

MAY 29, 1986

Mike Smith Interviewing CHARLES GENTILE
at the Walter Reuther Library
Detroit, Michigan

MIKE: I'd like to start with maybe just a little brief background -- where you were born and your family and possibly education or early work experience.

GENTILE: Okay. Well, I was born in Italy in 1904, and in 1907, when Mother and my brother, Leonard, came across the ocean, and it took us 22 days to get to Ellis Island and my dad was a citizen already here in America, so we didn't have any trouble getting across and we settled in New York City and I finally went to public school there and went to the eighth grade and in 1919, my father passed away there. He got killed in a stable accident, but I have nice recollections of being there; raised in New York City. It was really a busy place and I wandered a lot, mostly in the streets, you know, and I even got several jobs. I used to help the milkman deliver milk. Get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and then I graduated, delivery bagels and groceries to the Jewish families and worked for a Jewish grocer and I wound up -- I did all that up -- and my only occupation was lighting the gas stoves for Jewish families -- Orthodox families and they'd give me maybe two or three cents and I had maybe fifteen of those.

But in 1919, after my father passed away, we came to Detroit and by that time I had four brothers and I was the oldest one. I wasn't

even fifteen, and I had to go to work, because my Mother had no other means of support. Didn't have all these welfare programs at that time, so we had a couple of relatives that were boarding here with other people -- strangers -- they came and boarded with us and helped to pay the expenses. But I tried to get a job and I found out that I was too young, so I had to wait until I was actually fifteen years old and I got a job at the Dodge Brothers plant. That's how I got into the automobile industry.

MIKE: What was the first job that you held?

GENTILE: At the Dodge Brothers? I was delivering mail. I was a mail boy. Fifteen years old. And I got to know the factory. And one day I was delivering mail in the Engineering Department and the chief draftsman said to me, "Charlie, are you going to be a mail boy all your life or haven't you got any ambition to improve yourself?" I said, "Why sure!" He says, "Well, what are you doing to improve?" I said, "I'm going to night school". He says, "What are you taking up?" I said, "I'm taking up mechanical drawing and mathematics." He says, "Bring me a sample of your work." So he looked it over, I did, and he looked it over and he said, "Well, that's pretty good", he said, "How would you like to work for me?" I said, "Gee, I don't know...I don't know if my boss would like

that."

He said, "Leave that to me".

And I says, "Wait a minute", I said, "By the way, how much you going to pay me?" I said, "You know, my mother's a widow and I have to help to support her and my family."

He says, "Well, how much you making now?"

I says, "\$60.00 a month."

And he says, "Well, I can give you 40¢ an hour."

I says, "How much will that be a month?"

He says, "Well, that will be about the same thing."

I says, "Okay".

So I started in as a file boy, you know. Pretty soon he gave me a drawing and he says, "Here, copy this drawing". And that's how I got started in the business.

MIKE: What year was that?

GENTILE: That was in -- let's see -- I had to be eighteen -- it was about 1922, and I worked there until about 1926, and somebody that had worked in our department got a job at Briggs and when he got over there he wanted one of his own people, so to speak, and he called me and asked me if I'd accept the job there and I said, "Well," I said, "How much are you going to pay me?" And he says, "I can pay you 87½ cents an hour". Well, at that time I was maybe making 60¢ an hour or something like that, so I said, "Gee, that's a heck of a jump.". So I took the job.

And I worked there for, I don't remember now -- but from there I moved around to several other places. Gee, I even worked at the Pierce-Arrow factory in Buffalo and I worked at Murray Body and then I got into -- went to the Ford Motor Company. A friend of mine had taken the job as the chief designer at Ford and I was working in Buffalo at the Pierce-Arrow plant and he found out I was anxious to get back to Detroit, so he got me in at Ford's.

MIKE: Were you doing design work during this period?

GENTILE: No, I was doing detail work, because I didn't have that much experience, you know, and nobody'd give you a chance. Finally, I got a break to do minor layout work and I forget where the heck that was -- I think it was back to Dodge's. I went back to Dodge's several times, and I finally -- I didn't work at Ford's very long, because that was like going to a penitentiary to work. There was strict discipline; they had -- you talk about labor spies -- they had a guy by the name of Harry Bennett was the chief security man. I guess that's a delicate title, to put it delicately, but he was a big goon and he hired all the goons he could as they came out of prison. That was his security force. They were a ruthless bunch of guys and they went around just looking to see if they could have somebody fired, I guess.

MIKE: What year was this? .. That you were at Ford's?

