly plant in either Kansas City or Gainesville, took X number of jobs from St. Louis. We determined they ain't going to do it any more like that, the guys had to be protected. That's how that came about. And so when they advocate a short work week now, hell, that's nothing new. We'd been talking about it way back.

The pensions that we got in 1950 weren't new. Hell, in 1938 we were talking about them. When we first advocated pensions in 1949, the left-wing forces tried to seize upon it as Walter's pipedream. "You'll never get it from GM," they said and things of that kind.

RUGGLES: Why would the left wing, in particular, be against pensions?

MERRELLI: They weren't against pensions. They wanted to embarrass Walter, that's what it was. They weren't against any of that stuff. They thought it was a political advantage. The same thing is happening right now. This is a democratic union. You have a right to do that. Thank the good Lord, they don't impress anybody. I made the statement earlier and I'll repeat it: If we'd listened to those people and their opposition to everything new that developed, we'd still be talking about our first week's vacation, because they opposed it. And I might say that despite the fact that when I retired I had 48 years seniority at Gear and Axle, I never collected a paid vacation from GM. I left the plant before we had

it. I left the plant in 1940 and we got the first vacation paid in '41. So I never collected vacation pay from General Motors.

RUGGLES: You're overdue.

MERRELLI: Yes. I tried to tell them that, but they wouldn't listen to me.

RUGGLES: Let's take a look at politics. We've been talking politics here all morning, but I wanted to ask you a question about the Democratic Party. There was a bit of sentiment, back in the late 40's, to develop a third party, a progressive political party, until Truman won. And then the leadership and the union decided to support the Democratic Party. Were you in on any of that planning in those days?

MERRELLI: Well, yes. Well, if you say planning, I was one of many.

RUGGLES: For a third party.

MERRELLI: Yeah. We established a third party. In fact, we did it twice. A miserable failure, but we thought we were right. We established Labor's Non-Partisan League, headed up by a lot of good people dissatisfied with both parties. I was sort of lukewarm to it, because I didn't think it would have much success. I didn't like what was happening in England and a couple of other countries that had 20, 30 different splinter parties and labor always got it in the neck.

Although I gave it support, it failed. Labor alone cannot do it. They were idealists and they worked very hard. I think it was an idea spawned by the Socialist Party that had been trying to do something for years and couldn't. We found out that what comfort we had in the political arena was from the Democrats. The Republicans simply opposed us all the time.

RUGGLES: Since the late 40's, the UAW has thrown its weight behind the Democratic Party. Has that been the route to go, generally?

MERRELLI: They had no place else to go outside of starting a new party, which everybody in the leadership recognized was doomed to failure. So whatever you could do you had to do within a party, and the Democrats were the party to go to because of the Depression years and what they did under Roosevelt. But I would say right now that there are a great deal more so-called independents among the average voters in the United States. There is at present, I think, a lack of confidence in labor leaders like we had 10, 15 years ago, because of decisions that have been made contrary to the thinking of the people.

RUGGLES: For instance?

MERRELLI: The labor leaders must accept the fact that they have to represent the thinking of their membership if they want to maintain their loyalty. They aren't doing that any more. You can't make decisions up here and expect the people down there to follow blindly.

RUGGLES: What decisions are you thinking of?

MERRELLI: I'm thinking of political policy decisions. There's a school of thought in the labor movement that you have to choose a candidate to support way early. I think the two times they did it was a disaster. The McGovern thing and the last one. You don't do that. You have to find out what the people are saying down below. It was very obvious from the beginning that the Mondale thing was a disaster, right from the start, because the people in the plants were not talking that way. They had a different sense of values in the political arena.

The attitudes are shifting. Coming out of the Depression, what was a liberal? They were called socialists. What the hell is a socialist? I don't know. I never could find out. A liberal is a guy dissatisfied with the status quo and wants to do things for people who don't have the means to do it for themselves. I think it's the same thing as a socialist. That's been their philosophy also. That's what the movement was about. And for about 20 years, liberalism had a great deal of support. We were able to do a lot of things. And when I say "we," I mean the liberals. But there comes a point when economics and such things change a little bit. The liberals haven't accepted that.

The average person is more conservative, I guess for several reasons. He's a little better off than he was before, he's sort of satisfied and doesn't want to take as many risks as he used to. He's concerned about improving conditions to a degree, but he's not always advocating change. Well, labor leaders have to accept that fact, that workers are moderately conservative now. You can't put a flaming liberal out there and expect them to follow you. They aren't going to do it.

RUGGLES: You might have answered my next question. I was going to ask you if all the great battles have been fought and if things like the UAW convention have gotten quite dull. Is it true that all of the great issues have been settled and all the battles have been fought?

MERRELLI: No. There will always be issues.

RUGGLES: What's next? What's coming up that you see?

