

This is Randy Brooks, I'm interviewing Esther Stohl, and today's date is February 10, 1992

Could you tell me about your background and how you began working for the Federation?

I was born in 1919 in Olympia, WA. That makes me so old I can't subtract and get the correct age anymore! I went to school in Olympia. I took a business course and then I went to work for Georgia Pacific Plywood, it was at the old Washington Veneer Plant. I was the secretary and we got into kind of a labor dispute. When Georgia Pacific took over they were from the south and they weren't too friendly to labor relations. I was named the spokesperson for the whole 50 some odd employees. Georgia Pacific promised things and didn't keep their promise, so I got disgusted and started looking for another job. I had heard about Labor before, but that was really something. It was kind of a scary beginning to working there, but I decided I lived through it everyday, so I could try another day. I have never regretted that I went to work for the Federation. It was a good job working with people and that was the part I liked the best. Finally, towards 1960 we got Unemployment Compensation as a benefit for our members. That was got in the Special Session of that year. Norm had typed up a letter to Governor Langlie. He had me deliver it to Governor Langlie's mansion after 5:00 one night. The special session was going to take place on like the

next day. I went to the back door, and knocked on the door. The maid opened the door, and a BIG dog came out and bit me on the leg. So I'll never forget when we got Unemployment Compensation benefits. There was almost a complete turnover in those days, back in the '50's and before, everytime the Governorship changed parties. And it was expected. All the Safety Inspectors in Labor and Industries, the janitors in the Capital Building and Grounds. They didn't do that so much with the mental health people because they couldn't get anyone else to do the work. The mental health people were pretty well stabilized, but most of state government wasn't so lucky. Every year we would type up a new civil service bill. I got so I could almost type it from memory in my sleep. In those days, before computers, I used actual Legislative Bill paper to actually type the bill that was dropped into the hopper of the Legislature. We all were tired of doing that and not getting anyplace. The legislators didn't want to give up political patronage, that was a big, hard thing, so we had to use the Initiative to get Civil Service enacted.

What was your role in the Civil Service Initiative Drive?

One of the best things we did was have the policy committees, such as public assistance, highways, because case workers and truck drivers who patrolled the highways didn't have the same purposes or needs. So if they could all get together and talk in their own vein and needs it was better. That was a real good

thing. We found out that it wasn't too smart of an idea to have the boss belong to the Union and sit in the same meeting with the employees that he supervised. This was because they were scared, they didn't want to speak out freely for fear of retaliation. So we had supervisory groups as well. They need representation, too.

I want you to know something. Norm was my best friend from the day I met him and still is my very best friend. We have been through an awful lot together and I think very, very highly of him. Norm had an awful lot of productivity left in him after the Civil Service Victory. I think it was '79 when I retired. We retired together at the same time for us. When we retired from the Federation of State Employees, we didn't stop. We quit them and went to work for the International AFSCME. They established a legislative office and Norm was it. Then I went with Norm working for the AFSCME office, then Norm got out of that and Bob Meyer came from Minnesota to staff it. I stayed on there for five or six more years. Norm worked with the Retired Public Employees Council that was started in like 1972, I think. That was because we needed to have someone speak for those who couldn't speak for themselves at that time, mainly senior citizens. There wasn't as much developmentally disabled and so forth, they still hadn't found leadership to advocate for them so much but the seniors were all talking. The teachers sat on one side of the Legislature, and the retired police over in another corner, the retired state

employees in another. Norm saw the need for a unified group that would gather all these groups together to present a unified front to the Legislators. Norm also saw the need way back if you quit state employment you could withdraw your money from the retirement system. Then after the ex-employee got the money it quite often would get spent and no retirement check would be forthcoming. So Norm got the rules changed to say that an employee couldn't withdraw his contributions to ensure that there would be something there when you needed it. I believe teachers can still withdraw their retirement funds but that isn't very good because the money is being held for a specific purpose. It took a big struggle to get health care for state employees. Health care after you retire you could keep in the group, that's kind of a subsidy from the state, really because if the retiree's weren't in the system their health care would be quite expensive. It isn't that expensive to pay the insurance premiums when you go onto medicare. But it, medical coverage extension for senior retirees, is a big help.

Do you remember Neville Crippen?

