John Buscher
RWDSU Local 110

August 17,1982

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Interviewer: Merle Davis

IOWA LABOR HISTORY ORAL PROJECT
Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO
Des Moines, Iowa

Merle Davis: This is an oral interview conducted by Merle Davis. The date is August 11, 1982 and I'm talking to John Buscher. And John what's the address here?

John Buscher: 326 Higley Building [Cedar Rapids].

D: John, how old are you?

B: Forty-eight.

D: What year were you born?

B: 2-2-34.

D: And where were you born?

B: A little town called Dundee, Iowa.

D: Where's that?

B: I think it's about 50-60 miles north of here, up on the other side of Manchester.

D: What was your father's occupation?

B: My dad was a farmer.

D: And where was he from originally, do you know?

B: My dad come over from Germany when he was seven-years-old.

D: And where was your mother from originally?

B: She was from the Dundee area.

D: And did she ever have a job outside the home?

B: For a little bit she did some—she cleaned offices.

D: And how many children were in the family?

B: I have two sisters and I have two brothers.

D: And how many years did you go to school?

B: Twelve.

D: What year did you finish?

B: I graduated in 1952.

D: What sort of work have you done since you got out of high school?

B: Quaker Oats.

D: When did you go to Quaker Oats?

B: Graduated from school one week and come to Cedar Rapids the next Monday and I think I hit every place in town looking for a job, and Quaker Oats was the only place that was hiring at the time. So that's where I started.

D: Why did you come to Cedar Rapids?

B: Closest big town around.

D: So you just came looking for a job.

B: Just come looking for a job. Been working on a farm. My dad sold his farm in '51. Then he went to town and he worked at a tractor repair shop. And so I worked part-time on a farm. I think I was making thirty dollars a month, room and board. And the guy told me, he says: "When you get out of school, work for me full-time and I'll pay you forty-five dolllars a month, room and board." And I said, ah there's gotta be something better than that.

So I come to Cedar Rapids. I and another guy come to Cedar Rapids looking for jobs. Like I told you, we hit every place in town. Quaker told us to come back the following Monday, I think it was. Take a physical and we'd go to work right away. So

we come back. I think I was clearing about forty bucks a week. I don't know remember what I was making now.

D: What did you do when you started at Quaker Oats?

B: I started out—see Quaker's made up of different departments. And I started out in the package department. And that time they were big in the dog food business. They had their [not audible] down there where you hand packed the small boxes of dog food. So I did that for—actually I didn't really start there. They had what they called a [not intelligible] unit where you hand packed pancakes, a five pound bag. My buddy and I, we worked there for about a month and a half, and hell it was too much like work, so we decided to join the service.

We'd been there long enough we got a service leave there. So I went to the service for four years and then I come back in '56 and I've been working there ever since. I worked in package, I worked in the oatmeal department, shipping department, now I'm working maintenance department.

D: When you got back to Quaker Oats in '56 about how many people did they employ?

B: Now this is just the production side—I'm gonna say it was right around twelve to thirteen hundred people working in it.

D: Have they had any ups and downs since then?

B: No, pretty much been just about the same, the only thing is with automation. When I come back there was a hell of a lot of hand jobs. It ain't hand jobs any more, you know. They put in more machines, but they picked up more people. Their employment stayed pretty much the same.

D: What were the health and safety conditions like at Quaker Oats?

B: I'm gonna use '56—I started in '52, but like I told you I spent four years in the service. I was pretty green, coming fresh off the farm, you know, and that's what Quaker liked,

farm boys. And Quaker has always pushed quality and all that kind of stuff, but I wanna say that in the '50s and early '60s it was clean. It was a good, clean place to work. They had a lot more people doing sweeping and stuff like this. Then they went through kind of a slack period. Then the FDA cracked down so that they cleaned things up a lot more. They went through a period there when it was not a clean place.

D: Did you have problems with dust in the air?

B: A lot of dust. When you're in the grain business. I can remember when—this is after I signed out of the package department and went into the oatmeal department—

D: What department?

