BUILDING THE UNITED AUTOMOBILE WORKERS AT RYAN AERONAUTICAL COMPANY

WILLIAM C. OXLEY

Interviewed by Thomas J. Connors

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: May 20, 1915, Elk Point, South Dakota.

Education: Public schools, Laurel and Belden, Nebraska.

Spouse: Helen Gries Oxley, married 1937; four children.

CAREER HISTORY:

Assembler, Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation, 1942.

Metal fitter, Ryan Aeronautical Company, 1942-46; machine parts inspector, 1946-75.

UNION ACTIVITIES:

United Automobile Workers, Local 506, shop steward in inspection, 1944-52; bargaining committee, 1952-72; vice president, 1956-57; president, 1957-62.

San Diego Industrial Union Council, president.

Federation of Retired Union Members, 1975-present.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Thomas J. Connors, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Anthropology, Brown University. M.A., American Civilization, Brown University.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: UAW Local 506 union hall, San Diego, California.

Dates, length of sessions: January 20, 1989 (86 minutes); January 27, 1989 (100); February 3, 1989 (85).

Total number of recorded hours: 4.5

Persons present during interview: Oxley and Connors.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series of interviews with former leaders and organizers of the United Automobile Workers (UAW).

In preparing for the interview, Connors consulted **UAW Solidarity**, the organ of the UAW, and selected issues of the **Challenger**, the organ of Local 506. He also examined various contracts between Local 506 and Ryan Aeronautical Company.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Oxley's early life and work in the aircraft industry and continuing on through his years of involvement with the UAW.

EDITING:

George Hodak, editorial assistant, edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Oxley reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made a number of corrections and additions.

Teresa Barnett, editor, prepared the table of contents and biographical summary and compiled the index.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 20, 1989

CONNORS: Why don't we start by talking about your background. Where and when were you born?

OXLEY: I was born on May 20, 1915.

CONNORS: Where was that?

OXLEY: In Elk Point, South Dakota. My dad [William Everett Oxley] ran a bakery in Elk Point. Then later we moved to Sioux City, Iowa, which is across the river. Then he began working at a meat packinghouse--first building, then working in it. Later, about 1919 or 1920, we moved out to a farm in northeastern Nebraska and we lived there. I went to country school, farmed, and went to high school in the same little town of Laurel, Nebraska. And after I got out of high school, I worked in a grocery store and in service stations. I went over to Iowa and tried my luck over there for a couple-- Well, two or three seasons. Finally, I decided that I was going to come to California, no matter what the cost.

CONNORS: Could we back up just a bit? Going back to Elk Point, it's located, I believe, in the eastern corner of South Dakota.

OXLEY: It's right in the corner of South Dakota, near Sioux City and not far from the university.

CONNORS: The University of South Dakota?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: What was the basic economy of that place?

OXLEY: Well, prior to 1929 it had been a fairly prosperous area, but after the stock market crashed, the price of grain and all the commodities that were grown in that area bottomed out, and it became a pretty hard place to make a living in. So I started high school in 1929, and graduating from high school offered a very bleak future for most young people in those days. Those whose folks managed to have enough money to send them to college made out one way or another, but the rest of us, we could work on farms for $20 to $30 a month. And that isn't a hell of a lot. So I think I had a good high school education. In those days, a high school education, of course, was considered a pretty advanced education.

CONNORS: By this time, you had moved to Nebraska?

OXLEY: Yes, and my dad was farming there. He continued to farm until he was in his sixties.

CONNORS: Was that one of his dreams or goals, to be a farmer, and working the bakery was just an interim--?

OXLEY: Yes. My mother [Marian Hylbahl Oxley] came from big cities--New York City and Perth Amboy, New Jersey. She had a pretty tough time accepting farm life. She wanted to wind armatures or do something that the girls she knew back East did. But I remember her being pretty game about it.

She was a good musician. She played the mandolin and the piano very well. So I'm sure she got very lonesome [and was] probably very grateful to my brother [Don H. Oxley] and I for coming along afterward.

CONNORS: Had your father been involved in farming as a boy?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: Did he grow up in that part of South Dakota?

OXLEY: No, he was originally from-- Well, first south-eastern Nebraska. That's where he was born. Then they moved up near Laurel, Nebraska. There were three or four boys at home and two daughters. They farmed. In those days, 160 acres was a large farm. Nowadays, what, a family of that size would probably farm 1,200 or more acres. So I learned how to do just about every farm job there was to do.

CONNORS: So the family's moving to Nebraska was actually your father's going back to his home?

OXLEY: His home. You bet.

CONNORS: Did he own the bakery that he worked at?

OXLEY: No, I think he rented it--equipment and all.

CONNORS: But it was his shop?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: At what age--? You must have worked sometimes--

OXLEY: Oh, I was just a baby. I was born in Elk Point.

CONNORS: Oh, okay. So they didn't put you to work when you were two years old or something. [laughter]

OXLEY: No. We moved to Sioux City and he got-- This is now the tail end, of course, of World War I, so they were very hard up for help of any kind. And he got a job as a fireman on the railroad. He "fired" for I think two years. He often wished he had kept on, because the wages were much better than farming.

CONNORS: Would he have been in the union, the [International] Brotherhood of Firemen and Oilers?

OXLEY: Yes, I imagine. I don't think you could work on a railroad in those days without being in the union. I was wondering how in the devil I was going to make a living after high school. It turned out that I met several young guys who were back from California on vacation, etc., and I talked to them about California. They said, well, if you knew how to do anything and were willing to work, you could probably get a job in California. So I decided that that was my goal. So I started for California when-- Well, we got word of the Pearl Harbor bombing on December 7, and I think I took off for California in January. I got a job after twenty or thirty days of perusing, looking around up in Los Angeles. They insisted that I had to have some sort of training.

CONNORS: You went to Los Angeles first?

OXLEY: Yes, I had a friend in Pasadena, and I could stay there. Of course, gasoline was dirt cheap. I had a V-8 [engine].

CONNORS: How did you get out here? Did you drive out here?

OXLEY: Yes. I brought my sister [Betty Jean Oxley] and another fellow.

CONNORS: How many kids were in your family? You spoke of a brother and a sister.

OXLEY: There was a brother and a sister, yeah. So the sister was coming out to meet her boyfriend; they were pretty serious. He had a job with one of the aircraft factories in, strangely enough, San Diego. So we went to meet the boyfriend, left her off, came to Pasadena where I had a friend who was building homes then, and I helped him do a little yard landscaping and paint scraping for a while. Then I decided to come to San Diego, because every plant in Los Angeles was absolutely demanding that I have aircraft-building experience.

CONNORS: Who did you check out when you were in Los Angeles? Which plants?

OXLEY: Well, Lockheed [Corporation] was the big one, as I remember. Douglas [Aircraft Company], Hughes [Aircraft Company]--I tried them all it seems like, looking back. When I decided that maybe San Diego had some fresh

"move-ins"-- Consolidated [Vultee Aircraft Corporation] had just come from Buffalo, and they were really employing people. They had long, long lines of applicants. I thought maybe I could get on on the basis that I could start on as an assembler. I had a little background of mechanical experience.

CONNORS: What had that been? Was it on farm machinery or that kind--?

OXLEY: Well, service station, auto tear-down, some rebuild, and making everything I operated run. Then I had had some tool experience in high school--manual training I believe they called it. It wasn't really easy, and it wasn't until I got into the plant which was-- Well, there were three lines of applicants about a block and a half long on the Wednesday morning that I reported. I finally got my application in. A week from then, I reported back. When I finally got in, he told me, after reviewing my application, that he figured that I didn't have any training, that he couldn't use me. So then I became a little bit desperate and I wanted to know, "What the hell do you mean you can't use me? Have you ever stopped at your $250,000 overpass and watched the people who come out of this plant? And you say you can't use me? Something's wrong!" So he kind of grinned. He said, "Where did you get all this experience? At a manual training course at

Laurel High School?" I said, "Well, that was eleven years ago. I certainly had to learn a hell of a lot of things since then, because I'm still alive and I got all the way from Laurel to San Diego." So he said, "Well"--and he made a few erasures--"follow the white line for your physicals." So that's how close that was. Anyhow, I reported for work the following Monday. That was my introduction to aircraft, swing shift.

CONNORS: Going back a little bit to your education-- We'll be moving back and forth here. That's the way the dialogue usually goes. You were in school when the Depression hit. You must have been fourteen or something.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Was the farm in any danger at that point?

OXLEY: Well, see, my dad, having had this city life, about like people who come to California now-- He didn't have money enough to buy a farm. His dad owned his farm, but, of course, the older boy was living on it. So my dad rented a farm, and he had to give two-fifths of the crop for rent. That's the way that operated.

CONNORS: So two-fifths of the crop went for rent, and then the rest of it he could sell.

OXLEY: Right.

CONNORS: And what was it for the most part? What did he grow?

OXLEY: Corn and oats, mostly corn. Nebraska, in the southeastern part, was about like Iowa. They excelled in the production of corn and steers, cows.

CONNORS: So you worked on the farm while growing up?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: Was your father able to hire people when it was harvesttime or planting?

OXLEY: When I was a little guy, he hired people in corn picking, and once in a while he'd hire somebody to harvest small-grain oats, barley.

CONNORS: But you decided at some point that farming was not going to be for you?

OXLEY: Well, my younger brother seemed to adapt a little more to the farm and had more patience. I went a little crazy trying to work with my brother and my dad. They had two speeds, slow and slower, the way I saw it.

CONNORS: That was their speed. So when FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] started his campaign-- He was elected in 1932. You were about at an age when people were becoming somewhat politically aware. What were your memories of that campaign or his election?

OXLEY: First of all, my dad and mother were probably-- We lived at that point near a little town, Belden [Nebraska].

CONNORS: What's the town?

OXLEY: A little town of Belden. I graduated from Belden

High [School]. So we were probably one of the only three families of Democrats in the whole area. My mother was Democratic committeewoman for the area. I remember that much. Roosevelt was, of course, the first president I voted for. After my twenty-first birthday.

CONNORS: So with the New Deal programs, do you remember discussing these in school or around the house or in the community at all?

OXLEY: Well, the area was heavily Republican, first of all, and still is. I doubt that-- Socially, maybe it wasn't safe to get into too much of an argument. There were some Democrats around Belden. I think there were maybe three or four Democrat families.

CONNORS: What about trade unionism there in that area? I know that it wasn't a manufacturing center, so you wouldn't have that, but, say, in school or civics classes, would you discuss trade unionism? I ask this because in speaking to my father about this, he showed me an essay--we're from Providence, Rhode Island--he kept about the textile industry in that area. And in this essay, very well written, well thought out, one of the main points was how the textile industry in New England should not be unionized. That was kind of an extraneous point, but it must have been part of the discussion that they were having in civics classes. I know it was formative in his own

thinking about unions, and I was wondering if that--

OXLEY: Well, that was then with my dad, who had been with a union-- He belonged to the stonecutters union [Journeymen Stonecutters Association of North America] in Sioux City when they were building the new Midland packinghouse. It was an ultramodern place at that time and was very expensive. When they finished it, it [the Midland company] immediately went into bankruptcy and Cudahy Meat Packing Company bought it out for pennies on the dollar. Evidently, a way to get the farmers to invest quite a little money around there and then go south with it. But my dad was a firm believer in unions. My mother's dad, my grandfather [Christ Hylbahl], an old Danish fellow, had been in terra-cotta unions in the building trades and was very firm. I remember one time, we had a fight--I was four or five--and I called him an old scab. And he chased me and gave me a good spanking when we got back to the house. From where he chased me, he went in, went upstairs and found his dues book, and came down and showed me where he was paid up. Of course, that didn't mean much to me at that time, but it meant a hell of a lot to him.

CONNORS: So when you found yourself in the aircraft industry, you had a frame of mind that was supportive of unions.

OXLEY: Well, it's a funny thing. At first, I thought-- I

had a wife by then and three children, and I thought, "Well, my primary thing here is to see what this is about, if there's any advancement, what kind of a thing it is." I'd never even been inside of a factory. So I spent two or three nights there. The people I rode to work with, for instance, had been there for a while, and they said, "The best way to treat this is to just join the union and get them off your back. Because they're going to keep trying every week, every night, or anything to get you to be a member, and the dues aren't all that high." They were a dollar and a quarter a month or something. So I joined, and it wasn't very much longer until I could see that a union with that many people-- Thirty-seven thousand were working there then. You really had to have some way to talk to management.

CONNORS: Now, this is at Ryan [Aeronautical Company] we're talking about?

OXLEY: No, this is the first job I had.

CONNORS: At Consolidated.

OXLEY: At Consolidated. So being a farm kid, when you work for someone, regardless of where, in the town or out on the farm, you're a member of the family and they never tell you to do anything--they always ask you. Well, in a factory, of course, they don't do that. So depending on the way they tell you is, I think, what I was concerned

with. But I got very dissatisfied in this big, impersonal place. I mean, to the nth degree. One night, I just blew up. Family or no, I think a mixture of night shift and then kind of a sassy supervisor, I just-- It was pretty much over nothing. But I think the point I'd like to make here is that when I was out of work for two weeks and applied at Solar [Aircraft Corporation] and Ryan, I was accepted at both Solar and Ryan, but I decided on Ryan because so many of my friends who worked there said it was a good place to work, that it was a family-type place. Again, getting back to the point, all factories are basically alike. I found that out. So I decided that I was going to stay at Ryan. It was kind of a dirty little place and all, but they had a habit of hiring family members. If I'd be in there for a year or two and worked out, they'd hire just about anybody from my family that I recommended.

CONNORS: Was Ryan considerably smaller than Consolidated?

OXLEY: Yeah. Consolidated then was over 30,000 comfortably, and Ryan was around 8,000.

CONNORS: That's considerably smaller. What did you do at Consolidated? What was your work? You said you were working night shift, or swing shift. What was the actual work?

OXLEY: Well, what they called us were assemblers, but what

we were were general assemblers.

CONNORS: And that's when you talked to the employment man and you convinced him that--

OXLEY: Yeah, I wanted to be an assembler.

CONNORS: So that's where he placed you after that?

OXLEY: Yeah. So then about two weeks before Christmas I got my general assembler's rating, and I was doing the top jobs in the department. These were kind of funny times. We had two people that worked on the pressure test for these oil tanks that we were building.

CONNORS: You were building oil tanks?

OXLEY: Yes. The sixty-five-gallon oil tank had a contour the same as the attachment for the engine. So the oil tank fastened onto the wing and then the engine onto the oil tank and then the prop[eller] in front of that. These were seaplanes, PBYs. It was interesting. My first job was getting all the drill burrs that fell into the tank out. And it was a night shift job, working all night with a little mucilage brush on the end of a rod and a little Vaseline to make the chips stick. You'd go in with the light hanging inside. There was a fellow-- If you were on the filler-casting end, he'd be on the drain-plug end. You'd each have your lights, so you were looking into this really shiny aluminum background and looking for little burrs to scoop up. When you got all through, you'd bang it

on the horses a few times, around and around a couple of times, and then you'd start all over again. Then when the navy inspector came along, he'd do the same thing. And if he found one chip, why, you usually were in for another half hour of looking around. But that's how they got the crud out of them. After they hired a couple of three new guys, then you got to go into assembly. I think I cleaned tanks for maybe forty days or forty nights.

The fellow I worked with was a Nebraska kid who began staying with my wife [Helen Gries Oxley] and me. He quit at the end of about a year or two and finally joined the army. He was just out of high school, so young that his uncle brought him out. His name was Frank Moore. Since then, Frank went into the army and came out a captain and began teaching school. He was about ten years younger than I. He's now living in Sacramento, quite a guy. Anyhow, we talk about our old tank-cleaning days quite often.

CONNORS: Let's talk for a minute about the work force in general at Consolidated. There were people, I guess, streaming in from all parts of the country to get into defense.

OXLEY: Yeah. Most of them I think, as I remember the general character at the skilled trades, were all from Chicago, Detroit, Michigan, someplace where they had worked at before and got mad back there because they didn't get a

particular promotion or something and had come to California.

CONNORS: Skilled in aircraft or in auto?

OXLEY: Well, they had been in auto, farm machine, agricultural implements, that type of thing, and now they wanted to come to California and live in style. [tape recorder off]

CONNORS: You were talking about Consolidated. Where was Consolidated?

OXLEY: It's just across the field from Ryan.

CONNORS: And where is that?

OXLEY: Ryan is right on the [San Diego] Bay. There are two plants of Consolidated. One of them is just down the street from here, the old Highway 101--that was plant two. That's the new one they built when they came out from Buffalo. But the other one was an old plant. I don't know where they got it from. Maybe they built it also, but it was the old plant.