He was the president when they tried to "oust" Norm in the early '50's. Frank Muscott was the President and there was a difference in philosophy and thinking. Frank was the elected president and my goodness, they did everything, they meaning the officers at the time, I can't remember all of them. They had

keys to the office, they would come in and read all the correspondence and if they didn't like it there were charges and counter-charges made. I took the minutes of the meetings from the time I went to work for the Union. At one of the meetings in Seattle, I can remember they said; "Is there anyone here who isn't a member of the Union, please leave the room." I raised my hand and so I was ordered to leave the room. Norm said; "If she goes, I go." He ended up not going. The confrontation was a matter of philosophy. Norm was popular, and knew his way around, he had worked in the Federal Government, had worked for Thor Tollefson, Congressman Tollefson. So he knew that Legislature. He was a legislative liaison for Governor Langlie and so he was well known on "the Hill" to Legislators. If we didn't know something, we never said or tried to bluff our way through. If we didn't know it, we found out.

So when it came up with the Muscotte guy, what was the situation?

They were trying to "oust" Norm. They didn't like him, they didn't want him to continue with what he was doing. The Board was called, Neville Crippen came home from a hunting or fishing trip from Canada on one meeting. They never dared meet, would never have a Board Meeting until, well we controlled when the Board met, but we would count the votes and if we didn't have enough to defeat the dissolution, we called somebody to come in that would vote in support. We would call a Board member and

say; "You have to come," even if they were sick with a broken leg to put their leg in a cast and hobble down to the meeting. It was pretty tough. Out of some of that came the other association, The WPEA, or Washington Public Employees Association. The WPEA was formed from disgruntled people who didn't really know all that had happened, honestly. I still am friends with a number of them who are still living. They didn't have the finesse, the knowledge, the ability to get the job done. So they decided to go their own way and that's the American Way.

We started the Credit Union, the Washington State Employees Credit Union, that now is a huge banking organization. We started that with a few people throwing in \$5.00. I think Pat Ett was the first president. The credit union was put together in one meeting. They gathered \$100.00 and you could loan four people \$20.00 apiece and they pay back \$2.00 per week and you've got some more money and you can loan it out again. It grew like crazy. I do all my business there. Maybe I could do two cents better in interest somewhere else, but look at what we're doing to help each other as state employees. I don't know that I could do better, I've never checked into it. I wouldn't think of looking, I have a loyalty for what they have been able to do for thousands of people. It is worth it to me. The credit union was started somewhere between the late '50's and the early '60's.

George Masten started in 1959 as a field representative. We just had a couple of guys going covering Western Washington and Eastern Washington. Bob Cook who I still correspond with all the time, he was the Eastern Washington representative. He ran all over Eastern Washington, that is a pretty good sized area, this is a little bit smaller but there are more people involved over here on the Western side of the State. We got another one for the Northern Part of the State, Bob Henry, I don't remember the date when they all came to work, but we just kept growing and growing.

I stayed with Norm; there used to be resentment that no woman was going to tell a man how to do business or how to work. There was some of that in our office. They'd say; "You can't tell me what to do," and I'd try not to but sometimes I would have to. Quite frequently there would be things that would happen. The thing that I came across was when Norm would say; "Tell the Field Representatives to do something." So as carefully as I could couch it, there was often resentment, "Who are you to tell me what to do," and I was careful to advise them to deal with the boss, not me, since it was something that he had asked me to get them to do. We worked that out, but it took a little working to do it. Those feelings of resentment were really strongly imbedded. When we started working on equal pay for equal work that was a toughy too. When we got big enough to where there was professional staff and clerical staff, that wasn't too good

either. We had some problems and we combatted that by having monthly potlucks in the office and everybody would bring something or chip in some money to buy something to share. This was just so we could all sit down and talk together for an hour. We were progressing, there had to be a way that we could all work together as equals, irregardless of our job title. I like our Union, The Washington Federation of State Employees because it was the same from the Janitor to the Director. It didn't matter who you were, you might belong to different locals, in Tacoma there was one at Public Assistance, at Employment Security and there was another at Western State Hospital. We weren't divided because we were a Clerk 1 or a Supervisor 2, that didn't exist.

