

Thomas Brown
Laborers Local 177
Des Moines, Iowa

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Interviewer: Paul Kelso

IOWA LABOR HISTORY ORAL PROJECT
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DES MOINES, IOWA

Paul Kelso: I'm talking to Thomas J. Brown. What do they call you, they call you Tom?

Thomas Brown: Tom Brown, yeah.

K: And we're at 3831 36th Street in Des Moines, and it's May 4th, Friday. And Tom is a longtime member—fifty years?

B: Yeah, I've been fifty-three years in the union.

K: And the local is number 177 here in Des Moines. Tom, where was home? Where were you born?

B: Well, I was borned in England.

K: You were?

B: Yeah, in nineteen-six. And then I come to this country when I was three years old. We landed in Philadelphia and my dad got a job working in the mines in Cherry, Illinois. In fact, he was in the Cherry, Illinois mine disaster. He was trapped underground for ten nights and nine days.

K: Is that right?

B: There's only a few men come out.

K: I'm not familiar with this story at all.

B: Yeah, there's only a few men come out of the...over three hundred died in that mine disaster.

K: Is that right?

B: My dad was one of the lucky ones to come out.

K: About when was that Tom?

B: That was in about nineteen-nine. I'm not sure, but I think it is. I've got a whole book on it. But I think it was around nineteen-nine. We'd only been in this country a little while, I know, because the company didn't think when they opened—see they had the mine sealed down with concrete. So no air could get—that's the only way you could put the fire out—so no air could get down. They sealed both holes, concrete slab over 'em. It was just a tomb down there. But when they opened it up the first time after ten days, they opened it up to go down and look for—they found my dad in the one bunch of men. Then the fire broke out again so they had to get right out and they sealed her down again. Then they didn't open it up for quite awhile. Then they were all dead the next time they opened it up. But while my dad was down there, the company tried to settle up with my mother and get her to go back to the old country before they even opened up the mine, but she wouldn't do it, you know, she wanted to stay around. It's a good thing she did because they brought him out alive.

K: Fantastic! Gosh...

B: So then we come to Des Moines and worked in the mines here all his life. That's how I got started in the mines.

K: I understand there were a lot of Englishmen in this area that were in the mines.

B: Yeah, that's the reason my dad come over here. They wrote him and told him about it and that. My dad used to be in the coal business over in England and used to sell coal by the sack. You know, had a route, you know they go around and sell the coal by the sack over there in England. They didn't burn too much coal. So he come to this country and went into the mines, then he worked in the mines all his life, dad did. Until about 1924, that's when we both joined the labor union. In 1924, we both went in together. We worked together for about three years.

K: Let me ask you a couple things in there somewhere. Do you recall what your dad was making in those days? Did he ever tell you what his wages were in those early days?

B: No, he didn't tell me what it was then. When I went to work with him, his wages was eight dollars a day for eight hours. That was in about 1923 when I went to work with him. You just figured a dollar an hour, then, it was eight dollars a day. He was a company man in the mine, he wasn't a coal digger. He did company work, see, he was a cager. He was a man down below, putting the carts on the hoist...they hoist 'em up, you know, they take the empty off, put a load on, you know, fellow would trip a light.

K: So you started working then when you were about sixteen, seventeen years old?

B: Yeah, I started the hosiery mill when I was fourteen.

K: Is that right?

B: Yeah, I used to have to go to continuation school two half-days a week.

K: What is that now?

B: Well, that was a school. You know, you could quit school when you was fourteen, but you was required to go to continuation school two half-days a week. That's the only way you could quit school and go to work, see. You had to have at least eight hours of schooling a week. So, two days a week I had to go to a continuation school. It was down on 9th and Mulberry, down there in Des Moines. The old school is gone now. But then, Monday and Tuesday I'd go to continuation school and then right from school to work at the hosiery mill in the afternoon. Then the rest of the week, why, you know, work all day at the hosiery mill the other three and a half days. Some days I worked five and a half days a week.

K: Now you asked me before we started, you didn't know how you could help me with this. Well, this is where you can help me here. Here you are, you're fourteen years old, it's about nineteen twenty, right in there. And you are going to work in Rollins Hosiery Mill, huh?

B: Yeah.

K: All right, now this is how you can help me with this. I would like you to try to describe for me what it was like being a kid to work in a place like that.

B: Well, my first job to get out and you know, make a few dollars. See, there was ten of us in our family, and that extra money—cause I had a sister workin' in the hosiery mill, in fact they even paid her to bring me to work there. You know, if you brought anybody else to work there with ya, if you bring someone to work and they work, they'd give you so much a month as a little bonus for the first month or two while you was there. And then I forget how much they give you altogether, but anyway, you got a little bonus for bringing someone to work. Them days, it was hard to get workers, you know. My first job there was turning socks—they'd come to me wrong side out and I'd have to turn 'em right side out. That's all it was. They had a little stand there, you did it. You could do about three hundred dozen a day on 'em. So you know, turn 'em from wrong side out to right side out.

K: You mean, they had a little stand. What...

B: Yeah, they had a little stand, kind of a metal deal and you push 'em up through there and pull 'em down, and that'd turn 'em right side out see. It wasn't much of a machine, but heck, I enjoyed working the hosiery mill. I thought it was all right. I worked at turning the socks right side out there for awhile, and then I got promoted to a roust-about, where you did a little bit of everything. Picking up boxes from the box department—they used to make their own boxes at the hosiery mill, to ship their socks and that in. And they picked them up and take 'em and store 'em in down in the basement. Then when different departments needed the boxes, you'd take 'em to 'em and that.