GENTILE: This was in 19-- let's see, I remember in 1928 they had, I think that was when Hoover and Al Smith -- I think there was a

presidential election in Buffalo, so it was after -- about 1929 that was at Ford. That's right! Because I was driving a 1928 Ford roadster, that was the first one after the Model T's, and if I hadn't been driving a Ford vehicle at the time, instead of parking in a paid parking lot at Ford's in Dearborn, I would have to park across the road in a muddy field with any foreign kind of a car. That's the kind of a place it was and talk about discipline -- you couldn't smoke on the premises, no matter what. You had to go outside the property line to smoke. That's the kind of -- well, I'll tell you one thing happened there:

I don't know if I should tell you this or not, but anyway, something happened at Ford's that really was, will never be expelled from my mind.

We were working on the drafting board then, the drafting board would be about as big as that table there, and we were working in the Lincoln division, and this fellow that I was working with, Harry Bidard, he was -- we had a very simple job to do, we didn't have to concentrate. All we were doing, the bodies were made out of wood, wood structure with aluminum panelling and then they screwed the panel into the wood. Well, our job was to take -- wherever there was a center line, we would take a cellulite template and put it on in there and then trace a screw to show that that's where the screw goes, you could do it with your eyes closed almost.

Well, we got talking about what happened over the week end and we started to laugh, and so about the same time -- we didn't know it -- but one of these spies was walking around and he heard us laughing and that was enough. You can't laugh on the job at Ford's at that time. You see, this was when Henry Ford was there. He was still living and Edsel -- he was only interested in the Lincoln division. He didn't bother anybody. Edsel was a well-respected person. But it was Harry Bennett and his crew. Now this one guy, Big George, he was an ugly son-of-a-gun. If you didn't wear your badge on your shirt, naturally going to work, and then you had a great, big metal badge. I used to put it down here on my belt. He'd come around and he'd poke me on the chest like this -- "Put that over here", you know. Big George told my boss to fire Harry Bidard and I because we were laughing on the job. (Laughs)

And you know what? The indignity of it all, was my boss came over and he was almost crying, and he says, "Geez,, I'll do anything I can for you. Your work is satisfactory, but you know, I got orders to let you go." So he says, "You better go over to the pay window and get your pay." They paid in cash in those days (Laughs).

They figured out our pay in no time, gave us the envelope and Big George almost pulled me by the collar and walked me out the gate to the front and that's my recollection of Ford Motor Company.

MIKE: Was Big George a goon or was...?

GENTILE: Yeah.

MIKE: Service department.? Or was he a foreman?

GENTILE: No, no. He was a service department personnel. He didn't look like he was a convict. He was a clean-shaven, nice looking man and maybe Bennett had a way of taking these convicts -- I don't know what the hell they were in prison for, but around there they didn't look like they were -- you know, didn't have any uniform on or something, but that's where he got these guys. It was Henry Ford's idea to rehabilitate prisoners. (Laughs) Anyway, that was my career at the Ford Motor Company.

MIKE: How long were you there? A year?

GENTILE: Maybe not even a year.

MIKE: Not even a year.

GENTILE: No. And I never bought a Ford after that. (Laughter)
But anyway, then I went on to different companies -- with Studebaker in South Bend and -- but then I finally went back to Briggs and I stayed there then 'til Chrysler took them over and then I retired from Chrysler.

MIKE: What year was that? That you went back to Briggs?

GENTILE: Oh, I think 1938 or something like that, about 1938.

MIKE: Thirty-eight?

GENTILE: Yeah. I'm not sure of that date, but anyway it was around in there.

MIKE: Did you go before the Society for Designing Engineers? Were you at Briggs at the time?

GENTILE: Yes, I was; yes, I was. Well, I worked at Briggs several times. I tell you, it was a job shop, so they would get a contract from Chrysler or somebody and you worked that contract out and you got laid off. You know that there wasn't going to be permanent and then you latched on to some other job the best way you could. 'Til finally it got so that they had enough -- well Chrysler gave them a more or less permanent contract, and so the job then was quite permanent, but well, the thing was, they had no seniority. If you were the boss's pet or something, somehow or other there was no rhyme or reason to how the hell you were going to keep your job. You could work your fanny off and work overtime for nothing, like we used to get 50¢ at the end of the shift -- the day shift, get 50¢, go down to the corner in some greasy spoon and get something to eat and go back and work two or three hours at least and you didn't get any pay. And that's the way it was in those days. So then we decided we ought to do something about that. We heard about other unions and, now I wasn't in on the formation of the SDE, but when we heard about it, we wanted to go to the meetings and you know we couldn't let anybody know where we were going that night and we met in a German hall down on Elmwood off of Mack Avenue on a dark street and we felt safe there, you know. We always figured somebody was going to turn us in. And I remember some of the movers of this thing, they were mostly tool design people from other places, they sparkplugged it until later on some of the people in the body engineering groups, like Bernie Hoffman and

some of the guys like Doug Fraser just mentioned out there, well, they got into it and then we got into it and we had to collect dues on the side, you know, on the Q.T.. We used to pay a quarter a month or something like that (Laughs) and we didn't get anywhere with that thing. We just coasted along with it and finally somebody got ahold of John L. Lewis and asked if they had some kind of an organization that we could affiliate with and he suggested we affiliate with the -- let's see -- what did they call it now? -- the Federation of -- Federation of Chemists -- Architects, Chemists and Engineers. It was a New York-based outfit and it was a bad mistake, we didn't know, but they sent some of their people up here and in the end we found out that it was a Commie-dominated thing.

