

OS: Opal Skilling, and I work for the Office and Technical Employees Union, Local 15.

SD: Can you tell me a bit about your family background, how you became interested in Unionism?

OS: My father was a homesteader in --I'm going to read this--in southern Saskatchewan during the early 1900's. My family name is Bannert, and my dad was active as a schoolboard trustee, and in 1933, the C.C.F. So I have a strong socialist background.

SD: Was trade/unionism discussed in your family?

OS: It was a farm community, and it was more co-op related, like, prairie farmers rather than being in an industrial environment in a city. Like, we were out on the prairie, and our area was actually not union related in any aspect, other than co-op. Like, during the harvest and things like that they shared the combines and they shared the threshing machines, and things like that.

SD: How did that interest in socialism grow into an interest in unionism?

OS: Well, my older brothers were members of various unions, when I was growing up, and worked in the mining in the mid-forties, and my brother--one of my brothers was quite active in the BCGEU, up in the Nelson area. I joined my first union in September, 1950--the Theatre Employees Union, Local B72--but was keenly interested in probably politics, having had the early association with the CCF. I was the first female in the family and my dad took me to the Schoolboard meetings, and the CCF meetings, and my early recollection was attending a meeting in Drummer, Saskatchewan, where M.J. Callwell(?) spoke to us, and of course that was the formation year of the CCF. And he told us that every child in Saskatchewan should have an apple to eat every day, and I thought that was just great, because the only time we ever saw apples was probably a boxcar of fruit would come in around Christmas time, and it was given out to those people who were on relief. And so we were lucky if we saw apples once a year, not every day. And I thought--boy, if somebody can provide you an apple every day--that that's what I was most interested in. And I never joined the Party. Of course I was only nine years old when the CCF was formed, but I was always--when I reached voting age and that, I was always...voted for the CCF.

SD: What job were you employed in when you became a union member?

OS: Well, my first job was with Odeon Theatres from 1950 to 1960, and we were the Theatre Employees Union--I mentioned earlier, Local B72. And our union meetings were on Sunday, and all the cashiers and usherettes would get together on Sunday and it was almost like Hollywood, you know, where you get dressed up with your hats, and furs, and go to a Sunday due.

Rather than church it was to our own union meeting. And I was the, of course, the office steward. That was my first union.

SD: How did you become an office steward?

P.W.
OS: Just by taking positions, ^{and} getting elected to the position. Mostly seeing that we should be paid as much as the doormen. We were paid eighty-five cents an hour and the doorman was paid a dollar.

SD: And exactly what was your job? You were..

OS: Cashier.

SD: Can you tell me a bit of the history of how that union organized?

P.W.
OS: They didn't. It was all organized before...I don't know anything about the pre-Local B72. A 'B' Local is part of the Projectionist's Union. The Projectionists would have been the...formed the union, and then they set up a 'B' Local for the other people.

SD: Were the other people mostly women, in that job?

OS: Yes.

SD: And did that 'B' Local have its full autonomy, or was it part of the Projectionist's ?

OS: Oh no, we had our full autonomy. As you can see in the pictures, they're mostly all women.

SD: Were you successful in winning equal pay with the doormen?

OS: No, there was always the fifteen cents differential.

SD: After being a steward, did you take any other positions in that union?

P.W.
OS: No. Local B72 was not active--it was strictly, you know, within the theatre that you worked in ^{and} most of them were quite small. I worked at the Circle, out on Kingsway, which was not a lot of people, but we were keenly concerned with our union.

SD: What was the next job that you worked at?

P.W.
OS: Well, during that period, of 1950 to 1960--in 1955, I went to work in the Bank of Montreal. Because you could work in the Bank in the daytime and work at the show at night. ~~Odd~~ Theatre was all night work. And on a Stat holiday you would have a Bank holiday and ... but you worked in the theatre, because Stat holidays were missing matinees and afternoon matinees, and evening matinees. So, I think...my comment here is I was probably more interested in politics at that period in my life, than in trade unionism. In other words, politics was my first knowledgeable interest in the plight of the working people.

SD: In the bank, was there a union or an attempt to bring in a union?