K: Do you recall what your wages were when you went to work out there?

B: Golly, I can't think of what it was, but I know—I couldn't say for sure, but I know it wasn't over four or five dollars a week at that time. It wasn't very much. 'Cause I know my allotment was a dollar a week, that's what I got out of it. Well, that's what my mother'd give me.

K: You'd turn it over to your mom?

B: Yeah. She kept the money on that. I'd get a dollar back...

K: For yourself...

B: Yeah. That'd be my pay—one dollar.

K: Okay. So these people were making cotton socks. Were they working in silk?

B: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. There was silk hose then too. In fact, they had a lot of fancy socks. They used to call a clockwork socks, you know, and put arrows in them—men's silk socks and stuff like that. A lot of fancy work in them. In fact, you don't see it nowadays.

K: Umm-hmm.

B: Yeah, it was in silk though, yeah. They had boarding rooms and everything else, you know. Where you had to stretch the socks over these hot forms and they'd come to 'em kind of damp, and they'd stretch 'em over them hot forms. And then when they'd take 'em off, they'd fold 'em and put 'em right there... In other words, that was pressing 'em. But they called it a boarding room, see. That's where they pressed all the socks into shape and that.

K: Was this considered to be a pretty good job? To work at the hosiery plant?

B: Oh well, yeah. There was a lot of good jobs there. I never did get to the good job because to get to the good job you had to be a knitter. You had to get up there in that department—a knitter or one of the mechanics, or something like that. Like my wife, she was a looper. She made good money, loopin', 'cause...

K: What is a looper?

B: A looper is the one that sews...well, when they come to 'em, the toe of the socks open...

K: Yes.

B: ...and then they put all them eyes, and they thread that across the machine and that closes the toe up. Yeah. That was piecework and they made good money. The job I had wasn't piecework—that roustabout job—you just got so much a week and that's why...

K: You're just all-purpose.

B: Yeah, I was just a flunkie in them days, I was only sixteen years old. Just a roustabout.

K: There was no union in this...

B: No, no union involved at all, no.

K: How many folks were working in that place?

B: At that time, there was around three hundred people in the hosiery mill.

K: Were they mostly women?

B: Yeah, mostly women, umm-hmm. But there was a lot of men there, but most of 'em were women. I'd say two thirds of 'em was women. Yeah.

K: As I understand it, a woman could make a heck of a good salary in a place...

B: Yeah, yeah, yeah. The women in the loopin' department, and in the boarding room and that, and the finishing room, they all made good money, yeah. In fact, the women, I think were making better money then men. I know they was makin' more money than I was makin' anyway.

K: Yeah.

B: My wife was toppin' me. Making twice as much as I was makin'.

K: When did you get married?

B: Oh, we got married in 1924.

K: And you were still working at the hosiery mill at that time?

B: No, no. I'd just quit the hosiery mill, just quit the hosiery mill about six months before I got married. That's when I went in the coal mines with my dad.

K: Where were you in these coal mines?

B: Well, the first coal mine I worked in was way out here on Delaware Avenue, they called it. It's out here by the Polk County poor farm. It was a shaft mine, it was about three hundred foot deep. It was a mile and a half back into the first mortar part...that's the part where they pick up the coal and bring it out. That's where they have the mules pick it... the mules switch it all together, and then they put it on this parden, and then when they get twenty cars on there, why, a big gasoline engine goes in there—motor goes in there gets it and takes it out to where they cage it, where they put it on the cage and send it up. Them days, they used gasoline engines, it's against state law to use 'em now, because...

K: The fumes, I suppose.

B: Well, we used to have splittin' headaches everyday by ten o'clock. I know guys that used to eat a whole box of aspirin some day, and then stick their head in the water barrels and everything else. Then, we'd send in for help, and you know especially the days when the air was real bad...One time they bought a brand new motor, they brought this down. They used to have two little ones, and they thought that this big one would do away with the two little ones, and just have the one big one. I remember the first day that new motor took off, when it was let down on the bottom where we worked it was just clear as a bell, we had electric lights there. It was clear. When we had them other motors, when they used to leave, they used to put out so much smoke, you know and oily, the lights'd look kind of yellow, they'd just fog the lights up, like you was in a fog. But this new motor was just clear as a bell when it left, and we thought, oh my god, we've got it made now. You know, we thought that it was all over with. But by nine-thirty, ten o'clock that morning, we was falling over. See, that thing was puttin' out gas

fumes. It wasn't oil fumes, it was really gas, it was really getting active, stronger than the other stuff, see.

K: Did you fellows talk to 'em about this problem?

B: Oh well. You couldn't talk to 'em about it. You just accepted it when you went to work there. There wasn't nothing to talk about.

K: You weren't an organized mine?

