

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

OF

CATHERINE GELLES

Interviewed By  
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I was born in St. Joseph, Missouri. When I was quite young, my family moved to Denver, Colorado. I was raised in Denver and completed my schooling there. My father was a cattleman. He worked in the stockyards shipping cattle to all parts of the United States. He was later employed in the packing house. Our family moved to Detroit in 1926. I was married to Albert Gelles in 1927. Albert's father was a coal miner in Iowa, in fact he was killed while working in the mines. One of my first jobs was working at Bohn Aluminum and Brass Company. I worked there for some time before I was married. At that time we had no union at Bohn's. The wages were low, we worked long hours, and the working conditions were not too good.

Skeels: What kind of work did women do in those days?

Gelles: I worked on the production line inspecting pistons, and you had to work fast to keep up with the line. It became quite tiresome because it was the same thing over and over. The shop was noisy, cold and drafty in the winter and terribly hot in the summer.

Skeels: Did your husband work in the auto plants?

Gelles: Yes, he too, worked at Bohn Aluminum. In fact, that is where I met him. We went together for about a year and then we were married. My first association with the union was in 1936 when my husband's plant went on a sit-down strike. He along with about 450 other men and women sat in the plant for 28 days. My brother also



worked at Bohn's on the afternoon shift; therefore, he wasn't sitting in. I was concerned about my husband sitting in the plant. Maybe it was for selfish reasons. But having worked at Bohn's I knew there were quite a few good looking women working there and I wondered if they would be sitting down too. My brother suggested that I go down to the union hall where the afternoon shift was holding a meeting and make my complaints there. This was the first time that I had actually come into personal contact with the union. So I was not familiar with any of their program.

I went to the union meeting to find out what it was all about. I'm sure you will agree that I had a good teacher because Walter Reuther was the speaker at the meeting. After listening to Brother Reuther's explanation of what the strike was all about and also an outline of the goals and aspirations of the UAW, I was thoroughly sold on the union. After the meeting he asked the few wives that were present to remain. He then asked us to volunteer our services in the strike kitchen because our main job was feeding the men and women in the plant. Of course, in the early days of our union we did not have much money and there was no strike assistance program like there is today. Not only did we have to set up a strike kitchen to feed the men but we also set up what we then called "chiseling" committees, who went to the merchants and got donations of food which we prepared and served to the strikers. After the meeting Brother Reuther asked me, "Sister Gelles, you look like you have a question." So, I

finally asked him about the situation in the plant, would the women be staying in the plant also. He said, "Yes, of course, it's their fight too. You can't expect the men to stay in and carry the ball. Everyone who is working in the plant is involved and will remain there until the union gets its demands." He assured me that everything would be run in an orderly fashion and I had nothing to worry about. So I rolled up my sleeves and worked all during the strike which lasted 28 days, until our demands were met.

I could write a book on the heroic courage of those men and women who for 28 days stayed within the confines of the plant which was a small, dreary, damp machine shop and foundry. At that time the minimum rate for women was 39 cents an hour; for men the minimum rate was 50 cents an hour. After the strike they got a 30 per cent increase. Provisions of the settlement was the rehiring of the men who were discharged for union activities which precipitated the strike. Minimum rates of 50 cents an hour for women and 65 cents for men were also included. This provision meant an increase in pay for 95 per cent of the employees. No discrimination against any workers for union membership or strike activities and, of course, seniority rights. Seniority rights was one of the issues which I was particularly interested in because before the union the boss could lay you off, and did, and put one of his relatives or friends on your job. As I said before, they sat in the plant 28 days before they received union recognition.



One other item I think I should mention is safety devices which they never had before the union. Because of the type of work in the Bohn Aluminum plants, and no safety devices, many of the men suffered from silicosis and other occupational ailments. In two of the Bohn plants, plant 2 and 7, the UAW's Medical Research Institute took a survey and discovered after careful examination of 150 workers who worked in the Sand Foundry that approximately 50 of these men suffered from silicosis in various stages. Many of these victims came to the plants originally from farm occupations at which they could not possibly have contracted the disease.

Personally, I feel this was one of the important achievements our union made over the years. Because of this research, safety devices were installed which eliminated this occupational hazard. Skeels: Did anything come of the women's activities on a more permanent basis then?