I mentioned about the people that came into San Diego to work. I think that most of them were from Texas, Arkansas, Nebraska, and all the Midwest states. But the skilled trades, very few of them came from that area. Most of them from the Midwest were mechanics or got to be mechanics. So it takes quite a little hands-on training to get to be in the skilled trades.

CONNORS: How about women workers? You hear stories about Rosie the Riveter and that kind of thing. Were there many women at Consolidated?

OXLEY: Yes, but there weren't any when I first started. I think I remember the first night a woman came walking up the aisle--the whistles, the howls, and so forth. It must have been sort of embarrassing for the gals. But within a month or two of that, there were women galore. They really came in fast and they were good workers. They proved real fast that they could learn the business and build airplanes.

CONNORS: And they did the same sorts of jobs that men were doing. Not necessarily the skilled mechanics' jobs, but--

OXLEY: Yes, they did. They knew how to use tools and they quickly adapted.

CONNORS: After women started pouring in there, once it leveled off, what would you say was the percentage of women working at Consolidated?

OXLEY: That would be a little hard to-- I'd say somewhere around 30 percent.

CONNORS: What about minorities? Blacks and Chicanos or Mexicans.

OXLEY: I never encountered, you might say, any blacks at Consolidated. See, I was only there a year. When I moved to Ryan, they began hiring blacks to do jobs such as

janitorial and sandblasting, all the more or less physical-type jobs. That went on for two or three, maybe four years. Then you began noticing that the blacks began wondering why they weren't-- As the union got stronger also and the international union began putting the heat on, the blacks began wondering why they had to stay in sandblast areas and custodial jobs. They began grieving and winning their grievances.

CONNORS: Going back to Consolidated-- First of all, what was the local there? Was it a UAW [United Automobile Workers] local there at Consolidated?

OXLEY: No, IAM [International Association of Machinists].

CONNORS: It was Machinists. Now, were you particularly active? I know you finally joined, but did they have meetings or any kind--?

OXLEY: I wasn't very active, I'm sorry to say. They had big lodge meetings. I had inquired, "What do they do?"-- thinking if I could lend a hand-- And I was just told, "Well, somebody went to one and he was completely disenchanted with it, so he never went back," and that type of report. Besides that, I was busy at home trying to get comfortable with California.

CONNORS: Did you live close to the plant?

OXLEY: Well, I had a hell of a time finding a home. First of all, I found a place in La Mesa, California, and when I

went to settle down there, why, I came to find out that the place wasn't really for rent. The gardener's wife and the fellow who owned the place-- The fellow and his wife were in the process of a divorce. The gardener's wife apparently had led to this thing, because when he came back, they decided that it sure as hell wasn't for rent. [laughter] Coincidentally, the realtor that had arranged for the rental was from Plainview, Nebraska, and knew my dad's cousin real well, knew my dad also. So he said, "Damn it! Look, I've got a trailer. I'll pull it to any court you want it in." So he pulled it into a court up near University Avenue, and the five of us moved into a seventeen-foot trailer. Now, it was real hot out there.

Meanwhile, I had put in for federal housing. Fortunately, one of the Federal Housing Authority investigators, who wanted to see how badly you needed it, came out and discovered our living conditions. So he said, "Well, folks, you qualify."

CONNORS: How old were your kids at that point?

OXLEY: One was a baby. Bobby [Robert Oxley] was only about eight months old, I guess. Bill [William Oxley] was a couple of years old, and Paul [Oxley] was about four. They were about nineteen months apart. So I said, "When can we move in then?" He said, "Right now. This afternoon. Tomorrow. Report at the office." I had heard all the ridicule about

federal housing. They called it "Diaperville," "Pregnant Hill," you know. So I had hesitated to move. When I went up there, the boys were all dressed neat, smiling, sitting in the backseat. The lady that took us to look at it said, "Look, I had three or four homes that I was going to show you, but after seeing these guys, I think I have only one." So she took me to this house in a cul-de-sac, nice, beautiful, overlooking Mission Valley. She said, "This is the only house for you. Your kids can play here without getting run over." So we've been here for forty-six years. Anyhow, we finally bought it.

CONNORS: Where is this?

OXLEY: Linda Vista.

CONNORS: Linda Vista.

OXLEY: Yeah, [it was] federal housing. The first in the United States--dedicated by Eleanor Roosevelt.

CONNORS: Was that part of wartime housing?

OXLEY: That's what it was, war housing. Nothing but defense workers, service people, and government workers. So down there, you might as well have been a millionaire. You couldn't have found a better place to live. You look for rattlesnakes because we're right on the canyon.

CONNORS: But you stayed at Consolidated for one year. Did you have a defense deferment?

OXLEY: Yes. I never asked to be deferred--not once. I

told myself, "If they ever need me that bad, I'll go. There isn't any argument about that." And I guess there's a little feeling of guilt, too. There's the rest of the guys getting shot at, and here you are, the toughest job you have is to go some place with a toolbox for a few minutes and come back. After two years at Ryan, I went into weld inspection. I think I was immediately sorry that I did. I had two ways I could have gone. I could have gone into machine shop and learned how to be a lathe operator or something, but instead of that I went into weld inspection.

CONNORS: That was after how many years at Ryan?

OXLEY: Let's see-- Two years.

CONNORS: For the previous two years, what was your job at Ryan?

OXLEY: I was a metal fitter, they called it.

CONNORS: What did you do?

OXLEY: Well, Ryan at that point-- Their main job was to make collector systems, exhaust collector systems, for just about all types of military aircraft. They made them for the Pratt Whitney Lockheed fighter. They made them for, oh, big bombers. And our job-- We had pedestals with every configuration of rods sticking out and balls, or something with a bullet nature on the end of them. We could run these circular collector systems down and beat the dents

out. The thing on the inside of the rod would form a solid mass under the bump, and then as you very skillfully whacked around it, it would raise the dent out. So that's the bumper. And I got awful tired of that. The noise is a terrible thing--I still don't hear worth a damn.

CONNORS: So Ryan did specialty work for aircraft, but Ryan didn't build planes themselves?

OXLEY: Well, they had built trainers prior to that. In fact, they still built a couple after I was there. PT-22 was their big one, and they sold hundreds of them to China, Chiang Kai-shek of course, and to England. A lot of people bought their trainers. In fact, a lot of people are still flying them around for old keepsakes.

CONNORS: They were well built?

OXLEY: Yeah. They were rugged.

CONNORS: In those first two years, were you active in the union then?

OXLEY: Yes, I met a fellow and eventually rode to work with him. By now, I'm living in Linda Vista and I've got a home figured out and no divorcée is telling me, "I'm sorry but--" By that time, I was broke most of the time. We moved into Linda Vista without any furniture, you might say, to speak of. I had hauled it down there from a fellow's home, a fellow I worked with at Consolidated.

OXLEY: I was complaining in my department one night, "I've got this good place to live, but there's no damn furniture." A fellow employee said, "Hey look, I'm going to Washington, and I just bought a bunch of furniture a year or so ago from Gustafson and I'm still paying for it. If you want to sign and take over the payments, that will be all you'll need." My opinion of Washington went up a couple of notches from that moment on. Anyhow, I said, "Well, when can we do this?" He said, "Tomorrow morning." Now, we're on swing shift. I drove up the next morning, and they're all asleep. I think, "What a hell of a nice thing that is. People are in there sleeping, and this is the life for me, you know." It gets worse. So I decided to take the furniture. He was a good old boy and he didn't mind overhauling a carburetor on the sofa. [laughter] My neighbor then, an Oklahoma guy, Mr. Hunts, said, "Well, how are you going to get that furniture?" I said, "I don't know. I'm wondering if I can't tie it on this Ford." He said, "Oh, no. I've got a pickup. We'll even get it all on one load." I thought he was crazy, but we did. So that's sort of the way it was those days in Linda Vista. Everybody was from Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri,

Oklahoma, Arkansas, someplace, and they were all good ol' guys. So that was the start. From then on, we had an installment plan until we had enough furniture really to get by with.

CONNORS: Did somebody from the UAW [United Automobile Workers] approach you to--?

OXLEY: Yeah, a fellow right across the street who later-- Now, he had been a crater and packer back in Chicago or something and worked with making boxes and whatnot and was just a hard worker. The union bug really bit him. He later lost his job for subversive activities, but he really introduced me to union business. He even lied to me. He said, "The union has a sort of relief fund. For instance," he said, "I can give you ten dollars. It comes out of the fund. And in a couple of weeks you'll pay me back." He did and I paid him back, but I found out afterwards there wasn't any fund. [laughter] So that was kind of the way it was. Then they began to ask me to come to union meetings, because they, quote, thought I could "think on my feet" and they liked the way I supported issues or failed to or something.

CONNORS: You would make your opinions known on the shop floor?

OXLEY: Yes, quite a little of the time, yes--if I was asked. There get to be union people who you have a lot of

faith in. [John] "Pop" Gavin was one of them. He and his wife came to every meeting. He had been a big shot in WPA [Works Progress Administration], and he was a poet. Just a little old Irishman--and spunky.

CONNORS: Yeah, I saw a picture of him and his wife [Emma Gavin] in the publication that you gave me.

OXLEY: I don't think he called anybody else, but he called me to his bedside--he died two days after my visit, and he wanted to talk to me. He said, "Bill, you're going to go someplace in this union. And there's a couple of things I'd like to see done for Mom, for one thing, but for all of them for another. I want you to get going on that goddamn paid insurance. The health plan shouldn't be all that expensive for that company if they worked it right, and burial also." And he went right on. He said, "Stay on the insurance and the seniority. Unionism isn't anything anymore without them."

CONNORS: This would have been the end of the forties?

OXLEY: Well, yes, this was probably toward the end of the forties.

CONNORS: What would be some of the issues that you would speak out against on the shop floor? Would they be simple grievance matters? Favoritism?

OXLEY: Yeah, if that was the-- I had some real interesting ones. We had a little old person--she was real old I

thought at the time, probably fifty-five--Sally, in inspection. She would sit there and look like everybody else, inspect and measure. I had only been steward for a week. One of the supervisors came up and said, "Bill, I want to talk to you."

I said, "Okay, what?"

He said, "We're going to have to let Sally go."

I said, "Oh, what seems to be the problem?"

He said, "She's drinking."

I said, "On the job?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," he said. "I don't know about that, but I can't stand her breath."

I said, "Well, too bad. I always thought Sally was a real friendly, real nice girl."

He said, "Well, I wish it was that way, but it isn't."

And I said, "Well, I think this is a thing that I would have to take exception to. I haven't been a steward very long, but, by God, I don't believe in firing people like Sally."

"Well," he said, "she's going with this old navy commander, and he's retired and apparently he has more time to horse around and get her drunk and in trouble."

So I said, "Well, why don't we go in and talk to Mr. [D. J.] Donnelly about this." (He was above him.)

So we went in and I said, "We're in here about Sally, Mr. Donnelly."

He said, "Well, Bill mentioned her to me"

And I said, "Well, she has a grievance, too."

"What's that?"

I said, "She's getting fifteen cents less than anybody else. She's been here just as damn long and she does good work. I've watched Sally. The only time she looks up, she's smiling at somebody, and [goes] right back to work again. I don't see how you can dig up something like the use of alcohol on her own time. You know we'd have to go all the way through arbitration if you persist."

"Bill, I'll tell you what. Let me talk to Mr. King about this for a while," he said.

I said, "How about getting her up to snuff wagewise?"

He said, "All right. We'll see what we can do."

Instead of getting fired, she got a raise. Well, that was my first case.

CONNORS: How active were you? You became a steward in 1944, right?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Were you asked to run? Is that how it worked?

OXLEY: Well, Pop Gavin was working in processing, letting parts down into the solution tanks. He was president

then. He said, "I need a steward in this area, in inspection." I said, "Don't look at me. I've got enough problems." He said, "Bill, I'm going to ask two or three people, but, by God, it's got to be you." I said, "No, I don't want it, sorry." So in about a week, he came over and just pinned the steward badge on me. He said, "I know you'll do a good job, so I'm not even going to ask you to." "All right." But Pop was quite a guy.

CONNORS: Where did he hail from to begin with?

OXLEY: Well, I think the old boy must have been a Californian right from the first. He and his wife lived up in the hills up by Ramona in the thirties. They were on relief, on WPA. They dug back in the rocks and made a little oven with a metal door on it, and she baked biscuits, bread, and everything else outside, just like the Mexicans in the area. She used to like to tell me about all those times. They had a couple of boys. One of them later was a stage actor, Gavin. You probably have heard of him. I get letters from Emma on Christmas. We always write on our cards. She's old now and ailing pretty bad. She's in a home up north out by L.A. someplace.

CONNORS: So as a steward, this was in the inspection department, right?

OXLEY: Right. In those days, I had every inspector in the plant, but later on it broke down to tooling inspectors and

assembly inspectors and so forth, and each one had a steward.

CONNORS: Did Ryan grow considerably during the war or did it stay at that--? You said it was around 8,000.

OXLEY: They didn't grow very much. I think I probably hit it at the peak. It grew maybe a little.

CONNORS: Did the same thing happen at Ryan as far as women coming in after a certain point?

OXLEY: Yeah, as soon as they began hiring women. Like I say, it was a family affair there. I could have had my wife in there, but, of course, she and I thought that she had a better spot with the boys. We still think so. At Ryan, it was mostly wives and girlfriends, live-ins, and so forth, where they got the women.

CONNORS: The Ryan local [Local 506, United Automobile Workers] was formed in-- Was that 1941? I know it was before your time.

OXLEY: Yeah. I believe, though, that the union movement started there a little earlier than that. Maybe '37, '38, '39. It kind of grew with the company, a little bit. But you see, it was a hard place to organize because it was family, and, hell, sometimes they had a hard time meeting their payroll at first. So to tell them they needed a union was a little bit futile at first.

CONNORS: Was T. Claude Ryan a very visible kind of

presence in the shop or in the factory?

OXLEY: Yes, very much.

CONNORS: Like [James H.] Kindelberger up at North American [Aviation, Inc.] was early on. He was always around and people saw quite a bit of him.

OXLEY: Yeah. Mr. Ryan always had a smile for everybody. He was tough to buck. He screamed at times--he had a pretty good temper. This fellow that got me in to the union, Ray Morkowski, he [Ryan] screamed at him one night and threw his keys down out at the guard gate right on the counter there and said, "Take the keys. You run the place. You know so damn much." It was hysterical. Funny!

CONNORS: Where did Ryan come from? Was San Diego the original location for Ryan Aircraft?

OXLEY: Well, he was a captain in World War I, and I've given you the story about the five captains.

CONNORS: Oh, yeah, that's right.

OXLEY: They all ended up with him. So I really don't know where he did come from. He may have been from out here.

CONNORS: I suppose I can dig and find out something about that.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: In reading the little history that you gave me from the dedication publication for this building [the UAW Local 506 union hall], a short history to about 1956, there

was a little paragraph about getting the first contract in 1941. Granted that was before your time, but when you came in, did you hear of that first contract? Was that something people would talk about?

OXLEY: No, I don't think so.

CONNORS: Would people talk about and say, "You think this one's bad, you should have seen the one in 1941"?

OXLEY: Oh, I see what you mean. I thought you meant the company. Well, the first contract was really a mess. What? A two-day vacation or three-day vacation, I think, and a couple of days' sick leave. You could work those days if you wanted to and get paid for them. See, I was under the first contract when I came there, and it didn't change appreciably for several years. I think '49 is when they first began to talk about health insurance.

CONNORS: So whatever was in place for that war period, then, was kept in force during the war.

OXLEY: Yeah, because of course we had a no-strike agreement during all the war years--you didn't dare move. But the minute they signed the peace treaty, it immediately began. We told the company, "Look, we don't know if you know it, but [the] auto [division] has really been going places back there, and we want to catch up." They said, "Well, you're not going to catch up with us, I'll tell you that. Because that isn't the way this whole thing was

planned. Let's go back. We were making airplanes. Auto was making autos. They had their business; we had ours. And that's where we were." So there were some hellish arguments over that.

CONNORS: During that no-strike period-- First of all, was there ever a strike?

OXLEY: No. No. You couldn't. If you had mentioned a strike, somebody would probably run you home and beat you to death.

CONNORS: How about work slowdowns or any kind of ways to--?

OXLEY: No. No. The autoworkers that came out here to represent us, you know, because they were experienced-- they were UAW and they knew what they were doing. The ones that came out here to help, of course, were just itching to get at these companies, because they could see that they were hiding behind the no-strike [pledge].