MERRELLI: One issue that I think is very important and it's still there is national health. We were close to getting the votes in Washington for national health insurance, now that I look back, but they (the right wing) cleverly sidetracked us by giving us

Medicare, Medicaid. There's a history about health insurance. Blue Cross has a very important history. I don't know if anybody told you how it came about.

We had no hospital coverage in the auto industry. If you went to the hospital, you paid for it out of your pocket. Heath insurance, what did we have? When we finally got health insurance, GM wanted us to go with their plan under Metropolitan Insurance Company, which was $5 a day for 12 days or something like that. I think to get an appendix out, you had to stay in the hospital 10 days. Well, we wanted the option to go with Blue Cross or the company plan, but they weren't going for that so there was a battle. GM stipulated that 75% of the workers in the plant had to vote for it, so we had the job of going around to all the plants to drum up support for our position.

Flint was an interesting experience. There was a doctor up there who controlled the Genesee Medical Society. And they fought us tooth and nail. And some of our leaders were with them. When the vote was being taken, somebody tipped off Walter that some of the union leaders in Flint weren't going along with us and were not going to put out our literature. He sent Jack Livingston and me up there and we covered the three plants, in particular Chevrolet. We didn't have the problem with Buick. We were the only two people passing out our leaflets on all three shifts — local leadership supposedly had something else to do.

We went out to dinner and left our bundles of leaflets — I think there were about 20,000 of them — in the local hall. When we came back, we saw a big fire and we thought the hall was on fire, but it wasn't the hall at all. They'd put our leaflets in a drum and set them on fire. It was lucky that I'd kept one copy in my pocket, so we hustled up a printer

and went back out there passing them out. We won that election. That's how that health program developed.

RUGGLES: About Walter Reuther, you were obviously an admirer of his, a close friend. Were the UAW conventions democratic? I've heard that Walter always got what he wanted, but at the same time, the conventions were run in a very democratic way. There seems to be a conflict there. Was there?

MERRELLI: Really no conflict at all. Walter got what he wanted because the people had the confidence in him. See, our convention is a real democracy. The people at the plant elect our union officers. The delegates elected are delegates from the plant. They are charged with the responsibility of selecting the leaders. They know who the people are.

I think that's what makes our union the success that it is. The convention delegates are the highest authority in the union. They will select one issue, sometimes a very innocuous thing, and they'll knock it down just to let you know that they're boss. They used to do that to Walter at every convention just to say, "Walter, we're still boss. While we'll follow you to the end of the road, we're still boss and don't forget it."

RUGGLES: Can you think of an example where they did that?

MERRELLI: Every convention.

RUGGLES: A particular issue they raised?

MERRELLI: Oh, hell no, you'd have to go back and check the minutes for that. There was the issue of a dues increase in the late fifties or early sixties, though. A lot of guys on the board were talking about how we needed more money and the reports from the regions were that there would be overwhelming support for a dues increase. None of them were realistic. Normally there would be a caucus of leaders in each region before the

convention where you'd talk about programs, etc., but this time somebody convinced them not to take the question of a dues increase to the caucus, to depend instead on the reports that were given at the executive board meetings. When the issue hit the convention floor, it was knocked down. Why? Very simple. He didn't take it to the caucus. They let him know not to take them for granted.

RUGGLES: This was the Reuther caucus.

MERRELLI: Yes, the Reuther caucus.

RUGGLES: How does this caucus work now? This is just an informal meeting?

MERRELLI: It's informal to a degree, except you aren't going to get anywhere without it politically. And it's changed over the years. Now each region is allocated so many delegates to the caucus. The directors and the officers add to that, but not too many. I think there are roughly 400 altogether who attend the caucus meetings. But they are all key people.

RUGGLES: This is sort of a pre-convention convention?

MERRELLI: Well, you could call it that if you wanted to. Frankly, it's simply a caucus of people who believe in the same thing, same principles. You go to them to get their approval to do things at the convention. Now if they don't approve it, forget it. You're not going to get it passed in a convention. If they approve it, you can bet your last dollar it's going to be carried, because they are the recognized leaders in the plants. They're the movers and shakers.

And so these people are usually elected officials or key guys. The director puts them on the list and they're called two or three months before the convention to do two things. Number one, if you have some new issue you want brought up, a policy issue that

has to be approved by the convention, you go to them to see whether it would fly. Secondly, you go to them for support for the election of officers, official candidates, particularly the top officers. Then each region has its own caucus built the same way. Without that, you aren't going to fly. But they still maintain that little bit of independence to let the top people know that even though we love you and we follow you, we are still boss. And it should be that way all the time, because it brings us out of the clouds and keeps us down there with our feet on the ground. Unfortunately, I don't think that's happened enough in national politics.

RUGGLES: Is there another Walter Reuther somewhere?

MERRELLI: Oh, I presume there will be. I was a great admirer of Walter. We never socialized a great deal, a couple of times. I was like that. I don't like to socialize too much; it can create problems.