B: Sure, we was organized. We was a union, sure. But there wasn't nothing to talk about, that was the conditions you worked in when you got your job. My dad worked as cager there all the time, see. He very seldom had to give it up, you know, like go on top for awhile. He was physically fit and he could stay at it pretty good, you know. But they'd have to give him help a lot of days. Send a man to help him pull on the car, so he wouldn't have to work so hard, see. Some guys—I've seen 'em send guys out to help us from the inside. When you send for help, that'd be guys that have to come from about a mile and a half back in the mine, to come out to help you. They'd send a timberman or somebody else out, you know somebody they could spare, to come out and give you a hand, ease your load, so you can stand it. I've seen some of them guys come out and only stay two hours and have to go on top. They just couldn't make it—the fumes. See down there you're right on the tail end of the air, see.

K: How were you paid there? Was this by the ton?

B: No, we were paid for the day. I remember, when I went there, my dad was getting \$8 a day, and I was gettin' \$4.59 a day. That was my startin' pay, \$4.59 a day. Then after I worked there for awhile, then they give me one raise before I got up to my eight dollars. I think the next time was around \$6.50, I got. Then my next jump was when I went to a different mine. That mine shut down, I forget what year it shut down, but we went from there up to Fred Norwick's coal mine, out on Park Avenue. That's out here by the cement plant. Then I got \$8 a day, like my dad got, then. Then wages started going up a little bit in the mine. How fast they went up, I don't remember, by then wages used to start goin' up then.

K: So, in the summers, though, you started working construction?

B: Yeah, 'bout around the first of April. We'd come out about the first of April every spring and go to construction work. I could always find a job.

K: When you went to construction, this time you joined a union—the Laborer's Local. Is that right?

B: Yeah.

K: Did they require you to serve any kind of apprenticeship?

B: No, no.

K: Not in the Laborer's?

B: No. We'd go around and find a job first.

K: Yes.

B: You'd have to find a job first, and then after you got a job then you'd go down and see about a union card, so you could go to work. In fact, the first job we was on, I think they come around and asked us to join. We was working at a schoolhouse, and we was working for just a little contractor, see. He didn't work very many men. I think my dad and I were the only one that worked for him. And we were doing this job and this business agent from the laborer's union come around and asked us to join. You know, the rest of the men on the job were union, so he come around and asked us to join, and we did. We joined up. From then on, we stayed union, and kept our dues up. When we'd go back to work in the wintertime in the mine, we'd pay our dues, you know, right through the winter.

K: Did you have any ideas about unions before you joined them?

B: No. I'd never given it a thought, no. In fact, when you're workin', never give a thought about union.

K: Was your father ever a union man when he was in England?

B: Well, that I don't know—whether they ever brought the union there or not. I don't think so because he had a coal route...

K: I see. He wasn't actually in the mines.

B: No, he wasn't actually in the mine over there. So, I don't know whether he ever belonged to the coal mine over there or not, the union.

K: Well, what I was thinking about Tom is if you didn't know anything about unions when you went into it, I was wondering if you had any previous prejudices in your mind about whether a union was good or bad, or a necessary evil, or what...

B: I always thought that you got better pay in the union, you know. And your conditions would be better and you'd get better pay too. It all worked out. I know we always looked for union jobs. Every year we got out, we'd go right back to our union work. Never did try to work on any job that wasn't union, because they were the best-paid jobs. It was good work, it was construction work and that's what we was looking for.

K: Do you recall what they paid?

B: I think, I worked so dang long for sixty-seven and a half cents an hour. I know I worked for that a long time. But I think that the cheapest I ever got was fifty-five cents an hour, I believe. Sixty-seven and a half cents, we worked a long time for that. I think that come to \$24.70 a week...or \$27.40 a week, something like that.

K: In those days, you were telling me before we turned the tape on, you didn't have modern construction equipment that you have now...

B: Oh, no.

K: Why don't you talk about that a little bit. What kind of equipment did you have?

B: Well, we didn't have much of any kind of equipment. In fact, when you'd break out concrete, you'd have a sledgehammer and a point. One guy'd hold the point and the other guy'd take the sledgehammer and drive that point to break out the concrete. It wasn't till later on the air guns come out, you know, where you take an air gun. And when they come out, we really thought we had it made then. Same way with diggin' a hole. There wasn't no back-hoes to dig the holes with. When you had to dig a hole, you dug it, and if the hole went very deep, you'd put scaffolds in the hole. One man'd throw it up to this scaffold and the next man on this scaffold that'd throw it over there and they'd work it up that way, see. Dig them holes down deep that way. Many holes I'd dig, you'd have to have two and three scaffolds in 'em, you know, to get the dirt out from the bottom. Then timber it as you went down, they'd have to put timber in the hole.

K: To keep it from caving in, right.

B: And there was no cranes to handle the timbers. Like them days, you used to use a lot of ten-by-tens and twelve-by-twelves and that, you know to shore up the banks and everything else when they had to timber the banks and stuff to keep from caving in. In them days you just have to get timber hooks, you know, two men, one on each side of the timber hookin'—maybe six men to a timber, see. Just put these timbers on and pick it up and carry it away. No, everything was done by hand in them days. There was no cranes around or nothing else to set things in place.

K: Well, did you have horses to help?

B: Well, they used to have horses to pull the cage up with, even. They used to use them on cages, to pull the cages up. They used to use slips. Yeah, they used to slip the dirt up into a hopper. Just pull it up into the hopper and then the wagons would pull underneath this hopper and then they'd load the wagons. The dirt'd just roll over there right down in the wagons. These wagons had bottoms on that would open and dump, see. And that's dump wagons, they'd just open up at the bottom and dump, pour right on off the dump. Yeah, they used sometimes three and four head of mule on some of them slips. Some of them big—I forget what they call them damn big things, they used to get that handle and pull down on 'em. That wasn't slips, it was something else. A slip's just got a

little handle on each side of it, you know. I forget what they used to call them big darn deals that carried the dirt—they'd sometime have four and five head of mule of one them pullin'.