CONNORS: Who were those people who came out here to help you out?

OXLEY: Of course, Paul was one of them.

CONNORS: Paul Russo.

OXLEY: Yeah, and before him there were several that were much, much older than Paul. Several of their names are on our charter. I don't remember any of them. During the late forties and into the fifties we raided the IAM once--

tried to--and they tried to card us out once. Both of us failed.

CONNORS: Where did you try to?

OXLEY: We tried to take over their plant once.

CONNORS: Which plant was that?

OXLEY: Convair [Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation]. It wasn't a very friendly situation between us. But we finally made up, and now we're the best of buddies.

CONNORS: In that period of 1942 to 1944, before you get actively involved as a steward, do you--? In fact maybe this was even before you came out here. The North American strike of 1941 was big news. Did people still speak about that at all when you got here and began working in aircraft?

OXLEY: No. No.

CONNORS: Because it was quite a situation. I've seen pictures with soldiers with bayonets there, sending people back to work.

OXLEY: That took a lot of nerve. A bunch of forty-year-old farmers, and some eighteen-year-old kid sticking him in the butt with a bayonet.

CONNORS: How long, then, did you stay as steward of the inspectors?

OXLEY: I think something like eight years. Then I got to

be an alternate committeeman. As such, I became a committeeman within, I think, three months. One of the fellows took a supervisor's badge and left the committee, and I took his place because I was the first alternate in line.

CONNORS: Were contracts coming up every year at this point?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: The first contracts that really had pension provisions, insurance, and those kinds of benefits-- When did that start to take place in the process?

OXLEY: Probably in 1951 or 1952, right in that area.

CONNORS: There was a period right after the war that, because of the lack of demand for planes, there was a tremendous layoff problem. Were you affected with that? Were you layed off at all?

OXLEY: Yes. People would come to work and just be sent home from their department right back to the gate, maybe a hundred. It was kind of bad.

I remember the-- I think it was 1949 when we first got interested in insurance. I remember Bill [William] Kircher was helping us out that year. I wasn't on the committee yet, but they were telling me about him. Jim [James] Bunnell was the industrial relations manager then and the chief negotiator for the company. He was going on about

how he thought that it was terrible to make a faceless mass out of a whole population of a plant and shove them all down one insurance lane. Maybe some of them would have some part of that "good old American freedom."

So Bill is sitting there picking at his pencil eraser saying, "Come on. Come on. Jim, you're not an unusual case. Believe me, there are plenty of them like you. You know the American people decide there's danger from somebody, maybe over in Russia, Germany, or someplace, that they might get attacked. So they get together and say, 'We need so many navy, so many standing army, and we'll need so many aircraft!' Well, you're in the aircraft business, so you readily understand. You like that. What the hell, they're going to need maybe a thousand of them--there are these manifolds."

But he [Bill] said, "What the hell? Nobody around here is going to get killed. But they're going to die from disease, sickness, and accidents. So they decide they need insurance. And all of a sudden, you don't want any money to go in that direction. But, oh, for airplanes, 'Sure, let's go!' Jim, you present an interesting case." Now, Bill said, "We're going to keep after you on this goddamn insurance, so plan on it." And we got it, of course. That was 1949.

CONNORS: Bill Kircher, by that time, was he--? He came

out from the aircraft department of the UAW.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: He was working with Jack [John W.] Livingston, I guess.

OXLEY: Probably. I think they started together. Bill is in real bad shape now, I hear. The only way I've heard it was from either you or Paul.

CONNORS: I think he's in Cincinnati.

OXLEY: In a home.

CONNORS: I never met him, but when I worked with AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] back in Washington, I came across a lot of his reports. I guess he was with the organization department there. He was very active in the [United] Farm Workers [Union] organizing out here back in the sixties and the seventies.

OXLEY: Bill was extremely clever. You didn't dare say anything that you didn't want to be heard, because he heard it all. Of course, we had so darn many that were that way. I don't know whether you've ever heard of Jim Stern?

CONNORS: No, I haven't.

OXLEY: Well, he's another one. He quit and went into some kind of a business. Bluestone, Irv [Irving] Bluestone.

CONNORS: Yeah, Irv Bluestone.

OXLEY: You've heard of him?

CONNORS: I've heard of him.

OXLEY: A whole negotiation might go on for three months and some subject would come up that took place the second week. "Oh, no, I didn't say that." And Irv would sit there and listen to him while he was going on, and then he said, "Well"--and he hasn't looked at a note, not a damn thing--"I'll tell you what you did say." And it was so close that it may as well have been that. He'd tell him and it would get very quiet. What a brain!

CONNORS: An amazing man. I wanted to stick to talking about the forties. After that period, when the war ended and there were a lot of layoffs, production started up again, apparently.

OXLEY: Yes, it more or less improved, even though Ryan had been called a "baling-wire" place. They had a little old experimental assembly man that went through manifold--

CONNORS: Why was Ryan called a "baling-wire" place?

OXLEY: In the strictest term, it is not what you would expect to see as a factory. It's kind of a dirty, little old place--it was then. Now they have great big machines that do remarkable jobs, fifty-spindle drills and stuff like that. But in those days, it was hand forming. My God, you'd have maybe twenty-five gals working there with a form block, each hand forming parts. The factory manager was an old-timer called John Vanderlinde, who worked on the **Spirit of Saint Louis**--that's how long he was there. John

said, when Teledyne bought the company, "You know, I don't think they know what they bought. I think they think that they bought a modern factory, but this is just a place where we make things." [laughter] It was the truth.

CONNORS: Were you active at union-type, labor movement activities outside of the UAW during the forties? The local [San Diego] Industrial Union Council for the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]?

OXLEY: Not so much in the forties. I more or less got my feet wet starting in the fifties.

CONNORS: How about politics in the late forties? I think you told me before that you did support Henry A. Wallace's campaign, for instance. Tell me about that. The UAW did not, as a union, endorse him. I believe they endorsed [Harry S.] Truman.

OXLEY: Yeah, they endorsed Truman. I got yelled at pretty good over this Wallace thing, but then most of the people who-- At that point, you've got to believe Truman was buddy-buddy with [Winston] Churchill, who really wanted to fight Russia. And a good many of us, I guess, looking back, thought that Russia had been an ally of ours and we may have damn well lost World War II had it not been for Russia. So we didn't have the antagonism that a lot of them had. And Henry Wallace made some pretty good speeches. He was talking about the Arab chiefs getting

three cents a barrel for oil, and since they took all the money and didn't divide it among their people for education, medicine--nothing--it made them wealthy. Whereby the people were starving to death. Henry didn't like that, but he thought that our oil people were in love with the idea. So he took a position in an area that would get him called a commie a lot faster than anyplace else.

CONNORS: Was there a Wallace committee that you worked with? Or was it an individual thing among--?

OXLEY: It was, I suppose, the Independent Progressive Party. And they had a regular ticket.

CONNORS: How was it that it was known that you supported Wallace? Did you wear a Wallace button?

OXLEY: I was open about it. I said, "I'm going to vote for Wallace."

CONNORS: Did this come up at union meetings or was it strictly--?

OXLEY: No, excepting that I was excluded from all the PAC [political action committee] action.

CONNORS: Because you were going to support Wallace and not Truman?

OXLEY: That's right. I voted for local Democrats also. There were some good ones those days, governor and whatnot. I think president was the only one I was interested in. I just didn't think Truman had balls enough

to be a good president.

CONNORS: Was there a vocal left-wing group within Local 506?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Were these people active in the left-wing groups back East or something? How did that develop?

OXLEY: I think some of them did come from back East. Of course, you never knew in those days who was left-wing and who was FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or anything else, because we were working with the FBI all the time. One of our presidents, I found out afterwards, reported to the FBI every Friday night.

CONNORS: Could you tell me which president that was?

OXLEY: He later took off and formed another union. What the hell was his name? Bill [William] Salmon.

CONNORS: After the forties and after the no-strike pledge was off and you were fighting over new contracts, were there any strikes that took place during that period?

OXLEY: We had a strike in 1948.

CONNORS: What were the circumstances of that strike?

OXLEY: Well, as I said, we were trying to catch up. We were trying to get suitable vacation length, sickness, and accident written in. We were trying to get paid medical insurance commensurate with the automobile [division]. They wouldn't go for it. And as it turned out, they didn't

go for it, and we came back into the plant with our tails kicked.

First of all, I should tell you about the family situation, the pressure of the wives on their husbands--all due to the fact that they got hired and Mr. Ryan was good to them and they had their home damned near paid for, or half paid for or something. During the strike, I was in charge of welfare. Now, they gave that job to me because the old heads in the union that didn't agree with my political philosophies decided that would be the quickest damned way to get to Bill Oxley. I didn't-- I thought it was a good chance to help out. Well, when we tried to take on a payroll of that size, with $1,500 to $2,000 a week from strike relief, it couldn't be done. So I began really catching hell. Well, the company knew they had us pretty well beaten, I believe. One of the Reuthers, Roy, made the mistake of saying, "If they insist on pushing us into a strike, by God, every family will receive a food basket every week." Of course, he couldn't do that. There were too many damn families, too many baskets. And then they misconstrued that to mean that there would be money every week. After all, they had been paying these two-dollar dues every month. That should take care of them for life. That's sarcasm. Anyhow, it turned out that we came back in, as I say, with our tails dragging.

CONNORS: How long were you out for?

OXLEY: Five weeks I think.

CONNORS: Five weeks.

OXLEY: Which was a long time in those days.

CONNORS: What was the situation for? Was it union shop or maintenance of membership?

OXLEY: Well, we threw that in. That was discarded. This wasn't a North American thing. We began dropping these things. The basic thing was insurance and seniority.

CONNORS: At the shop itself, what was the percentage that was UAW?

OXLEY: Oh, I would say probably not over 75 [percent].

CONNORS: Oh, really?

OXLEY: We had tried our level best to kick it up, and probably that would have been the peak. So that's why I say when you go on to '49, when Kircher came along, they won that strike. But they had never believed that we could get people out of that damn plant, anybody. And here we had them all out for a couple or three weeks. So it scared the poop out of them. They hadn't given us anything in '48, and then our people found out that other people were getting these things. Meanwhile, we kicked membership up to probably another 10 percent and we ran a hell of a bluff. So a good salesman came in, Kircher, and he gave them the message, and the old man knew then that he had

loyal people but that they would go out. And he decided that "If they're doing it up north and they're doing it back East, let's do it." Now, I'm reading his mind there, but I think that's what he thought.

CONNORS: The last of the 1940s topics I wanted to hit on is the Taft-Hartley [Act]. That was, I guess, put through in 1947. I can imagine how it was received in Local 506, but can you tell me what--

OXLEY: Well, that was a very brutal piece of legislation. It just took the fangs right out of the union. Management can figure out where the shortages are and they can put double crews in that area and create a stockpile. They can put foremen running the forklifts to ship them out, and there's no problem. One month's extra time can really make a big difference. They usually create another month ahead of that one so that they have sixty days to really stockpile, to get ready. It was a bad thing. A group of us went out of the shop--I suppose left-wingers, troublemakers, activists--and we had taken up a collection in our area. We got Truman's office on a pay phone downtown. I think six of us gave a message to his secretary. Of course, this was seven o'clock here; it would have been nine or ten o'clock there. She said that he was out of the office but be assured he'll get your message. Mostly what we wanted to tell him was that we

wanted him to veto the Taft-Harley bill, which of course he did--and Wallace would have, too.

CONNORS: This is a period when you were just getting active and, as time went on, more and more active. You were playing a greater and greater role in the union. Did you and your closest buddies in the local sit around and analyze and discuss matters? Did you read the **Auto Worker** in those days? Did you read that regularly?

OXLEY: Yes. I'd say half of the union people didn't care much about politics, international or national. They were interested in, some of them, being the best worker in their area. I kind of went the other way. I thought, "Well, there's no need for me to try and make other people around here look bad. I'm a farm kid. I'm built for it. I could really rush around here. I could be the fastest one to the tool crib and back. I could do all kinds of those things, but I'm going to take a pace that probably will make management think I could do more if I wanted to, and just let them make something of that." Now, that was my life-style while I was at Ryan, but I've seen union presidents, chairmen of the committee who worked their damned butts off. And I always thought that that was harmful to the union, really.

CONNORS: What about the big factional fights within the UAW during the forties and Walter [P.] Reuther's rise? Did

Walter Reuther have a good deal of support at Ryan?

OXLEY: It wasn't one of his stronger plants. Of course, you also had the so-called left-wing element in the international union, especially at Ford [Motor Company], perhaps. I suppose, just for mischievousness, some of the delegates from Timbuktu would support a left-wing candidate in the international election.

In the local union, Tom, once you get started in union business, if you're dedicated, if you say, "I'm going to live up to what I said and I'll protect the employees in this local--" If you're going to do that, once you start there's no backing down. Once you win your first grievance and make an enemy of that first supervisor, he may respect you but he'll never love you again as long as he lives.

I went out and I shot trapshoots, after I retired, on the Ryan trap team. I bought a good gun and made friends with one of the supervisors with whom I never even could talk. So no pressure now--we talked about duck hunting, pheasant hunting, trapshooting. He said, "Bill, you know, you're a little bit different than Frank." (He [Frank] was the last president.) "I explained to Frank that some of these gals in my department are getting an awful lot of seniority, [and] when we talk about promotion, they should probably be considered." But he then said, "On the other hand"--he convinced the young guy [Mike] to come and shoot

with him--"there's Mike over there."

So I said, "He's been there only about a year or two years."

And he said, "Mike catches on to everything just like that. He's very good." He said, "I told Frank, 'Frank, I can't promote those gals. They're all good. They know their jobs, but Mike here is so much faster. I think I'm just going to make a leadman out of him, which is against the union contract.' Frank didn't say a word. I didn't say any more. I went ahead and did it. I never heard a word out of it. I know you, Bill Oxley," he said. "I'd have a hell of a grievance out of you."

I said, "Yeah, you would have. I know Frank and I know you, so we don't have to explain anything about any of this stuff." And that's the way it is. That's how I got to be a damn radical.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 27, 1989

CONNORS: Today, we're going to be talking about the period of the 1950s. I was reading over the past week the issues of the **Challenger** and the **UAW Solidarity** that you gave me. I wanted to start talking first just about the newspapers itself. Volume 1, no. 1, came out in February of 1953, and I just wanted to say that it was a great newspaper. It was very lively, it was humorous, and it also gave a lot of good coverage of what was going on. As an outsider, I was getting a lot from reading this. Whose idea was it in the first place to come up with the newspaper?

OXLEY: I think it came up on the executive board at one of the meetings that we had to have a newspaper. After all, we were making quite a little bit of news. So what we did, we went to one of the local union printing establishments and asked them about what they would consider the size of the paper, in view of being feasible economically, and then something that we could fill up with news, because we weren't going to have any advertising. And this is what we came up with, a little **Challenger**. We really got to management on a few controversial issues. We were really able to scorch them in areas where, I think, after the years of being held by no-strike agreements, we needed this

kind of a blast. So it was a good idea.

CONNORS: Could you tell me something about the editor? I think the first editor was Bob [Robert] Spears. Could you just give me some background on him?

OXLEY: Bob Spears was a union man back in the Ford [Motor Company] plant, and he wasn't any stranger to unions. He was a machinist in the plant, and he seemed to get around in politics very well, not only citywide but statewide. He was knowledgeable about grievances and contract issues. Bob was a college man and knew how to write. He put together a real good paper considering that this was his first experience.

CONNORS: I'll say. It did take advertising after a while, because he has a little note in his first editorial, as regarding the advertising, saying it's all people that are prounion. So that must have been a--

OXLEY: Yeah. I think in later years, though, the advertising part more or less fell through the cracks. We had a few discussions about whether to or not to, and I think the way you read the editorial was correct. In the case of a union ad, why, fine, but otherwise, no.

CONNORS: There was one column by someone called the Old Timer, "The Old Timer Sez." I got a particular kick reading them because they were-- I think there were only about three of them, actually--they didn't carry on--but it

was done in a very folksy way, where the guy, whoever was doing it, was saying, "Well, I was talking to some of the boys and these are the kinds of issues that came up." It would always underscore something that was being talked about in the paper.

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: Who was the "Old Timer"?

OXLEY: I figure it was probably Bob.

CONNORS: It was Bob.

OXLEY: He was a Missourian, and he could get "old-timish."

CONNORS: He mentions in one of these-- I guess he was making some point and I guess some of the younger workers were grousing about something, but he mentions that he told them about the IAM [International Association of Machinists] that raided our plant back in 1947. We may have just touched on that last time. But what were the circumstances of that?

