

I'm interviewing George Masten for the Community History Project at the University of Washington at Tacoma. Today's date is January 28, 1992.

George, would you like to tell me a little bit about yourself?

Well I was born in 1928 in Gage, Montana, spent my first three years in school, I think, in Montana in a little one-room school. Moved to Washington in 1937 with my folks. I lived in the little town of Rainier, about 17 miles out of Olympia. I graduated from high school in 1947 there. During high school during the war years, I worked for Weyerhaeuser Timber Company one summer and for the Northern Pacific Railroad weekends and during the summer, till the war ended. After graduation I worked for the Weyerhaeuser Timber Company as a logger setting chokers, second loading, first loading, and then worked for small gyppo⁴¹ logging outfits, a gyppo sawmill, worked for a period of time for Holland Furnace Company cleaning furnaces and as an installer / maintenance person. I went back to logging and worked in logging until January of 1952 when I was injured in a logging accident. In January of 1953, when I had recovered from those injuries I went to work for Department of Labor and Industries, I started out as what was known as an X-ray file clerk. That was the lowest paying job that you could get with the Department at that

⁴¹Gyppo is an old logging term for a one-horse, small time outfit.

time. I worked up to be a Disability Claims Adjudicator. I left Labor and Industries around the end of September of 1959. On October 1, 1959 I started out as what was known as an Area Representative, a Field Representative, for Council 28; what is more commonly known in the private sector as a Business Agent. I worked as a Representative for several years and then was promoted to Supervisor of Field Services supervising the field staff. I then was doing a lot of the day-to-day running of the Union in that role. In 1970, I left the Federation and worked from January 1st of 1970 to December 31, of 1970 with the International AFSCME⁴² as an Area Director covering Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and Alaska. Actually AFSCME only had members in Oregon, Washington, and Montana. I returned to the Federation on January 1, 1971 as Supervisor of Field Services and worked in that position until July 1st of 1974 when I was appointed acting Executive Director. The Executive Director at that time had terminated his employment, his name was Norm Schut. Around September 1, 1974 or October 1, 1974 I became the permanent Executive Director of the Federation. I served in that role until October 31 of 1985, at which time I retired. Since then I have worked as a consultant to the National Union for projects and then I spent most of my time for the last two and a half years going back and forth but mostly living in Alaska working for the AFSCME group up there, AFSCME had won representation rights for them.

⁴²American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees

So are they, (the Alaska Group) in their infancy, or are they more mature?

Well, it was actually an ongoing organization in existence that had bargaining rights for state employees. They were part of an independent association, the larger part being 8,500 members strong, what was called the General Governmental Unit of Employees (GGUE), which were the secretaries, correctional workers, everybody except maintenance; a small maintenance group, certain supervisors and confidential employees⁴³ are the only ones that aren't in this group. It is the biggest union in Alaska, actually, they broke away and affiliated with AFSCME, there was an election between AFSCME, the Laborers, SEIU, and the GGUE. There then was a run-off election between AFSCME and the Association, and AFSCME won. So AFSCME now represents the GGU Group. They have had contracts but I went up to help negotiate the first AFSCME contract, and to help them get it running as an organization.

So there was opposition similar to what we have in the State of Washington, the two opposing Unions, AFSCME and the Washington Public Employee Association (WPEA)?

Yes, the Association up there now has probably got 1,800 members and AFSCME has 8,500.

⁴³These are the positions that are appointed by the Governor

So AFSCME is the stronger of the two?

Yes,

I had been told that you were a logger in Toledo, Washington. Is that accurate?

No, I was a logger, but I worked in logging really from 1947 except for about a year, maybe a little better than a year when I worked for Holland Furnace Company. I went to work about five days before I finished high school in 1947 so that would probably been in May or June of 1947 until about the fifth of January of 1952, when I had the logging accident.

So you experienced both being a Labor and Industries claimant as an injured worker and also as a Claims Adjudicator?

Yes, as a client and then as an employee!

What can you remember about the early Union?