K: A slip is kind of an oversized wheelbarrow, it didn't have wheels on it.

B: No, it just slid on the ground.

K: Yeah, it was about the size of a kitchen table, and you piled dirt on. It had handles on it.

B: Well, it had handles on it and then you control that—you'd pick it up to make the blade across the front. It's kind of curled up on the sides, see. And then it had kind of a back on it where it kind of curled up. Kind of a like a pocket for the dirt to go up in, see. It was sharp and you'd pick it up. You picked it up too much, hell, it's liable to throw you right over the top of it, you know. Hit something real hard, it'd throw you over the top. You have to be careful of that thing—you didn't dig in too deep.

K: When you use this device, you put behind a horse, like you were using a plow to move dirt with. Today, of course, they have the giant machines...

B: Oh, yeah.

K:...huge blades.

B: Blades and everything else, sure. Yeah.

K: I would guess that that was a long drawn out process to move a lot of dirt.

B: It was. In fact, I've seen 'em—I never worked on a job where they had one—but they used to have a self-loading machine that was pulled by the horses. But it took a lot of horses to pull it. Well, this thing would go along and the wagon would ride right along side it and the dirt would be conveyed right into the wagon, you know. But it would take a lot of horses to pull that. I never did work on a job where they had one, but I've seen 'em.

K: Now in these years, then...you married in 1924. Your wife was still at the hosiery mill. And she continued there for many years, didn't she?

B: Yeah.

K: Till it left town, I guess?

B: Yeah, she left the hosiery mill in about '34. And she went back to work there later at the hosiery mill. But she was gone from there from 1934 to about 1936. Then, she went back to work there. And I don't know how long she worked after she went back the second time. I forget what year she quit. She'd know, but I don't know.

K: How about the safety situation in the laborer's work. You were talking about the mines, some of the problems there.

B: Well, I think that the safety, when you're a laborer, is what you make it yourself. I've worked in labor, like I say, all my life. Over fifty years, and hell, I've never been hurt real bad. I've had things where I've run nails in my foot or something like that. I think safety is something you've got to kind of look out for yourself a little bit. Like if you build a scaffold, you've got to build it good. And when you tie it off, you got to tie it off good to something. I read in the paper the other day where a scaffold fell. I've seen down here on a building the other day, a scaffold blowed over. Well, I was telling my wife that night, they've got to put good mud cells under. You gotta get 'em down on the solid. You can't have sand or dirt under 'em or it's gonna wash out if you get a hard rain. And then you gotta be sure they're tied in good, and things like that. And your plank you walk on, you gotta be sure there's no knots in 'em and stuff like that. You've got to watch out for yourself. I know a lot of people on construction work that are gettin' hurt all the time. They're reckless.

K: Why do you look for knots in a plank?

B: Well, them knots, boy. Especially if it's out in the middle...

K: The board'll begin to crack on that?

B: Yeah, she'll break in that knot real easy. That takes a lot away from a board, see. Especially if that knots out in the middle of the plank, see. It'll break right in the knot pretty easy. That's a flaw in it.

K: I would never have thought of that. Do you recall hearing any stories about how the 177 got started, or how old a union it is?

B: No, I never heard much stories about it. I know there wasn't very many in the union when I first went in. They didn't have too many members at that time. How many they had, I don't know. There wasn't a whole lot of members at that time.

K: All right. Now you continued working in mines and at labor jobs then for...

B: Till 1936, and then I didn't go back in the mines no more. I stayed out.

K: What happened to your industry, then—in mines and labor jobs and so forth, when the crash came in 1929 Depression.

B: The job I was thinking about mostly was when I was working on the Iowa Des Moines National Bank. The company I was working for, Newman, they went in hand-receivers that year. Then they went bankruptcy on them hand receivers. I don't know, that was the worst times, I think because at that time Newman cut down to only two or three men. Laid off most of the men and that, but, I wasn't laid off too long. I don't I was laid off too long, so the Depression really never hurt us too much. We went all through the Depression, in fact, we raised two children during the Depression. A boy and girl. But the reason that the Depression didn't hurt us too bad—because we always both had a job. You had a job in them days, you was rich. I think if you had just a little bit of money comin' in you could make it in the Depression.

K: The hosiery mill didn't close down either then, during the Depression?

B: No, the hosiery mill didn't close down, no. My wife took time off to have two babies. That hurt us more than anything else at that time. In fact, I had to give up an automobile. It got so for awhile I couldn't afford a car. I had to ride the streetcar and that. I always had automobiles before that. The last car I bought then was in 1926, I think it

was. I bought it brand new. That was the last car I bought until 1932. That's the first time I bought a car after that. So I had to get along that many years without a car. 1932 was the first time. It was rough at times. We only paid eighteen dollars a month rent for the house we lived in, and it was a nice little house. Eighteen dollars a month rent. And our groceries, they were cheap. Hell, pork chops was only ten cents a pound. But a lot of people didn't even have a dime to buy 'em with. That's the problem see...