I had to set my foot down several times, but was helped by the fact that I always was the oldest one. I'm even a couple of years older than Norm. So that I think helped. I knew the Union from stem to stern. There wasn't anything that had been done that I hadn't done. That helped as well. I loved the job and enjoyed working with people. I never wanted to do any other job in the Union. I wanted to be there because you had your finger on everything. One area representative doesn't understand another area representative's problems and confusions, nor do they know the legislative part or the administrative part. I had two little sons and didn't want to travel, so I was more than happy to stay put. Norm was great to work for as well. It was exciting and so there was never any thought to go out into the

field. I thought I had a job that was ten times better than anyone else's job. The Area Representative's job was hard. My job many times went beyond the eight to five normal job. During the legislative sessions you worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day, or whatever it took to meet the need. We were active in a lot of political campaigns and we worked for our friends in the Legislature who voted for us after we got through, because you didn't monkey during your working hours as you don't have all one side or the other. You might get 5,000 copies of a letter, fold them, stuff them and drag them up to the post office at 10:30 to 11:30 at night. The job didn't end at 5:00, but it was exciting to be in the political arena, too.

Do you think your work was more valuable than money to those Legislators that supported the Union?

Yes, we didn't have the money to give support, but we could donate our labor. We were highly successful in our own efforts sometimes perhaps due to Norm's wisdom of who was going to make it or the fact that we were organized. There weren't too many organized groups back then. They weren't as sophisticated, that came later. It then became a big item to be sharp politically. Just like way back there weren't all the personnel in the Department of Personnel. Then gradually it built up until there became experts and with grievances we at first just went in and sat down and talked to the bosses. Pretty soon you had a battery

of personnel analysts and so forth, it became a complicated procedure. About that time we said the less you put on your grievance form the better off you are. You don't have to defend what you don't put down, just state your grievance. I don't think that every state employee is right all the time, some we didn't win, some we told the employee they were wrong, they had to change their ways. Every area representative came from different areas of expertise. Most of them learned from experience. Gary Moore, the current Executive Director is a great guy that learned from experience. We just grew up together in the Union and that is part of the success.

Can you tell me how long it was before there was another woman on the staff of the Union?

Well, there was another clerical in the late '50's. I am sure that Elsie Schrader was the first female hired to be a field representative.

Could you imagine what the Union would have been like if there had been a succession of Esther Stohl's instead of you staying put?

Yes, I'm sure it would have been different. It is difficult when you change leadership direction. Everybody has their own way to do things and their own way to encourage. I'm an eternal

optimist, I'll be till the day I die. So I look on it as though my cup is half full, rather than half empty. You can engender that into a group of people. You can control a meeting by the proper questions at the proper time. You can control, if you want to use that word, the attitude in an office by how you feel today. I was always upbeat, ready to go to work today. You can set the mood. But if you have someone new there all the time they're feeling lost. They didn't have too easy of a time after I left for a while. It was because it was someone new telling a bunch of people who were used to doing things one way and that person couldn't say; "Hey, look, I know how difficult this is, because I've done it too." When you come in new there are differences that change the whole operation.

What could be done differently now?

They have an awful lot different situation than we did. We didn't have anything, state employees didn't have anything when we began. Now state employees have an awful lot and so what do they have to strive for? There's only wages and protect what they have already achieved, like insurance and medical. You've got good vacation, good sick leave, unemployment compensation, Labor and Industries coverage and Social Security benefits. These items were achieved in the '50's and '60's. Our agenda just ran the gamut of these items. Everything was up for grabs. I feel sorry for the current Union because there is so little

left to do. I feel that Collective Bargaining would be great. I think they should have to Collectively Bargain. That is liable to do something to the Merit System and they need to watch it. If they can collectively bargain in a big enough chunk, fine. But if you're going to have 10,000 collective bargaining units you are in trouble. There's got to be some standard, consider how much it would cost the state to do that. Then you can do some extras on the top of it, but to collectively bargain for everything would be too costly. I as a taxpayer would resent that.

Can you think up anyone that I haven't talked about that was really important to the Union?