Walter was a great visionary and there aren't too many in the world. That mind was always going. Not today, not tomorrow, but for 20 years. He had the facility of being able to grasp things real quick. Now, John Kennedy had that same facility, you know, to grasp things. You didn't have to explain things twice to either one of those two gentlemen. They understood. He had the facility to gain your confidence. You might hate him, but he'd gain your confidence if he had any time to work with you. And most of his support came that way. People would hate him until they got to know him.

A lot of people said he was aloof. He really was not aloof. He was dedicated to causes and all his energy went towards that. I think that's why people thought he was aloof. He could be sitting there reading, thinking about things five years down the road. There

aren't many people like that. He was a great man. He would have been a great political leader. Controversial, but a great one.

Walter had some brilliant ideas. At the beginning of World War II when Hitler was overrunning everything, it was Walter, you know, who came up with the idea of getting the plants ready. Walter came up with the idea of building 500 planes a day, but everybody pooh-poohed his idea. He said we should transfer the knowledge of mass production of automobiles to war materials. Of course all the old munitions manufacturers said it couldn't be done, but in an emergency it was.

He was the one who advocated one engine for the tanks. We had tanks out in the field with engine breakdowns and no spare parts even though sitting right along side of them were 200 other tanks with different engines. He advocated the same engine in every tank and that was eventually adopted by the military people. It was ideas like that that made him a great visionary.

Mondale is a liberal, but I don't think he's a visionary. They don't come around too often, but there will be some more, although I don't see anybody on the horizon right at the moment.

RUGGLES: When Reuther was killed, he was only a couple of years away from retirement. He must have been, maybe not grooming, but there must have been someone waiting in the wings. There must have been some talk about someone succeeding him. Did it work out that way or was Woodcock . . .?

MERRELLI: Walter was a very astute politician. Walter would never commit himself openly to anyone, any individual. It was Walter who insisted on the 65-year thing.

Although we had tried to talk him into changing his position on it, he would not budge on 65.

Fellows were getting reputations and you liked what you saw. There were a lot of capable guys. Leonard had one type of personality and Doug had another. They had the experience. One thing about the UAW, there's an abundance of top leaders. If he was grooming anybody, he never gave an indication of it. I think you could say that he depended a great deal on the top officers — Greathouse, Woodcock. Doug was sort of a late bloomer, but he depended on him a great deal in Chrysler. Dick Gosser was a very close confidant of his. I could name a lot of people. They earned it. These fellows earned it themselves.

What was our problem in '70, when Walter got killed? Well, we had people who we liked. Finally, I came to this conclusion myself. I had high regard for both Leonard and Doug. It was not easy. Under our setup, I would support Leonard for two terms and then Doug would have two terms. When I made my decision, I told them I made my decision based on this: I admire both people, so I would support each one for his term. Now, whether that had any influence with my friends on the board, I don't know, but they went along with it.

I also immediately called my leadership together and told them, here's how I was going to cast my vote, because under the constitution, the board selects the successor to the president. I told them, here's the way I'm going to vote and here's my reason for it. Ninety percent of them agreed with me. They were well satisfied. I think both men made history and made their mark. And I let my other colleagues know right away this was the way I

was going to go. We talked to each other about it, but we were all being cagey with each other.

RUGGLES: You mentioned earlier this morning that you've been taking a lot of notes on a lot of things that have never been recorded. Can we discuss those things?

MERRELLI: Well, it was an idea I got after I retired. So many new people coming in there and we assumed a youngster coming in has the background and experience that we gathered over 40 years, and I think we made a mistake there. They're good, but they don't have the background, the experience.

So I went to Ramona Allison, education director of Region 1, and told her about my idea of putting together a forum to discuss the behind-the-scenes politics and collective bargaining of the early days of our union. Everybody knows what happened, but they don't know why. She said, "Okay, let's do it."

We had an eight-week session with 24 people. I started right from '37 — in '36 and '34 there were other strikes, but the big push was in '37 — and the people involved and their political philosophies. Names like Ed Hall, Mortimer. These people never heard these names. I dealt with the political aspect of the left wing gaining control — not that all of them were members of the left wing, but they just got ahold of the people and convinced them to follow them.

I pointed out to them the business that happened with the '39 convention and why we did some of the things we did in that convention. Why did we put a constitution together so tight that it took us 20 years to loosen it up? Because we'd gotten hurt by Homer Martin. He abused his authority under the constitution and we had no provisions in the constitution to stop him. When he lost control of the executive board, he proceeded to

suspend the majority of them under the constitutional provisions then in force. We tightened that up; you can't suspend without a hearing now. You can't sign agreements anymore until they've been approved, voted on. All of this was politics. This is why you have certain procedures in place now.

This is what woke the class up and they were very interested. At first they didn't say anything. There wasn't a single question asked. I thought, boy, this is a flop. At the end of the second meeting, still no questions (I lectured for an hour and then an hour for questions and answers), so I said, "I guess maybe we ought to call it off, because you don't seem to be interested." And then they said, "Well, wait a minute. We're making notes. You're saying things we never heard of. We will have some questions, but we have to assimilate this first." So we went on.