K: We had the tape machine off for just a minute. What was the story about the guy who went to buy liver?

B: (laughs) A guy went to buy a dime's worth of liver and the guy asked him, "What'd you bring to carry it in?" You get a hell of a lot of liver for dime in them days. Probably all you could carry home. And bananas...me and my wife we used to be pretty sharp buyers, my wife and I did. A lot of nights we'd go downtown—and you'd want to be there on about closing time for the stores. They'd have bananas that wouldn't hold over till Monday morning. They were a little over-ripe and Monday, they'd have to throw 'em out. You could buy 'em pretty much for a song, you know.

K: So you learned how to be at the right place at the right time?

B: Yeah. At that time, you learn to shop—we'd go down there, you'd get a whole sack for them bananas real cheap, see.

K: You learn how to scuffle and hustle.

B: That's right. You had to know how to shop and that.

K: The effect of the Depression years on the union—didn't construction come to a halt in town and weren't a lot of fellows out of work?

B: Yeah, there was a lot of people out of work. That's the reason I don't know too much about the other guys because I was always busy myself. I always seemed to have a job. But that time at building this vet's hospital over here, that was a big job going up at that time. That was right there in the Depression too, see and that took—they'd give a lot of people work.

K: But there were some guys lookin'...

B: Oh, there was a lot of people that was lookin' for work. Yeah, there wasn't no work to be had, as far as that goes.

K: Some fellows let their cards go 'cause they couldn't pay dues.

B: Yeah, oh yeah, they couldn't pay their dues, they'd have to let their cards go. But, if they could pick 'em up within six months, they could be reinstated, you know. Or, in them days, it wasn't no trouble to join over again either. You know, if you could find a job without the union, they'd give you a card. You'd ask for a card, and you'd get a card. Not like it is today. You put in your application today, and go down the hall and wait till they call you out from down the hall, union hall. In fact, they don't do much hiring out on the jobs anymore. You call the hall when you want them in, and they'll send them in to you. It's a little different than it was in them days. They got that hiring hall clause in there now, you know, the man's gotta be hired at the hall. It makes a difference. So now, you have to have a card before you're sent out. But, if a man comes out on the job and you want this particular man, and if he goes down to the union hall, and you call and specify—by calling and if there's so-and-so there, and if he's there, you'd like for them to send him out. You're going to give him a job. They gotta give him a card then.

K: Does the Laborer's Union make contracts with contractors, or was it just a matter of sending out so many men on a job? Some of the crafts, you know, had contracts with contractor associations. They negotiated contracts and set scales.

B: Well, they'd had a scale committee. When it come time to negotiate a new contract, the laborers would have a scale committee that would meet with the master builders. And then they would try to arrive at some figure that they could take back to the men that they thought the men would accept. But they didn't have the power to settle. They couldn't—like if the master builder did offer 'em a pretty good contract, they couldn't settle. They'd have to go back to the body with that offer, and it had to be put to a vote whether they accept or not. That's the only thing I know where they had a body of men meet with each other, with the master builders or contractors. The contractors didn't

meet with them, what they call the master builders meet with 'em—who was ever on that building committee.

K: All right. Mrs. Dorothy Brown has joined us. Now, you worked at the hosiery mill from 1922...

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

K: Up till when?

Dorothy Brown: 1935, when we went to Milwaukee.

K: Now, Tom and I have gotten up to about 1930 in our talks about the start of the Depression and so forth. At that time, there was still no union at Rollins. What happened at the mill when the Depression came on? Did it effect...were there lay-offs, or changes in wages?

Dorothy Brown: No, no. Only thing is when Roosevelt was trying to get in for President. A big guy got up on a box and he said if we voted for him that everybody'd be out of work and everything.

K: This was a company man who was telling you all this?

Dorothy Brown: Yes. I can't recall who it was. I never paid any attention to anybody. (laughs) But, we voted for him anyway, and he got in. And right away, our wages went way up.

K: Do you remember what your wages were?

Dorothy Brown: Twelve dollars a week before that.

K: And then they went up to?

Dorothy Brown: Well, that's when I first started there. I made twelve dollars a week.

K: In 1922?

Dorothy Brown: Mmm-hmm. And then I don't recall how they raised it. In fact, it was through piecework, and the better work we got, the more we made.

B: Back when I was working in the coal mine, I know at one time—that's when you was makin' more money than I was makin'. At that time, I was only makin' \$4.59 a day though, wasn't I?

Dorothy Brown: Yeah

B: But you was makin' more money than I was. So I think that time you were makin' six dollars a day or a little better. But that was good money then.

Dorothy Brown: Yes, uh-huh. Well, you never made above twenty-seven dollars a week till you started on the Banker's Life.

B: I think it was \$27.40, or something like that.

Dorothy Brown: At Banker's Life, and he was in the union too.

K: Now, let me see here. You say your wages went up after Roosevelt got in.

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

K: Was that because of that law with the NRA that said you had to put a minimum wage on it, like forty cents in forty hours?

Dorothy Brown: Yes, I think that was it, that started the minimum wage.

K: So, they raised your base rate, under your piecework.

Dorothy Brown: Uh-huh.

K: And it resulted in more money then. What were you doing in the place? What was your job?