P.W.
OS: Well, in 1958, 1959, we attempted to form a union. I worked right over here at the Bank of Montreal, and Broadway and Main--and...you can have

this--this is our international union. This had many, many runs. This was organizing, at the Bank of Montreal, where I worked from 55 to 60, like, for five years. We attempted to form a union. I had...there was a staff of thirty-five and we were about fifteen, sixteen of us were signed up into the union. And the managers came over from Broadway and Granville--we attended a meeting and we were told what all could happen if we formed the union. We could be fired and all of these things could happen, and I was taking notes, and I was told that, number one, I couldn't join the union because I was a supervisor--I was part of management team,--and number two, I shouldn't be taking notes during the meeting.

P.W.
SD: Management told you that?

OS: Oh yes, and so I filed an unfair labour charge at that time. Alex McDonald was my legal advisor, and I left the bank in the middle of it, because it was getting too--it was really getting pretty hot. Because, number one, they took away my door key, and number two, I couldn't be responsible for my tellers anymore. They wouldn't let me--they changed the combination to the safe, which I used to open up the safe every morning. And I wasn't responsible enough to do that anymore, and you know, all of these things started happening--and then I was not allowed to talk to my tellers. I was active then in the CCF and my colleagues and I, we used to ^{go} around and say, "Hi Comrade", and all kinds of funny things like that. But, it was quite a trying time, and if I hadn't known what was going on, of course I would have been interested, but I wasn't naive. I knew why they were doing this. But I quit, and left and went to work for the IWA.

SD: To go back a bit, when you became interested in organizing at the bank, did the people who worked at the bank initiate the organizing campaign, or did the union contact you?

OS: The union contacted me. The...Bill Low, then he was the international representative of our union, this union, and he came to my home, and told me all about this new union, and I became the secretary-treasurer of the Bank Employess Association, Local 387. We had meetings and they provided me with cards and we were doing card signing.

SD; Could you describe how you would approach someone to interest them in the union?

P.W.
OS: Well, we had lots of meetings. We had coffee breaks and noon hour meetings, and the part that bothered me the most was these new young fellows would come in...(Interruption)

SD: I was just asking, how you would approach someone and actually ask them to join the union?

P.W.
OS: Yes, the part that was really bothering us was the fact that they were hiring these young fellows, and we would train them, and they would end up up at top counter, and their wages would be more than ours. I mean they were hiring these fellows in at higher wages than what the women that had been there years. And, I didn't think that was fair.

SD: Its the classic bank worker's position, isn't it?

OS: Still is.

SD: Right. So that was something that made people want to join a union, was it?

P.W.
OS: Not so much in the banks. You could get them interested for a little while. After I left the girls would say, "Come on Opal, its time for another union scare." Because every time there was a union scare, we would get a raise. I got four hundred and fifty dollars in the first year, after the union campaign. I told them it was time that they stopped depending on the labour movement for scares, that we'd done all the scaring we could do, that they had to sign the cards. We couldn't sign the cards for them.

SD: Who were the five women who decided that they wanted to join the union-- was there anything about them that was in common, for example, an interest in the CCF?

OS; Most of us were CCF. Most of us. There was fifteen of us.

SD: And how many people worked there?

OS: Thirty-five.

SD: So you almost had a majority.

P.W.
OS: Then they did the test case, up in Kitimat, and then we were not allowed to organize branch by branch. Thats when they made the decision that it had to be all or none. That was in '59. I don't know if that decision came out in late '59 or early '60, about that period.

SD: How many branches had been organized by then?

P.W.
OS: None. Even our branch was not, because we put in the application in Kitimat, and the ruling came down which was the Canada Labour Relations Board, that one branch was not an appropriate unit. So none were organized. But there was a lot of raises-giving, and a lot of organizing, talks--I don't know how many people may have lost their jobs, during that period, because I was only associated with that one branch, and the meetings I went to-- there were other people from other branches, but nothing really material-- it didn't really get off the ground at that time.

SD: And the same situation would then happen again ^wenty years later. O.K., so then you went to work for the IWA-- and could you describe what job you did there?

P.W. OS: I was switchboard receptionist. And the Woodworker Hall was just opened then, on Commercial Drive. I worked there for two years, and of course, at that time then, I joined this local. It was called the Office Employees International Union, Local 15.