MIKE: We need to talk more about this, of course. But to get back -- the SDE was organized in 1932, according to the records I have.

GENTILE: I think so, yeah.

MIKE: And then the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians -- that came along -- you affiliated with that in 1938. So there was about a six year gap in there.

GENTILE: Well, we didn't hardly do anything. Well, conscience -- we couldn't negotiate with the Briggs management. Well, hell, they'd laugh at anybody that'd approach 'em. We had nothing. We had no strength or nothing. So when we affiliated with the Federation, we tried to negotiate, but you know who was doing the negotiating for us? We tried to get the UAW, Emil Mazey was the president of the local at that time at the place where we worked, at Mack Avenue plant. And

I don't exactly recall how it came to pass that we finally affiliated with -- oh, we had what they call a joint contract, but I don't know how the hell this was worked out. They got us -- what they got us at first wasn't even a contract, it was a letter of understanding, and in that letter they had all the things that we already had.

MIKE: What the Federation got?

GENTILE: Yeah. That's right! But I think it was the UAW that put the pressure on the company to negotiate with us and let us on our own. You know, and we came out with this letter of understanding. Well, then, we thought about that, we said, "What the hell, they're making fools out of us", so we disaffiliated then --

Oh, by that time the Federation, they were sending guys from New York and they were strictly -- the only thing they wanted was our dues money, you know, and we fluffed them off, finally. We affiliated with Local 212, and then we got them to do the negotiating, you know, with some of our people involved and that's how we got started.

MIKE: The Federation was a left-wing outfit?

GENTILE: Yeah, sure. I can remember one of the guys, I forgot his name now, but, boy, whenever he came we knew watch out for this guy. They had another fella, too, that came. He was a very articulate but he was oily to me, I thought -- I had those guys figured out, I could tell. When we asked them questions and we suggested that they ought to do this -- I think we knew our situation better than they did -- they never acted on it. They did nothing as far as we

were concerned. So, we got out of that. That was a bad mistake, but what the hell? -- We were groping around, really, for quite a few years.

MIKE: Yeah, before you affiliated.

GENTILE: Yeah.

MIKE: The Society of Design Engineers -- the SDE -- were just sort of a social group?

GENTILE: A social outlet, but it was -- well, the reason we never named ourselves a union is because if you said "union" you were fired. So we figured, what the hell? -- Let's call it a "society", you know. (Laughs) The Society of Designing Engineers. We had no power at all for a long time.

MIKE: Briggs is well-known for being a lousy place to work. What's the old thing? "Posioned at work? Try Briggs!"

GENTILE: Yeah.

MIKE: Was it any better for the Engineering Department? What were the working conditions like when you were there?

GENTILE: One thing was, we'd work overtime for nothing. You know, vacations-- if you were there, I don't know how long you had to be there, but we got a week or something like that. They had no insurance. I think they had maybe a \$500 life insurance policy. Outside of that there was no health insurance of any kind and it was simply a place to work. You had to make your own way, that's all, because there was nothing happy about the thing,

There was no reward and the pay wasn't the greatest and then you worked overtime for nothing. The other grievances were -- you never knew -- no matter how hard you worked -- you never knew if you were going to survive the layoff when it came and you'd be surprised at some of the survivors, you know. And we figured for cripes' sake! We ought to have some kind of seniority system and that was the guiding thing.

MIKE: Well, was it any better or -- Were the working conditions any better for your department compared to say, production, the line?

GENTILE: Well, they had their own particular problems. That was a slaughterhouse, you know. They had no safety equipment, they used to call it "the butcher shop", especially the press room. The people were always losing fingers and pieces of their hands and stuff. That was lousy there. Well, like they had no safety measures, they didn't care.

Our thing was, the lighting was bad, that was one thing. They never had anything like adequate lighting for the drafting room. That was one complaint we had.

Another thing was, it was a factory building and it was -- they had a regular concrete floor, no tile, no carpeting or nothing, in fact, one of the items I gave to the Library has a verbatim discussion on labor relations with Fay Taylor, "Fay Taylor is a horse thief" they used to shout in the halls.