So I dealt with that maneuvering in the '39 convention and the battle when Walter split with the so-called left wing, Walter jumping from left wing to right wing — that is, on paper, his philosophy didn't change. Then I tied into it the question of the effect our internal political struggles had on our collective bargaining. I then dealt with the developments in our early relationship with GM and the battle in the 40's, one-year contracts and our first experience with the grievance procedure. While the coal miners helped us a great deal, coal miners never had a formal type grievance procedure like the one that was required in the auto industry. We were frustrated because we had many good grievances, but we had to drop them because we could not afford to strike the plant over them. Out of that frustration came the umpire system. And in that system, we learned as we went along. At first, we gave the umpire no leeway to amend any decision, but we learned quickly that that was impractical and changed it in a later contract.

I might add that our negotiations with GM provided some other important breakthroughs like the question of plant-wide seniority and recall. GM, before the end of World War II, interpreted it to mean that when your job is eliminated, you took the place of the employee with the least seniority, which at that time meant a decrease in pay. Our position was — and I fought the case before the umpire — that the contract said you would be transferred to an equal or comparable job in line with your seniority and if it wasn't there, you went one step down. We won that. It was a big policy-setting decision. We won it and it paid off dividends down the line.

In Atlanta, Georgia, despite our enlightened union, we still had first- and second-class workers in the plant. When they reconverted the Chevrolet Fisher plant to automobile production after the war, they still had two classes of workers. The blacks could not join a union, but they'd fight for their rights. They could attend the membership meeting, but they had to sit in the back. They didn't have to pay dues. When GM started to call people back after the war — I suppose to get rid of people, because I can't think of any other motive — they called the lowest seniority people back first. And who were they? They were the blacks.

It must have been an unwritten rule at that time that no white man would take a black man's job, no matter what it meant. The end result was that guys were being eliminated as automatic quits, because they refused to come back and go to work on the janitor's job. We had to take that to the umpire. Fortunately, here again, we got our interpretation of the contract. It did not mean the lowest seniority person. It meant equal job, equal rate, lower seniority person than you, not the lowest. We won that as a principle.

No smoking in plants was a GM fight. Others allowed some, but it was not universal. We won that fight and then the policy developed throughout the industry. We had to fight it out with GM to get leaves of absence for people to do political work. That had to come out of an umpire decision.

But we weren't able to make real gains until Walter got control of the national executive board in 1947. And despite the fact that his opponents charged him with being ruthless and demagogic, once he got control he put team leadership into effect and offered his enemies an opportunity to remain in the leadership. Then of course, came the real gains: the short work week was modified and improved, the pension was there and the cost of living, which was the brainchild of C. E. Wilson, president of General Motors. It was scoffed at inside the labor movement; they said Reuther was selling the workers down the river again. A couple of leaders didn't want any part of the cost of living.

They had absolute faith in Walter Reuther. And while many times he was advocating causes and using terminology that they could not understand, it was still Walter and they had faith in him.

RUGGLES: I wanted to ask you at this point whether there were any admissions from time to time from management, maybe in private conversations, that you guys were right and they knew it. Wasn't there some sympathy on the part of management, at times, for what you were demanding?

MERRELLI: Individually?

RUGGLES: Yes. Even though they couldn't admit it out in public.

MERRELLI: Oh, yes.

RUGGLES: Do you recall anything particular?

MERRELLI: One of the things Walter established — and here again, it's Walter. I hope it doesn't sound like I just idolized the guy, because this is actually history. One of the things that he advocated is that you never shut the door on yourself, both in politics and collective bargaining. In dealing with representatives, treat them in the same manner in which you want to be treated yourself. They're working for people, same as you are. Most of collective bargaining was sitting around telling stories about people. You talk to each other confidentially, so trust has to be there. Actually, when you get down to the nitty-gritty of collective bargaining, when you get down to that last moment and you've got that decision to make, it's usually two or three top people sitting down in confidence and saying, "Here's where we are, let's see what we can do." This is when the confidence and trust pay off.

RUGGLES: It's quite amazing, I imagine, for you to sit and reflect back on those days of the early 30's when you were fighting those early fights simply for a chance to be heard with the management and then to see the day arrive when someone like Doug Fraser becomes a member of the board of a large corporation. That's a lot of progress. Did you ever think that it would go that far?

MERRELLI: Well, yes, I knew it would go that far. I'm not satisfied with what we can do. That was part of the encyclical, you know, that there should be an equal voice. Germany has that to a certain degree and some other countries do. I think they're beginning to recognize that people should have some voice, but when you have that profit motive, there's a question on how much. Having a person on the board I think is good; you have access to the privileged information they give the boards. But you know, corporations operate just like anyplace else; it's a small handful of people that make the decisions. I

don't think that one member representing a labor organization as powerful as the UAW can make a very big dent in the policy of a corporation. At least not right at this moment. I think they tolerate it. I may be wrong, I'm not sitting there. But I don't see anything changing that philosophy at all. It's a good thing to have people sitting on that board, but I think some people expect too much out of the person sitting there. He hasn't got much power.