B: Oatmeal. That's where they do the milling of the oats. And it used to be broke up into two different buildings, where they've combined it now. They had what they called the "cleaning house," and that was where the grains come in right out of the elevators. And the building itself is about thirteen floors, and the grain would come in—and grain's dirty, you know, it's got just plain dirt on it and the dust from the grain itself—the building where they did the cleaning of it and the drying. Oh you'd get in hunks of board and dead rats and you know corn would be next to the oats and stuff like that.

And this was all done in one building. Well, at that time I think there were thirteen floors and on thirteen floors there were two heaters. Now it's so dirty in there that you had to have all the windows open to let the dust out. And in the winter time you'd goddamn near freeze to death, and in the summer time it wasn't too bad 'cause there was always a good breeze with it through there. But wintertime you'd goddamn near freeze to death.

I remember we had one old guy, he'd be working nights, he'd be working second or third shift, and he'd get tired. Hell, he'd go stand up by the seventh floor where one of the unit heaters was and he'd stand by the tiller there and fall asleep standing up 'cause it was the only warm place where you could take it a little bit easy. I think back then they had about two sweepers taking care of thirteen floors.

D: They were sweeping by hand?

B: With a push broom, yeah. Where now they've got, hell they've got five or six people there sweeping.

D: Why would they have had only two heaters? Were they worried about grain dust exploding?

B: As far as grain dust exploding, they had back in those days, you know, it was all open electric motors and stuff like that. So you could have had a grain dust explosion any place. No, they just had two heaters in the place. I don't know why, but that's how it was.

D: Did the grain dust affect a person's health?

B: You're gonna get a personal opinion on that. I would say definitely, yes. Back in the old days why you were a pansy if you wore an aspirator. Like I say, you come in it didn't make no difference if it was 30 degrees below zero you'd open all the windows so the dust could go out. Yeah, I think definitely grain dust and not so much the health, but it seems like everybody I worked with ended up wearing glasses. I think it irritated their eyes as much as anything else.

D: Did you think the factory inspector made any difference, or when OSHA came in did that make any difference?

B: OSHA made a difference and FDA made quite a bit of difference. I think the FDA—the company had to go along with what the FDA and then with all the hell we raised, there was a lot of OSHA improvement.

D: The hell you raised, was that through the union?

B: Through the union, yeah.

D: What were some of your complaints?

B: Everything from unguarded belts to elevator inspections, stuff like that.

D: Before OSHA did you ever bring those things up with the company before, did you ever set up any sort of company-union safety committee to inspect the plant?

B: As long as I can remember, they've always had a safety committee. But not until the OSHA rules and regulations . If you did a lot of hollering usually there was a safety inspection.

D: So it wasn't very effective then.

B: No, I don't think so.

D: How are people paid there at Quaker Oats, is it hourly or piecework?

B: We have no piecework. It's all hourly. Base rates are pretty much the same through all departments, but some of your departments got a little more skilled jobs and they'll have maybe higher rates in them, but it's all hourly.

D: Is there a lot of manual labor there, or is it mostly push button nowadays, or changed a great deal? You said there was a lot of automation.

B: Well, anytime you get the milling industry you're gonna get into a lot of manual labor because oats fall on the floor and they gotta be picked up, and you're talking shoveling oats, corn, wheat. They still do a lot of packing of 100 pound sacks and stuff like that. But even that's been made simpler

D: How hard do people work there, are they pushed a lot, are they watched over closely, or how?

B: Usually everybody's pretty much got their job and they pretty much know what to do. And like I said, it depends on the department situation. In my opinion, today we got supervisors that ain't never worked in a factory before in their life telling other people how to work in a factory. And I would say you're getting into a pushing situation there. They're telling "Go do this." And hell maybe somebody's already did it two hours before and they don't even know it.

D: Is that something new there, to hire the people off the street to be supervisors? Where did they get the supervisors before, say when you started?

B: When I started most of the supervision was by people who moved up and were aware of what was going on. I'm gonna use the packagers as an example, and correct me if I'm wrong. I think when I started in the package department there was probably three hundred people, and six supervisors. And today there's three hundred people and how many supervisors?

D: About thirty-five to a department?

B: Yeah. I can remember when—I'm gonna say there were four or five in the day time, you'd be on second shift there'd be one supervisor, on third there'd be one supervisor. And shit now there's more supervisors than there is employees, it seems like.