"Fay Taylor is a horse thief". He wasn't respected at all, but

he was our labor relations person and it wasn't a very nice place to work and he said in his conversation, I think that Emil Mazey brought it up, "well, the guys up there would like to have carpeting on the floor or tile". And he says, "Well, I don't think everybody wants that." He said, "What are we supposed to do, then, go around and ask them if you want a piece of carpeting or if you don't we cut it out and let everybody have their own --" You know, that kind of crap. It was in the discussion. Well, anyway, I think eventually they did tile the floor. They did tile the floor and now they got carpeting in there in the drafting rooms and stuff. I think they have, anyway. So we finally got the UAW to step in and then from there on we got improvements, you know.

And that was about it.

Then Chrysler bought out Briggs and by that time, you know, the pension -- Chrysler had a hell of a long strike on getting a pension -- a funded pension, and that was all behind us by that time. So we dovetailed in with the Chrysler contract and everything -- I think everything was all right after that. We didn't have any big problems.

MIKE: Going back for a moment to this Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians -- that's a real mouthful.

GENTILE: It sure in the hell is!

MIKE: Were most of the people dissatisfied with that Federation when they affiliated with it?

GENTILE: They liked the name! They thought that was gonna really help us, you know and, like I say, we were very patient. We waited all those years for something to happen and nothing was happening. So, a few hotheads had had it up to here. Well, let's do something, for Christ's sake! So we started talking to Emil Mazey and then it happened that I knew some people personally that were in the UAW, like Pat Caruso and Jess Ferrazza. They were all from Local 212, these guys, you know, you could get to them. And they understood our problems and they were behind us. They helped us to get affiliated, you know, with the UAW. So that's how we started there.

MIKE: I see in August '42, when you started to disaffiliate, that Louis Allen Byrne, the president of the Federation.....

GENTILE: That was the slick guy that I was telling you about. Gee, I'm glad you got that name there. I couldn't remember that name! But he used to have a little thin mustache, you know. He always seemed to me like he had silk shirts, he was a dandy, you know. But he was the guy -- and then he brought a fellow with him that was just the opposite of him and he was kind of a -- he was a nice enough guy to talk to, but he had his job to do and he was -- well, he was like a -- he was like an armtwister, you know. He'd talk rough to get his point across, you know. He was intimidating, you know. We figured, what the hell? These are supposed to be our brothers, you know, but being that they were from in New York and we were over here, we had very limited means of communication.

MIKE: Did this guy try to lean on any of your brothers?

GENTILE: Well, not physically, because what the hell?.. We'd of clobbered them, you know. Not physically, but with his ways, his methods, you know. Like he'd say like, "Well, I wouldn't go that way", he'd say, "That isn't right", he says. "That could hurt you more than help you," You know, always discouraging; always intimidating and we didn't like that at all.

Well, I'll tell you, we were very patient people but it finally got to the point that we had to do something and we got into the UAW, that was the only way we could go that was effective.

MIKE: Some of the records indicate, you know, -- well, the records indicate that -- some of the papers you gave us and some of the other papers, that for a long time you tried to get some action. But then I see that this Byrne who was the president, he suspended the executive board?

GENTILE: Yes, he did that. Oh, I forgot about that! We had an office on Woodward Avenue and I was telling Dave about it, I says, "we used to have an office." Bill DeLisle, I think, was the treasurer at that time and one night they broke into the office and they took the records. But, what they did take -- at that time we were forming a credit union and they took the credit union records. And I don't know how we found this out -- somebody told us, "Look, you can prosecute, you can have them thrown in jail for stealing bank records, you know, there's a law -- well, a law against stealing, but when you fiddle around with finances like that, it's

like stealing from a bank.

So, I guess somebody got to them and says, "You know you guys --"
'Cause we figured it's got to be them. So the next day all the records were left in front of the door on the second floor. They brought them back. That's the kind of people they were. So it finally got to that, where they stole our records. They were trying to discipline us or something.
After that we never saw them anymore.

MIKE: Were you tried to put in administratorship on the.....? On the SDE?

GENTILE: Yeah, that's right. I didn't remember it, but now that you bring it up, I clearly remember that. Oh yeah!

MIKE: These are part of the things in your records?

GENTILE: Oh, yeah! Sure.

MIKE: Well then, in '43 you transferred to the UAW-CIO?

GENTILE: I think so.

MIKE: Local 212?

GENTILE: That's right. That was in '43, yeah. And at that time, I think like the Chrysler local, they must have did the same -- they probably got a charter.

MIKE: 412?

GENTILE: 412, yeah, and there weren't too many engineering locals with draftsmen in it, you know, and stylists. General Motors, we still haven't got them, you know. We tried several times. Ford Motor Company. -- I've passed leaflets out there to try to help to

try to organize them, but we couldn't break through.

MIKE: What kind of work were you doing in '43 at that time when you went into the UAW?