Dorothy Brown: Well, when I started there, I was a looper. But then I went to Wisconsin, and when I came back I didn't work for awhile. But they called me and

wanted me to come in, and I went to working on the machines then. Knitting machines. What they did was close—put a foot on...

K: On a sock, or a stocking?

Dorothy Brown: Uh-huh.

B: But wasn't there two girls on there at the machine? One man and two girls?

Dorothy Brown: Yeah. We had these bars and you'd have to put the loops like I did in the looping department. I put loops, only there's a lot more of 'em. That was in the whole sock part. And then you put those bars in the machine and the machine'd run the foot onto that. And that's what I did when I come back from Milwaukee.

B: You was a knitter's helper. You put the sock on the bar, and the men'd put the bar on the machine. You was a knitter's helper. There's two women to every machine.

Dorothy Brown: (laughs) I had a crochet hook and if I had one that missed the thing, I'd take my crochet hook and I'd hook it up and make a good sock out of it.

K: After Roosevelt got in, was it at that time that the people in the plant started talking about getting together a union?

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

K: Did you know Harold Oglevie?

Dorothy Brown: I've heard the name.

K: I believe he was the first president of the local. So what was going on in the plant that made the people want to get a union? What did they want to change or correct?

Dorothy Brown: Well, we wanted higher wages. 'Cause the company people, were, well they was in the money, that's all. They were getting' it all, and the ones that was makin' them money then wasn't getting anything. They just didn't want to give up any of the gravy, they call it, I guess.

B: There was no seniority, or nothing like that.

Dorothy Brown: No, no. You just made what you wanted to work, how hard you wanted to work.

B: In other words, all we just cared about the union is just being organized and making more money. Organization, that's it to power.

K: But you had no seniority, job security, or no benefits, or anything to speak of, huh?

Dorothy Brown: No.

K: So what did the fellows do? You say they finally pulled out and went on strike against the company?

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

K: Fellows, I say. Heck, most of the people were women at the plant.

Dorothy Brown: Yes, well there never was more than a thousand worked there, but it got up that high. That was one of the best places in Des Moines for women to work.

K: So why did they go on strike?

Dorothy Brown: They wanted the union.

K: They wanted the company to recognize the union?

Dorothy Brown: Yes, they wanted better conditions, in other words.

K: So, the company wouldn't play and so they walked out and said, okay, we'll see what happens.

Dorothy Brown: Umm-hmm.

K: So eventually—then, this is when you went to Milwaukee, is that right?

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

K: And worked at the...

Dorothy Brown: Phoenix Hosiery.

K: Phoenix Hosiery.

Dorothy Brown: Oh, they were a big place.

K: And when you got back is when the union was in place—when you got back. They were organized at that time?

Dorothy Brown: Uh-huh.

K: Okay.

B: Was there a different company here then? Was it Rollins when you left and was it Muncingware when you come back?

Dorothy Brown: Well, Muncingware came in later on. That's when the real trouble began.

K: They were the ones that moved the big plant out of town, as I understand it.

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

K: Okay.

Dorothy Brown: Took 'em a long while though—I think it was '52, 1952, when they finally closed it out. And then they went in business out in West Des Moines, but I never did work there.

K: Yes, I got this story from Mrs. Sample and Mr. Branscomb about the moving of the plant down to Arkansas, I think it was. And a group of Des Moines businessmen bought Rollins. After Rollins moved, some people took over the factory and tried to

operate it—I forget the names, it's on the other tape. So, you worked at this place for twenty years?

Dorothy Brown: About thirty.

K: Thirty years?

Dorothy Brown: Uh-huh. From '22 till '52.

B: Outside of that one year you was down in Wisconsin.

Dorothy Brown: Yes. I was there, I'd say, two years.

B: And then you had had a couple years off to have two babies.

Dorothy Brown: Yes.

B: And that's all. And as soon as the babies were ¹⁹being enough to leave, she'd run right back to work. My mother took care of 'em.

Dorothy Brown: He wouldn't know it until I'd say, well, I'm going to work Monday. (laughs)

K: Well, do you remember when you got back, what the initiation fees or the dues were to the union were joined up?

Dorothy Brown: No, I don't. I just don't know much about it all, because I never was on any of the business deals.

K: Then you didn't take an active role in anything?

Dorothy Brown: No.

K: Okay.

Dorothy Brown: I just went along with the crowd.

K: Well, Tom was telling me about how difficult it could be in the Depression and days like that. Were there lay-offs at the plant? Did they have to cut down on their business at the Rollins plant?

Dorothy Brown: It don't seem like it.

K: Just kept rolling on?

Dorothy Brown: In fact, the hosiery was higher priced then than after the nylon come in. It was all silk you know.

K: Let me ask you two—When the Depression started, did you have children by this time?

Dorothy Brown: Yeah, right in the middle of the Depression we had two children.

K: So they were born during the Depression?

B: When was Marvin borned?

Dorothy Brown: 1929, and then Lila was born 1930.

K: So here you are, at this time in the world when everything's going to heck and you got two babies. Tell me how you got by...

Dorothy Brown: Why, we just sailed along. I think we even helped his brother out.

B: Lila and the first baby didn't even cost us nothing—Marvin. He was pretty near borned in the ambulance on the way to hospital. In fact, she didn't even have time to take her clothes off when we got to the hospital. It was born right now, before the doctor could even get there, see. But it was over at the Lutheran maternity hospital.