RUGGLES: Let me backtrack for just a moment to the makeup of the membership of the UAW. There have been some complaints over the years that it's all autoworkers and not much emphasis on the aircraft people and the small shops. Could you comment on that? Did you run into a lot of that as regional director?

MERRELLI: Yeah. I was in the forefront of establishing the parts department in our union, because I had most of these small parts plants in my jurisdiction. I must have had over 400 small parts plants.

Parts plant history is interesting. At one time, in the early days, the parts industry was ahead of the Big Three in wages and benefits. But there comes GM again, the big bad wolf, with its clever tactics. First, they, not the suppliers, would own their dies. This way, they had control over the small parts manufacturer. If you shut a supplier down, they can get a writ of replevin and move in and pull all their dies and fixtures out, take them to another company and within two days they're producing parts again. They used to send their people in to observe operations. If they found a shortcut to make a lot of money, they made sure that that was reflected in the price that they paid the next go-round. So the pendulum shifted from parts leading the pack in wages and benefits to them not being able to keep up.

We recognize that. We've had plants shutting down. Concessions are not new with the 1980 contract. My local union in Region 1 and some others have been doing this for 30 years with the independent plants. We worked out settlements where we waived increases, waived benefits. We've even loaned wages for a year, taken 75 cents or a dollar an hour less for a year so that company wouldn't have to pay that 18 or 20 percent on the free market to pay for his materials, because he didn't get paid until he delivered the goods to his customer. And then a lot of corporations, in trying to keep busy 12 months out of the year, began bringing some of the tool and die work back home and so you have that conflict. There was a real shake-out in the tool and die end of the parts business a number of years ago because of this change and the fact that they increased the model change time from three years to five to eight, and that means less work.

Part of their problem is that they're not organized. And then when the economy went bad, they weren't prepared to handle it. Now, I can say I was involved in setting up the first committee to go to the convention and put pressure on the convention and the union leaders to recognize the independents.

RUGGLES: On a totally different subject, let me ask you about Canadian-American UAW relations. It would seem that the withdrawal goes against the idea of unity within the union, too.

MERRELLI: Well, I hope that the current leadership of the UAW doesn't get into that. I think it's just some ambitious people have sold a bill of goods. I don't think we ought to get into a contest with them. Eventually it's going to work out. See, the thing that people lost sight of in Canada was that Canada couldn't make the progress they did without us. The equal rates that Chrysler obtained a number of years ago were obtained with the

support of the American Chrysler people. They never would have gotten them without it. Neither would they at GM or Ford.

While it seems that they can ride by themselves now, I don't envision any large corporation — despite the fact that they're building plants over there — I don't see Ford, GM, Chrysler or Bendix or any of those large corporations sitting idly by and letting a handful of people in Canada shut that big corporation down. I don't see GM, Ford or Chrysler letting the Canadian workers strike for more than what they gave out here. Maybe they can, but you'll only do it once, and then they'll take steps you don't do it again.

RUGGLES: Let me ask you to give me a thumbnail sketch of some people. I'll throw some names at you of some famous people. And especially if you've had any personal contact or encounter with them or something happened in your life that connected you with them.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, what do you think of him?

MERRELLI: Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of those rare people who had a sense of responsibility to humanity, and I think his career showed that. Franklin Roosevelt could have been dictator of the United States in 1933. We were ready. He didn't take advantage of it. He was a man of character that had a feeling for people and the country. What he did, that so-called first 90 days, was tremendous. I hope it never has to be repeated again. But all of it was geared for people, to help people out. A tremendous person. There are very few people I think would be able to be placed in the same category as Franklin Roosevelt.

RUGGLES: Father Coughlin.

MERRELLI: Father Coughlin. I used to think Father Coughlin was a great person. I later came to the conclusion that he was a dupe of the Nazis, who seized upon an opportunity to do things. Later on, as you analyze the statistics that he used and the things that he advocated, no question where it was coming from. In my personal opinion — I'm a Catholic — I think history has shown him to be a disgrace to the Catholic religion. That's my personal feeling. I think he violated the very principles of Catholicism. The question is then, what did he think he would gain by this thing? Certainly he was not interested in becoming a world leader. The unanswered question is why.

RUGGLES: We'll probably never know.

MERRELLI: Why did he take that course? He was a powerful force for a while. He had us eating out of the palm of his hand.

RUGGLES: Frank Murphy. What do you think of Frank Murphy?

MERRELLI: Frank Murphy was a great, compassionate individual. Frank Murphy should go down in history, although he hasn't. What he did in Detroit during the Depression, the program he introduced and put into effect saved a lot of lives. That alone would stand out. But he also was responsible for the solidification and continuance of the UAW. Without Frank Murphy, the labor movement in Michigan would not have won that battle in GM.