SD: And when had that Local been organized?

OS: It was chartered in 1945. And it was chartered by fifteen women. And there are their names...You may have that.

SD: Great. Thank you.

P.W. OS: So, unlike the other union, our union was formed strictly by women. When I first came in there was only one man on the executive board. The rest were all women. This is something, Sara, that you will find interesting--this is January 26, 1946, and we were then called the Stenographer's, Typists, Bookkeepers, and Assistants, Local 18177. That was before '45, when this charter was first established. And, from what I can find out, the history of the local, in our book and everything, goes back to '31, 1931. I also have one of our first agreements here, which is 'Stenographer's, Typists, Bookkeeper's and Assistant's'. And it's our old agreement--you see, we were down in the Holden (?) building--and there were only two pages. Our contracts in the beginning were only about these two pages. I thought you might find that interesting...Here's ~~a~~ photocopy...I haven't got page one, but you can see that the president was a lady, and the secretary-treasurer was a lady.

SD: Was that because most of the people who worked in union offices were women?

P.W. OS: It was the old--what did they call them?--Trades and Labour Council. And the women who worked for the Building Trades Unions.

SD: So that was where Local 15 came out of?

P.W. OS: These fifteen women in that charter worked for all the various unions, most of them were one person offices.

SD: How did that union then move into the Canadian Congress of Labour unions -- did that happen after the merger in '56?

P.W. OS: No, it started in '45. They ^{were the} AFLCIO, which I think was '56. And this charter was under the old...in 1945.

SD: That would be under the Trades and Labour Congress, but, do you know if they organized in unions like the IWA, and the Boilmaker's and so on, that were not in the Trades and Labour Congress, before the merger?

P.W. OS: They were...We didn't have an international union then. It ~~was~~..I don't know that much about it. It was before my time. I'm trying to get a hold of our first president and our first secretary-treasurer, and get some past

history. Like, here's 1944, for instance. Bernadette's still around. She's not a member of our union, but she has a lot of this history that I need.

SD: That would be great. Maybe I could do an interview with her.

OS: You can have that. She left our union and went to work for the Service Employees International Union. I don't know whether she...I haven't approached her. I think she had a little bit of a...(Interruption)

SD: So, can you tell me how you became involved with the OTEU?

OS: Well, when I first started, I had joined the CCF, and--that was before it was the NDP--and my circle of friends were trade unionists, and I went to the B.C. Federation of Labour Convention as a visitor, and you know, ... really, I don't know very much about any other circles. Other than labour circles, of friends. And my first (???), I guess you would call it, when I joined the IWA, was to find out about this OTEU--I didn't know anything about it. I joined it, and I became the chairperson of the organizing committee, and we started a lot of organizing drives, and that was in May of '60, until September '62, when I left the IWA and came to work for my own Local. And then at that time I was elected Secretary-Treasurer. So that's it, until up to and including today.

SD: That's a long history.

OS: It's a long time.(Laughs)

SD: That's really exciting.

OS: September, 19...May, 1960, I joined the union. When I left the IWA I started working fulltime for Local 15. It was September--on my birthday. September the 28, 1962. And I've been elected to that position ever since.

SD: Can you tell me about the organizing campaign?

OS: The best one, the one that I think is most important in my lifetime, was organizing Macmillan Bloedel in Port Alberni, in 1964. We had a lengthy strike, in Alberni. It was part of the Macmillan Bloedel Story, here. In '63, and it goes on to talk about OTEU being certified. You can have this--this is out of the Macmillan Bloedel Story. You can have that for your notes...That was really exciting because there was sixty people in that mill, and Bill Low, the first chap^{that} introduced me to this local, he was in Seattle at the time, and I phoned him and said I have this organizing call. People in Port Alberni literally lined up to sign cards. I still have the signed cards, you know, because we still have...we had a terrible fight, terrible strike, and no where would it have been successful except in the Alberni Valley where all of the other unions supported us.

SD: The people who you signed up--were they all office workers?

OS; Oh yes.

SD: And, can you describe what happened during the strike? And some of the support you got?