Dorothy Brown: Yeah, both of 'em were born there.

B: I think it was thirty-five dollars, wasn't it?

Dorothy Brown: I don't know.

B: Yeah, I think it was thirty-five dollars to have a baby born and that...

Dorothy Brown: Well, I didn't see a doctor, either, when Lila was born, until about a week before I went in the hospital. The intern was Marvin's, was there when Marvin was born. So, he was a doctoring for himself. And I met a girl downtown that I used to work with and she said that her doctor was, I forget his name... anyway, she says, "Why don't you go see him now?" She said he's doctoring for himself, and she told me where he was. So I went up to see him, and he said, "Why, you're pregnant again?" and I said, "I say so!" (laughs). About when I went in the hospital again, I didn't have any doctors for either one of 'em, so it didn't cost me very much.

K: But generally, you guys made out pretty well in the Depression.

Dorothy Brown: Yeah.

B: It wasn't too much hardship. I mean that we had a good home to live in and we had food to eat. But as far as transportation, we was deprived the privilege of having a car to drive around and things like that. But we was used to that too, because we did a lot of driving around when we had our car. 'Cause we used to have to get on the streetcar—I remember one prizefight we went to one night, and we went on the streetcar clear from West 56th and University to...

Dorothy Brown: To 48.

B: ...clear to the East side of the fairgrounds, and had to walk across that viaduct and everything else, just to hear a prizefight on the radio.

K: To hear it on the radio?

B: Yeah, to hear the prizefight on the radio. That's the time that Dempsey—and that's when he won the championship at the time.

K: You're talking about very early on.

Dorothy Brown: Yeah.

B: Yeah.

K: That was early '20s, I would guess.

Dorothy Brown: Yeah, just a little—what do you call them radios?

B: Yeah, this was when Marvin was born, because we took Marvin with us. At Kent radio—my dad had one.

Dorothy Brown: What he had was a little crystal set.

K: They were selling tickets to this?

Dorothy Brown: No, we went to his mother's. She had a big house on 6th and University. We had to walk to 48th to get on the streetcar. Then, we had to go to East 27th and walk across the 26th Street viaduct. And I had to nurse Marvin on the streetcar, 'cause when it come time for him to eat, he had to eat (laughs). In those days, they didn't have bottles. They didn't raise babies on bottles.

K: This was after you had to get rid of your car, then, huh?

B: Yeah. Then we'd have to go home after the fight, and I'd have to be up at 6 o'clock the next morning and go onto that same streetcar line again, so I could get down and catch my ride to work. It was a lot of hardship involved, by not having a car and stuff like that to get around on. But, as far as food and clothing and that, why, we got along pretty good during the Depression. It wasn't too much hardship on us outside of the automobile and that.

Dorothy Brown: Well, it's because we didn't go to things that cost a lot of money. We never did.

B: But we didn't have nothing modern either. No water.

Dorothy Brown: No water. That's a reason I wanted this place down here. I didn't want water. I wanted a well. We never got to use the well!

B: We didn't have no sewer or nothing like that.

Dorothy Brown: When we finally moved in, they had changed the ordinance and we had to have city water.

K: Let me ask you a few questions off my list here of things, just to prod your memory a little bit—things that my people are interested in for the purposes of this project. When you were working at the Rollins Hosiery Mill, were there very many Black people there, or Mexicans?

Dorothy Brown: Not a one.

K: Not a one?

Dorothy Brown: Not a one.

B: I don't remember I've ever seen one either, when I worked there. I don't remember of ever seein' one.

Dorothy Brown: Well, even till '52, I didn't know of any.

B: The coal mines—there was quite a few in the coal mines.

K: There were...well, yes of course, in southern Iowa. It was full of several communities there...

B: Right around here in Des Moines, there was lots of 'em.

K: I see. Brought up from the south by the railroad agents.

B: ...Coal mines. I counted a number of people, yeah.

K: Did the hosiery plant have any one type or group of people, like Swedish or Germans, that dominated the business?

Dorothy Brown: No.

K: Okay. Well, sometimes everybody in one part of a town will all work in the same place. I was just wondering about that.

Dorothy Brown: That type of work...you wouldn't have seen 'em, you couldn't have told the difference anyway. You had to keep your nose to the grindstone, in other words. You're just busy all the time.

K: In order to make any money, you had to really get after it, huh?

Dorothy Brown: Yeah. It was work that was tedious, you know. You couldn't take your eyes away from nothin'.

K: What was it about the lighting?

Dorothy Brown: Oh, that's what wrecked everybody's eyes. They put in that neon stuff. That's the worst stuff there is on eyes.

B: I wouldn't say it wrecked everybody's eyes, now, because...

Dorothy Brown: Well, when I was there, I had perfect eyesight, and then when I left there I had eyesight that—where I looked at one place for so long, for so many years, that I had funnel vision, or whatever you call it. Because now, I can read the smallest print there was without glasses. I need glasses only to watch television. That's the first time I got glasses, when I watched television.

B: I can remember when they always had them machines—before they put on the neons, like you say, where they just had a cord come down. Then the light was shaded with something like this, with just a light bulb over each machine. You know what I mean, it wasn't very well lit up. Them days, there was quite a few windows in the building too. They depended on daylight a lot in the daytime.

Dorothy Brown: Well, to this day, I don't like them neon lights, or whatever they're called.