RUGGLES: The Flint sit-down, in particular.

MERRELLI: That's right. We would have not have won that battle without his coming in and telling the vigilantes that they weren't going to shoot us. Because they were ready to march into the plant with 300, 400 people. Who knows what they would have done? They were an undisciplined crew, army. Thank the good Lord that Murphy moved

in and said no. Murphy is the one that told GM it was going to have to deal with the union. Without him, I seriously doubt that we would have survived. He was a great humanitarian, had a compassion for people. It's unfortunate he didn't get the recognition that's due him.

RUGGLES: John L. Lewis, did you know him?

MERRELLI: Yes, I did. I met him personally many times in the coalfields, as a kid.

RUGGLES: Capsulize John L. for me.

MERRELLI: Conditions in the coalfield were very bad before my time. But John L. Lewis became drunk with his power. His philosophies were not the best. His philosophy of "no contract-no work" led to the destruction of that union in 1927 and '28. Franklin Roosevelt gave him the union back in 1933. He had nothing left. He had a small handful of dues-paying members.

When I got laid off in '31 and went back home to live with my parents, they tried to get their union back again by striking the Goodyear plant in the valley that I lived, and it was lost. Roosevelt gave him the union back. His arrogance I think got the best of his thinking, and he attempted to dictate to others what was going on. His falling out with Roosevelt was based upon that arrogance.

The arrogance showed in his political shift. People always said he was Republican. I don't know. I didn't know him that well. I'd met him three or four times in Ohio, when he came through. But that arrogance showed also in the political arena, when he advocated the desertion of Franklin Roosevelt by the labor movement in support of Wilkie.

The other story that's not told too often, although I don't know whether it's true or not because I got it secondhand, is that when he made that commitment that if you reject

me, you reject me as a leader, he was not sincere in it. I'm told by people who were leaders at that time that he tried desperately to find a way out of that commitment and they wouldn't let him. Others who wanted to become head of the union wouldn't let him get out of it. In his final years, he was a little bit heartbroken because of this tremendous ego that he had. He was very arrogant.

I was born in the coalfields and raised there. He was not the shining light that everybody claimed he was. He was a great orator, of course. John Lewis became a dictator. And that's one of the reasons why in our '39 convention, I, as one little guy, was damn sure that one man wasn't going to have that kind of power. He had taken over the administration of 18 of 26 districts only because they were opposing him. And for some years there was no election of district officers, although the constitution called for it in the coal mines. The district that I lived in hadn't elected district officers from 1924, because they opposed him. This didn't last for one year, like under the UAW where we have an 18-month limitation. This went on for 18 years. Finally, they got to elect their officers again, after the Taft-Hartley law was passed. The only thing good that came out of Taft-Hartley was that it gave the mine workers some semblance of democracy.

He was almost a Jekyll and Hyde in my books. Did a lot of great things for people, then proceeded to destroy it because of his personal egotism and arrogance.

RUGGLES: Let me ask you about a person that I can't even identify. As a labor leader all your life, somebody must have had a dominant influence on you. Who would it be, if you had to single out one person that has shaped your philosophy or your life?

MERRELLI: I really don't know. I haven't given it much thought. My philosophy, yes, I've been in leadership positions practically all my adult life in one way or

the other. Compassion, because you have to have it, probably is born in you. Dad and Mother were very compassionate people. The tendency to support the underdog — and I've got some black eyes on that one — I really don't know where that came from. Again, probably parenting background.

Shaped my career in the labor movement? Well, it was probably a culmination of the Depression and the arrogance of the automobile industry. I can't tell you any other reason. Angry young man, not satisfied with things that were happening.

Leadership, I really don't know. I think it's just one of those things that developed. As I said, even when I was younger, I showed leadership in organizing things like baseball clubs, managing a ball club when you're 16 years old, taking on adults. It just seemed to be automatic.

RUGGLES: I'd like to ask you about some of the people in the UAW who are still alive. You might not want to answer. Just a brief description. You've worked with them a lot, people like Ken Bannon, for instance. I don't know Ken, but you do. Irv Bluestone, Doug Fraser and Leonard Woodcock. Would you comment about the leadership of the union in modern terms, these men?

MERRELLI: First, I think we all have something in common, which is the belief that the unions belong to the people and that all of our energy, both financial and physical, should be directed towards that. All of them, I think, share that belief. One thing about the UAW leadership is that while their styles, their methods of approach are different, the philosophy, the commitment is the same.

That's true of Ken Bannon. Ken Bannon was a committed person. Whether he got some of that commitment from his background in the coalfields of Pennsylvania, I don't

know. But there's no question about his commitment. His commitment was to people. His method of operation was different than others — we each had our own way of working — but we were all very committed people.