OXLEY: Well, the IAM was a very big organization, and we were the only UAW [United Automobile Workers local] in San Diego. So I think they thought that they should have it all. They more or less scorned the idea that we could exist over here with such a small local, but, there again, we were a better place to work. That was Ryan [Aeronautical Company]'s credo. And we thought we had a lot better union, and that's why it was a better place to

work. Most people who went from here to Convair [Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation] did because Convair was big enough to absorb a lot of people--some people they didn't need--where at Ryan they got rid of them. So the Ryan people that went to Convair got union jobs pretty quick because they were aggressive and knew what they were talking about. There again was an example of-- The IAM could get almost any contract language they wanted because management knew that they were a little backward about enforcing a contract. Anything we got we had to fight for, because we would insist on contract-adherence enforcement. So they came over and raided us and passed out leaflets. I think maybe one out of every ten they handed out ever got through the gate. They just ditched them right on the spot. Of course, they had to bring about three people to clean up for every one that they had hand-billing. They gave up and it didn't last very long.

CONNORS: So nothing much came of it. Convair is Consolidated Vultee, is that right?

OXLEY: Yes. Now it's General Dynamics [Corporation].

CONNORS: Now it's General Dynamics, okay. When did Vultee and Consolidated merge? Do you have any idea on that?

OXLEY: Guessing, I'd say in the middle sixties.

CONNORS: The middle sixties, when they became General Dynamics?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: So when you were working at Consolidated that first year, it was strictly Consolidated?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: The Korean War started to heat up there about 1950. What was the response at Ryan? Was there any expansion happening? I know at North American [Aviation, Inc.] because of new jets and new kinds of fighter weaponry, I guess, there was a lot of expansion taking place. Did that happen at Ryan?

OXLEY: Well, our target, our drones business. That was a big time for them. We made the first, I guess, ever retrievable drone. It had so much styrofoam in it that it would actually float. It could be saved, dip-netted out of the water and repaired. We did a pretty wholesale business. Now, the navy finally began repairing its own. However, if the fault was in the construction or if it was a new model, we usually got them back for repair. The drone was a unique innovation. It would cruise at bomber speed or it would go at jet speed. It would do it all--and was a very good target.

CONNORS: So they were radio controlled?

OXLEY: Yeah. We also made the console with all the controls. It would send it out and bring it home. In order to give it more push, we had the, I believe they

called them jato bottles, that hooked on and that gave it added impetus. What it would do, at about three hundred yards down the runway it would drop the jato. They were retrievable also, unless they went into the water or something. The important thing about the drone was that it would give you any kind of target practice you wanted. Later on, of course, they began flying at low altitudes and carrying cameras or whatever they wanted to put on them. The speed of the thing was blinding, below radar. Finally, the Chinese shot one down, and they couldn't understand that small, little bitty airplane that flew faster than they'd ever seen.

CONNORS: What was the response among the workers on our getting more and more involved in Korea, until we were sending troops over there?

OXLEY: Well, we had quite a few sons and regular employees who were old enough to have sons who were over there. So it got to be a controversial thing. You had to believe that the Chinese and/or the Russians were going to finally take over the whole continent in order to be in favor of any intervention over there, especially if you had a son over there. So there were mixed feelings. Anybody, I think, would be surprised in the interest in any kind of a war that enhances the work schedule for the most part. People like to be busy. They like to be making big money

and have lots of overtime. That's sort of the way it is. Now, there are people who would just as soon be laid off, but very few.

CONNORS: You were elected to the bargaining committee in 1952.

OXLEY: Right.

CONNORS: What did that entail? First of all, how did the election take place? When you became steward, it was sort of handed to you. The first one.

OXLEY: Yeah. Our union was very small when I became steward. But in '52, we were operating according to strict union bylaws and referring all problems to the international bylaws. So, really, I had to run. We had to do our campaigning throughout the plant for committee. I had set up a pretty good record for writing and winning key grievances. So I was able to win, even though I wasn't known that well at that point throughout the plant as a union guy. It seems as if I had come in with a committee of five; I think I came in sixth, so that I was an alternate. A fellow by the name of Barlow, who made the committee just ahead of me, took a job in management, and I stepped up for the remainder of the term. After that, I was elected each year for Lord knows how many years.

CONNORS: Still in 1952 here, that's when the [Dwight D.] Eisenhower campaign got cooking and was successful. What

was the response at Ryan among the local political action people. I imagine you would have worked for [Adlai E.] Stevenson then.

OXLEY: Yes, we did. The union did.

CONNORS: The union did?

OXLEY: We found that Ike was a very popular fellow with our members and the nonbargain people at Ryan. He was sort of a popular guy, and a lot of us could see that he was sort of okay in many ways. He issued a warning not to ever let the military establishment get ahold of the government, which I thought was good. I think maybe they have. [laughter] The fact that he was pretty big in the military, and the fact that he said it, made a difference to some of us. No, the union never backed Ike for a minute but-- After all, he wasn't the most unpopular president we ever had. He wasn't good for unions, and I don't think he intended to be. No, I think we usually just had, oh, I'd say a group of politically aware people who generally knew about people like Eisenhower and [Richard M.] Nixon and nonunion-type presidents.

CONNORS: That's right. Nixon ran alongside that year. Of course, being from this area, people must have been aware of what kind of guy he was, remembering Jerry Voorhis and Helen Gahagan Douglas.

OXLEY: Yeah. Yeah. You'd get a phone call at midnight:

"Did you know that Helen Gahagan Douglas is a communist?" It happened many, many times. You don't have to tell very many people in Orange County that somebody's a communist. They catch on quick.

CONNORS: Looking at the **Challenger** for some of those earlier years, '52 and '53, the issues that seemed to be coming up around contract time were insurance and classifications. I'd like to talk about some of those things. Now, the insurance was a company fringe benefit.

OXLEY: Well, the reason that the fifties was such a big decade was [because] all of the forties we had our hands tied for the most part. I guess the last couple of years we could have caught up, but the company was ready for us. We possibly tried to take too big a bite in '48. So we missed that one. The following year we made some pretty good strides in insurance and vacations. We've been real short on vacation time, and from that point Ryan got to be, vacationwise, a leader in San Diego aircraft. I don't know exactly what year we got retirement. I just seem to think that it was in '56. At that point it wasn't that much, but, of course, wages weren't that much either. But at that time, some of the people had been here quite a while and had some money saved up, had former jobs or navy, army, Marine Corps pensions and were able to get by fairly well. Some of our early retirees had quite a little real

estate and were in pretty good shape.

CONNORS: On the matter of insurance, would that have been catastrophic or was it a full package of any kind of medical attention that your family would need? Not just hospitalization but tests, dental, and that kind of stuff?

OXLEY: We tried to stay as much as we could in the catastrophic area, figuring that anybody could take care of a visit for flu or a broken arm or something. So we tried to emphasize the need for poor people to have a catastrophic, long-illness-type thing. So I'll say this: Detroit sent out some very, very good insurance actuaries, and we were able to present a hell of a nice picture to the company. Understandably, I suppose, though most people don't think of it this way, a company negotiator has a family, and, hell, he's getting insured too. He may rip and roar and snort and tear, but in the end he'll buy it too. So we knew that as a last resort, all this insurance was here. Money, retirees, and some of the other promotion clauses--seniority issues and all of them--needed to be tied down first. You'd put one that you were pretty sure to get, short of a strike. At the end it worked out. We had some very, very good bargainers. They knew what they were doing. And we had a very loyal membership, too, in the fifties. They didn't always know whether to believe you, but it seemed like a good idea. A bad thing is when a

contract, of course, comes up in the bad months when you're all caught up workwise and the company would just as soon ditch a few people anyhow. This happens. I have had people tell me, and I guess it's true, that there's no good time to strike.

CONNORS: So, ultimately, the company didn't put up much of a stink on the insurance question. They were pretty much--

OXLEY: Well, yes. As I say, they had the idea that they'd buy their own insurance, that the employees should be able to buy their own, and that nobody should interfere. Otherwise, you'd just get to be a faceless man. You go in, you're insured, so forget it.

CONNORS: That's right. We were talking about that the last time. The other item was job classifications and the shop. I talked quite a bit with Paul Russo about this because he was so strong in trying, from the national aircraft department [of the UAW], to change these classifications. I know that, I guess during the war, the SCAI, the Southern California Aircraft Industries--I guess Ryan must have been part of that--agreed to a classification scheme for work. Then that was enforced for a hell of a long time afterwards.

OXLEY: We, time after time, told him where they could stick that business. We felt that on a yearly or bi-yearly, whatever-- See, we could go in and argue about job

descriptions any old time. Now, they had book after book of each job in the plant, a description of the A job, the top job, the B job, and usually a C job. That's a terribly hard thing to do. If you have, like, forty people working in plastics, you just can't ride herd enough on that. In the first place, when a fellow runs out of a job, he'll take most any job rather than get sent home. So if he's a C, he'll do a B job if he can and think nothing of it. His buddies say, "Well, what the hell"--they don't want him to lose pay--"let him go ahead."

Then we used to fight--and I mean fight--about a glossary of terms that would tell you what "skilled" meant or "semiskilled" meant. Holy smoke. The worst one that we ever had was over a compound complex angle. There's a complex angle and there's a compound angle. But we had this big grievance that went on. There isn't anybody down there today that would-- But if one of them happened to vacation in San Diego, one of the old employee-relations managers, I'm sure if you mentioned that to him, he'd say, "You've been talking to Bill Oxley." Because I'm about the only one left out here. We'd get engineers in, senior engineers: "What's a compound complex angle?" And holy smokes, Tom, you should have heard it. Presumably, it's an angle and then another angle going off this angle creates this compound part, as far as that goes. But if it's a

tough one, then you've got a complex angle--that's it. We never applied it to a grievance because an arbitrator would sit there looking cross-eyed and wouldn't care.

CONNORS: Where would that come up? Something like in welding?

OXLEY: Well, usually it was when we were trying to determine that they were working a B tool-and-die maker or a jig-and-fixture builder in the A classification. And that's when we would give them our idea of a compound complex. Really, [John] Allard used to say--and I agreed with him, I guess everybody did--that there shouldn't be any job descriptions. [If] you get a tool-and-die maker, a jig-and-fixture builder, a maintenance machinist that can do anything that he's called on to do, he's an A man. That's how it should be, but you had a hell of a time getting any agreement on that one from the company.

CONNORS: The purpose of these classifications, I suppose, was to break the work down so that they could always have somebody doing something at the lowest possible pay scale.

OXLEY: Yeah, now, they had a-- And this is significant. I guess anybody getting elected to a union bargaining position would look at it. They had a pretty sizable wage and salary division. Now, what they did usually was roam around the plant and look at jobs and see if there was an opportunity to maybe do away with one job description and

move it over into another one or dilute it in such a way that they could do away with the top job and they could do away with the second job. Then everybody would be in the C, which would save them twenty, twenty-five cents an hour. So in their big wage and salary they'd have-- Maybe we only had 1,500 in the production maintenance, which was all union, and they'd probably have 10 or 12 people in wage and salary. They'd put a couple in one department, a couple in another. And they go out there, look around, try to figure out how to cut wages. Usually it was some fellow that had experience in the department, and now he's the company person and he's willing to go out there and do the cutting. We considered it the most debasing thing a union man could do, to take a job cutting wages. We had two or three union committeemen that went into those jobs through the years.

CONNORS: Was that one of the main ways the company had to recruit management, from the production workers?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: And there was quite a response?

OXLEY: Yes. Really, the pay wasn't that great. I think most of them just had a vision of not having much to do and not getting dirty. But really, it was something to do. They had to take a lot of abuse. Normally you'd hear them, "Well, you're not doing us any more damage than you did

when you were on our committee. So don't feel bad about it."

CONNORS: How about you? Did they ever approach you to kick you upstairs?

OXLEY: Yes, two or three times, but at one time I had just been elected chairman of the committee. I had gotten more votes than anybody else. We had a bylaw then that made whoever got the most votes the committee chairman. So my boss--who, incidentally, was a nice guy, I liked him--came to me and said that he had noted how I got along with people in the area and he'd like to have me take a job as leadman, which would within two or three months at the most end up with the supervisor's job. I had just two weeks before won the chairman of the committee election. So I told him that I always figured that if I was offered that job, I'd snicker a little bit, but I said, "I'm not snickering. I'm honored that it is coming from you, because you're a good guy, but I can't take it because these people just elected me to what I consider the most important job in the union two weeks ago." I didn't tell him this, but the timing, it looked to me, was a little bit suspicious, too. But a few years later, the fellow that got the job-- Well, he [the boss] had told me, "If you don't take it, I'm going to have to give it to so-and-so, and I really don't want him to be a supervisor." And in

about eight years or ten years, I guess, the fellow got on--what was it--a company plan for supervision. He got $17,500 for his settlement.

CONNORS: What year was that that you were elected chairman of the committee? I don't think I have that.

OXLEY: It probably would have been, I would say offhand, '57 or '58. It couldn't have been '58.

CONNORS: You had became president, yeah.

OXLEY: It was probably 1956. Believe me, a couple of hundred thousand things happened to me.

CONNORS: Getting back to the classifications, how was this resolved eventually? Were you able over the years to cut back those A, B, and C divisions?

OXLEY: We did away with some of them. The company found out that we were wasting a lot of time bellowing about them, but there was never any noticeable progress, really.

CONNORS: Do you think it's still divided up that way?

OXLEY: Yeah, and I think the company is still dragging out the glossary and the job descriptions and trying with their wage and salary people to slice away at some jobs someplace.

CONNORS: There were a couple of significant Southern California strikes in the early fifties that you were probably very well aware of and may have even gone there to support. One was the Douglas [Aircraft Company] strike in

1951, which was Local 148 UAW. The other one was the North American strike in 1953. What kind of support activity did--?

OXLEY: Well, we sent them money, quite a little money, groceries, and we went up on weekends so that some of them could have a weekend and handled their picket line for Saturday and for Sunday.

CONNORS: Did you have a community services committee at that time or would it just come up at a meeting?

OXLEY: No. Normally, it would come up at a meeting and we would put barrels out at the gate and people would bring in-- Of course, there were always those who would put in dog food, [laughter] but mostly people were pretty good about it. We had our own strike in 1948, and Douglas and North American helped us out. We got a lot of help from all over the country.

CONNORS: In fact, I noticed in one of the later issues of the **Challenger**, in the president's column--your column--I think it was 1960, you made mention of how the Longshoremen and Warehousemen [International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] had been very helpful during that 1948 strike. I take it, it was a local down here in San Diego of the--

OXLEY: Yeah, the Longshoremen let us use their hall right next to the ballpark. Several of our strikers--since they

were shorthanded--would go help unload ships at good wages. Then, too, after the seventh inning, we could get in the ball game free. There were always some longshoremen hanging around there. They came down and picketed with us. They were just a hell of a good bunch of union guys.

CONNORS: It didn't come up that they may, being a union that was associated with Harry Bridges's union-- That didn't become an issue?

OXLEY: It may have with a certain wing of the local. We had people, a few, who were anti-Bridges. I didn't bring it along, but one of our supervisors in inspection, in the Ryan paper, I noticed where he had been asked to give a speech in front of some local group about the advance of atheistic communism. He had a sister who was a nun and a brother who was a priest in North Dakota. Actually, the guy had been--and still is, I'm sure--speaking about communism whenever he got a chance. He and I, of course, used to have many arguments. And I didn't think, to tell you the truth, that socialism was a bad idea. I don't know where they got the communism part. That was a small part of it.

CONNORS: It's true. It's true. Would the North American strike of 1953--? I pick on this because having spoken to and interviewed people that were involved in it, it's very interesting the kinds of opinions and attitudes and

assessments you get. For instance, Paul Russo said that it was completely wrong and that they shouldn't have struck; other people thought that it was necessary and a good thing. Even in the **Challenger**, once the strike was called and the guys were out, there was a statement by John Allard saying, "They're out and we're going to support them."

OXLEY: Well, of course, he had Paul Schrade to deal with up there. Paul Schrade was a brilliant guy; he knew a lot of things. I remember Allard in years, maybe months or weeks afterwards-- I'm not sure if he was booted out of the negotiations at the very last or what. I don't think so. But at any rate, he said that Paul made it very, very tough. Maybe it wasn't Allard. Somebody told me that Paul made it very, very tough, because he didn't allow his committee-- He was very vociferous. He'd say, "Don't drop an issue. They're all good. They're all just. They're all fair. The hell with it, just hang on." You know John knew, most people knew--I'm sure Paul Russo knew--that, hell, you've got to drop some demands in a period like that because, say, half of your people are back in and the other half about ready to go in. Settle the son of a gun. Take them on later, because they don't want another one any worse than you do. So that was, I think, the tough part about that strike, that it went on and on and on. The company just wasn't going to hang on to all the issues.