GENTILE: I was working on the board. I worked on the board all the time until -- yeah, I was on the minor layout until -- It happened that the chief draftsman at Briggs was a man by the name of Doty, who I first encountered and met at Dodge Brothers the first time I got a job and, you know, we knew each other, so he said to me, "You know", he said, "You're getting up in years now", he said, -- Hell, I wasn't old but he figured I was on the board long enough to advance I'd either have to go to say a designer and my eyes weren't the greatest, you know, I always had trouble. So he said, "You know, I'm gonna put you on checking," he said, "You're going to check the detail of the drawings," he said, "Instead of going that way, you go this way." And well, that's where the hell I landed and I stayed there. It wasn't bad. My classification, I think, was only one grade lower than the top designer, so I made the top money, you know.

But I'll tell you, that's pretty good. I told him one time, he said to me, Mr. Doty said, "You know," he said, "I'm gonna give you a raise," he said, "You haven't had a raise in a long time." See, they could do that for you. It all depends on who the hell you were and who you knew.

I says, "Oh yeah?"

He says, "I'm gonna raise you to \$500 a month."

I said, "Gee, \$500 a month!"

That was a helluva -- I said, "Geez, that ain't bad for an immigrant kid, is it?"

And he laughed about that. He says, "Is that the way it affects you?"

I said, "Yeah, to think I started with zero and here I've got \$500 a month! That's quite an achievement for an immigrant, sure!"

MIKE: Sure!

GENTILE: So I have some nice memories of working. Doty was a nice fellow to work for.

MIKE: How was the UAW's attitude towards you? Were they encouraging?

GENTILE: Yeah. A lot of people in the drafting end were a little bit dubious about it because it was a factory, a factory union, it wasn't a federation of architects thing. Autoworkers! (Laughs) But that, you know, that dissipated because they got the action for you, you know, what the hell, they had the clout, so whether you liked it or not, it was the best way to go. We didn't have any serious trouble with that at all.

MIKE: When did you become heavily involved? I see in '45 you were the first executive board member representing engineers at Local 212?

GENTILE: Yeah.

MIKE: Were you -- when the UAW came in, did you start being a steward, or --

GENTILE: Right from the beginning I was collecting dues. Twenty-five cents a month and writing receipts, cripe! -- I've still got some of

those things home -- writing receipts for the members that we'd try to get them to join, to pay 25¢ at least, you know to join, what the hell -- we didn't have no power, but we'd get a quarter from them and then we felt that we were getting bigger and stronger, you know.

MIKE: Join the UAW?

GENTILE: No, the SDE. I did that and one time when I went to work at Studebaker in South Bend, I had a book with me and they didn't even have a local or anything. Oh, but some of the fellows that were working at Studebaker, I'd worked with them -- you know, we used to go around and we'd meet each other at different jobs, and some I knew, well, they'd come up and give me the quarter and others I'd say, "Do you want to join the SDE -- it's a quarter", you know, and that's all we could do.

And then later on -- then I got to be steward.

Oh, no! Being that I knew Emil Mazey and all those guys, they wanted a fellow from the salary workers to be on the executive board because they had no representation, so they asked, you know, several people and I said, "Well, hell, if you want me to serve, I'll serve". So I got on the executive board that way. I was the first one and then I think, Bernie Hoffman didn't get on because he had another fellow that he was pushing -- a guy by the name of McGilvray, he was representing the tool design group, you know. And we had representation in there then.

Oh, and then they wanted me to run for trustee because they had, --

a Polish fellow that could hardly read and write English and they had a colored fellow that worked in the shop. They figured they ought to have a guy that knows how to read and write, you know, and they says, "Well, get a guy from the engineers, or something", so they asked me, "Why don't you run on the green slate with us -- Emil Mazey and all those guys are on that slate. You want to get pulled in -- get elected!" Oh, okay! So I served as trustee then until we moved to Highland Park Engineering, you know.

MIKE: What year did you first become trustee?

GENTILE: Oh, they called me -- now what the hell did they say? -- The longest -- The Champ of the Trustees. I served from about 194-something - '43 -'44, something like that - til '61 -- 'til we moved to Highland Park. When we got to Highland Park, Jesus! -- We thought they weren't aggressive enough at Highland Park, so (laughs) me and several others that were active in Local 212, we got ourselves elected, you know, stewards, in fact one of my friends Emerick, even got elected I guess Unit Chairman. He ran against the old Unit Chairman.

Well, they called us "carpetbaggers". George Merrelli, who was the Regional Director, and Ray Sullivan, who was the President of Local 412, they figured we were coming over there to take over, you know. That wasn't our intention at all; we just wanted to get into the leadership so we'd know, what the hell, we wanted to go in the right direction. So after awhile it all simmered down and we didn't have any bad feelings after that and I stayed there 'til I retired. It was a long time.

MIKE: Going back maybe a little bit again, back to Briggs. There was a '47 strike at Briggs?

GENTILE: Yeah.

MIKE: Was this one of the first big strikes for --

GENTILE: No. While we were in that Federation thing --

MIKE: In '47?