They had another president in there, but he is dead. His name was Jim Cole. He died, he came after Neville Crippen but before Howard Jorgenson. He died several years ago. His wife, Mildred Cole, was real active in the Retired Public Employees Council. She is no longer active in it either, for health reasons. Many of the others I could name are no longer living. Don Hall was the Treasurer for many years. He was the guardian of the union, believe me. He was a real, real sincere worker. He isn't here any more, he was living in Seattle. I didn't hear from him this year. They lived up on Camano Island. I don't know, I would think that he would still be a member of the Retired Public Employees Union. You might talk to some of the AFSCME people,

they are back east, Joe Ames, Jerry Wurf, Jerry Wurf's dead, they kind of changed it, the International AFSCME and Norm was in on that. And Arnold Zander was an important figure from the International AFSCME. He was in and then the first time I saw Joe Ames and Jerry Wurf was at a convention of ours in Spokane. They stood at the back of the room and they were big, burly and they had dark suits and white shirts, black ties and I thought, "Oh my god we're being invaded by the mafia." That was my first impression, I said to Norm; "Who are they?" He told me who they were and they became real good friends, but they surprised me. I can remember a near riot that Norm stopped at Western State Hospital. In the good old days of Dr. Harris, he had pushed them a little bit too far, and so Norm and I went up there. I had never seen a mob before. People get mesmerized and they were saying; "Go get him, Go get him." They were swaying back and forth, and I said to Norm; "How do we get out of here?" Norm said; "Sit still, everything will be alright." And all at once he clapped his hands and said; "That's enough of that." Everybody kind of jumped and shook and slowed down. But they had real problems and they needed help. That was another time when you had to make them think, they thought they were being ill treated but didn't have an answer. They didn't have a solution. You need to think out your solution, ask what you don't like, figure out what you want and how to get it. So I can remember walking up with a couple of the irate ones to the Legislature, talking in the sunshine and made up this bill. They got big

raises that we didn't get. Norm should be able to tell us when that happened. I think it was probably in the '60's at least. The issue was not as much over hours as it was over workload and Dr. Harris. Norm said that the employees there were just the same as everyone else but were being treated like "blobs." That wasn't right nor was it very kind to those workers. Eastern State has had a riot and Eastern had the "snake-pit" which was really something. You had a building, a brick building, and the poor souls who were still living that were completely out of it were kept there bare naked and food was shoved through holes in the wall. They turned the hoses on them every once in a while. It was awful. The staff rotated through to serve these people, but that was an awful thing to work in. To have to treat human beings like that... I have still got some little baskets and carts and wagons made by people at Lakeland Village. It might have taken them ten years to make it. I wouldn't part with them for any amount of money. I don't know who it was but they were given to me as gifts by employees over there. I was at Northern State a couple of times but not too much. I admired patients and I'll never forget it at Rainier one time we were there for somebody's birthday and after the noon meal they had cake and they had a candle on the cake. The attendants came and sang happy birthday. They told me that they took turns making cakes for somebody's birthday and they made big sheet cakes from home. This was because families never came to see those kids. They weren't kids, some of them were pretty elderly but that impressed

me. That's why now I work as an ombudsman in a nursing home. I don't want to someday be in a nursing home where no one cares or even comes to see me.

Sounds like they (the workers) had commitment back then.

They sure did. Way back, and their wages were horrible. When we started comparing wages and all you'd get your wage survey. You'd have a laundry worker, and a laundry worker outside doesn't make anything, so the poor laundry workers here to compare with them looked as though they had fair wages. So the Union said they are working with patients. It was the same with food service. Food service on the outside had terrible wages. These people that were working for the state were working with mentally ill or physically handicapped patients. We had to work all sorts of little devices to get acknowledgement of the special conditions that those in the Union had to endure on the job that gave jobs some degree of equity to what they were worth. We said we wanted to be compared with the outside. So when we realized how poorly the outside workers were paid it became apparent there was no justice in our qualification for class of workers.

So you found out that not only were your workers poorly paid, but those in the private sector doing the same jobs were just as poor?

Oh, the private sector's workers were horribly paid. But you can't solve their problems, our focus was on state employees. You had more problems than you could solve yourself. So you'd just feel real sorry and try to work around it as best you could. We have actually come a long, long way when you stop to think about it. There are areas where we need caseload management better, we need more help in the Institutions, the Developmentally Disabled, now there's a big tug going on there on whether they should be institutionalized or not. No one wants to be in an Institution, they want to be community-based.

Do you feel any sense of complacency "that now we have arrived" and yet things aren't, in 1981 for instance they did away with a lot of the Civil Service Protections and they've increased the workloads all state employees are required to shoulder?