D: When did this change occur? Was it gradual?

B: I'm gonna say like from the '70s on this thing started changing like this.

D: Why did the change come about? A new policy, or did they have a lot of breakdowns or low production? What happened?

B: I'm gonna say considering production was probably better back then that it is now. And you know when you got a bunch of people running around don't know what the hell is going on, why that don't help improve production, I don't think.

D: Where did they get these supervisors from? Did they just hire them right here in Cedar Rapids off the street, or did they bring them in from other places?

B: Well some are college graduates. Some of them are—I can't say too many of them are maybe people that come out like I know over in the elevator department they got a guy there that got terminated when . Dave Sherrill come right out of college.

D: Who controls the speed that the machinery runs or how much grain you process in a day? Is that just by supervision, they just say we have to have so many tons through, or how do they operate it?

B: Well, once a week they have a planning meeting and they say okay this is what's gonna run next week. It's pretty much scheduled a week in advance what you're gonna run.

Like right now, this time of year, we're going through the oat harvest. Maybe the elevator department will get in five or six trucks in a day and maybe 10 or 15 rail cars. Where now they got everybody working twelve hours and trucks are lined clear up out to the street. Part of it's seasonal. It seems like people buy more cereal in the winter time.

D: workers there had any control over how much production was gonna be accomplished through a day. In packinghouses the union there had a .

B: No, we have no production standards. The company set some kind of a production standard, but I've not heard of anybody being disciplined or anything like that because they didn't keep up with it. Justine [Shields] can probably answer that because he worked in the package department where the standards would be set. The union does not accept any standards. You put out what you can in eight hours.

D: And if it's set too fast and runs onto the floor you try to do your best. Is that it?

B: Usually if it ends up on the floor why they get somebody over there to help you clean it up.

D: Are there any unofficial standards set, like people get together and say we're not going to do more than that in a day. That's asking too much. Let them bring other people in to help us.

B: Yeah, I've got my job and if I come in in the morning and it's screwed up, I'm gonna be there for eight hours, I do what I can and what I can't get done I don't do. I think we've all got to pretty much stick together on that.

D: You find this in, oh trades, building trades and stuff where they'll have what they consider an eight hour day. They'll do that. And you see that in factories a lot, with piecework jobs. They have 150 pieces a day, and if somebody turns out 200 they tell that person to slow down. The other person tells them to have a reasonable amount.

B: That's pretty much the way we work. I believe in giving them a fair eight hours for eight hours pay. But when they tell me I gotta give them nine hours for that eight hours pay why I revolt and I think everybody—you know, you've got a few that's doing it.

D: Now John when did you join the union?

B: Well I think I joined from the day I started.

D: Now you were from a farm background, was this the first time you came in contact with unions?

B: Yeah. I was green as a new mowed grass. I joined I think because I was told I should, you know. And then after I got out of the service when I come back in '56 I was a little bit wiser, and I don't think anybody could've told me I couldn't join the union then. After you been in the service, you know, you kind of know

D: What union was it then? Did it have a different name?

B: Well, I'm not too sure on this. Somewhere along the line we were with the Tobacco Workers. As long as I can remember it's been the RWDA. I want to say '56, like I say, I was only there for a couple of months. One time why Quaker was represented by the Tobacco Workers. I think that was when they were a left wing organization and affiliation, and that's when the RWDSU come in and took over.

D: I was wondering about that, if you knew the background of that.

B: I'm kind of a little bit interested in labor history, and I haven't been able to dig up too much about it. Sometime I want to take the time and do some real digging and see if we can find any information, I'll give you a holler. It'd be kind of interesting to see just exactly what happened here.

D: The RWDSU is what—Retail Wholesale Department Store Union. What's the local number?

B: 110.

D: Are there any other grain milling firms in Iowa in the RWDSU?

B: Nope. RWDSU is a predominantly east coast union. And there is a Del Monte fruit plant over in Illinois that we're pretty familiar with, because they're in the food industry. And

the Quaker plant down in St. Jo, Missouri is RWDSU. As far as I know the only other RWDSU Local is in Waterloo, and that's a pharmacy or department store or something like that.