P.W. OS: Well, the reason the strike carried on so long was Macmillan Bloedel were not about to recognize the fact that the office people had a right to join a union. It was not appropriate for office workers to join a union. They were their potential management people, and they didn't want the unions brainwashing them. And J.B. Klein, at that time, under no circumstances would he give us a union security clause--where the people had to join the union. And its only been in the last five years, I guess, since we were able to get the union security clause that said that, as a condition of employment, they must join the union. We had the rad (??) formula, and the maintenance of membership where the employer said that if we got down to less than fifty percent that they would make the forty-ninth, fiftieth person join the union. But that was--it made the strike last longer because we didn't want to sign a first agreement in the pulp industry without a full union security clause. And like I say, it has taken years to get that clause into that collective agreement.

SD: Can you tell us a bit about the story of the strike? Did people put up picket lines?

OS: Oh yes, we closed down the valley. Its all recorded in the past history. There's a lot of it in that...

SD: What was your role in that?

P.W. OS: I was the Secretary-Treasurer--collected the dues, ^Iwrote all the receipts, I attended most of the meetings. Not in Port Alberni, but group meetings, meetings in Nanaimo where the people were coming out to find out what we were going to do next. Like through the Nanaimo Labour Council. I wasn't in the forefront, but I was strictly in the background, for all the telephone calls and everything, strike pay and everything all ^during the whole period. I did not lead the negotiations.

SD: How long did the strike last?

P.W. OS: It was ~~was~~ six weeks, seven weeks.

SD: When you say you shut the valley down, was that every mill in the valley?

OS; Well, all of the pulp workers and the IWA respected our picket line.

SD: And were you ^successful in winning that clause at the time?

OS: No, I think I mentioned that only in the last five years have we been able to negotiate a clause that states they must join the union.

SD: So, in your opinion, was the outcome of the strike ^successful?

OS: Yes, because we were able to keep all of the people. We never ever got down where people were not joining the union. They were all quite happy to join

the union, and we established rates and benefits for the people. We still have them today, which proves that they're quite happy with local 15.

SD: In terms of the history of organizing at that period, were you organizing general offices and union offices at the same time?

P.W.
OS: We have not spent any time organizing union offices. That's not our major-- it was never our major. I think that some of the union fellows like to think that that's our major. Because they become the employer and we're the union. Anytime anybody mentions major negotiations, I refer to the freightway companies, the shipyards, anything other than the trade union offices, which you can understand. If we spent a lot of our time just organizing in the trade union office sector, we're neglecting the commercial aspect. Local 15 has a hundred and sixty-four certifications. We're not like the other trades that have one contract. We negotiate every day. Like, we have Noranda, Wire Rope, Neon Products, Scott Paper, Burrard Yarrow, which is now Versatile Pacific, and we have everybody from the filing clerks up to the top computer analyst, the draughtsman, and lab technicians. We have Utah (???) Mines up in Port Hardy, and Credit Unions. We have what we call 'freightway companies,' commercial offices, credit unions, and the trade unions.

SD: Have you found that the companies where there's other unionized workers are easier to organize? Than ones where there aren't?

P.W.
OS: I wouldn't say they're easier to organize. I would say they're more familiar with collective bargaining. Every unit that we've organized has been a struggle. None have come easy. Like when I started, we had three hundred members ^{and} now we have two thousand. So it's been steady. But if we have any spare time at all, there's always lots of organizing to do. But it's not ^{easy} to go out and find and concentrate on a group if they're not interested. You can't meet them, and insist on a meeting with you. And handbilling helps sometimes, but most of our contacts ^{come} through bad management. When people just get fed up, they phone in and say, "We want to have a meeting."

SD: Has one of your jobs been to organize?

P.W.
OS: Oh yes, right from... I was chairperson of the organizing committee right from day one. And always, it's been a priority.

SD: Can you share with us some of what you've learned through organizing?

P.W.
OS: Well, I'm on the Board of Referees with the UIC, and I think what you can most learn about organizing is the difference between having a contract and not having a contract. There's a big difference in wages, between union and non-union. But the people who are working without a contract, they have nothing. I mean, I just think office workers are so slow to work,

and women especially --to go and work and not have a collective agreement, at least a contract. They go to work, they don't even know what they're going to be paid. They don't know when they're going to get their three weeks of vacation. They don't know when they're going to get a raise. In the office occupation you're just at the mercy of the employer. And we have a big job to do. I don't know what I've learned, other than, I just can't see why people would work without a contract.