Well I joined the Union in 1953. And at that point in time it was relatively small state-wide, it was if my memory serves me right between 2,000 and 3,000 members total. There were quite a few locals but the Olympia local at that time, as I recall, didn't even have 300 members, there were maybe 200 or something

like that. Now I think the Olympia local alone has over 2,000 members. The dues, I was thinking about this the other day, the dues I paid at that time were \$3.00 per month; and \$1.00 of that was for a life insurance as I recall of \$1,000.00. The other thing I would say is, in those days of course, there was no state-wide civil service, there was no collective bargaining law, to the extent that exists now. There was some grant-in-aid money, the agencies that had federal grant-in-aid money like Social and Health Services, or then what was known as the Welfare Department, Health Department and the Institutions Department. Institutions, I believe, fell in that den, too. There was, had to have been some minimal civil service established for establishing registers. It was not anywhere near what it is now, and the rights of employees were very limited. In Labor and Industries where I went to work there was a mini-civil service, and that was by Governor's executive order. They had rules that a three-member committee adopted and if you were fired you had some appeal rights to that and so on. Or if you felt you got unfair treatment on a reclassification you could, you had some limited rights on that register.

How many people were on the Federation's staff at that time?

At the time I was just an active member, there was I think only an executive director and his secretary. There may have been an accounting person, but I don't think so, I think it was just the

executive director.

Was that under Norm Schut?

That was under Norm Schut. And the secretary was Esther Stohl. And she is still around.

Do you know how long she had been with the Federation?

I think Esther went to work there about the same time that Norm did. I'm not positive about the time, but I think she had only been there about two years when I joined the Union. I think she went to work for the Union in about 1951. I may be off a year on that one way or the other. Norm Schut is also around. There was a very small staff, with a very small office. It was in a building on the Southwest corner of Union and Capital Way in Olympia. Then we moved right around the corner on Union Avenue and in fact they fixed us what we thought was a great office in those days, and it had one office and a couple of just open rooms with dividers. Field staff worked out of the front reception area and there was a workroom in the back.

What kind of rapport did you have with the Governor's Office, or with the Legislature at that time?

Well that varied. In the early years it was pretty good rapport

with the Governor's Office. Norm Schut had been on Governor Langlie's staff and he had a relationship with the Governor and with some of the political appointee's and so on, including Legislators.

Was that a strong help at the start?

Well certainly it was a help. It opened doors that wouldn't have been open for another Union. It helped with that kind of contacts.

Was the Union kind of radical, or was it more conservative?

I would say it was not a radical union. It had a lot of major issues, but in those days, things were so bad for state employees that small gains were very appreciated. I remember the first pay raise I remember getting was \$15.00. I thought it was, I mean we all were in seventh heaven. I think I was making about \$150.00 per month. I think the next raise I got was a \$6.00 per month raise. Talking in those terms though, any movement at all in salary was greatly appreciated and felt good about.

So there wasn't much radicalism; no socialism, like the Cannery Workers Union?

No, not what I would call radicalism. You did not have a boss

that would act the way that private sector bosses were acting in those days. And in that kind of environment, because a lot of them were political appointees, they owed their job to somebody, even the lower ones. They wanted something better, but I know when I was at Labor and Industries, most of the people that had held any job with status had come in with Langlie. They came in with that term. Now they frankly had been there before that when Republicans had been in power and they had just come in and wiped everybody out and brought in their people.

And then the others would come back in four years with the next Governor?

At the end of Langlie's eight years, just about a year before his term was up we had finally caught up and claims were current. I mean we had drawers and drawers, file cabinets that were full of claims that had never been processed, because during the first year after they brought in a new crew, it was all training and just handling crises. We had nearly complete turnover, with almost everyone wiped out. And it was expected. Now, when Democrat Albert Rosellini was elected in 1956, at the end of Langlie's term; there was some upheaval. I mean the top level of management left, it dropped down into some of the supervisory positions. The director, the assistants directors were gone, a lot of the supervisors were gone, too.

Like it is now when a Governor changes?

Well, they don't go as low now. Not anywhere near as low as it

went then. But Rosellini's people set out to move a lot more people out, but that time the Union had a lot of strength at L & I.

The Union had grown to about three or four thousand members by then, and was recognized as a political force and the Federation had become recognized as a legitimate Union. The Washington State Labor Council (WaStatLaborCo) was willing to battle for us, and so the line staff that were slated for firing, most of them were not fired. We saved most of them. So it was a different environment than we had eight years before.

Did you know Neville Crippen?