D: Black's Department Store.

B: Black's Department Store.

D: When was Quaker here first organized, do you know?

B: I don't know. I don't know how long it's been organized.

D: What jobs have you held in the local?

B: I've been a chief steward.

D: When was that?

B: You're putting me way back now.

D: Approximately.

B: I think '67. I was on a negotiating committee as chief steward in '68. I run several times for that, but that was the first time I got elected. I was vice-president, I'm gonna say right around '74. And then I was president '77-'78. I was president in the '78 negotiations. Now I'm the educational director and I've held that job for—I'm up for election now, so I've been there for two years. I sat in the last negotiations as educational director.

Our union is probably a little bit unique. We have a seven-man negotiating grievance committee, which is filled by the president, vice-president, chief steward, educational director and treasurer. And when we're elected, why we're elected as officers and members of the negotiating and grievance committee. Some locals, you know, they have a special election for a negotiating committee. Our offices are held just as we're elected.

D: Has there been turnover in leadership over the years, or have a few people held, say, the presidency for a long time? How has it worked?

B: I remember Sam Clark was president, Tom Knox was president, Virgil Smith was president, I was president, then Emmitt was president. We're going back a good twenty years, and six people have held the office of president. The upper offices were pretty much steady, where the lower offices there was quite a bit of turnover. The education director, I can't remember how many of those we've had. Chief Steward has pretty much stayed the same. Probably had five-six chief stewards in the last twenty years.

D: Have the officers in the past come from one single department?

B: Well, our departments are not equal on personnel. Like package and ready-to-eat department are probably the two biggest departments. Maintenance is one of the smaller departments, and we've probably got more people as officers out of the maintenance department than we had out of package or ready-to-eat.

D: That's often the case.

B: Three of us are out of maintenance right now and one out of chemicals, which is a small department. One out of by-products, which is a small department.

D: Does it take more seniority to get on maintenance, usually?

B: Well, at one time—we used to work rotating shifts, the whole plant worked rotating shifts. And the maintenance department right along with them, but we didn't have as many jobs on the night shift as the rest of the departments. A lot of people didn't want the jobs, because it would screw up their—if you were on second or third shift and you had to come here for grievances why it kind of screwed things up. Where now we work—we negotiated in shift preference and I think every one of us is off the day shift.

D: That's often very, very true.

B: It's hard you know when you're working third shift and like we handle our grievances usually during working hours. But it's in the afternoon—well, that screws up your sleeping. It's bad enough being on grievance and have to come in maybe once a year if you've got a grievance, but they expect our union officers to come in two times a week. And we usually have grievances about every week. Pretty hard.

D: Are any of these offices full time?

B: No, we have no full time offices. We are paid for our lost time. Like today is membership meeting day, and the president, vice-president and recording secretary are excused for all day. Well the unions pays back their lost time. We have no full-paid, full-time jobs. Which I'm kind of in disagreement with. It takes a lot of dedication, I mean you've gotta come down to the office at least three nights a week, spend an hour or two hours down here. Why that kind of wears you down. I feel like we're a little bit lax on some of the work that should be done.

Now I see everybody sitting around here today. We got time between membership meetings, grabbing something we want to check out or reading it over and getting it taken care of. We like to go fishing and hunting just like everybody else.

D: What's the duties of the education director?

B: Well, my main responsibility is to put out the newsletter, which we used to put out once a month. But because of the cost and federal regulations that are getting so goddamned hard to keep up with—everything's gotta be just so or the Post Office won't take it—we're down where we only put it out every three months or special editions or something comes up. Printing costs are a factor in it, and like I say, the postal regulations. Postage, you know, we send everything bulk mail, but still bulk mailing has went up so damn much. So we're down to one newsletter every three months. In a political year we'll probably put out a few more come around election time.

My feelings are, it's one of the best ways we've got to communicate with our membership. You know, this is the only way you're gonna get something into every member's hand. Whether they read it after they get it. If you put something a little bit interesting in there every time they're gonna read it. They're gonna look through it anyway. It's one of the best means we got to communicate with the membership, and our government hits so hard on you you can't hardly do it.