SD: Is it true then that most of the contacts have been made organizing the people who come to you?

OS: I would say that strictly on the basis that people that are happy in their jobs, don't go out seeking a union. So most of our organizing comes about by, really, bad management.

SD: And then how do you work with the people once they've contacted you?

OS: Well, we set up a committee, and then hold a meeting, sign cards, and take it from there. But there is still, even in 1986, there is still a fear. There's a big --its scary--they're afraid of being fired. Really people don't know that they have a right to form a union, without being fired.

Tape1 Side 2

OS: ...by fifteen women. The executive board has been predominantly female, especially in the formation years, and our membership is still 80% female, so obviously women in our union have been active all during the whole period, because otherwise we wouldn't be here. And, I think your other questions have pretty well been covered. Like, I'm not talking in terms of just myself, personally, Sara. I always say "we"--like, our whole local union has always been, in my opinion, its always been "we", and we've always all worked together. The only co-ordinating thing is that I have been here so long, that I have a lot more history than the other people I've worked with.

SD: In going back a bit, to the issue of organizing, what issues have been really foremost for office workers when they've contacted you.

OS: Well, I think that the biggest gain would be, number one, to have a contract that sets out your wages and working conditions, your vacations--getting longer vacations--and office workers have worked years and years and years without any pension. And we have been able to establish a pension, and finally have a pension in the trade union offices. Which, we've tried, but people, when they're younger, aren't that much interested in--specially women--in having a pension. They think they're going to work,

and get married, and have babies, and that's it. BUt then when they get to my age--"Where's my pension? How come my union has not provided a pension?"

SD: Have you found that women's attitudes, just generally over the years, has been that they see their work as temporary? Even with the changes in the labour force?

OS: Still.

SD: How do you deal with that, when you're talking to them?

OS: Well, mostly that I have about three key points—Would you buy a car without a contract? Would you buy a house without a contract? Would you get married and have children without a contract? —So why are you working without one? I mean, the whole important thing is they're working without a collective agreement. At the Board of Referees at UIC a lot of the professional people now are coming in, attempting to collect UIC. They don't have a union, they don't know anything about a union. They've been working without a contract--professional women--and they're the new unemployed. They're still working without a contract.

SD: What issues have been specifically important for women? As opposed to say, generally, the work force?

OS: I have a problem with women. The one problem I have--if you want to turn that off I'll be very frank about it...(Interruption)

SD: I was asking you if there was any specific issues that you...(unintelligible)

OS; Well, one issue that I would like our membership to consider, in some of our bargaining units, is the Maternity Protection Clause, which states that when you're on maternity leave under the Unemployment Insurance Standards, that when you return to work, in six months, you get paid the difference between UIC and your regular pay. But, at this point, I've not been successful in getting that proposal ratified by the membership concerned. Does that help?

SD: Yes, that definitely helps. What do you think would be necessary to organize the large numbers of unorganized women office workers? That's certainly been a problem and your union has made important inroads there, but, what kinds of things do you think would...just looking back, over the years you've been active in this position, and thinking about...

OS: Well, as a member of the organizing committee, and a member of the unemployed committee of the Vancouver Labour Council, and as a member of the technological change committee of the B.C. Fed, I think all unions have tried to impress upon working people the need for collective

P.W. bargaining, but, we can't seem to get our cause highlighted in the newspapers, like, perhaps, picket lines, and other things they associate unions with. And we still have this fear--a fear of forming a union, the fear of being fired--to contend with. So I believe it's something that, through education, I've been trying, and my pet resolution is to teach trade unionism, have a course in the curriculum for the school children, which sets out the role of the labour movement in our history. In the curriculum, we're lucky if we have one or two paragraphs about unions, and I think it should be taught in the school and ^{as} part of the curriculum.

SD: Have you seen a change in attitudes towards unions from the fifties, sixties, and seventies to now?

P.W. OS: Not really. The struggle's the same today as it was in my time. I think the big struggle was probably prior to my time.