Irving Bluestone. Very intelligent guy, probably had the best educational background of all of us. My impression of Irving goes back before many other people, because I had the occasion to work with him closely when he was in the plant. I think he wanted to be a teacher. I'm convinced, because of his Jewish background and economics, he wasn't able to get a teaching job. So he had to go into the plant, despite the fact that he was a well-educated man. There wasn't anything there. And I'm convinced the reason was anti-Semitic discrimination.

He was a very good chairman when he started out in the UAW, but he would be labeled a Communist. He didn't know it, but all our people in the East said to lay off of that fellow because he's a Commie. It all came about because of his wife Zelda. She is a very active person. In the Second World War, she joined the Russian relief work to help the Russians. Because of that, they were labeled Communists. He was no more Communist than the pope was.

He wasn't too familiar with UAW internal politics in '41, '42, '43. I know. We had many discussions. When I was talking about policy, he didn't have the faintest idea what the hell I was talking about. But being a very intelligent person, he caught onto things very quickly. And it was a complete foreign world to him. And he moved up quite quickly once we wiped out that stigma. As soon as he began to work on things people recognized right away his leadership qualities. All he needed was the opportunity and the minute he got that

opportunity, without any question, his greatest detractors immediately changed their opinions, that here was a person who would do the job. But isn't that true of all of them?

If you look at Gosser — a rough, tough guy — he played a hell of a role. George Addes played a hell of a role.

MERRELLI: Tell me about Addes. I've read a lot about him, but I still don't have a clear picture.

MERRELLI: George Addes lived in Toledo and he was in the vanguard of taking on the auto industry in Toledo. He was one of the key guys. The unfortunate thing that happened to Addes was that the left wing saw potential in him and got ahold of him (this happened to a lot of young people). I've never talked to him about it, although we lived just the next block over. He was dedicated, but he went through a great deal. He was very proud and, unfortunately, his loyalty to his people caused him to leave the UAW. Because in 1947 Walter recommended that Addes be kept in the leadership of this union as secretary-treasurer, despite their bitter rivalry.

The other thing that may have crept in — and this is only my opinion — he was a very proud, tough man and I'm not too sure he was prepared to take a secondary role. Addes played a very strong role when Thomas was president and I'm not too sure he was ready to take a secondary role.

RUGGLES: And it would have been even more secondary with Walter at the top than it had been with Thomas.

MERRELLI: No. Well, it would be secondary, but not more so. Walter was the easiest fellow in the world to work for. Despite what they all said, that he was an SOB and all, he was the easiest man in the world. In fact, too easy. He'd give you an assignment

and tell you to go ahead and do it and don't bother me, that kind of thing. And Walter would try ideas out on you to find out whether they would fly or not. Remember that famous story about Walter, that when he threw an idea out to the board and it wasn't flying too well, he devised what he called a straw vote. Never be recorded. A secondary role under Walter was meaningful. He would listen and he would change. Addes, I think, could have been a tremendous help to him if he'd been in the frame of mind to help. But when a fellow is top dog, is he able to place himself in a secondary role? He and Walter would have been a hell of a combination, that's my personal opinion. Unfortunately, we'll never find that out.

RUGGLES: Emil Mazey. You knew Emil?

MERRELLI: Yes, very well.

RUGGLES: He replaced Addes, didn't he?

MERRELLI: Yes. He convinced Jack Livingston that he had the votes, although there was a question among some people about whether he did have them. Actually, in the caucus Emil had them. Emil, as a young guy, got hurt like all of us in the Depression years. Got booted around and didn't like it and decided to do something. He was a socialist, as Leonard Woodcock was and as Walter was at one time. Emil was a little different type of guy. He would leap sometimes and then turn around to see what he had jumped into. But the philosophy and dedication were the same, right from the beginning.

RUGGLES: How about Maurice Sugar. I hear his name a lot.

MERRELLI: Maurice Sugar was a brilliant attorney who was in the Communist Party. I don't know how he got into it. Was active for quite a time. He didn't impress me to be an awful liberal, which I couldn't understand. He played his quiet role. He was not

the ogre that a lot of people painted him to be. I think he made some good decisions and fought some good fights in the legal field for us. Unfortunately he was tied in with the Party people.

He evidently was an individual that didn't turn his back on his friends, no matter what happened. A certain degree of loyalty to people. It would have been interesting if he could have come along with us. I think he would have been all right. That's my own personal opinion. But he had a lot of respect from the so-called right-wing people, as we were called. We were as liberal as they make them, but we were called right because the Addes group was left. He was respected by a lot of our people.

RUGGLES: Did you know George Burt very well?

MERRELLI: Yes.

RUGGLES: He was around for a long time.

MERRELLI: Yes, he was. I presume his heart was really broken over the developments that have happened recently. Burt was one of the strong ones in the split between the AFL and the CIO. Burt emerged as the leader of the CIO group. A very solid person. Liberal to a degree, not wild-eyed. Took a common horse-sense approach to problems. He had the belief that Canada's laws left a great deal to be desired, and he was right. He had to work under adverse laws much more than we had to.