I knew Neville Crippen very well. I don't know how far Neville goes back with the Union, but there is information that would tell it. Yes, I knew him well. He was certainly a major player in the establishment of AFSCME as far as state employees were concerned. I know he was a member active even before Council 28, the Federation of State Employees, was chartered. He was a case worker, and at the time they were having employees go to court, and he was one of these employees, to establish that they really weren't county employees, they were state employees. They won that lawsuit, and that had a major impact on how those employees were treated from county-to-county because then they were treated all alike. He was involved in that, and he was the President of the Council for a number of years while I was on staff. I was a

local union officer for several years, I knew him through that. I was on the Council Executive Board at Conventions, and I served with him as an officer. I went to National Conventions when he was International Vice-President and I knew him in that role, so yes I knew Neville well.

Do you think he could be called " The Father of the Union " ?

Well, I would think if there was a rank and filer who was "the father", then it would be him.

I understand he has passed away. Is that correct?

Yes.

Is his wife still alive?

He had a wife and I cannot tell you where she is. I could probably find out, I may have to help you on that. Neville wrote up a little history of the Union, too, Mark Brown might be the one that would know where that is. Mark or Gladys Burbank might be the ones who would know about that. I think Mark did a story in the council paper that was drawn from that, or that Neville helped with.

Could you tell me about how the State Civil Service Law was

enacted?

The Federation had tried during several sessions of the Legislature to get the Legislature to pass the Civil Service Law. They had not succeeded and the Federation started to pursue an initiative to the people the year that the "Right to Work" people ran a right to work initiative. The Executive Board, led by Norm Schut, decided not to try to run the civil service initiative at the same time that Labor was under major attack by the Right to Work forces. So they did not file and decided to take one more crack at the Legislature, and frankly, took what money they had and donated it to fight against the Right to Work Initiative in 1958⁴⁴. In 1959 they tried to get another bill through the Legislature and did not succeed and so in '59 we went after the Initiative to the People. It was Initiative 207; commonly called the Civil Service Initiative. We went to membership at the Convention and got an increase in dues of twenty-five cents per member to finance the initiative and then we got our members working like crazy. Everybody that could worked to get signatures and we developed a good working relationship and partnership with the League of Women Voters who were interested in good government and they supported the Initiative. .

Sounds like the Midnight Judgeships of Olde!

⁴⁴This measure was an attempt to guarantee that certain percentages of work would be performed in Union shops. It threatened the pre-existing contracts that Labor had in place.

Yes, not many, but some of that did happen. The law went into effect. The law went into effect and that changed the whole tenure of political appointments. There was far less opportunity for political appointments after the law passed than there is today. I'm sure you're aware that each administration has went to the Legislature to get more positions exempted from civil service. The passage of the civil service law was certainly a major fight and a real accomplishment of the Union. It really set it apart, it achieved something.

Do you feel that the accomplishments of the Civil Service Law have been eroded since it's passage, particularly during the Spellman Administration?

Each Legislature and Administration has eroded it. Governors Ray,(1976-1980), Spellman,(1980-1984) and Gardner,(1984-1992) are each guilty of trying to strip that initiative. Certainly this was to take away a lot of the rights of employees and protections that were in place.

When you became leader, what did you feel needed doing? What was your agenda?

Well I had been involved so long it was not a case of some new agenda. One of the first things I strove to do was to bring stability to the organization financially. Ever since the

initiative had passed, we had grown and added staff and were trying to serve the members appropriately. We were always on the verge of not having enough money. In fact, we went through a two year period, I think, when we had three conventions where we had to go back and ask for more money. Even having done that, when I took over we were not in good, sound financial shape. I became the Director on the first of September, and we had a convention that year in October. We went to that convention and I was still not sure where we were at financially, and at the convention I advised in my report that we were not asking for an increase, and explained that the reason we were not was that we were not sure where we stood and we thought once we got a handle on it we would come back. I didn't want to keep coming back and once we understood where our financial situation was, what we needed to operate, then we would call a special convention and just deal with that issue. And so we did that, we finally got a handle on it and we went back and had a special convention and the delegates overwhelmingly passed the huge increase because they were frankly fed up with us continually having to come back. That gave a lot of stability to the organization then. Also along that same time, in fact, before I became the Executive Director, we had covered our financial crisis partly by establishing Union Shops. That helped to a degree but when you brought these, like when Institutions came in, we had to add staff because it almost, I think, doubled membership. It was at least a 40% increase in members in that huge Department. We had

to then staff it, so you gained membership, but you also picked up costs and we had done about all of that we could do by the time I became Executive Director. Then we just had to get more money. We later improved that stability by going to a percentage-based dues which then as raises came along the dues followed, with a cap. At that period in time we were able to get the salaries, and we had over half the membership at the max, and so it wasn't working anymore. So they made the cap float with whatever the average percent of the increase was. It had pretty good stability from then on.