D: What kind of attendance do you get at meetings?

B: Poor. And I would say for a local union, poor but it's average. Everybody I talk to, you know, "What can you do to get more people there?" Well, the only thing you can do is tell them every membership meeting you're gonna raise the dues and maybe they'll show up.

D: Was it any better back in '56?

B: No, no I don't think so. I think over the years it's run about the same average.

D: How may members do you get on average?

B: Well, I'd say thirty to forty out of nine hundred to a thousand membership. That's not very good.

D: Have you ever been raided?

B: Never have. I can remember back in '68 during negotiations there was a big scare on about they were gonna bring the Teamsters in. But that never materialized. I think that kind of was a little bit organized, and it sure helped get a better contract.

D: You brought that up, not the company?

B: Well, it was floating around the plant.

D: To frighten the company.

B: To frighten the company I think, just as much as…

D: I think that's often used by people who tell me about that tactic. It works.

B: It worked, it worked. Since then I can't remember of anything ever coming out of it, serious. You always got a few rattle brains that's gonna say, "Well, we'll get the Teamsters in here."

D: Has the company ever tried to de-certify the union?

B: No.

D: Have you ever been out on strike?

B: I think the last strike at Quaker was—I'm gonna say '51, here in Cedar Rapids.

D: That's before your time here.

B: That was before my time.

D: The company's been able to handle negotiations and grievances and so forth without a strike.

B: Without a strike.

D: You ever had a wildcat?

B: We've had a couple of wildcats. But we managed to get everything filled without any disciplinary action or anything. You couldn't really call that a wildcat. We've had departments that get upset and went to the cafeteria and sat down, you know. A few minutes talk, and get things resolved.

D: Have you ever practiced an organized slowdown?

B: No, not that I can remember. We got several Quaker plants, and it's set up so all our contracts run out at different times. Not because we want it. We've tried to go for coordinated bargaining. We've tried everything to coordinate bargaining, even down to just all the Quaker plants have all pretty much got the same insurance, pension programs and stuff like that. So we tried to just coordinate it so we could get just on insurance and pension programs. Of course now in this day and age you're out of luck. We're down today where it's, I'd say, every man for himself. Everybody's running scared. I think it's in the future, it's a long way away.

D: Are all the Quaker plants under the same union?

B: No. We have some under the Grain Millers, some under UAW. We have a plant out in Germantown, Pennsylvania that doesn't belong to any affiliated AFL-CIO. The one down in St. Jo—we're supposedly the biggest plant—the one down in St. Jo is the second biggest. And we're both under the RWDSU. The rest of them are under different locals.

D: What sort of seniority system do you have there, plant wide, department wide, or what?

B: Okay, our seniority at the plant here is plant wide for layoffs. Now we have department seniority for reductions, for say a department falls down why you'll get farmed out of the department, but you'll bump into another department. And then plant-wide seniority is for layoffs.

D: Do you have many women working in the plant?

B: Well, let's go back and start at the beginning. There's always been a lot of women in the plant. When I first started there the only place that there was any women working was in the package department. The packer's jobs in those days was considered typical women's work.

D: What would the packers do?

B: Well, where the final product comes in it's cased and shipped out. And the package department had all the women …

D: Putting the oatmeal in the round cans?

B: Putting them in the boxes and shipping them out, yeah. Then when the equal rights come in, which we had a hell of a time convincing Quaker it was part of the federal law and they had to follow through on it. We even had women working as sweepers making $1.50 an hour, and a man sweeping making $2.00 an hour. Then we even had discrimination. We had the whole bit. Now it's all equal pay, equal work.

D: When did that problem come up with Quaker, that about when the union brought up this question of discrimination against women?

B: When did we finally get it settled, Justin? It come up in the '60s, but I don't think we ever really got it all ironed out until the '70s did we, the early '70s—'71 or '72, something like that.

D: Before this time, before the federal government stepped in, did the women ever come to the meeting and say, "This isn't fair, we want to be able to work on any job in the plant."

B: I'm trying to remember. Oh yeah, the women were hollering about it. We'd even bring it up in negotiations and stuff like that. But what I was trying to remember was whether a suit was threatened.