They wanted something to go off the table.

CONNORS: In 1954, you were elected vice president. What did that entail? There were two vice presidents, I believe. Is that--?

OXLEY: Night shift and day shift, one each.

CONNORS: Yeah.

OXLEY: I was day-shift vice president, and all that amounts to is if the president is ill on meeting night or-- Now, for instance, I couldn't sign a check. In order to defray the expenses, the president and the financial secretary have to both sign. I couldn't sign a check. That was about it. If we had a meeting and the president made a report and somebody thought he should have his head examined, he'd surrender the chair while he discussed it, debated, whatever. And when the argument was over, I stepped off. This, by and large, is what all UAW vice presidents do.

CONNORS: Is that considered a training ground for the presidency?

OXLEY: It's kind of the way it works out, but I don't believe that's it, because I don't know of anybody that really wanted me to be vice president at that point. I was always a kind of a membership guy and didn't depend an awful lot on a caucus to get elected until the first year that I became president. At that point, a group of people came to me, quite a number, and asked me to run.

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CONNORS: Okay, that's what I was going to ask you next, about the question of a caucus or slate.

OXLEY: This is what happened. Most people, at that point, had no problem if they wanted to run, as in the case of Dewey Cress and Bob Spears, who had been in union circles so long, in high places. Bob had been recording secretary and had held down good statewide political jobs at election time. And I had never-- See, I had three sons--well, at that point four--and I wanted to be around to see how they were going in school and help their mother [Helen Gries Oxley] to kind of figure out if they were minding well enough and that sort of thing. So I didn't get involved in out-of-town jobs very much and I didn't get involved with caucuses too much. But when this group of people came to me from tooling and some of the critical areas-- You don't mess with tooling; they're the ones, when they pack their toolboxes and leave the plant the company really pricks up its ears.

So when I found out that I was backed by this group, I did one thing that I've never really been sorry for. I went over to the then president, Dewey Cress, and I told him, "Look, Dewey, I've always been on your side and I still am. There's one thing that I want to know. Are we

getting along or aren't we?"

He said, "You get the hell out of here. I've heard how you're cutting my butt."

I said, "Look, Dewey, I don't want it this way. I'd like to see you be president."

"I'll get to be president whether you like it or not."

I said, "Okay, Dewey, let's see about that."

So I just walked away. I had planned, really, to get into a handshaking contest and go back and tell them no, but I'm glad I didn't. We accomplished quite a few things that Dewey was actually opposed to. He didn't think that we stood a chance with the holiday grievance. He thought that any person that had time off repeatedly with illness should be fired: "After all, he's hired to do eight hours' work, and here he is gone." So I always said, "Well, I think the contract says that they can be sick." It's an act of God, whatever. So we had problems with this. We had to coax Dewey a little bit, because he felt that he was the chairman and he could determine if grievances were good grievances or bad grievances. I'd go along with that, because we had a little old trio of people on the committee who could usually talk him into getting behind the grievance.

CONNORS: Where did Dewey come from? I know from reading

the newspaper he seems to have been around for quite a while.

OXLEY: Yeah. He was one of the first. Dewey was a neighbor of mine at Linda Vista. Our kids were good friends. He's from Monett, Missouri. He was a railroad man back there. He had a job--he liked to talk about it--with Huey [P.] Long. He was a gravel inspector, which we found out was that he had to look at the gravel to see if it was the right size, pea or whatever, and that was it. He made good money. Dewey was a hell of a good poker player. Poker used to scare me to death, because with the family, you don't play very much poker.

So it damned near broke Dewey's heart when he got beat in 1958, and he got shellacked just about as bad as I did later. Of course, I waited a couple of terms to get beat. But it may have saved his life, just like it may have saved mine, because those were tough negotiating years. We were into the fifties, and the old no-strike thing was gone. The collection of dues, however, was just as tough for me, because we didn't have the union shop then. You just had to get your membership high. We had it in the nineties most of the way.

CONNORS: Ninety percent?

OXLEY: Yeah, a little better than 90 [percent] most of the

way. Actually, there was a lot to be said for the union shop and a lot to be said against it. When you have union shop, even if it is a modified or whatever the other one is, what happens is the people are a captive audience--and they know it. The other way, they could always say, "I'm going to get out of this son of a bitch. The way you're running it, I'm not going to have anything to do with it." So during what they called the "escape period," they got out, with a proper letter to the company and to the union. Then you had the job of going around, kissing it up, trying to get them back in, explaining what happened. "Well, now we've got different officers." So that was the way that went.

CONNORS: What were some of the reasons people gave for not joining the union? This is the age-old argument: If they're benefiting from the contract and they're getting the same wages as everybody else, why don't they go along with the rest of the group? Because it's that group effort that makes it happen. I know that sometimes people, on a religious basis, don't join unions.

OXLEY: Well, some of them were on the basis of religion. Others just didn't believe that anybody had to tell them when, where, and how to work someplace. I think for the most part, they just didn't want to part with that money every month. Then, you know, you see a couple of union

committeemen walking up the aisle with their grievance pad in their hand and headed for a meeting with the company. It doesn't appear, when you're all sweaty and banging away and screwing away, that they're getting anything done. I've come out of a-- Bob Spears and I worked together quite a little. We've come out of a meeting where we really were disheveled. We had been screaming all afternoon at somebody. The first fellow you met at the plant would say, "When are you two lazy so-and-sos going to work?" Well, there's no defense against that. I wasn't going to work until I had to, that's for sure. But, anyhow, that makes it a little bad.

CONNORS: At Ryan, the officers have time off to take care of union business, but otherwise they still do their jobs. I know that at some other locals, that's not the case at all. They can work at the office.

OXLEY: They have a committee room that they--

CONNORS: Or some of the reps or stewards don't have to do any work. They just go around to make sure things are happening.

OXLEY: Well, times have changed. I got $20 a month for gas that I might have to buy to come down to the hall and work on the weekends or to go to the airport and pick up any service rep that might be in town who flew down from Detroit or Los Angeles. So they gave me $20 a month. The

month after I was defeated, that went up to--for the president--$100 a month. The recording secretary didn't used to get anything because he didn't have to record except at meetings--that was it. So he went to $75 a month. The financial secretary went to $50 a month. So there was quite a raise for paychecks around here for a while. It used to be sort of a grass-roots thing. We used to go out and do things without lost time, but no more. Now they get paid.

CONNORS: I'd like to move backward in time a little bit. We were talking about your period as president. I'd like to push that aside and go back to a couple more items from the pre-1957 period. One was your time as president of the [Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)] industrial union council [IUC] of San Diego. I think last time you told me that it was really in the fifties when you started to get active into a broader picture of the labor movement here. How was it that you got involved with the IUC to begin with?

OXLEY: Well, I was a delegate to the industrial union council, first of all, and I guess I just ran for president and I had the most delegate votes. That's the way I got to be president. At that point, the industrial union council was sort of on its way out. We had a contingent of fellows who used to go to their meetings after I was defeated, and they harassed them and accused them of being communists and

so forth, taking communist positions. It just gradually faded out. Nobody wanted it.

CONNORS: I know the California IUC was dissolved sometime in 1949 and then reemerged. I guess some of the communist-dominated unions were thrown out and a purge took place. Now, that would have been before your time obviously.

OXLEY: Right.

CONNORS: But I guess the legacy--

OXLEY: Well, we had a so-called communist-dominated delegation at one time from Local 506. At the point that I was president, however, aside from having liberal leanings, we sure didn't subscribe to any communist doctrine. I think that's about all, excepting that I'm sure that in county, state, and national elections, the old CIO council would probably endorse Progressive Party candidates in some cases.

CONNORS: So you were IUC president for, was that two years?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: Was that a term of two years or did--?

OXLEY: I believe it was. Yeah.

CONNORS: Were you happy enough not to be president for another two years?

OXLEY: Well, I ran for two more.

CONNORS: Oh, you ran for two? How much time did that take

up? Was it more of a--?

OXLEY: Oh, it wasn't that much. I'd just show up for the meetings and whatever business. We had a recording secretary and financial secretary--they took off with their business. Mine was making sure everything was properly placed on the floor and voted upon. That was it.

CONNORS: So you had to follow parliamentary procedure? **Robert's Rules of Order**? From 1954 to '56, of course, what's happening nationally is that [George] Meany and [Walter P.] Reuther are starting to talk, or had been talking for quite a while. In 1954, I guess, they announced the merger, and in 1955 the merger of the AFL [American Federation of Labor] and the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] took place. How did that go down here in San Diego generally, and at Ryan?

OXLEY: We had very little trouble, actually. Making it easier, some of the most anti-left-wing elements in town--One of them was the Butchers [Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America]. They had two leaders go to jail for terms of two or three years each. I don't even remember what for. So that kind of pulled their claws.

CONNORS: Was it for some sort of racketeering or something?

OXLEY: I don't remember exactly. Anyhow, they were very itchy about having anything to do with anybody who might

even say the word "Russia." So what we did-- I was asked to be on the merger committee. Apparently, there wasn't any aftermath. It was just my delegation that might have disagreed with me in the old industrial union council. You never know.

CONNORS: You personally were in support of the merger?

OXLEY: I thought it was a pretty good idea, yes. Things were happening then. For instance, the [United Brotherhood of] Carpenters [and Joiners of America] union had more people expelled for left-wing activities than did our union. And I mean fired.

CONNORS: The Carpenters here in San Diego?

OXLEY: Yes. So I guess thinking liberally isn't with one group only.

CONNORS: Well, that had been a problem at 506? People were fired for--

OXLEY: I wish I could remember the year. A fellow by the name of Whitey Rosen was fired.

CONNORS: Well, that reminds me. I wanted to ask a general question about the McCarthy period. I suppose this would have been during that period.

OXLEY: Well, roughly, but I don't remember whether it was exactly or not. He had gone to UCLA and I don't think he graduated, but he came down here after a couple or three years. He had been a very young kid and he got caught up

amongst the-- Oh, I don't want to call it "radical element," but for want of a better word. So he joined, I think, in San Diego, but I didn't know that and when he was terminated, I didn't know what the hell to do. You can throw yourself on the mercy and go before the committee and say, "Hell, look, this is what I did." Or you can get an attorney and let him fight it. But the truth of it is if the company didn't have a nonvital job to put you on where you wouldn't come in contact with any vital national security job nor employees, if they didn't have that kind of job, they would let you go. So it's almost incomprehensible what some employees will do to get a fellow employee fired when there's a matter of loyalty involved.

CONNORS: Did you go to the last CIO convention, which was in 1955 some months before the merger? It might have been in the summertime or in the fall.

OXLEY: Oh, I'm sure I did.

CONNORS: Did you generally go to the national conventions?

OXLEY: Yes, I automatically went when I was president, but '55, that would have been the year before I was vice president. Yeah, I think I probably went to that. I'm not sure.

CONNORS: I also noticed in one of the earlier **Challengers**, in 1953, you went to a full-employment conference back in

Washington, D.C. Was that your first job as a representative in a national kind of a setting?

OXLEY: It really was my first trip of any distance. I went with the president, a young fellow by the name of Jim [James] Harmon.

CONNORS: Jim Harmon, yeah.

OXLEY: He just ran from the airframe area, and, hell, nobody knew him, but he was a perky young guy and got elected. I think his learning curve was still going straight up when he left. Old Jim. He was a fighting idiot, you know, being so young, so inexperienced. Most of us thought, "Oh, well, what the hell. We can live around him." But, like I say, he was scrappy and anything for a good honest fight. And so we found ourselves more or less taking to him.

CONNORS: Where was he from?

OXLEY: I think he was a full-fledged Oklahoman. He had a wife who could whip him. And she did on a few occasions, and it was just sort of a mixed-up pair.

CONNORS: He preceded Dewey Cress as president, right?

OXLEY: No, he beat Dewey Cress. I don't know whether he resigned or what. He didn't run another time.

CONNORS: Dewey Cress preceded you as president?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: And Harmon--

OXLEY: Was before me. See, Dewey came back then and beat somebody after.

CONNORS: Oh, Dewey came back.

OXLEY: Then I was after Dewey.

CONNORS: In the mid-fifties, into the later fifties, I guess, aircraft-- In fact, "aircraft" is becoming "aerospace," too. That's when the word starts being bandied about that it's "aerospace." Now, as Ryan is expanding its facilities, I believe-- They were off site?

OXLEY: Yes, I had two hill plants at one time, both electronics.

CONNORS: What are hill plants?

OXLEY: Well, they were up on Kearny Mesa. This was the home plant, and they were Ryan Electronics. They had their own committees and their own chairman, but I was the president. The one big electronics [plant] started at Torrance and then moved down here. We had to organize them all over again.

CONNORS: Really, they were just able to cancel the--?

OXLEY: Oh, we had to sign them all up again, which wasn't really that much of a problem.

CONNORS: What were the communications with that group? I guess it would be not much different than--

OXLEY: Well, we knew most of them and we worked together real well. I never really used to have very many

arguments. I delegated authority if they wanted me to. Otherwise, I assumed they had the ball, and I just didn't believe very much in bossing.

CONNORS: How about training? Here you have all this electronic stuff happening and these fabulous new jet engines. How did the company handle the fact that they needed the work force to be better trained? Did they have training sessions for new hires?

OXLEY: Well, for certain jobs they required that they know it when they came into the plant, but for the most part an old-time assembler that really knew his business could do the job. The training period was so short for him. We worked with sonar, radar--all that sort of things. I was on the Mariner program for the first trip to the moon where it scooped up moon dirt, held it up in front of the camera.

CONNORS: You were working on the prototype for that or the actual machinery?

OXLEY: We made everything for the solar panels. It was quite a machine. I think the striking part about any lunar excursion or any such thing is that all vehicles on the ground are encased because they've got to go rushing through hailstorms, wind storms, dust storms, or whatever. So they have to be wrapped. But the minute you push the button down at the console and the encasement falls away and panels come out, all four of them, and here

are the energy cells, why, from then on it could be a card table out there. It goes the same speed. So no more shielding and enclosure. The difference between a spacecraft and aircraft. I think once you understand that, it simplifies the matter.

CONNORS: How about security clearances? Of course when you're talking about the Mariner, we're talking about something developed in the sixties. Did they tell you what you were building?

OXLEY: Oh, yeah. We knew all about it. We had clearance to know that. They called it "need to know." Yes, I raised some kind of hell at one point. They were getting a secret clearance for something and there were people like with, oh, let's say five years' seniority, and in here I was up in the twenties. And they were working overtime and I wasn't, because my job wasn't cleared for security.

So I went to the chief of security and I said, "Fred, I want a secret, whatever it is, super-secret clearance."

He said, "Hell, you don't need one."

I said, "Oh, I think I do. There are people with twenty years less seniority than I and here they are working all the overtime. I have a family and I can use a little overtime."

He said, "Yeah, but you're not on that job."

I said, "No, and I won't be as long as I don't have

the clearance. Well," I said, "Fred, I hope you don't take this lightly, because I mean it."

So he went to my boss. My boss came to me and said, "Hell, Bill, you're not needed on that job."

I said, "I realize that, but I'm very dissatisfied with the way you're treating me with my seniority. Show me another guy in here with this kind of seniority that doesn't have secret clearance. I look out of place. They all have the stripe on their badge--me nothing. It makes me feel like you don't think I can get a secret clearance."

He said, "I don't know about that."

I said, "Well, give it a shot, because I'll go over your head. You're clear down here. All you have to do, though, is go out and tell Fred you want one for me."

So he did. Well, now, you'd be surprised where they had to go and who they had to talk to in the air force to find out that I was a candidate for a secret classification. Anyhow, they did. I went back on vacation, and some old guy, old enough to be my dad, would say, "There was a guy around here asking me if I knew you. I said, well, not since you were a baby. [Just since] you were in California."

I said, "Did you say I was okay?"

"Yeah, excepting he thought that you worked for some

chain grocery."

I gave the name of the chain, and he gave the name of the fellow who ran that store. Eirenberg I put down, and Krasnow was the guy I actually worked for. Anyhow, they went through all that. They went clear to the cradle, and I got the clearance. I was never sorry I did. It was just a matter of something to raise hell about.