Can you recall some of the early important decisions that you made?

I'm not sure I made any important decisions (laughs). Well certainly I think the decision to change the dues was an important decision to the organization. I think we also made a conscious decision to really aggressively beef up our political action program. As a result of that we probably were recognized by, and I think the Federation still is, as the Number One or Number Two political force in the State by the Legislature. We went from having a budget of \$10,000 to \$20,000 dollars for political action to having \$200,000 to \$300,000 for political action. That made a major difference in the effectiveness of the organization, because in state government, particularly in this one, I don't care if you have full collective bargaining, the

funding comes from the Legislature. A lot of the benefits of government are lost if the political apparatus shifts, so that was certainly an important decision. I would never say that I made that decision, but I was certainly a party to it, and I encouraged the Board. The organization is, and has a good mechanism for participation by the members who were elected officers or are all active state employees and a lot of those positions are made, confirmed and even thought of during those meetings.

Back in the late 1960's and early 1970's before Mark Brown and the others that help him now who did the lobbying?

Well in the early years, Norm Schut, as the Executive Director. He was the chief lobbyist certainly from the time he was hired until he left staff. Mark came to work the year that Norm left, and he worked with Mark in at least one session, and then when I took over I did a lot of the lobbying and delegated more and more to Mark as time went on, and Mark carried a big chunk of the load. But in the early days Norm Schut, the Executive Director took responsibility for lobbying.

During your time as leader, what do you remember as the best time that you had?

Best time I personally had, or? I guess the one thing that

really sticks out with me is the Comparable Worth issue. (This was the lawsuit that the Federation was pursuing against the State for sex/wage discrimination for female jobs paid at substantially less wages than male-dominated roles doing similar work). It was actually finalized after I retired, but I was the chief negotiator on it. After I retired, that certainly was one of the best. Some of the legislative sessions, such as the one in 1979, it was the year that we had a joint Speaker of the House was one of the best years that we ever had with conclusive results. That worked to our advantage due to utter chaos that resulted from the split House. It worked to our advantage when we had a Democratic majority in the Senate and we had one of our best sessions. I remember that very well. I guess the other thing was when we were able to negotiate actual contracts for the employees, in the early years, at the joint signing of contracts. Particularly at Institutions after Doctor Garrett Heyns was hired, we were able to sit down to full negotiations, and then he issued a document, I can't remember but I think they were called M.O.'s or something. He could change them at any time, but he didn't, he didn't change them unless he sat down and negotiated them again. He forced the agency to abide by those. It was a unilateral management document we couldn't enforce anyplace except in the good office of the Director. Getting into the mode of actually signed contracts that could be enforced through the arbitration of the Board, that certainly was a major achievement for the Union and for the members. Negotiating a number of those

contracts was a real joy for me.

What would you remember as the moment of crisis for the Union, when it could have "folded up"?

I don't remember that there was ever a time that I felt that it could have "folded up". There were just too many things that the employees needed and wanted for that to have happened. We went through two, one very bad, times during the legislative sessions. During these years we were on the verge of a statewide strike. I think those were very touchy and trying times. They happened in 1975 and then in 1976 was the second one. One year right after the other. The first time we were like, if 67 people would have voted yes that voted no, we would have been on the street. It was that close.

Would you have wanted to go on strike, or were you glad that it didn't happen?