K: I know the type that you're talking about—the overhead, those long...

Dorothy Brown: Umm-hmm.

K: You were saying, about Italians and Blacks and things in the coal mines...well, what about in the Laborer's Union?

B: Yeah, there was quite a few colored people in the labor union too.

K: Yeah, you were telling me of some fellows that were officers.

B: Yeah, just previous to Snider—Snider's a business agent now—just ahead a him, a colored man was a business agent, Marion Barker. He was business agent then. That's when Roy got his job. And Burt Cooper, he was secretary—that's the guy down in the windows that you was talkin' about. Well, Jackson, he was a colored fellow. He was a secretary of the local union. Yeah, they were in there together, Jackson and Marion Barker.

K: I understand that Mr. Barker is deceased and...

B: No, is he?

K: That's what Snider told me.

B: Is that right? Marion Barker is deceased. Well, I didn't know that.

K: And Jackson is still in town someplace.

B: Is he?

K: Yeah, but I haven't spoken to him.

Dorothy Brown: Was Blakely anything other than...he was really...

K: Did either of you have to, in your work careers, did any of the companies ever ask you to sign a agreement that you would not join a union?

Dorothy Brown: No.

K: What they used to call a “yellow dog” contract...

B: No, not me. No. In fact, Newman—that’s one thing I’ll say about Newman—Arthur Newman was a gracious man for unions and that. He was a union man’s best friend, for a big contractor. He believed in unions. I think he figures he accomplished something by having union, because he knew where he could put his hands on some trained men whenever he needed ‘em. Like if you want good workers, he knew where to call and get ‘em. I think it was important to a big contractor to have union put your hands on ‘em when you need ‘em. And men that’s familiar with construction work and that. It’s just like bricklayers and anything else. When you want bricklayers, you call up for bricklayers, when you want painters, you call for painters. And well, when you need laborers, you call for experienced labor. Someone who can run wheelbarrows and handle concrete and grade your concrete nice and smooth. Some peoples got eyes that can grade real smooth and they got a good eye on ‘em. And some guys ain’t worth a nickel gradin’ because their eyes are no good—they’re too rough. So, Newman, I think he liked labor unions, ‘cause he knew where he could get his men wherever he needed ‘em. Regardless, whether it’s ironworkers, painters, or bricklayers, or whatever he needed. He knew where to call and get men whenever he had to have ‘em. He got a supply of his labor from that source of help.

K: The idea was, by getting the most experienced men into the union, you guaranteed yourselves jobs.

B: Well, that’s right. And that way, you could figure at jobs—you knew how much work you could get out of a man. When you’re around a city like this and you’re workin’ men everyday, you see these men over and over again. Like if you lay a man off now and he goes back to the union hall, next time you call, that same man might come back to you again, see. So, you know you’re men over and over again. And if some men come back and they’re no good, you just work ‘em a day—you’re required to work ‘em four hours, you gotta work ‘em four hours. When I was there, you had to work ‘em four hours. But at the end of four hours, you could lay ‘em off again if you didn’t like them.

Or wait till that night and give 'em a time check, and just tell 'em it was just one day at work. That went on a lot, if somebody was sent back out you didn't like, you just got rid of him that night again.

K: Yeah, right. The contractor didn't have to keep him.

B: No, that's right. The contractor didn't have to keep him.

Dorothy Brown: I think what the hosiery mill didn't like was shortening the hours. They didn't wanna work just eight hours a day. They needed to work longer hours, why they just wanted to do it.

K: They wouldn't let you have overtime?

Dorothy Brown: I don't know. But, I just always thought that was it because we had to work longer hours.

B: The hosiery mill never was a place to work overtime anyway. They never was much of an overtime...

Dorothy Brown: But, ten hours was their hours. I went there, we worked ten hours a day.

B: I don't remember that.

K: You know, usually when I kind of wind up one of these sessions, I ask general questions like: how do you feel now about having been in unions after all these years? It looks to me like, from what I can see here, that you people have done very nicely and have a very nice home and a backyard full of goldfinches. (laughs) And I think my question would be kind of dumb, because evidently you saved your nickels and did all right.

B: Yeah, we've enjoyed ourselves. We go to the races up at Omaha, and we go to Florida. We've been down there three or four times. We go to California once in awhile. Denver, down to Arkansas. We've been all around. We got two good children. We live

right in the same neighborhood. My daughter just lives one block straight west of me here. My son just lives about a quarter of a mile from here. I built him a house and my daughter, she got a lovely home. She got a duplex right in back of me here. They've done real good. Like you say, I think we've accomplished quite a bit in our life.

Dorothy Brown: ...

B: We don't owe anybody in the world a dime. Don't owe nobody a dime. Don't have no charge accounts, don't even have no credit cards, I don't.

Dorothy Brown: Oh yeah, I have Master charge.

K: (laughs) Did he know that?

Dorothy Brown: Yes, but I didn't ask for it. They just sent it to me.

K: I thought you slipped up there.

B: No, I don't have no credit cards or nothing. I pay cash for everything I get.

K: Well, it's great to be in that position.

Dorothy Brown: I use that Master charge...

B: And I've got a good savings now and everything, so, we're all set for the rest of our days I think. Unless something real bad happens.

K: Well, we don't want to even think about any of that.

B: No.

K: Okay. Thanks a lot folks.