CONNORS: It was a matter of principle, I guess. Going back to the mid-fifties, I'd like to talk a little about this building that we're in now [the UAW Local 506 union hall]. Where did you meet, first of all, in the forties and early fifties before this place was built? Did you have a hall then?

OXLEY: We were down on Market Street.

CONNORS: Market Street in San Diego.

OXLEY: Fourth [Street] and Market. We used to have a little bit of a problem parking sometimes for the meeting, especially for the swing shift. They'd meet at one in the morning or one thirty. They'd park, get out of their car, lock it up. The cops would stop and shake them down and all this and that. So we toyed with the idea of giving them a form to hand to the cop that they were on their way to a meeting, or from one, and then we decided, no, maybe the cops would wake up after they frisked a few of them.

At one meeting, somebody got up on the floor and said,

"Look, we've been down here paying rent on this place, paying rent on the chairs for all these years, and we don't own anything. I suggest we set up a building committee and think about building a hall." So Allard, I think, was there. He said, "Well, they did that at Bell"--or wherever the Chrysler local was. He said, "Look, it's been paid for for years, and we're pretty proud of it. You'll be surprised how fast that goes once you get going." Incidentally, I got up in a retirees' meeting in 1989 and complimented the old guy that was on the building committee. They found this lot for $15,000. The hall cost $85,000. The building committee went out, found a lot, and we voted on it. A little bit later, we got an architect to get his idea of about what it would cost. We got a bank loan. The bank we'd been doing business with refused us. Mr. Ryan was on the board of directors for a bank, and right away that bank lent us the money. It was interesting. He [T. Claude Ryan] kind of grinned at Dewey Cress and said, "Well, I trust you." So in no time, then, we had the backers for the thing. There were the dollars, the ten dollars, and we all chipped in.

CONNORS: It was dedicated in 1956. I've been told that it's been used, even now, as a kind of community center.

OXLEY: Well, that was our concern. We wanted to make sure that the design more or less conformed to Spanish

architecture, in a way at least--the color. We've been real accepted. We have grandkids of kids now that had their wedding reception there. You can tell by the number of tequila bottles lying out in front. [laughter]

CONNORS: I wanted to talk about some of the larger issues that you faced when you became president. But first, one of the big issues that I noticed going through the papers here for that 1955 period was the question of a guaranteed wage, guaranteed employment. The point that was made in one of these 1955 issues was a headline that Ford had gotten this guaranteed employment and that the aircraft [industry] would try to go for the same--

OXLEY: It was pretty tough out here to get a lot of the things that automobile had. Auto, during that period at least, had a lot more gas than we had, so we didn't get very far with guaranteed wages. All the while, however, we did strengthen our seniority and layoffs, and we made cross-bumping between departments-- Where if you could do the work or if you had any experience at a certain job in another department and your classification was running short, you could put in to move across to some job that you were capable of doing. If they couldn't think of a good excuse for not putting you over there, you could go, and you would bump the bottom fellow, of course. After that, you had your seniority in that department and in the one

you came from.

CONNORS: When we had that preliminary discussion the first time, you were telling me about the holiday grievance, and I think that took two years to clear up. Why don't we talk about that? Describe what happened. That would have been what, 1958 to 1960?

OXLEY: Well, I had just won the election in May or June with an entire slate of new committee people. Not a single old guy on it, just a bunch of young guys.

CONNORS: What happened there?

OXLEY: We ran on the first slate I ever really had anything to do with. Some of them I recruited. They call me up on Christmas or New Year's to remind me of it and thank me for it. "Otherwise," they said, "I don't think I'd ever have known anything about anything." Anyhow, the chairman of the committee, an Indian guy, Stan [Stanley] Cain said, "You know, what they're doing"--he was from the airframe area--"is that they're coming around to suggest that for two weeks prior to the holiday, we work straight time for Saturday and Sunday. Then on the holiday weekends, we'll go straight through and have those two days off." He said, "I think it's a bunch of BS." So the company then decided that was the way they were going to go. There were a good many mistakes made by the company during the assessment of this grievance.

Now, as John Vanderlinde, who I mentioned the other day, said, "Well, Bill, have you ever thought of letting the people vote about it?"

I said, "John, I have never thought about that because it isn't really proper. They really don't know that much about it. What you're doing here is not contractual, and you're going to get in bad."

"Well," he said, "I think they'd vote 90 percent."

I said, "That's of no interest to me whatsoever, John. You're asking for-- Actually, there's 1,300 people working overtime, Saturdays and Sundays, right now. What you're asking us to do is have them give you half time for two days. You want a $12,500 Christmas present. That's all you want. We're not going to give it to you. And if you persist in this thing, we're going to get it back."

The factory manager then came to me, Bob [Robert] Chase; he since banged into a big support under one of the overpasses here and is with us no more. But Bob said, "Bill, have you seen an attorney about this thing?"

I said, "Bob, I am not such a stuffed shirt that I would take on a $15,000 attorney bill"--which now would probably be $45,000 to $50,000.

"Well," he said, "you know we won in '52, don't you? A grievance just like it."

I said, "No, it wasn't just like it. You weren't

trying to bulldoze anybody in those days, but you are now. You're telling us we should let the members here vote on it and everything. Now, that isn't what the contract says. It says we're the sole bargaining agent and it says a lot of things."

So we set up a deadline on a day and I called a meeting with the company. We had the full committee and we went in and made one last plea to them. "What's your membership going to think, Bill? It's going to cost you a lot of money." I said, "Yup. Well, they've put up with me so far." Then we on the committee went into a huddle. Allard came down to help us.

CONNORS: John was an international rep at that point for [the] aircraft [division of UAW].

OXLEY: Well, yeah, that was about the time. I was going to think if he was down here organizing. Anyhow, he just helped out a great deal he did that. That way he got two or three hours of sleep at night. So John said, "I'll tell you what. You're a good old casual dropper-in. Meet [Wally] Herbert"--that was the chief negotiator for the company--"meet him accidentally in the halls and ask him if we can have a meeting with him." So Allard and I went in, and all we wanted him to do is agree to negotiate the holiday grievance. So he gladly signed our little agreement. So then that was another step.

I've never been through a grievance that was so carefully orchestrated between a lot of people. We went up to see Ralph Nutter, who has since become a judge and was quite a prominent labor attorney. He said, "Well, I'd give you guys about a fifty-fifty chance of winning that." So Nutter and [Edgar A.] Jones--Jones used to have "The Judge," I think it was called. He had a trial on some [television] program.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

JANUARY 27, 1989

CONNORS: We were talking about [Edgar A.] Jones and [Ralph] Nutter.

OXLEY: Yes, Edgar Jones. He agreed to be the arbitrator after we got it into arbitration. So [Ryan Aeronautical] Company had about three attorneys, and, of course, we [United Automobile Workers, Local 506] had Ralph Nutter. There was some parade of witnesses, but our case hinged on the fact that, look, they took it out of the hands of the committee and said, "Either take it to a vote of the people or we're going to work." Then they posted for their employees a sign at the management: "Due to the action of your union, you will find many, many dollars missing from your paycheck over these four year-end days." Well, we said that no one has the right to blame this on the union when they won't even negotiate. They just closed her down, so we called it a lockout.

Well, in a few weeks, here comes Edgar Jones's award. He not only gave the employees the pay for those four days, but he also ordered the company to write an apology and hang it in the places they hung this thing blaming the union. So it was a complete victory, and the award was $254,000-plus, which was the biggest thing in the United States that year or probably God knows in how many years. Many people thought that we were really clobbering

the company, company-bashing time, you know. So it made it a little tough in some areas. Some people thought, "Well, good for you." Anyhow, we never had any holiday trouble after that; we always got together and talked it over. Of course, now I imagine the company would call in a couple of guys from the committee and scare the hell out of them and tell them when they were going to work.

CONNORS: What were some of the other issues that came up during your presidency?

OXLEY: Well, another one was determining for certain whether you could be sick as long as you were under a doctor's care for as long as you wanted to until you were well or died. That one cost them nearly $2,000, which at that time was quite a lot of money. That wouldn't be that much nowadays.

CONNORS: What was the company saying?

OXLEY: The company was saying that after a fellow-- And a couple of our committeemen were saying that too. "What the hell? After you missed so much work in a year-- My God, 117 days, that's ridiculous. You should lose your job." But we were saying, "Now, look, as long as he is under a doctor's care and he can show doctor visits and medical expenses for those days, what the hell? He was sick--too sick to work." And we won that one. We put the office girl to just doing nothing but calling doctors. Ralph

Myers was the guy's name. He brought in every slip he could find and arranged them all bookwise. We won that rascal. I was on the board of arbitration then, and the company guy who was telling the arbitrator how unreasonable it was, he said, "My God, Bill," talking to me-- [William] Bill Sullivan was a company rep, too. He said, "It looked to me like you believe a fellow can be sick anytime for as long as he wants to." I said, "Well, I believe that the contract says that." The arbitrator says, "I do, too." So, my God, Sullivan, he was new with the company, and I felt sorry for him because he was at the age where [if] he leaves Ryan, he's got problems getting a job. Anyhow, we enjoyed the award just the same.

CONNORS: How about right to work? In 1958, there was a big right-to-work push in California. How was that responded to by Local 506?

OXLEY: We didn't have much trouble with that. What was the other one? Not who is right but what is right-- Moral Majority.

CONNORS: Yeah, Moral Majority.

OXLEY: That was another one that made an attempt. I won't say that no one listened, but they didn't get a hold. They had some pretty good sounding-- They sent one of our people, a welder, over to the Swiss Alps--he and his wife and two children. There must have been something in it for

him.

CONNORS: Maybe we can wrap this up just with a couple more items from the fifties. In looking at the newspaper, on the last page towards the end of that decade--it might have been 1959 or 1960--there was a push to organize the white-collar workers at Ryan. What was behind that? What was the response?

OXLEY: That was nationwide. Chrysler [Corporation] had organized its white collar, and they had just a nationwide push to organize. We lost that bugger by four votes. It was about the biggest heartbreaker, because you always have a lot of man-hours and a lot of money in one like that.

CONNORS: How many people do you think that would have covered?

OXLEY: Oh, at least two hundred.

CONNORS: How long of a campaign was it?

OXLEY: I'd say six months at least. One fellow that I disliked ever since let us know that he talked four people into voting against the union the last day.

CONNORS: Was that one of the managers?

OXLEY: No, he was one of the the white-collar workers.

CONNORS: These people would have been people in personnel and--

OXLEY: Well, yes.

CONNORS: Employee relations.

OXLEY: Perhaps planning and scheduling, that type of thing.

CONNORS: Would some of them have been engineers?

OXLEY: No, engineers are the untouchables.

CONNORS: Were there secretaries involved in this?

OXLEY: Not at that time, no. Toward the end of the sixties, we noticed a tendency for the company to start instructing their supervisors, when they received the written grievance, just to sign it-- Oh, what was the word they used? "Disagreed," whatever. They weren't going to grant it. That way it went out front where the real smarties got ahold of it. So we noticed a tendency on their part to move in that direction. Always before, we could call a meeting with the supervisor out on the floor, hash it out with him. I would say that the majority of the time that was the last of it. "No problem here. I'll just take care of that." But all of a sudden, even the slightest one went to the front office--we skipped the second step of the grievance.

CONNORS: When was this happening?

OXLEY: Towards the end of the fifties.

CONNORS: Fifties, okay.

OXLEY: What happened in an atmosphere like that, it made the wage and salary group look pretty sharp. They were taking some real nonessential-type grievances off the floor

and away from the supervisor and the employees in the area and moving them into their domain. It strung the union out. It got more grievances in the third step, we called it, the one just before arbitration. So now all of a sudden, in place of having maybe eight or ten grievances waiting to be heard, you had maybe-- I think it got up to two hundred at one time. This ruins the union's reputation for service, because somebody is gone--hell, he is back in Georgia--by the time his grievance is heard. That was not during my domain. I'm glad--I think I would have done something about it. I think most of the supervisors down there, had they had it explained to them what they were actually doing, would have cut the number of grievances that they sent out there.

CONNORS: How did that ultimately get stopped?

OXLEY: It isn't stopped.

CONNORS: So it became a company tactic to tie the union's hands.

OXLEY: It worked. Now, somebody had to tell them that. Or they just said to themselves, "We need business out here to justify our existence."

CONNORS: One last topic for the end of the fifties is the JFK [John F. Kennedy] campaign and his emergence. As a senator, he was pushing for health care legislation. I know when he was a senator, he was speaking of civil rights

and civil rights legislation. Of course, the McClellan hearings were taking place, and he and his brother [Robert F.] were associated with that. How did you see Kennedy as he was coming up? What was his image here among your fellow union members?

OXLEY: I think he was great. He had a debate with [Richard M.] Nixon, was it?

CONNORS: Uh-huh.

OXLEY: I thought he really scored on it and on these types of issues. I thought Jack Kennedy was one of the best.

CONNORS: In the McClellan hearings [hearings of the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field] where-- Well, in fact the UAW [United Automobile Workers] was brought into those hearings. I know [Walter P.] Reuther testified, and there was some crazy attempt to compare the UAW to the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters. I guess the impetus for those hearings was to pay some attention to what the Teamsters were doing. How was that taken in Local 506?

OXLEY: Well, we thought that Reuther handled himself real well in disclaiming any similarity between UAW and the Teamsters. He outlined it in the areas that were in question or in doubt. Really, I don't think anybody ever too seriously decided that we were Teamsters. Of course, I've always understood what goes with the Teamsters, too. When you get a bunch of trucks and truck companies spread

out from coast to coast, you really have a runaway shop. There isn't anybody that you can police with a five-man committee. And some of those cowboys get pretty rough out on the road. They own a couple of trucks, and you're not going to tell them what the hell to do, even if they starve to death--which they will. So the organizational methods have to be less discreet than you'd like them.

CONNORS: In the IUC [Congress of Industrial Organizations industrial union council], obviously, you wouldn't have any contact with the Teamsters because they were an AF of L [American Federation of Labor] union, but how about after the merger in San Diego? Did you have any contact with the local Teamsters here?

OXLEY: I was never a delegate to the San Diego County Labor Council. After we merged, why, I never did go down, not once. I know a couple of Teamsters now. They go to this FORUM [Federation of Retired Union Members] that Paul [Russo] was president of. Believe me, they're well informed.

CONNORS: What were your thoughts when they got expelled in 1957?

OXLEY: I was for it. That wasn't a democratic union. I think [the International Union of] United Auto[mobile], Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America [the UAW] are probably the most democratic, unless they go

completely insane like they can and let politics run the local rather than adherence to the contract, the constitution. [There is] too much time wasted fighting one another. That's PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] too, isn't it?

CONNORS: What's that?

OXLEY: [laughter] Fighting one another.

CONNORS: Yeah. [laughter]

OXLEY: Even church choirs, for God's sake.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

FEBRUARY 3, 1989

CONNORS: Last time, we ended up in the middle of your presidency, around 1960. I wanted to talk about the second term. Did you have any kind of opposition come up against you after the first term?

OXLEY: The second term was a very close election. They ran an inexperienced, junior fellow against me from tooling, which was a pretty solid group. Really, I think, experiencewise, any way you'd figure, he didn't have any record in the local [United Automobile Workers, Local 506]. A likable guy. So he did pretty darn well. I beat him, but not by very much.

CONNORS: What was his name?

OXLEY: I can't think of it.

CONNORS: I'll go back into the newspapers and find out. Didn't the guys from tooling first approach you two years before?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: Was it at the caucus? Had they became dissatisfied or--?

OXLEY: Well, let's put it this way. The actual fellows from tooling-- A couple of them, to tell you the truth, were sort of questionable. What I mean by that is that they weren't grass-roots, dedicated union guys. But you have to find that out later--and I did. Most of the

fellows that won that were eager to serve the union and did a good job after they were elected. But I have very little good to say about the fellows-- I had a premonition of some kind that this was going to come out this way. So I told them, "Well, anybody can get along when you're winning, but now we've got to do the job. And how we get along from now on is going to be damned important." We didn't always get along. We didn't have a bad two years, but it wasn't at all ideal. But I had a creed, "Don't mess with them." If you gave a fellow a job, let him do it, which I did. If he came to me for help, I'd go all the way. But if he didn't, let him do the job. It really worked out a lot better than probably other reporters would report it.

CONNORS: What guided you during your presidency? You talked last time about strict adherence to contracts, for instance.

OXLEY: Well, by the time I ran for president in 1958-- I had been there now for what, eight, ten--?

CONNORS: Fifteen years or something.