Gelles: Yes, it was during this period that our Women's Auxiliaries were organized on a permanent basis. In addition to organizing our Auxiliaries we also organized the famous emergency brigades. These were composed of women who could be on call 24 hours a day. The leader of the brigade was called a General and had five captains under her, and each captain had ten women under her, which enabled us to call together thousands of women at a moment's notice. The emergency brigades were distinguished by their berets and arm bands, which read "EB." Detroit chose as its color, green; Flint, red;

Lansing, white; and Ohio, blue. We were called upon in case of any emergencies where we could help the union and on picket lines. It actually wasn't until after the major strikes had ended that we were organized on a permanent basis.

Our main job after the strikes was to establish a program which would be beneficial to our union. So an important part of our program was public relations and working with other community groups so they would have a better understanding of our union. Since many of these people had never been in contact with union activities, I guess they thought we were a little radical. When you look back at it, I guess it was a little radical to engage in a sit-down strike, but it was the only method our men had in the early days of our union. However, by working with these groups we acquainted them with our union's program, etc.

Skeels: Was the Women's Auxiliary attached to the International or was it part of the local union?

Gelles: We were chartered by the International Union and affiliated to the local unions but we worked directly with the local union.

Skeels: That would be Local 208?

Gelles: No. When we were first organized we were in Local 174.

Walter was the president of the local union and I was the president of the Auxiliary. So you can see that we have worked together for a good many years. We went through many sacrifices and hardships together laying the foundation and helping to build this great union of ours.

We were involved in the Ford organizing campaign. Probably many of the other people that you have interviewed have told you how they kept the Ford workers from organizing. Of course, you know about the Ford Servicemen who were well educated in anti-union tactics by Henry's chief serviceman, Harry Bennett. These servicemen were used to keep our union from organizing. Another method they used was pitting one worker against another, Negroes against whites and foreign born against the Americans. In this manner they kept the workers divided.

During the Ford organizing campaign we set up a women's organizing committee in our Auxiliaries, of which I was the chairman. Our job was to visit the wives of Ford workers and acquaint them with our union program using as an example our own experiences. We pointed out to them the many benefits that our families were deriving from our husbands belonging to the union. In this way we were of great assistance to our union, and changed the attitudes of many women who were against our union because they didn't understand. Our Detroit Auxiliaries were also involved in the Ford riot which took place at the Ford plant, gate 4 on May 26, 1937.

I remember that day very vividly because of what transpired. Brother Reuther called a meeting of all of our Auxiliary members and some of the local union members. Walter explained to us that our union had a permit from the city of Dearborn to distribute our literature at the Ford plant, and that there wouldn't be any trouble. There



were approximately 50 Auxiliary women present and very few men. The men went out in the sound truck and in cars and we women went out on the streetcar. When we arrived at gate 4, we could see that there was trouble. The first thing I saw was Brother Reuther and Frankenstein being severely beaten and pushed down the stairs that led to the overpass. Naturally my first thought was to help them. I ran toward them but never did get close enough to be of any assistance, and I was so excited I didn't know what happened to them. I did manage to throw some of my leaflets over the fence to the workers who stood there amazed at what they were witnessing. As soon as the women got off the streetcars they were attacked by Ford thugs who began twisting their arms and taking the leaflets away from them. In the struggle I found myself isolated from the other girls.

During this time I saw one of our union fellows being beaten up. I didn't know who it was but I rushed to his rescue. There were three men standing over him and beating him. They were using those brass knuckles. He was on the ground and they kept beating him and I tried to pull them off. After I had pulled them off him, I saw that he was the husband of one of our Auxiliary members. He was beaten terribly. In fact, we later learned that his back had been broken. I screamed at him to get away and he finally got up and started to crawl away. I said, "Oh, my God, get out of here!" The three men who were beating him turned on me, knocking me to the ground and kicking me in the stomach and then they started pushing me toward the streetcar.

I finally got back on the streetcar and I was so ill that I really didn't know what was happening.

When we arrived back at the union hall we were interviewed by the prosecuting attorney, and we all told what had happened. During the entire riot, not one of the Dearborn police tried to keep law and order. It really was a shame, you know, that all of this had to happen, in spite of the fact that we had a permit to distribute our literature. Maybe the riot was what wisened the workers up, because it was the servicemen who were doing all of the beating. The workers were just standing looking at what was going on in a shocked manner. I guess they were afraid they would lose their jobs if they helped us because they just stood there and stared in amazement. This wasn't the last time that we went to the Ford gates in our effort to organize the workers, and every time we went out we were taken to jail for distributing our literature. However, we weren't booked, just taken in and given a warning to stay away from the plant. You know you don't generally brag about a jail record, but I am proud of mine, and I think it is a record because I was thrown in jail 13 times for passing out leaflets. We used to plaster the jail with our organizational literature.