D: Did you ever have separate seniority lists?

B: Separate seniority lists, yeah. We'd have women with twenty years laid off, and men with a year working. Yeah, that didn't get resolved neither till the late '60s, early '70s. Like I say, a woman got hired why she went over to the package department. Where nowadays we got, hell, we got women all over the plant. I ain't gonna tell you we got any more than what we used to have, but they're on different jobs, different departments.

I have still kind of a—I don't know what you'd call it—but when you have some of the older women get upset when the younger women sign operators' jobs and stuff like that, you know. Predominantly there was a cut off—this was a woman's job and this was a man's job. Operator was a man's job. Still even to this day and age some of the older women get upset, and some of the men get upset.

D: You find the same thing in the packinghouses, where they had traditionally women's jobs. And when the Civil Rights Act was signed women had finally the right to move around the plant, maybe the older women did not like that because they couldn't handle some of those jobs. And they were afraid men were going to come in and take their jobs, which was lighter work. The same thing there. Women were divided.

B: Yup, they had their work, and you didn't cross the line. As a matter of fact, one of them just got resolved here a couple months ago. All the girls retired. They had women working in the office up in the ready-to-eat department, so they had to have a woman's locker room, you know, a rest room. And three years why there was a woman from the package department went up there and cleaned the locker room . It finally become a ready-to-eat job. Because they got more women up there, they got more women's locker rooms.

D: What did you say—a…

B: Ready-to-eat.

D: Oh, okay.

B: Make ready-to-eat cereal. That's your cereal—it's ready to eat when it comes out.

D: You said you thought there may have been a suit over…

B: I don't remember. It seems to me something was threatened. I don't know whether the union was involved in it or not.. Do you remember anything about that, Justin? Wasn't there some threats on civil action on discrimination when the right-to-work thing got squared away? I think the union was involved a little bit too, wasn't it?

D: So there was some sort of a suit.

B: A threat of it. I don't think it ever got much more than a threat out of it.

Justin Shields: It was two-fold. They had a different starting rate for women. They had a higher rate for men, then plus also your job categories.

D: The same thing happened in the packinghouses through that same period. Ever had much of a problem with layoffs in the plant?

B: Well, Quaker's been pretty steady. We have our seasonal layoffs, usually figure November-December they start slowing down and lay off a few. Last summer, a year ago, was the first summer that I can ever remember that Quaker did not hire one single person in production. Usually every year they always hire.

D: Some of those college kids?

B: Yeah, but we'd call it "summer help." We never admit it was summer help, but anybody that's hired at Quaker as far as we're concerned is permanent help. But there were a lot of college kids, yes. They made their money working at Quaker in the summer time. They'd

wash windows and do some of the work that, you know, was kind of seasonal like washing windows and fill in for vacation relief and stuff like that.

But '81 is the only summer that I can ever remember that they never hired a soul in the plant. We got a clause in our contract if you're laid off for eighteen months you lose all your seniority. And the first time that that was ever used that was in January of this year, '82.

D: Did you ever have seasonal layoffs?

B: Yeah, like I say they start slowing down in the latter part of November, December. Usually everybody's called back by May 15th. Then end of the school term around the first of June why they're hiring to beat hell.

D: Now how many people would be laid off in the slow season? Was it ever standardized? Twenty, thirty, a hundred, two hundred?

B: Well, you're probably talking a hundred, a hundred and fifty. It's been like I say the last couple of years, it's been a little worse. And then we went through that—when was it—back in the early '70s we went through kind of a depression. We had a lot of people laid off there, but they all ended up being called back. They was back hiring when summer come. Mostly we'd have slow periods.

D: So in Cedar Rapids here they have National Oats Company too?

B: National Oats, yeah.

D: Now, are they organized?

B: Yeah, Grain Millers are in National.

D: Now is there another plant too?

B: Okay, General Mills has got a plant out here. It's been out there for quite a few years, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years. It's not organized yet to this day. The last time they tried to organize it, why it boiled down to a drive between the Grain Millers and the Teamsters and finally got till they ended up with nobody.

D: Does the Local ever take an interest in politics? You mentioned the newsletter and that you put them out more frequently during election periods.