GENTILE: No, this was earlier. They had the sit-down strikes, you know. We were involved in the sit-down strikes. Let's see -- how the hell was it -- I don't know -- we stayed out while they had a picket line in front of the place, we just didn't cross no picket lines. But then, -- what was the question -- in '47?

MIKE: In '47 there was a Briggs strike for thirty days?

GENTILE: Yes, sure. And not only that, there was a plant guard strike and we never crossed any picket lines. Fortunately, they were of short duration, you know. Outer Drive plant, when we finally moved from Mack to Outer Drive there was a plant guard strike and that lasted maybe about three or four or five days or something like that. We didn't have any lengthy ones, except that 30 day thing.

MIKE: Did that get your first engineering contract?

GENTILE: I don't recall whether that had anything to do with it or not. Maybe it did, but see, I can't remember that. I can't remember that too well.

MIKE: And there was a couple of other things about Briggs I was interested in. There was a '51 Briggs strike, wasn't there?

GENTILE: I'm not sure. Well, there might have been several strikes. I remember

There was always turmoil out in front of that place, you know, it was well-known for that, but I can't remember of any of them that were.

MIKE: And then there was a '58 strike against Chrysler, for six days when the office and technical people went out.

GENTILE: In '58?

MIKE: In '58, according to --

GENTILE: We hadn't moved over there yet, we were still at Outer Drive in '58, so I didn't have any knowledge of -- well, I probably knew at the time it was happening, but we weren't involved in any way in that one. That was at Chrysler. You'd have to ask the Chrysler guy about that, maybe Bill Archer, or somebody.

MIKE: I see. So then in '61 you went to Local 412?

GENTILE: Yeah.

MIKE: And that was -- isn't that Local pretty much strictly office workers or techs?

GENTILE: Oh, yeah! 412 was strictly technical and they have one unit like the janitors, you know, that was a unit of our Local. The rest were body engineering, chassisengineering, experimental, model-builders and clay modelers, stylists, you know, all highly technical -- that was our local. I think it made a lot of our Briggs people happy to be affiliated with that local instead of a production local. (Laughs) Well, it was what they were hoping for in the beginning, you know. They never dreamed they'd join a factory local -- the Society of Designing Engineers, what the hell, you know, they still felt that they were

-- I think they felt a little above labor, you know, felt above labor.

MIKE: There have been some indication that there were charges that the engineers and the technicians were into craft unionism.

GENTILE: Well, sure, they could be accused of that, yes, but really, I don't think that that applied here at Local 412. No, I don't think we can be accused of that. Justifiably, anyway.

MIKE: What positions did you hold at 412?

GENTILE: Well, at 412, the first thing I did was ran for steward in my department. I got elected because the guy that was there before me for years, he wasn't really aggressive at all, he didn't pursue grievances and some of the fellows, even the Chrysler fellows that were there, they said, "Why don't you guys run against----" I don't want to mention his name because after awhile I got pretty well acquainted with him -- friendly with him. He wasn't a bad guy, but -- maybe they had trouble getting somebody to run for those jobs, you know. But we gladly got into it. I got to be steward and then I got to be Unit Chairman, which took in a lot of departments in the drafting - engineering.

MIKE: What department were you?

GENTILE: Well, I was in (Laughs) I don't remember the number of the department -- 341, I think. It was body engineering, but there was several body engineering departments now, we had to do with trunk lids and maybe doors or something like that and another department would have to do with trim and maybe the quarter panels and stuff. They were split up in several departments. Then we had another group of departments

dealing with engines and transmissions and chasis and then we had another group -- it was one department -- it was the clay modelers' group and that was Unit 1. We had -- that was the biggest unit, Unit 1.

Then, later on, what the hell -- oh! -- Then I was the negotiator for the engineering group, along with the president of our Local and the international representatives, but I was included in there.

MIKE: The bargaining committee?

GENTILE: Bargaining, yeah, when it was contract time and then, of course, I went to several -- naturally I'd go to conventions. Finally, I got -- in my last, I guess, what the hell would you call it? My last hurrah was getting elected Vice President of the Local and I retired.

MIKE: What year was that?

GENTILE: In 19-- probably '68 or something, 'cause I retired in 1970. See, I only served one term as Vice President.

MIKE: You said you were on the negotiating team in the late '60's, specifically, maybe you could tell me about the '67 negotiation?

GENTILE: Well, that would be the latest one, yes.

Well, I remember it was -- we were -- I forget what we had on the table that was of greatest importance, but there were a lot of subcommittee meetings in different rooms, you know, and I remember some of them were long, tedious sessions, you know, far into the night. Some of the guys would fall asleep, you know, and that's how negotiations go and -- but I remember that in the end there

after several days. I don't remember how long it was, but it was quite a long time, and we met at different places. We met at the motel to start with, that was like breaking in guys, you lay out your demands and then the company lays out theirs, then you move into maybe the company conference room and in the end, I think it was at the company where we wound up in Highland Park -- yes, I remember that. And early in the morning, I don't -- the wrap-up was that Walter Reuther and I think it was Townsend at the time, if I'm not mistaken, was the president -- I'm not sure about that, but anyway, he went up to the main offices upstairs and they came down with the - what the company's final offer was and I recall that we -- Oh! Doug Fraser came down and talked to us, naturally, he was sent down --

MIKE: Talked to the bargaining committee--?