It wasn't until after February 11, 1941 when the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of the National Labor Board Election of the Ford Motor Company workers that things actually began happening and real progress was made.

We finally organized Ford. It was funny, the day they went out on strike was April 1, 1941. When they told us that the workers had struck the plant and were marching to the union headquarters, we just couldn't believe it. We said, "Oh, you are trying to April fool us," because it was April 1. But with all of the combined efforts of our union and Auxiliaries, at last we had organized the Ford plant. Now we know all of the benefits that the workers have derived from belonging to our union.

Skeels: What other kind of activities did the Women's Auxiliary carry on at that time? You mentioned something about contacting the wives of unorganized workers. Why was this?

Gelles: As you perhaps know, management always appeals to the wives in time of strike, in fact they still do today. Since the wives do not work in the plant, they have no conception of the working conditions. They had no idea what the conditions were in the plant before the union. So our job was to contact these women and explain our program to them. Many times they were very antagonistic and wouldn't even talk with us. But in most cases they were cooperative and invited us in for a chat. We generally took one of the International Representatives with us to outline the issues. Then before we left the wife would give her husband permission to join the union. Funny, but a lot of men will not join the union without their wives permission. The women used to complain. I know I used to complain myself, before the union, about my husband coming home and the first thing he



would do when he hit the house was down on the davenport sleeping before dinner. I mean, they were just exhausted. They were tired out. Today you can't interest our younger people about working conditions before the union because they have all of these benefits today. The working conditions are so much better they can't seem to realize what they were before the union.

Skeels: Did you people do any welfare work or was that another type of activity?

Gelles: We did do welfare work for our own people. If they were on strike, we would visit them and determine their needs and seek assistance for them. We set up clothing centers and collected clothing which was repaired and then distributed during time of strike.

We participated on the picket lines many, many times. I wish I had a nickel for every time I was out on the picket line. We used to organize special women's picket lines and demonstrations. We even took the children out on the picket lines on special occasions.

Skeels: Did the local activities tend to get coordinated later with the International Union? I know they set up a Women's Auxiliary later on.

Gelles: Yes, later, we set up International Women's Auxiliaries. Today our Auxiliaries function under an Auxiliary Department. All expenses of the department are paid by the International Union. I am the only person that is on the staff full time for Auxiliary work. Emil Mazey is our director and Tom Clampitt, assistant director.

Skeels: In the early days in the '30's, was the International active in women's activities or was it still mainly a few locals like yours and some of the others?

Gelles: No. The International wasn't too active then because they were too busy organizing our union. In the early days of our union there wasn't much money available for organizational work and there were very few paid jobs. Most of the people volunteered their services, and some of those who did receive pay received a very small amount. Many of our representatives worked for an expense account. I think most of the people in the early days of our union devoted their time because they wanted to see others organized. We wanted to see them have a better livelihood the same as we were enjoying. That is why we were willing to devote our time and efforts and make sacrifices to build our union.

Skeels: Did the women in Local 174 get together with other Women's Auxiliaries in other locals in other towns?

Gelles: Oh, yes, we did as I said before, through our emergency brigades. This idea originated in Flint. In many of the struggles in the early days we joined our forces. For example, one outstanding role we played together was a parade of women and children, estimated at over 7,000 marching in the streets of Flint, carrying banners in support of their strike. It was a colorful sight to see and one which I shall never forget. As far as the eye could see, there were women and children. The various Auxiliaries were distinguished by their

different colored berets, marching with determination in support of their menfolk. It was the fighting spirit of the auto workers and the courage of their womenfolk that cracked General Motors and started all Detroit organizing.

We used to have many conferences and get together in an effort to coordinate our activities and make plans for future activities. However, we were more or less groping our way as none of us had any previous experience in organizing groups such as ours. We didn't know exactly what our program should be. But today our program is very similar to that of our International Union and our Auxiliaries work in all phases of the union program.

Skeels: How did you get the experience, just by groping?

Gelles: Just by groping around I guess. We knew our union's program and felt that any phase of the program which we could help to promote should be included in our program.