B: We used to be quite proud of the fact we had two of our members that were elected to the House.

D: State House representatives?

B: Yeah, Jim Wells and Cloyd Robinson.

D: When were they elected?

B: Wells is the senior one, he's been in there I want to say ten years, longer than that probably. He's Senator now. He was in the House for quite a few years.

D: They came out of your local.

B: They come out of the local, right. Matter of fact Jim Wells is back in the plant working right now. When he's not in Des Moines he's back in the plant working.

D: So the company lets him off when the Legislature's in session?

B: Right, we got it negotiated in the contract where they get a leave of absence. This goes back quite a few years—Ken Perry, Sr., he come out of our production unit. He was Clerk of the Court for many years. Then his son worked up at Quaker. When Ken Sr. retired why Ken Jr. ran for the job, and he's Clerk of the Court down there now.

D: What sort of things does the local do to work in politics? Get out the vote, or educate people, what do you do?

B: Well, we try to do everything I guess every other local does. Try to get them registered; try to get them out to vote. It still boils down just like union offices, you still got your same few people that are active, they get out and do most of the work. Try to get other people interested, get them activated a little bit.

Side 2

B: We pick up a new helper here and there. Newsletter, bulletin boards, handbilling.

D: Has there been any one election you thought was more important than the others, or which you worked harder than other elections?

B: Well, I guess Dick Clark probably. John Culver. No, we worked in all of them. That's the way I got started. When Dick Clark was John Culver's campaign manager, why it was pretty active around Cedar Rapids here. I got started sticking bumper stickers on the parking lots on rainy Monday mornings, you know. I think that's about the way Justin got his start too. Wasn't it Justin? We was all pretty active in Dick Clark's campaign. I don't know anybody in the labor movement wasn't active in that.

D: Do you cooperate with other unions in some of your political activities?

B: We belong to the Hawkeye Labor Council, which is very active in politics. And there's been a new organization started in town here that—I can't even remember now that you ask me—

D: Labor Alliance?

B: Labor Alliance, which we belong to.

D: Have there been any political issues that come up, say since '56, that the union took a particular interest in? What about reapportionment in the Legislature? Do you recall that?

B: Mostly it was workman's comp and unemployment.

D: Do you recall when Governor Hughes refused—I think it was 1965—refused to push for the repeal of the right-to-work law?

B: I can remember.

D: You don't remember any particular thing the union did?

B: Well, back in '65 I wasn't quite that active in the union itself. I'm trying to remember offhand. Like I say, Jim Wells has always been active and he was an officer in the union before I first started getting active.

D: Did your union here ever take a part in forming any farm-labor coalitions back in the '50s, early '60s? In certain parts of the state the Auto Workers did and Meat Packers did.

B: Our local never did, no.

D: Have labor unions in Cedar Rapids had any effect in local elections? You mentioned the Hawkeye Labor Council's work in politics, but did you get the vote out?

B: I'd say definitely yes. Not only in local elections, you know, a few years ago they had a special election up in Dubuque and we took bus loads of people up there that went around on election day knocking on doors. I would say that Cedar Rapids has got a very—through the labor council—it's got a very, very active political group. Our local is in my opinion a little bit slow. A couple, three, four of us, you know, if they need volunteers they know who they can get a hold of. And that's who ends up usually going out and doing the work.

D: Do you have any sort of political committee set up within the local?

B: Well, we did have a COPE committee, but being's the federal government got so goddamned strict on that we spent more time—like I say, we got no full-time, all volunteers. I think we were amongst one of the first unions in Iowa to negotiate political check off. We have political checkoff.

D: When did you get that, do you know?

B: The last negotiations, '80. So now all the paperwork you gotta go through as a local political group, why we spend all our money into the international, and then fifty percent of it comes back for us to use as we see fit.

D: Did the Local take any role at all in the Civil Rights activities of the 1960s? Was that an issue at all?

B: I don't think so.

D: How about the Vietnam War, was that ever an issue within the local union?

B: Not in the local union, no.

D: Has the local ever taken up any community activities? Sponsored any community projects with teens or anything like that, or worked with Boy Scouts, Red Cross or anything of that sort?