OXLEY: 'Forty-two to '50 would be eight. And we go all the way-- That would be eighteen plus eight. I've been there nearly a quarter of a century. [laughter] I'd been vice president under people, and I more or less noted what I considered to be either tragic or bad mistakes that many of them had made. So I sort of structured my presidency

with that in mind, that I wasn't going to be overbearing or dictatorial or ornery. On the other hand, I wasn't going to be a dummy. So one of my credos was that I wasn't going to get chased out of my own union hall, and I never was. There was a time when I was scared stiff, but--

CONNORS: What would that have been about? A disagreement with contract elements or something?

OXLEY: Well, what happens-- About the only thing that a troublemaker can do is blame either you or one of your committee people or somebody of that sort of incompetence or negligence. I never wanted that to happen, because a good committeeman just plain investigates every grievance. So in one instance, for example, Chuck [Charles] Nichols was vice president on nights. So he conducted the night-shift meetings. He told me that there was a group from tooling--incidentally, they were against the group who had run on my slate, too--and that one of them was really surly on the night-shift meetings. He said for two different meetings--now, that would be two months--this fellow had shown up and didn't sit with the main group." He sat along the side of the hall on the bench with three or four others. And from there he would shout, and he was beginning to attract other dissidents who more or less didn't know what the hell they were talking about.

About that time, we were working to upgrade a couple

of tooling classifications. We were working pretty hard. So I asked him if he'd like to have me come down. He said, "Yes, I would. Because you've been working on those job descriptions and classifications, I believe you could explain it." So I came down, and at that time he [the dissident] jumped up and really tackled the union. He said that they didn't seem to know what they were doing. "Here we are. We don't know anything and can't find out anything." So then Chuck told him: "Well, we have Bill, the local president. He's served on the committee and knows precisely what's going on. Bill, would you come up and give a report on it?" So I did. And he was just about as surly-- His buddies shut up. They were satisfied, and the tooling people that were sitting out with the regular crowd in front were satisfied. Because I asked them, "Now, does that answer your question?"

"Yes, it does. We'll be expecting to hear."

I said, "That's right. By next meeting, we're going to know one way or another."

So this fellow said, "Well, by God, I'm not satisfied."

So then there was very little to do but ask him if he wanted to go to the back of the hall and out the kitchen door and continue with his insulting activity out there with me--just the two of us. No, he didn't want to. So I

said, "You see, this is important to me because I'm doing my best, these people are doing their best, and you are inciting and making a big commotion in these meetings. Really, Chuck is trying to do a good job in conducting these meetings, and you're screwing it up. Now, I want you to cut it out, please. Call me. I'll talk to you anytime you want to talk. I'll tell you what I know. I wasn't any Rhodes Scholar when I got this job and you aren't either. And the committee isn't, but we are doing our very best." So really, that stopped his antagonism. He came to the meetings after that.

CONNORS: So he didn't have, necessarily, any kind of political ax to grind. He was in to hear himself talk or was just a troublemaker.

OXLEY: He was-- I don't know if you've ever heard of Burkhardt.

CONNORS: No.

OXLEY: Well, Burkhardt later went out of the local-- Well, he got to be president for four years, I guess. Then he went out of the local and became an international representative.

CONNORS: For the UAW [United Automobile Workers].

OXLEY: Right. And this fellow was with the Burkhardt group, who were apparently beginning to feather their nest. This is sort of how it works.

CONNORS: What was Burkhardt's first name?

OXLEY: Francis.

CONNORS: So it was a faction thing that was going on?

OXLEY: It apparently was. I really never got so interested that I did any more than just identify factions. I didn't want to get that vulnerable, really. It's a serious thing at that point. If you have two thousand people in a group and they get together during lunchtime and rest periods, there's a lot of crud that could get started that you just don't want to have to cope with. I had four sons by then. I was interested that they all go as far in school as I could send them, and I was more interested in helping their mother [Helen Gries Oxley] to kind of handle them. So I didn't want to be out of town. The then regional director, I believe, was Charles Bioletti. He had offered and said that he would keep his eyes open for a job for me. I said, "Charley, don't bother, because I've got a family that I'm very interested in. I don't want to leave home for any length of time." So I didn't have the drive that some of them had trying to go out and up.

CONNORS: I'm looking here at a couple of documents that you brought in. They were handouts, I guess, for both the 1958 term and the 1960. I'm looking at the names. The names are all pretty much Anglo names--the people who were running. Then by the second time around, there were a

whole lot more Hispanic, Mexican-American or Latin-American, names coming up and more women. That's very interesting. This would have been 1962.

OXLEY: Right.

CONNORS: And it shows the main-plant committee and it shows pictures, so that members can, I guess, identify what they want to go for.

OXLEY: Of course, that's the year, 1962 was the year that they really came down hard with the American Way slate in opposition. That was, I suppose, to indicate that we were un-American for the most part. I guess the pictures revealed that we weren't all born within a hundred miles of Virginia. [laughter]

CONNORS: So this American Way slate-- Were they victorious? Were they the ones that prevailed?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Did they appeal to a kind of a racial sort of--?

OXLEY: Well, it wasn't so much racial. I suppose that I was probably the best known of anybody on the slate. I thought that the slate was-- Well, this fellow is from tooling and--

CONNORS: That's a guy named Ed Connors.

OXLEY: Yeah. And the machinist was a Burwell or whatever it is.

CONNORS: Don Hurlburt.

OXLEY: Don Hurlburt, right. So we thought we had-- And there were many, many Mexicans in the plant and darned good people, but the opposition did a job on my patriotism and whatever. See, first of all, I won in '58 by a sizable margin, and my whole slate--all but two people on the executive board--won. So there were very, very hard feelings on this one. Meanwhile, I recognized that there were people on the other slate, that were beaten so badly, who I could use around because they knew their business. So it was my dream that we get back together for 1960, which we did. So I ended up with sort of the pick of the two. And we had a real good two years then. But they weren't satisfied. Revenge! They really came on hard in 1962. I've never seen an election run with any more intensity.

In the meantime I was president, and I never believed that a president should be on a committee also. He can go if he wants to with the committee, but I very seldom wanted to. So I was in on the big holiday grievance, and for some of the big ones they'd invite me because they didn't want anybody to get some kind of a foot in their mouth. But I just didn't get a chance to go out and campaign at all--the rest of them could tour the plant. Because now, as I say, we were together, the mainliners and I--we were working together in servicing people--but my opponents could run

around, because they had the entire committee and all. I was in experimental inspection. [Ryan Aeronautical] Company had transferred me in there, and there was a crib right in the center of the plant now. There was no way I could get a pass to do anything but go out of the plant. So the campaigning was out of the question. If anybody came into the crib, I could say something to him. So I couldn't campaign and didn't. I just decided that I would go on my record, and if that didn't do it, I didn't want it--and it didn't do it. Once the bug bites you in union business, you don't dare back away, because the company doesn't back away. They don't like you. They might have a whole basketful of respect for you, but they don't like you.

So I stayed right in experimental inspection until the election was over, and then, miraculously, they didn't need me anymore. I was sent back over to the machine-shop inspection [department]. There, I could run around all I wanted to. So they elected me steward in the machine-shop inspection crib. Come 1964, then I was laid off with twenty-three years seniority. This is when I bought a beer joint. That's worse than getting beaten in a union election. But anyhow, I bought a job, actually, is what it amounts to. But in a year and a half, I was called back. So with all the insurance provisions and pension provisions and whatnot, I went back. By then, the beer joint was

doing real well. I had a lot of Ryan [Aeronautical Company] customers.

CONNORS: Where was it?

OXLEY: Up on India Street.

CONNORS: What was the name of it?

OXLEY: The Aero Club, and it was, strangely enough, the meeting place in the early sixties-- I think one night a week, the engineers from Convair [Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation] took over and it was closed to the public. So that's why it's the Aero Club. Now, we didn't continue that thing when I got it. We discontinued hard liquor, no cocktail, and we just sold beer. We used to hold some union-- Some of the union people that were interested in a particular trend would come around, and we'd try to form some sort of strategy.

CONNORS: So even during the time that you were laid off, you were still intimately connected to what was happening up in the plant.

OXLEY: I still get calls.

CONNORS: Did the engineers just go there to socialize, or was it an association that they had?

OXLEY: Well, I've often wondered about that. Of course, I didn't get to attend any of the meetings. But they at that point had a sort of a union or a society.

CONNORS: I know there is a group in Southern California--

It may be national. But I think it is called the Engineers and Architects Association. It's an old-line professional group, and they have at times done a lot of lobbying for betterment of working conditions, salary, and upgrading the profession.

OXLEY: I think this is probably an offshoot--either that or it was that [group]. Anyhow, they sure flocked in there on Thursday nights. I know. I went there a couple of times and was denied admittance.

CONNORS: I want to go back for a minute just to recap that second term. Would you say that you mainly continued, as far as your regime went, your accomplishments? Would they have been along the lines of continually improving the contract, getting the grievances through, changing the classifications? Did you see progress those two years?

OXLEY: The last two years?

CONNORS: The last two years.

OXLEY: Oh, yeah. I think, probably, they were the most productive. After all, we did get the holiday grievance through the courts, the [California] State Supreme [Court] in fact. There was a trend there during which if you battled the company, got right in the trenches with them and hung there and didn't give up on any grievance until it went to arbitration--if it was a good grievance--you were called a radical. There was a trend to kind of more or

less get along with the company. In fact, the chairman of the committee in 1962 did approach the company with the idea, in our first meeting, that he thought that everybody couldn't always be right and the company always wrong. So he was going to give and take. He believed that. That, by God, there was always a middle ground. And since the company wasn't always wrong, why, there would be times when he was sure we could help the company out. He made quite a speech out of it. So a couple of us assured him, when we got out of the place, that if he was making that speech for himself, fine, but if he was making it for us, we didn't think we could hold up our hands the night we were sworn in and claim to be union reps, because it didn't sound like it. Of course, he didn't give a damn. But membership now is beginning to believe that way, a little bit: "What the hell. They're taking $254,000 from a company that is feeding you and your children. It isn't any way to go." Of course, I challenged some of them when I retired. I said, "You see, T. Claude [Ryan] sold that place for $128 million. I didn't really hurt him that much, did I?" I don't know. You have to be a little philosophical.

CONNORS: A little bit earlier you said that you thought that the president should not be on the bargaining committee? Why would that be?

OXLEY: See, the only reason that the president ran-- He

can go with the committee anytime he wants to; there is no way that they can stop him. A president is a member, pro tem, of all committees, of course. So you've got to say, "What the hell! Why should I run for the thing?" Now, I found out afterwards why they ran. It gave them touring privileges. They could go throughout the plant as committeemen, and I had no business leaving for a minute. I was a little cocky; I thought I could be elected without all that campaigning. But I couldn't.

CONNORS: I don't know if this was after your defeat or during your time of office there, but in early '62, there was a national dispute in aircraft, and [John F.] Kennedy appointed a board to oversee and to judge. One of the outcomes of this board review of the situation in aircraft was that North American [Aviation, Inc.] got a union shop. Did that have any effect down here?

OXLEY: Well, yes. Sometime in 1963, I believe, we got a modified union shop.

CONNORS: Yeah, a modified union shop. What did that mean? Was it maintenance of--?

OXLEY: Well, they either had to join the union and pay dues or the dues could go to their favorite charity or church.

CONNORS: So, in any case, everybody was paying a fair amount.

OXLEY: That's right. Everybody paid dues.

CONNORS: How about--?

OXLEY: Well, what we suspected was that when they had to pay anyhow, they decided to come down there to elections and have voting privileges and the rest of it. And we decided that probably, in most cases, it was an economic thing--they just didn't want to pay dues. They got the same benefits if they didn't, and they had learned that, Ryan being a long-term place, they got the same raise that everybody else got--only more because they didn't have those dues to pay.

CONNORS: After you were defeated there and you were shifted out of the experimental inspection to machine shop-- What did you do in experimental inspection? What was experimental about it?

OXLEY: We were making prototypes. At that time, we were making a vertical takeoff with a big British engine in it. What's the big English car?

CONNORS: Bentley? Rolls Royce?

OXLEY: Rolls Royce. It had a big Rolls Royce engine in it, and it would almost fly straight up. Then we had another one with louvers in the wings, and it would go up vertically. It had a mixer box in it. After it got up there, the box controlled everything. It put everything back into horizontal flying mode and took off. It was

ingenious. I knew the guy that worked on that mixer box, Kay Kaiser. I think he's the best mechanic they ever had there. I went past him one day. Just looking at the prints would boggle your mind. [laughter] I said, "Kay, are you going to get it to fly?" He said, "Hell, I don't know." That was kind of-- But it did. It worked.

CONNORS: Had those things been brought to general use in the military?

OXLEY: I don't think so.

CONNORS: I've seen demonstration films or whatever on television.

OXLEY: I guess you know the legislation that [Franklin D.] Roosevelt called "legislation for the greedy by the greedy," and that was the legislation to destroy all the manufactured goods overseas and not bring them back--jeeps, motorbikes, anything.

CONNORS: This was right after the war?

OXLEY: Yeah. Well, they didn't roll a wheel until it was pased. That was after Pearl Harbor. The manufacturers just plain ground to a halt until they got financing of experimentation, until 1948--forgiveness of income taxes until then. And my God-- So Ryan could go into all these experimental things. Of course, commercial was what they were really supposed to be shooting at. Ryan began making caskets right after 1945, stainless steel caskets.

CONNORS: Caskets?

OXLEY: Yeah. That's how some of the stuff that didn't work came about. The caskets turned out to be pretty tough to make.

CONNORS: You mean burial caskets?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Not flying caskets. [laughter]

OXLEY: No.

CONNORS: Nothing that had anything to do with aircraft?

OXLEY: No. They were beautiful. However, when you get something all made and it feels just right, and painted, it doesn't make that much difference if it's made of solid gold or what. It's a painted piece of equipment. So we had a lot of problems with the caskets. The veterans came back and they'd say, "What the hell? Caskets?" Anyhow, that's how come we were making some of this Rolls Royce stuff.

CONNORS: Was there an experimental side to it?

OXLEY: Lift fans in the wings.

CONNORS: When you returned to the machine shop, what was it that you did there? Did you run a machine?

OXLEY: No. I was an inspector right from the start. As I say, I often wished I was on the machine, because most of the machinists were better inspectors than I. They just knew what it was all about. And I think they helped me a

lot more than my supervisor, too, because I think they recognized that that's, after all, what we were doing, trying to get stuff out of there, and I was out there to help them if I could. Really, my idea was that if there isn't anything wrong with it, buy it. But a good way, I noticed, for some people to get by is to fault the thing as long as you can, in hopes that you might get sick or be on vacation when it comes around again and somebody else will put a stamp on it.

CONNORS: After that period of being out of work, coming back you got involved again with union politics. You got elected to the bargaining committees during the sixties?

OXLEY: Yes.

CONNORS: And you stayed on the bargaining committees?

OXLEY: I was on the bargaining committee from, oh, what--? I had to be there a year, I think, before I could-- I must have won in '66, maybe, or I ran during a vacancy. I don't remember exactly how I did get back on.

CONNORS: Of course, those were the years when there was all kinds of incredible turmoil in the United States--the Kennedy assassination and [Lyndon B.] Johnson coming through with his huge Great Society programs and civil rights legislation, and of course the Vietnam War. Taking some of these particular issues like civil rights, how did that show itself--or did it--at Ryan? Was there an effort

to identify discrimination and to get rid of it?

OXLEY: I noted that Lyndon Johnson was-- I think his civil rights views were very good. We never made any attempt to fault him there. I thought he was fair in the area of civil rights. I think he was all wrong about the war. I guess I was a little too outspoken about that. When you're working in a defense plant, you're supposed to be in favor of war for the most part.

CONNORS: That is one issue I wanted to get at, and we can take it up now. At what point did you decide or feel that the war was wrong?

OXLEY: Actually, I started a lot earlier than that; I started after World War II. Then during the Korean War, I thought we had no business over there and we were getting a little cheeky when we decided to stay for ten years and the Russians got out in five. But then, of course, that was the treaty. So these things I used to say if I was pushed or nudged, accidentally jarred. I think probably if I had been a rambunctious-- If I had been a veteran and had I been manifestly in favor of whipping anybody that had an island and was giving us any problems, then I would probably have been elected for as long as I wanted to be. But I didn't believe that way.

CONNORS: So your stand on foreign policy, did that become an issue in the campaign?

OXLEY: Oh, yeah. Yes, I was called a "commie." I was called a "left-winger." And the best some people would say about me is that I was a "radical." The ones that liked me and voted for me voted for me because I was a radical. They knew that whenever they asked for help, they would get it.