Therefore, we felt we should be active in community activities. We were not very well accepted in these community organizations at first. When one attended a community meeting and introduced themselves as Mrs. Gelles from the CIO, you could feel everyone looking you over and shying away. Today it is quite different because these community groups have learned that we are interested in the same things they are, better schools, playgrounds for our children, housing and other improvements that lead toward a better community in which to live and raise our children. We have been instrumental through our Auxiliary activities in getting traffic lights installed near schools and other



places where many accidents have occurred. We work and contribute to all community agencies such as Community Fund, Cancer Society, March of Dimes, crippled children, retarded children, etc.

Skeels: In the early days though you were mainly focusing on being a supplementary force to the union in its organizing and its striking activities?

Gelles: That is right. It was mostly all strike activity in the early days.

Skeels: Did you people take part in something like the Federal Screw strike in 1938?

Gelles: Yes we certainly did since the Federal Screw workers were a part of our Local 174 we took an active part. Our Auxiliary women used to start the picket line early, very early every morning.

The plant had been out for some time and negotiations were at a stalemate when the company started recruiting scabs. On the morning that the skirmish broke out we had organized a mass picket line. Everyone was there from all of the flying squadrons of all of the Detroit UAW locals. That morning the police escorted the scabs through our lines, a skirmish broke out and many of our people were beaten by the police officers. Approximately 100 scabs were escorted into the plant, amidst our boos and heckling. The people in the community were up in arms about the police brutality and they really sympathized with us.

Fighting broke out again when the scabs left the plant under a police escort at the end of the day shift. Hundreds of our strikers and sympathizers were beaten but the scabs really got the dirty end of it. They never came back to the shop or even attempted to. Shortly after that we were able to terminate the strike and the workers got a good contract.

Skeels: Were the police involved in this action?

Gelles: Yes, they were. They were just beating up any one that got in their way. In fact, one or two of them followed our strikers right into the people's homes where they had gone for protection. However, they were soon shown out by the owners of the homes. It was more of a community cause than it was union because all of the people from children on up helped us.

Skeels: Was the Federal Screw plant located near a predominantly worker-class neighborhood?

Gelles: Yes, it was. It was a Polish workers' neighborhood.

Skeels: And they were pretty well organized then?

Gelles: Oh, yes, it really was.

Skeels: During the late '30's the UAW ran a slate of its own for certain of the posts for the city offices. Did the Women's Auxiliary participate in the political activities?

Gelles: Oh, yes. We were quite active then. At that time labor ran a slate of five CIO people for the Common Council. Walter Reuther was included in this slate. Although our candidates didn't get elected, they turned out a huge vote. Our Auxiliaries were active in all phases

of this campaign, getting out the vote by urging our families, friends and neighbors to vote. We urged them to vote for our labor slate because we felt that labor's voice should be heard on the Council.

Skeels: During the war did the activities of the Women's Auxiliary change any?

Gelles: Yes. All of us were active in warwork. Of course, a lot of our women went to work in the factory actually replacing their husbands. I think that the experience that they gained and the union knowledge that they gained by belonging to the Auxiliary was very helpful to them because many of these women who went into the plant became shop stewards. They were very active in the union.

The women who did not go to work in industry, of course, set up Red Cross headquarters in the different areas. In Detroit we had four headquarters. We made sweaters and socks and all of the other things we knitted for the boys. We also worked on the war bond drive. In fact, I got a silver medal from the United States Treasury Department because I was one of the 13 people in Detroit who was honored for selling the most war bonds. I am very proud of the medal I received.

During the war our UAW Auxiliaries throughout the United States raised funds and purchased three ambulances and nine jeeps for the War Department. We also worked at the USO centers arranging parties, etc., for our servicemen. At Christmas time our Auxiliaries in Detroit gave each service man who visited the USO an envelope which contained a \$1 bill, in addition to this we baked hundreds of cakes for

the party. In all we gave over \$900 at this affair. Most of our members were blood donors.

Skeels: By wartime did the Women's Auxiliary have a full-time representative with the International Union?

Gelles: It was not exactly full time. It was more or less working on an expense account.

Skeels: Did your group get involved with the problem of trying to help introduce women into various plants where they had not been hired before?

Gelles: No, that wasn't a part of our activities but our UAW Women's Department was very active in that phase of activities and were instrumental in getting women hired into these plants.