B: Well, we have our members you know that are active in this, but as far as the local itself sponsoring anything—no, not that I can think of right offhand.

D: You worked with United Way or anything of that sort?

B: We're very active in United Way, yeah.

D: You work with a company and try to get people to donate?

B: Right, as a matter of fact I think Emmitt was chairman of it. When he was president, he was chairman of it. We probably got more active in the last couple, three or four years than before. I think it's probably because the company finally wised up to the fact that you gotta talk to the people, you can't just tell them they gotta be there. You gotta talk to them.

D: Do you consider your union here militant or conservative, or how do you characterize it?

B: Well I'll tell you what, I think it used to be very militant. Today, you know, you're not in a very good bargaining situation.

D: You mean presently, with the depressed economy.

B: Right, because of the economy. When you can look out the door and see a couple thousand people looking at your job, you know, why I don't think they're that militant now. But five years ago—very strong.

D: How did it come to pass that you were able to get two of your members in the state legislature? Did the local help work especially hard for them? Did the other unions work for them? How did they get elected?

B: I'm gonna have to say that our Local didn't have that much to do with it. Jim Wells lives in a predominant labor neighborhood. He's well liked by the people down in the packinghouse union, a lot of their people worked for him. A lot of our people worked for him. But as far as the local, we'd be there when he needed money. We'd help him out there. But to actually get out and do that much work—no. Ken Perry and a lot of us knew him, and we'd get out and work for him. And like I say, the money was available.

Some day when they look back at this and they hear that Cloyd Robinson come out of our local, why they may come over here and blow up our union hall, because Cloyd Robinson kind of changed his stand after the last few years. I don't know how familiar you are with that.

D: I'm not familiar with him at all. In Cedar Rapids now is there any particular union, or any particular union Local that runs the labor council or has the most clout in the town and politics and so forth?

B: No, as far as running the labor council, no. I give a lot of credit to the people down at P-3. They're a very active union. They're active in politics, they're active in labor council.

D: Wilson Packing?

B: Yeah, they've got a fabulous retiree program, and their retirees are active in politics. A lot of the problem is—I think it goes back to the fact that, well where we're meeting at right now, this is our union hall. It's hard to get to. It's not that big. You gotta have something for the members. I said years ago that what we needed in this town was a large labor temple. Well, everybody went off in five different directions. We got I don't how many different union halls. None of them are big enough—well, like I say, what I feel we needed was a large labor temple.

With the economy the way it is today, it's a thing of the past. It's too damned late to do it now. It should've been done years ago. I myself have to admit, I ran around with my head in the sand for a few years. Now that it's too late I can say it. In order to keep your membership active

you gotta have a place to get them active at. A union hall I think—in the old days it used to offer them something. You'd come here, you had weddings, you could rent it out for weddings, your members could use it for any number of functions.

D: Did you ever ?

B: See, a lot of our people looked down at the packinghouse group, to see what they got for their retirees. They've got a good retirement plan, and good health care benefits after they retired and everything. So before our last contract expired, why I had me some pretty good retiree meetings. Contract expired, they got a little bit of improvement, and I haven't seen too many of them since.

And like I say, I go back and blame it on—where can they go and what can they do? If we had some place where they could have functions. Like down at P-3 they have bingo, they have their dinners, they send them on bus trips. When was it, when Reagan was in town here last winter? You had buses lined up in front of the union hall. I'd say half the people that was on the bus going up were retirees, walking around up there in that freezing weather. The union paid for it. Gave them something to do. You got to give these people something to do. You got something for them to do, they get at it.

D: We probably should put on tape that the weather was about twenty below zero, the wind was about forty miles an hour, they were protesting against Reagan.

B: Colder than hell. Well, you got hindsight now, but that don't do you much good.

D: Well John, we're about out of tape here. Is there something else you'd like to bring up that we haven't talked about?

B: I don't know what it's gonna take, but I'd like to see things back where they used to be. We talk solidarity, but I think it's a long ways from home right now.

D: Well thank you John, I really appreciated you spent some time with me today here at the union hall. I tell you, I've learned a lot and I enjoyed talking to you.