GENTILE: Yes, he came down (Laughs) -- it looked to me like he had an envelope or something in his hand and he had some notes, and he says, "Well, we can get you this and we can get you that". And I said, "I had one grievance in there that I was particularly interested to have, you know, taken care of. It was a classification thing. It only involved one person, and I says, "Well, you got yourself a deal as far as I'm concerned if we can get this."

He says, "Well, we'll take care -- we'll get that for you".

I don't remember the specifics. (Laughs). So that was -- I was glad. We went to some other Unit Chairmen and he went to Tobe Tyrrell and I guess Tobe Tyrrell, he had something on the burner and he was --

why he put on such a militant display that I thought they were going to blow up the negotiations, but he put on a little show and I think eventually they put that on the side and they negotiated that separately after the contract was more or less agreed to and to tell you the truth, I was glad the thing was over with, because it's not easy. (Laughs) I was getting along in years, too, you know, and it knocked me out -- I don't know -- you gotta be young and you gotta get a good night's sleep and I missed that.

But I can't tell you too many details because, gee whiz, so much was going on and then once in awhile we'd get so fed up with everything, we'd go to the pool hall down Oakland Avenue, I think it was, and we'd shoot pool, you know. (Laughs). I guess Doug thought I was a pretty good pool-shooter. (Laughs).

And that's about it. I had happy times there, but everything comes to an end, so --

MIKE: : You did several negotiations.

GENTILE: I did, but --

MIKE: Did they all end the same, with -- did they follow the same pattern?

GENTILE: Followed the same kind of a routine, you know, The first denials, they say, "No, we're not gonna give that". Well, you knew right away that somewhere along the line it was gonna be different, you know. That pattern, but of course, you know the actors and the amount of time is different in each case, you know, naturally it's not just exactly the same. But, you gotta be persistent and you

wind up with the best you can get. You don't get everything. That's for sure! You gotta drop something and they gotta give you something. That's bargaining, you know. I learned a lot from that.

MIKE: You mentioned Doug Fraser. You obviously worked with him, who else-- who were some of the others?

GENTILE: Doug Fraser, how the hell did --? Oh, I guess I met him -- see, he was the president of the DeSoto Local on the west side. I'd heard of him 'way before that, but then he got to be head of the Chrysler Department and that's how we happened to meet, you know, and -- but I always liked Doug. He always seemed to like me so we got along real well and I'm glad that I could call him a friend. I think he's a swell guy. But then the other guys, I'd met them all at Local 212 before they ever got to be anything. Mazey was a factory worker; Emil was a factory worker. His father worked in the production line there. He got elected president of Local 212, and then I met -- and then Jess Ferrazza was related to me and I used to go to his house and talk to him and he was a steward, I guess, in the department. And then I met others, like Pat Caruso and Ken Morris and all those guys and then they got very active in the union and they were all leaders in Local 212. In fact, they used to get beat up you know, the company would have them waylaid and they'd get beat up. Now Ken Morris, he wasn't doing too good in those days. He was a factory worker and he lived at the Parkside Housing Development. I think Pat Caruso lived there; Steve Despot, the financial secretary of the local, they all lived there, they were getting, you know, cheap rent. But

then I think one of the guys got beat up right there in the project and some of them got beat up in different places. There was some sinister elements around trying to do these guys -- do away with these guys because they were acting trying to form a union at Briggs. That's the kind of crap that was going on in those days. There was one poor guy, Roy Snowden, Christ! He used to get beat up every week because he was a single person and he'd go from bar to bar down Mack Avenue and they'd waylay him. They'd beat the hell out of him. He always had his head bandaged up or something. I don't know how the hell he ever survived it! (Laughs) Rough days -- there were rough times there! Jesus!

MIKE: Maybe one more question on negotiations --Did you work with Walter Reuther?

GENTILE: We talked, not too intimately, you know, like he would talk to all the negotiators. We'd be sitting in the conference room maybe, waiting for the company's answer to one of our demands or something, and we'd be talking about the subject and then after we'd talked so much on the subject, they still hadn't come down, we'd get talking about other things, you know, and so I don't recall any real conversations with Walter. I don't recall that, except just casual discussions to kill time. There was nothing, I don't think he depended on me personally for strategy or anything like that. (Laughs) But, he was easy enough to -- well, he was one of us, what the hell!

MIKE: Was he always involved with 412 negotiations?