SD: What relationship do you see between political parties like the CCF and the trade union movement? What's been your involvement in trying to work in both areas?

P.W. OS: Well, when I was younger, I spent a lot of time at the R??? Hall, in the NDP, on the executive board of the NDP, and I think it's really nice to know your MP's and know your MLA's, know the mayor and all these people on a first name basis. It became very involved when you had Labour Council--I've been in Labour Council since 1963. I was the first woman ever elected to the Labour Council, and have continued there now, like, as second vice-president, but starting, all those years in the Labour Council...I've lost my train of thought.

SD: You were talking about the relationship between political involvement and trade unionism involvement, and you were saying that...

OS: I thoroughly believe that what the Canadian Labour Congress has attempted to do, and the B.C. Fed has attempted to do, and the Labour Councils have attempted to do, is keep a close liason with our NDP, or with our political party. And, I was all in favour of the merger and of the founding convention, and of Labour's support in the B.C. Fed's resolution that we support the NDP. But, in us having a hundred and sixty-four bargaining units, and some of our bargaining units don't know each other--we cover B.C., Alberta and the Yukon, so we can't have a monthly membership meeting per se, because all of the members couldn't attend, and so it's very, very difficult to, number one, make trade unionists out of membership, let alone get them involved with political action. So the political action part, other than our directives from the B.C. Fed, has...we've all insisted that it be on

a personal basis, rather than ~~to~~ under the guise of the union.

SD: Just to wind up, I wonder if you could tell us a bit about the personal impact for ^{you} in your life, of being active in the union movement?

What its given you--what some of the, maybe, negative parts of it might have been?

OS: There's not any negative parts because I really don't know anything else. I mean, when I worked in the bank, I was already a member of the union. I was a member of the Theatre Employees Union, and went to my union meeting on Sunday, ^{and} went to work in a non-union bank in the daytime. So, I have been a member of a union all my natural life. I don't know the negative parts. I don't know anything about the negative parts, other than the parts I have experienced with people who come in and try to form a union, and have had unfair labour practises pulled on them. As far as I'm concerned, there isn't anything negative about having to belong, or being a member, of a union. So, I have been very fortunate indeed, to--all my natural life--to belong to a union.

SD: What kind of skills have you developed or have you brought to the kind of work that you've done?

OS: Everything secretarial. But I don't...I haven't--I would say mostly bookkeeper, running all the business machines, bookkeeping, typing. But, mostly, I think mostly, most of my time is spent on the phone with members, looking after their grievances, taking their concerns, talking to them. And organizing, doing organizing campaigns. Its like babysitting-- you know, they phone in and ^{they} have problems and they don't know what to say next. So most of it is just, comes naturally.

SD: I guess, sort of troubleshooting?

OS: Yes.

SD: What about public speaking? Have you learned, or did you start out as a public speaker?

OS: I took all of the courses in public speaking, and...Vancouver Labour Council, as Chairman of the Credentials Committee, you have to get up at the mike and speak every meeting. So, the first meeting I went to at the Fed, I had a resolution to speak on about Labour Unions and the Co-operative movement, and of course, I was much younger, and there was only about four women at the whole convention, and, the first thing, I got up at the mike and I was nervous but I had spent a lot of time preparing my speech, and, the donkeys--the men--you know, its usually your name and local union number--so, I started out really good, and this chap yells, "Name and phone number! Phone Number!" ^{well} You know, when you're new and young

Kellie
Skip

P.W.

and your first at a big convention getting up at the mike, ^{the} first thing, you know, it makes you lose your train of thought. But anyway, I handled it and finished my talk. But, it's not easy. It's not like the women today. The one thing they have managed is the ability to --with the sort of training and all that--the ability to get up at the mike and speak. And, there is a difference now between ~~that~~ B.C. Fed meeting where there were four women there, and today, where women are definitely in the forefront, and at the mikes. That is one big change in the [^]Labour Movement.

SD: Is there anything you'd like to say to summarize, cause our time's pretty well up.

OS: No, I just appreciate meeting with you, and seeing you after all these years. We've tried to get together several times, and either Sara was busy or I didn't have time, and we put each other off.