We were very concerned about the need for price control. We joined with other groups in a national caravan that converged on Washington to lobby for price control. I testified before the House Banking and Currency Committee Hearings on price control.

When the price of meat skyrocketed we organized demonstrations protesting this rise in the cost of meat. We organized a boycott of meat for a one-week period in our attempt to drive down prices. As a result of this action we were instrumental in getting the Office of Price Stabilization to send Mr. Tighe Woods, Director of Price Stabilization to Detroit and other parts of the country to investigate. Our Auxiliary members attended these hearings and expressed their views on price control and how it could be made more effective.

Skeels: How about the consumer co-op move that they had right after the war? Did the women play a role in that, too?

Gelles: We did work within the consumer's co-op, but we really didn't play an outstanding role in this activity.

Skeels: How about during the war with the price regulation and the problem of quality and all of that? Did you people collect information?

Gelles: Yes, we did collect information and that is when we sent the caravan to Washington on price control. In my testimony before the House Banking and Currency Committee we raised the question of the lower quality of food, especially in canned goods. We raised the fact that while clothing prices went up, the quality had gone down.

We also set up a child-care committee. That was when I was placed on the International staff to be in charge of the UAW Child Care Program. We were instrumental in getting nurseries set up throughout the country so that the women could go to work.

Skeels: How were these nurseries run? Who put up the money?

Gelles: Here is how the nurseries were set up: The local Council of Civilian Defense appointed a broad civic committee, in which labor participated actively to investigate the need for such centers and make recommendations. We found that the need was great. Unions reported that child-care problems accounted for a lot of absenteeism on the part of working mothers and that worry over their children kept women workers from doing their best work, besides hindering countless others from taking war jobs.



There were already about 20 nurseries in Detroit supervised by the Board of Education and run with WPA funds. These were quickly converted to the new wartime setup, but were too few to meet the needs of the many women entering industry for the first time.

The Board of Education, together with the boards of education of neighboring communities, made application for Federal funds for a new and enlarged setup under the Federal Lanham Act. These funds were granted and the new centers were soon set up.

Skeels: You mentioned that after the war you had demonstrations with regard to the rise in the cost of living after OPA went off. How do you go about mobilizing women for such a demonstration?

Gelles: It isn't as great a task as you might think it would be, if there is a real issue that concerns the people. We contacted as many other women's groups as possible and asked them to join with us. For instance the day we held our demonstration in front of the City Hall protesting the rise in the cost of meat. It was a very bad day, sort of raining and only a few of our members showed up. I believe there were 12 of us. We had so many signs printed, and we decided that since we had the signs made we would use them. So we started marching in front of the City Hall. Before it was over, we had hundreds of people join with us, from the street, who saw us marching because they too were concerned with the high cost of living.

Skeels: Isn't it quite a problem though to get women activated in many of these activities even during the war period because there are

so many other demands made on women?

Gelles: There are a lot of demands made on women but in spite of these demands if they are really interested they will join with us. The biggest complaint was that they could not get baby sitters. It is quite difficult though, and women are much harder to organize than men are, I think. Of course, the men join the union for economic reasons while our organization is a voluntary organization.

However, our UAW Auxiliaries have made continued progress throughout the years. Our goal today is an Auxiliary to each of our local unions and we are concentrating our effort toward reaching this goal.

In 1957 our CIO Auxiliaries and the AFL Auxiliaries merged into one great organization, the AFL-CIO National Auxiliaries. Our numbers are continuing to increase, and we find that our organization is a real force in support of our unions and in our country today.

Our platform today is: EDUCATION - The goal of our Auxiliaries is to educate the members so they will know the AFL-CIO, what it is and what it does. In order to effectively fulfill our obligation in promoting the program of the AFL-CIO we issue a monthly bulletin which is sent to all members. COMMUNITY SERVICES - To educate our members so they will know their community, its responsibilities to us and our responsibilities to it. UNION LABEL - To encourage the study and the use of union labels, shop cards, and service buttons, and to increase the demand for goods and services identified by these distinguished emblems. POLITICAL ACTION - To work with their local political action

committees in the election of labor-supported candidates. To encourage voluntary contributions to AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education.

LEGISLATION - To contact our legislators and seek their aid in the adoption of labor-endorsed legislation, also, to urge defeat of bills not in the best interest of the majority of our citizens. CIVIL RIGHTS - Implement the AFL-CIO program. SAFETY - Stimulate greater interest in safety-on-the-job legislation.