RUGGLES: I believe you're right. He was an internationalist. He believed in the unity of the union.

MERRELLI: Oh, yes.

RUGGLES: Well, Mr. Merrelli, this has been great. I've kept you a lot longer than I had expected.

MERRELLI: There's a saying in the UAW: if you want to spend a lot of time listening to somebody talk, just get a regional director talking.

RUGGLES: I did the right thing today, then. Now I'll have to take this back and digest it and maybe come back.

MERRELLI: I'm one of the fortunate people that got a tremendous education in the UAW. I was lucky to be there. I didn't understand at the time what was happening, but when you look back at it, it was pretty important.

RUGGLES: You might have answered this already, but just for the record, the single greatest gain of the labor union movement in your mind, what would it be in just a nutshell?

MERRELLI: Oh, there were several. I don't think you can point out a single one. Security was a tremendous thing that you got. Dignity. An oft-used word, but when you look at the conditions of autoworkers in the 30's, when you were a nameless nothing, dignity was very important to people. The right to speak up on your behalf with your employer, very big. The health program, the pension program are big milestones. To try to pin it down to a single thing, it would probably be the right to defend yourself under the protection of the law and the union.

RUGGLES: One more question and then I'll leave you. If you had to do it all over again, would you do anything different? And I'm thinking of, did you ever really mess up, really screw things up and wish you hadn't? What mistakes would you have avoided if you could redo things?

MERRELLI: Oh, Christ, you haven't got time. I think I made my share of judgments because of lack of experience and perhaps nothing to fall back on. What would

I do different? I would perhaps emphasize education more among our young leaders. At this stage also, looking back now, I would advocate increased education of people on the staff, but that's my personal feeling. That would be two things that I would be advocating.

One mistake I think that we made, and I was involved to a degree, is when we fought for Blue Cross and got it in GM (making the company's fortune really — without us they were just limping along), we let the opportunity get away from us to really control the philosophy of Blue Cross. We should have insisted upon having a majority of our people on that board, because I think they've gotten away from their original concept, which was low-cost medical care for people, for all people. Those who could pay for their own, fine, but those who couldn't, it would be given. I think that's one thing I would have hoped that we had paid a little more attention to, the question of the control of that board, so that that philosophy could be maintained. That's one regret I have.

Others, I don't have any regrets. I have some disappointments that we were unable to accomplish many things, but that's always true. We've always kept that list.

A story that Sidney Hillman told us on the tool and die strike was a very enlightened one. We were sitting around talking about responsibility, being responsible leaders, and he said, the Amalgamated had been convinced by some newspaper people in New York that they ought to take a responsible position on wage demands this one year. He said they sat down with their leaders and went over the thing, boiled it down, pared it down to the bare minimum, because the economy wasn't too good, and submitted it to the employers and within a half hour, they had a contract. It was a horrible political mistake. They could not go back to the membership and say our demands were so damn low that they accepted them within a half hour, so we had to spend seven hours playing cards. That's why we

always had a long list of demands — we threw in the kitchen sink. We always had things left undone for a later time.

I hope that the union does not give up its fight for national health. I am not sold on the Saturn setup.

RUGGLES: Why is that? What don't you like about it?

MERRELLI: Two things that are rumored to be in the contract. One, the Saturn wage thing — this is a return of the incentive system, the piecework system. Different term but the end results are the same and that's troubling. Secondly, it's rumored that instead of having the regular grievance procedure, a group would handle it. This, again, is like the old, hated piecework system, in which people start kicking each other around. I think it would be a mistake. I think the union ought to take a hard, long look at that one.

The terminology is different, but the end results are exactly the same as we had in the 40's. Region 1 was in real bad financial shape, so they worked out what they called a cost-saving program. You established the cost of materials and so forth and if you brought that cost down, you got the benefit of it. The first couple of years it paid off, 30 cents, 35 cents an hour. But eventually you got into a dog-eat-dog situation where people were criticizing, chastising people who were absent or who didn't work at top speed and so forth. We finally kicked it out. The incentive system was the same thing where people were carving each other up. We had to kick it out.

The third thing I don't like is that companies are taking advantage of the economic situation. We shouldn't go plunging into the business of relief. If you looked at their books, I bet you'd see that this Japanese competition thing is just a ploy, that this corporation with untold billions in profits needs this setup to compete with Japan. The minute they got some

competition and they had to start running an efficient plant, they couldn't do it, they didn't know how. I say that, because when we went into the plants to remove the incentive systems, who were the biggest objectors? You wouldn't guess it. It was the supervisors on the floor, because they would have had to go to work to direct the work force and see to it that efficiency was maintained. They created more roadblocks than the employees did, because it meant they had to go run the plant. They had to do things that the employees were doing. That's why I'm against it, if that's what that Saturn agreement means. From what I read, it does. I have never seen a copy of it. Big mistake.

RUGGLES: It's an interesting observation. I appreciate your thoughts on that.

MERRELLI: That's the first time I've said it.