No, well, I felt we had reached the point that we had too much money on the table to be out on the street. We had made substantial gains with the Legislature in upping the amount of money that was going to be appropriated for salaries. The fact that we were on the verge certainly had an impact. So at that point, I felt that we were too far along. I did not recommend to the membership that they not vote for a strike. I took the

position and I encouraged the rest of the staff that we were in a situation where if we went on strike those employees, the members, were putting their jobs on the line, we weren't. They had to make that decision. Frankly, there is no doubt in my mind that had I said "strike, I urge you to vote for a strike", we would have been on a strike. It was interesting after that vote failed, I had a number of calls at the office from members who said they were sure glad that didn't pass, and I said so you voted against it, and they said Oh, no, we voted for it George because we knew you wouldn't let it happen. When I explained to them, Look, if that had passed you would have been on the street, they said, Gosh, I'd never have voted for it if I'd have known that. We tried to make it clear to the members, that you're making the decision, it is your job. Frankly, if the Union was going to go on strike, it was probably the best time there was. We had an administration that frankly cooperated in every way as far as preparing for the strike. They accepted the philosophy that it could happen. We set up committees and met with every agency to set up contingency plans.

Do you think you were being "baited"?

No, I think we were just being dealt with by an administration that accepted that the strike was a possibility. They didn't argue that hard that we didn't have some legitimate rights to be out there. I think that same administration three years beyond

that would have taken a different position.

Was that the Evans Administration, or the Ray Administration?

That was the Evans Administration, the first time in 1975. I think that the second time around in 1976 the vote was not that close. You never can tell on those kinds of environments. I personally felt that while the vote was fairly good, that a lot of those people did not want to go on strike. They wanted to send a message, but they didn't want to go on strike. I encouraged the Board, and the way we set it up was if it carried, we went on strike. It wasn't a case they were voting to authorize the Board to call a strike, or the Executive Director to call a strike, but I didn't want a handful of people making that decision; I wanted the members to make that decision. It affected too many lives. I think a lot of those people voting thought, well, it really won't happen, but we have got to send a message. We had a substantial amount of money on the table and I felt it was too much to lose.

Did this reflect a general change of attitude between the Union and the Administration?

That had been coming on. I think that certainly didn't hurt our stature as an organization, a lobbying group, or as a legitimate union. In some respects it could have been argued that it would

have been good for the organization to have a strike. Back east, some of the AFSCME people will argue that unless you have a strike you are not legitimate. I don't buy that philosophy, I don't think that proves anything. Other than perhaps to validate our poverty. If the environment was ever good for a strike in state government, it was probably the best that I've seen it at that point in time. As I say, on balance, I still think the members probably made the right decision.

When the Union was started, sounds like it was a really small office, but as it went along, have you made an attempt to maintain integration, both male to female and also racially in the Federation staff?

Yes, originally when I first went on staff, it was a small staff. I went on staff there were three area representatives.

Originally, we divided it by Departments, and we finally divided the state in three geographic areas. Each one of us took a third of the state and serviced it. There was a substantial difference than what it is today. We spent a lot of time driving, it was nothing to put 30,000 miles a year on your car. So it was an all male staff, male Director, three Area Representatives who were male. We went from that to hiring another Area Representative, again a male. We hired someone to handle the Personnel Board activities and those types of things, again a male. We hired another Area Representative, again a male. Then I think shortly

after that, after I was Supervisor of Field Services, we hired our first female Area Representative, Elsie Schrader. I think that was about in 1971-1972. Then we hired an education person who was female. Then I hired a black person to be an education person, she only stayed with the organization for about a year. Then I hired one more female Area Representative, her name was Pat Sisco. We went from four people servicing the whole operation with two support staff to when I retired we had around twenty to twenty-five staff. By time I left, I believe we were about 50/50 in the male / female ratio. I think today they may be tipped a little more female than male. Getting minorities on staff, to bring that balance up, wasn't the easiest thing to do, but that has improved substantially.

Can you tell me a little bit about Elsie Schrader, since she is no longer with us? (Deceased)

Well Elsie was a Youth Counselor at Maple Lane School. She was active in the local union, and she had been moved up and promoted in the counselor series. She was very active in the local union and was active in the Institutions Policy Committee and was elected to the Executive Board as Vice President of the Council. She was hired on as a staffer, as an Area Representative, she was an excellent staff person, very aggressive, and very sensitive to Women's issues, gave us great leadership in that area. She won cases and reclasses that I frankly didn't think she would win.

Her tenacity and staying with it, so much of it she didn't win on the merits of the case, just on her tenacity to stay with it and just keep bird-dogging and sooner or later she would win. That is what counts. She also was active in the Committee for Women's Rights activity with the State Labor Council, and just was an excellent, aggressive member of the staff.

Thank you, George, I think we'll end it there.