I think they should make a study of what is needed. Shinpoch tried to do a reform over at DSHS. He never got very far before all kinds of darkness descended on him. I think we need to see how things should be run, if given budget realities, do we need all of the people telling those down below what to do. Or can we do away with a few mid-management types. There is such a paper-tangle in the mid-management of state government. It's awful. I think somebody should have the guts to start in. I bet there will be somebody that will do that. There will be. I watched DSHS be put together and it was disgusting to me. Theoretically

it was to make it easier for people to get service. That isn't what happened. One thing I can remember, there was a personnel officer for every one of the Departments in the Agencies that were put into DSHS. The Institutions being the largest Department at the time outside it before it was conglomerated, that Personnel Officer became the head one, four salary ranges increased, each one of them were bumped up with two salary range increases to take a section. Now, they had more people but they really didn't have more work because there was somebody down there keeping track of hours. They needed more people down here to do the work than they needed to give increases up at the top where their job didn't change. So to me, we need to make a study and see. Now private business would go broke if they were that top-heavy. This is why I like a little bit of collective bargaining and I think maybe they could do a little bit of doing workload studies. I don't think there is as much need to get rid of state employees as there is to reassign their duties. I'm not willing to say that there are too many state employees. I don't know why the Union doesn't, it would be hard to get the ball rolling. The only way to get change is to make change. You're not going to do it by waiting; take a step. If we make a mistake, we correct it. Other than keep on making the same mistake let's see if we can find the right way. The law of averages is going to make it be right. Not all of it, but we can correct it. People are beginning to realize that you'd better change the system of state government. If we don't we are going

to have to go the Initiative route and that isn't to me the best way to do business.

What would be the negative to an Initiative?

That the best way to get what is fair and just is to have open debate in the Legislature. You maybe make mistakes but you can correct them. They have thousands of bills every time and a bunch of them go through. So I think we should begin, but we can make corrections as we go. You can do it, attempts are made and the Union has to be ready. They should be the leaders, what's wrong with the Union reforming government? But you don't hear them talking that much about it. I don't doubt that it is hard enough to keep what you've got, but you are never going to get much more because it's costing so much.

Who's the most powerful lobbying group in the State?

Oh, big business. Boeing. The Teachers. Big Business, then small business, then teachers, then state employees, (AFSCME). In that order. Because teachers have kids. I've said several times this year that it's unfair to put grandma fighting grandchild for funding in these bills. That is what they, teachers, did. To me it is unfair for teachers to get a raise and the nursing home attendant to not get the same. To me it is unfair for the teachers to get a raise and that includes state

employees, too, with the rest of the people left out who are taking care of sick people and other vital services. I just can't buy that, those people pay taxes and so does everybody else.

So now since you've left state government you've went with? I know you're on the Health care initiative campaign.

I was on the Long Term Care Commission, worked two hours, sat for hours on I-5 between here and the airport. I was a commission member but they had five task forces that covered various areas because you couldn't do it all. I went to as many of those as I could. I wanted to hear what the people said. Believe me, I cried a lot of tears listening to the stories that were told. It's horrible how many people are falling through the cracks. It really is. It is obviously broken and we've got to fix it. But that nice pretty report, I have a copy at home in my library, we might just as well have saved our energy. We did it on a shoe string. I never cost the state anything but airfare, we crossed the state to hear testimony, to Bellingham and back to Seattle. I never had the state pay my meals; I figured if I'm a volunteer, I'm a volunteer. I worked for a long time with the senior citizens lobby as a volunteer. I have been working here as well. Part of this is paid for the Retired Teachers Association. I get minimum wage, but I come and go when I please. If I want to go up on the Hill and lobby, sorry Charlie, I'll come back tomorrow

and finish this! In the years that have gone by the Death With Dignity was a big strong issue and I worked with Sharon Parks, Sister Sharon Parks. I was on one side and she was on the other, but in the lobby office because the Catholic Conference lobbied some of our bills, too, our desks were like you and I are sitting here now. I answered their phone, we did all sorts of things together. We'd walk over and testify, and I testified in favor of being able to withdraw hydration and nutrition and she would say, "No, we don't believe in this," and the Legislators used to laugh at us because we sat side by side, we were obviously good friends. We could discuss the issue without being nasty about it.

End of Interview