GENTILE: Oh, he'd be in there. In fact, I think he was involved in all these

auto Big Three things. I don't think he got into some of these small shops, but the Big Three and Briggs, he happened to -- well, let's see -- I didn't meet him at Briggs at all, I met him at the Chrysler thing -- Chrysler negotiations, because it was the Chrysler Corporation. He never came to Briggs, I don't think, but I don't recall. I can say we talked several times and then like, I'd meet him like at a convention or something, if he happened to be coming down our way he'd say "Hello". I think he remembered me that I was from Chrysler. I don't think he remembered my name, you know.

MIKE: Maybe we could kind of sum up with some -- I just would like to know how you felt about maybe some of the special problems -- negotiating special grievances that the engineers had, compared to maybe the plants, and if you felt there was a big difference or if you would have --

GENTILE: Well, the work was not the same. The work was different. You had different kinds of problems, you know. There were a lot of problems that were identical to factory workers' problems. Like we had drinkers -- members who were alcoholics, you know. The same thing, but I will say that Chrysler was very humane about that. They tried like hell to keep a guy from going off the deep end and they would give him a break. They would want him to go to -- where the hell -- to take the cure, you know, and recommend that if he does this that his job would be, you know, would be safe, and that I thought was real cooperation, you know, both sides trying to help a worker. And a lot of the grievances were -- some of them were chicken

grievances, you know. And I had a bunch of grievances, gee whiz, that I guess I threw them out -- Oh, no, I put them in the file at the Local when I left. I put them in the file. Some of them were, I thought, were lousy. I think that they treated some people kind of lousy, you know, the firings and discharge cases. We had not too many of those. We didn't have too many -- maybe two or three at the most all I can remember. Some of them were justified, you know, gee whiz, you know, what the hell, we can't be right all the time, but you had to go to bat for them, you know, a worker, regardless, though you knew you couldn't win it. That's the way I felt, but you tried like hell, you know, you plead them, you plead to give them a break but you wind up at the end. Most of the time, though, they had their minds made up. All I know is we -- drinking -- we were able to save people's jobs if they had a drinking problem.

And then we had classification grievances, where a guy felt that he should have a higher classification. My god! Those were hairy -- you know -- and I don't recall what the greatest number of grievances were, what kinds they were. We had all kinds, really, but --

MIKE: Were a lot of them on classification? That seems to come up quite often.

GENTILE: Yes, A lot of them.

MIKE: That seems to be one of the harder things? For the engineers putting someone in a classification --

GENTILE: Yeah, you know, a guy is in a lower classification and he feels that

he should be put in a higher classification and then he, maybe he's got a record of some of the jobs he did, you know, so you get that list and you try to use that, you know, and sometimes you'd win and sometimes you wouldn't. That's what the hell it's all about, really. But the thing is, you always try to win them (Laughs) but you don't win them all.

MIKE: Well, is there anything you'd like to finish up by saying?

GENTILE: All I can say is -- in conclusion -- is that I'm not sorry that I did what I did -- get involved in this thing about the union because I think it was a just cause that needed to be done and now I look back and see, you know, it was a self-propelled thing that keeps going on and on and now we went so far and I see now there's another trend. There's a trend backwards. You have to give up things now. I don't know, I think maybe if the union agrees to that, they probably know that it's something that has to be done, you know, they have to give in. Giving back something.

At one time I asked Emil Mazey, I said, "Emil", I said, "How come every negotiations we ask for more and more. We were kind of satisfied. We thought we had everything straightened out and all they did was ask for more money, more vacation time, more holidays." I thought maybe they were going too far, you know. I was a little conservative, too, at the beginning. And I said to Emil one time at a meeting, I said, "Gee, don't you think we got enough? Where do we stop with these demands?" And he says, "Well, I'll tell you, Charlie," he says, "As long as the pie gets bigger, we want a piece of it." That was his answer. (Laughs). He says, "If the pie is there, we

want a slice of it." "If it means a bigger slice, we're gonna get it."

And I thought, well, maybe he's right.

But now I see they're going back, they've reached the point where the company says we can't give any more and this is what will happen if you demand it. This is what you insist on, this is what's going to happen, you're gonna wind up without a job. Well, then you start to think it over, you know, hey, look, no job is no good no way, so that's how I look at where I stand now. I'm still interested. I read the paper, if there's anything about union, I read it. My eyes aren't too good, so I save them and read the union articles and who cares about Henry Ford and the wives and all the what the hell you would call it -- his activities, excess marital activities, who cares about reading about that? I don't read all that stuff. I read the things that I think are still of interest to me and that's the union. I'll always have that in my heart, you know.

MIKE: Well, thank you very much for your time.

GENTILE: Well, that was all right. If you wanted to gab, I can give you gab, you know. You got it!

MIKE: Thank you very much.

GENTILE: All right.