CONNORS: What was the general sentiment at Ryan about the Vietnam War? I know that in my interviews with people from North American, there was a vocal, strong support for Johnson's policy there for a while, up to a point, and then it started to get turned around. I know Paul Schrade became a vocal spokesman for the antiwar side.

OXLEY: Well, Paul and I probably agreed on several issues. I think that was one of our strongest co-beliefs. We had no damned business over there is just about the way we thought. The French had had a dismal experience over there and told us to stay out. I thought we were messing around even with the religious beliefs, trying to make Catholics out of the whole group--not so much us but the French. Well, these things did come up, but for the most part I was a union guy. That's all I wanted to be. I wanted to be the one guy that would take a grievance or would take the lead in, what the heck, even in a parking dispute. [laughter]

The parking was always a bad thing. They always had

more employees than they had parking at Ryan. So there were about three of us that just hung ourselves to dry on that one. We'd park in an available spot, and the company would write us a ticket. Then the industrial relations manager would call us in and tell us, "One more ticket and you're fired." But he never fired anybody because there was a case pending back in Toledo, Ohio, or Cincinnati or something, and some gal had insisted that she had a right to park because it was along a highway, like it was over there. So the personnel manager, [James] Bunnell, and I were both waiting for that. Well, he wouldn't fire me as long as that case was pending. Finally, they decided against the gal and upheld the dismissal. So then, of course, I had to stop parking there, but I didn't give up.

The chairman of the committee and I went over to Solar [Aircraft Corporation]. Now, over at Solar, they were parked in herringbone fashion, but they were getting double parking by coming in both ways. The company insisted that "No, we would park parallel on the back side and then herringbone." So I tried to reason with Jim. I said, "Jim, you can settle this right now. Go over with me. We'll measure at Solar, where it's working just fine. At that point, if you find out that I'm right, that we just have as much or a little more room than they do, then what

the hell, we have no fight." He said, "I'm not going over there." "Well, then," I said, "you're just going to be an ornery bastard." He said, "Maybe that's what I am, but I'm not going over there anyhow." So we settled it. I stopped parking. I've always liked to park as far away as I can, anyhow, because that gave me a little exercise in the morning.

CONNORS: It also helped you get out of the gate quicker than the other guys can. [laughter]

OXLEY: Really, that's the truth, and maybe not as many dinged fenders. But that's a sample of some of them that I could lose.

CONNORS: On matters of civil rights, did discrimination grievances come up very much?

OXLEY: I'm trying to think.

CONNORS: Equal employment opportunity kinds of complaints?

OXLEY: Well, in one negotiation in the late sixties-- Burkhardt was helping us then, and it was about my last year on the committee. A federal-- Oh, what would you call it? Minority rights.

CONNORS: Affirmative action?

OXLEY: Yeah. He came in and wanted to examine what we were doing. In fact, he was going to nullify proceedings; he really had the power, as he told us. So the company tried to state, "Hey, look. We have many black people in

here and Latin people." He said, "Well, I don't note." And that's when Burkhardt broke in and said, "Yes, I think"--and we had three black people on our committee from both plants and also two or three Mexicans, a couple of gals and a guy or two--"we don't have to use anything but our eyesight here to figure out how the imbalance is." That was during negotiation. It was a very significant day, I thought, in collective bargaining.

CONNORS: So you would say, on the whole, the union local was pretty successful in keeping minority rights respected.

OXLEY: We were very--most of us--darn careful that they didn't overstep bounds that we had set up. Promotion was one that was bad. That's the toughest, because you find people who aren't going to work for a "damned woman," for instance, but then if he turns out to be a black guy or, worse yet, a black woman, then that just tears it. Really, throughout the plant-- Oh, we had some problems, but it wasn't all that bad. Normally, a fellow can be more or less shamed into line. After all, he has to get along with the people that he works with.

CONNORS: There was the big march in Washington, in 1963, where Martin Luther King [Jr.] gave the famous speech. I think it was organized by Bayard Rustin. Walter [P.] Reuther was right there among the speakers and he spoke, and the UAW was in big support. Now, the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] did not come out and endorse that, but a lot of affiliates went ahead and participated. Did Ryan have a delegation that went to that? I know that a lot of locals did.

OXLEY: I don't believe so.

CONNORS: How about on the other side of the country?

OXLEY: I think we probably would have had if I still had been president, because I used to be able to scrape up enough money for something like that.

CONNORS: Would it have been in the fifties that more Hispanics, more Mexicans started entering the work force? Or were they coming through all along?

OXLEY: They were pretty well recognized as good industrial workers. Their record was clean; they weren't out-and-out robbers, burglars. The possibility of thievery in a plant in those days was so great that they had to watch it. So I think our Mexican population was very, very good. Some of them were just unbelievably clever with tools.

CONNORS: Would these people have been active in supporting the [United] Farm Workers Organizing Committee, for instance? I don't have the exact date in my head when the Farm Workers Organizing Committee was established, but it was somewhere around 1965 or 1964 when the United Farm Workers Union came along. And the UAW, again, was one of the mainstays in getting that off the ground and supporting César Chávez. In fact, Bill [William] Kircher was very instrumental at the time. By this time, Kircher was at the AFL-CIO, but he was very instrumental.

OXLEY: What happened was we had the United Food Handlers, Agricultural Workers when I was in the CIO [industrial

union] council.

CONNORS: Right, it was a CIO agricultural workers union.

OXLEY: Yeah, something like that. Of course, what would happen there, a conglomeration of vigilantes out there would come out with their trucks and horses in the back and rubber hoses and beat the hell out of them in the field. The vigilantes were sure that they were nothing but communists. So one of our local union boys at that point was out there and he did get beaten up pretty bad.

CONNORS: He was out there to try to organize?

OXLEY: Yeah. So really, I think that if there was any way that anybody could tag you a radical, leftist, or communist, that gave the vigilantes the unrestrained right to come out and beat on you a while. Of course they were all gone, nobody knew who they were, by the time help arrived. And then, I suppose, the help that arrived was probably people in cars that had been on horses a few moments before. But I believe that our backing César Chávez and his group was all more an act of conscience than anything else: "Now we have to do something. We kicked out all the radicals--let's put somebody out there to organize." César tried a few things that most of us looked at, wondering what the hell is going on here, in that he would go on fasts and he would pray. I never really saw praying help very much. During our strike, they would ask

a priest and several ministers to go in and give Mr. Ryan a call and exhort him to take care of his poor employees. He never made a move, as far as we know, because of them.

CONNORS: Somewhat related to this is that the community action program [CAP] was being implemented through the UAW.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: How did that work? First of all, when did that program get launched?

OXLEY: Well, we either had a CAP or some sort of a thing resembling a CAP for a number of years. We'd take up a collection for candidates from the employees. But really the CAP, to be accurate, probably, I think, came along in '58 or '60.

CONNORS: And it was largely a political action group, or was it community services in there, too?

OXLEY: The community service program-- The way I remember it, we allowed-- No, we just had a plain chairman who was a community service chairman, and the CAP was an altogether different thing.

CONNORS: Okay.

OXLEY: The community service was supposed to go out into the community and take care of just about anything that a union member might be troubled with, that he can't take care of himself. So we had some pretty darn good chairmen.

CONNORS: What would be the kind of issues that would come up in community services?

OXLEY: Well, two of the people had nervous disorders and had to go to the county [psychiatric center] and be treated, and maybe they'd end up in one of the institutions up north for a year or six months, go on sick leave, and that way they were employable when they got back. But we'd get calls at the hall from members' wives that they were acting dangerously, so we'd set them up with the county psychiatric board and tell them, "Look, we don't know precisely how to handle this." See, we knew them on the job. We were hearing that they were acting strangely, so we'd ask them if they would care to come down and have a physical, which does go with the thing because quite often it is a physical thing that is causing it. So we'd meet them at the county psychiatric center, and going up in the elevator, the capable people that knew what the hell was going on would just come in the elevator with a prearranged signal, and the first thing you know we'd introduce them. "These folks can help you. Please go along." So they'd have a long interview with them during which they would get acquainted. Normally, the fellow would come out treated. He was okay. That happened in a couple of cases. We sort of worried a little bit about it because people are strange. Wives don't very often, after forty years of

marriage, lie about something like that.

CONNORS: And these people would become abusive perhaps and--

OXLEY: Oh, one of the wives raised his pillow while making the bed one day, and there was every sharp knife they had in the house. He was going to get the people who were poisoning the reservoir that was just a little ways from their house.

CONNORS: Yeah, that's paranoia. So with the CAP activity, then, that was mainly a political action where you would perhaps take up or do fund-raising for friendly candidates.

OXLEY: Oh, yeah. We would normally put a CAP chairman out of the plant full-time for a couple of months. He would tour and get acquainted with the people who were going to be running the campaign, and they'd outline what their plans were for every district. When he came back, he could use-- He had probably quite a little ability before he left, but when he came back he knew precisely how many people he would need. So maybe you would have three people out for two weeks or a month and maybe thirty people out for two days. And we were pretty active.

CONNORS: This was for leafleting or--?

OXLEY: Leafleting door to door, yeah. Precinct work.

CONNORS: Voter identification. That begs the question of California politics. Of course, in the sixties, the period

we're talking about now, Governor [Edmund G. "Pat"] Brown, Sr., came in and was, I suppose, the California version of the Great Society kind of politician. Was there as much support for him in San Diego as in California?

OXLEY: Probably less than anyplace else. He's spoken to labor here in San Diego several times, and I think I heard him nearly every time. He's a very congenial guy. He was more homespun and down-to-earth than "Jerry" [Edmund G. Brown, Jr.] will ever be, I'll tell you that. [laughter]

CONNORS: What did you think of Jerry as governor?

OXLEY: He's all right.

CONNORS: I liked Jerry Brown.

OXLEY: He was on the right path. I felt sorry for him because these old pros really know how to attack. With nicknames, innuendos, every dirty trick in the book. But Jerry did a few things that made him sort of hard to hurt. When he drove his old Plymouth, lived in his old apartment-- He did a few things right. Now, if he had been married and had a couple of kids, he would have just been perfect, you see.

CONNORS: Some other issues of that period that had more to do with the work-process side of the story are things like automation, which was becoming a very serious issue that the UAW spent a lot of time on analyzing and trying to propose policies for. How did that show up at Ryan?

OXLEY: Well--

CONNORS: Did you see a lot of unemployment occurring through technological innovations?

OXLEY: No. As I explained to you last week, Ryan is kind of a backwoodsy place. It was then. They bought some big, numerically controlled machines, but they're still-- They like to hammer it out by hand if they can. Now, the reason that they've improved is because some of the old-timers had to retire and some of them died. I don't understand their new machines. [laughter]

CONNORS: We have talked about the training period. You could say that a lot of it is on-the-job training. You got put somewhere and you learned. I remember last week, we were looking at the board up there in the hall. There was a list of names and the job that the person had was after the name. They had gotten their journeyman's cards, I guess. How does that work for these--? Are they mechanics for the most part?

OXLEY: No. Nearly all of them are top skilled. That would be master machinist, and then there are two or three machinists. There's maintenance machinists--he would have to be a master, too, for the most part-- and then you'd get into jig fixture, tool-and-die maker. And that's about the only classifications that it would apply to.

CONNORS: The UAW issues the journeyman's card?

OXLEY: That's right. That doesn't mean the company has to honor them at all.

CONNORS: Okay, that was my question.

OXLEY: They should--and maybe even would--but you can bet they would be in contact with the company the people came from, card or no card. Because it's like anything else--you can get it if you want to look around long enough.

CONNORS: Why have the card in the first place then? Is that a holdover from the old craft?

OXLEY: Yeah. Well, it's a pretty good thing, because many, many of them--probably the biggest majority of them--are qualified to do the work. If they're not, it would be a matter of taking a few days, hours, weeks and acquainting them with any difference there might be between the procedures in the plant they left-- The union, the UAW, recognizes that when a person goes to a new plant, he normally takes a beating on wages. If he has this card, it more or less indicates, "Hey, you've got to show me I don't know it, because I have this card that says I do." Then when they get out into the shop and they meet the other people who are doing the job, there is a tendency to help them out a little bit to get them over the hump. So I think that the card is probably a good idea.

Another thing that it does now, Tom, is to-- The skilled trades are always sort of top dogs in a predomi-

nantly unskilled union atmosphere. They are kind of a thorn in the side in a mostly unskilled shop. They always get after you if you give the janitors five cents and they only get six. They think they should get twelve cents and the janitors two cents, or something. So the skilled trade is more or less tough to satisfy in the union atmosphere. So the card, that's something that the janitor doesn't have, the aircraft assembler doesn't have, or the fabricators here and there don't have. It wasn't a bad idea on the whole.

CONNORS: The guys from the tooling department that you were talking about before, who at first were your supporters, they would be these people that would have the journeyman's cards. They would be the skilled workers, wouldn't they?

OXLEY: They'd be in line to get them. Some of them had them when they came. They had from their craft union. Tooling is a very-- What? Flighty, capricious, something. They're hard to keep. A "what have you done for me lately" type attitude. So if you're able somehow or another to find two or three tooling people that are good leaders and get their confidence and act for them for a period of years, why, you're in good shape.

CONNORS: Did they tend to be militant in strike situations or in periods where contracts are being negotiated, when

you're bringing the contract to the membership?

OXLEY: That's when they swing into play with the most emphasis, because when they get their great big rollaways with their nice toolbox on top and thousands and thousands of dollars worth of tools and, say, fifty, sixty, or a hundred of them go rolling up the aisle to the checkout of the guard gate, where they get their tools inspected so they don't have any company tools, and then they seal them and they go on-- Now, that takes sometimes two or three hours to check those people out of the machine shop, tool and die, and there they stand. And there are the people in personnel, from the president on down, watching all this: "My God, there goes so-and-so. You mean to tell me he's going out, too?" Well, these are people you can't order from Sears and Roebuck. Yes, they have a real impact in a strike situation.

CONNORS: Are they their own tools for the most part?

OXLEY: Yeah. There are some tools that they check out, but they're all company tools. They'd be K [i.e., made in the factory] tools, I think they'd call them on the planning-- So, yes, they own their own precision tools. You might get a scale. They have a ten-foot scale, for example, and Lord knows what it costs. They might check one of those out.

CONNORS: Again, in that late 1960s period, within the UAW

there was a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the AFL-CIO and George Meany's leadership, the situation on the executive council. Reuther wrote up a kind of manifesto or a long, very eloquent suggestion of how the AFL-CIO had to get with it. It was disregarded, and word started to get out in the UAW that it was time for disaffiliation. I think by 1968 UAW pulled out. What was the thought? How did this show up at Ryan?

OXLEY: Well, to the union people who were aware, that was no problem. We thought we should get rid of those no good so-and-sos. They weren't union in the first place. They didn't think union. They were no friends of ours, which they'd attested to in more than one speech. No, that was a fairly good deal as far as we were concerned. Meany was in bed with all the wrong people, and the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters, same thing. After all, I think they backed every Republican president for how many terms?

CONNORS: I know in 1968, of course, [Hubert H.] Humphrey was the big labor candidate, and his defeat was not a smashing defeat. What did you think of Humphrey?

OXLEY: Pretty good guy. No, I think he was fair.

CONNORS: What was his problem? Was it that he was too closely identified with labor or--?

OXLEY: Oh, I think so.

CONNORS: They used to say that vice presidents have a hell

of a time succeeding the president.

OXLEY: I think that it's true, and I know darn well it was in this case.

CONNORS: How did [Richard M.] Nixon appear to--? We talked a little bit about Nixon last time.

OXLEY: Of course, all the Republicans carry San Diego County and the "Orange Wall," like they call it. When you come up against the Orange Wall, you'd better be a Republican. [laughter]

CONNORS: The Orange Wall? What's that?

OXLEY: Orange County.

CONNORS: The Orange County line. Yeah. Would Nixon have had supporters among the work force?

OXLEY: Oh, yeah.

CONNORS: At Ryan?

OXLEY: Oh, yeah. Yes, I think the strongest vote for a Republican was probably for [Dwight D.] Eisenhower. He carried the plant. That's why I was never so badly insulted to lose an election around there. I mean, I felt like you could lose one and be 99 percent right, with maybe a fraction added on to that. [laughter]

CONNORS: How about the [George S.] McGovern campaign? You hadn't retired yet, so there would have been some political action around that in '72.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Of course, the AFL-CIO endorsed nobody.

OXLEY: I was a very strong McGovern guy. I have some personal letters from George. I was born in South Dakota, after all, and he has written to me. I got a letter from him on behalf of some [Ku Klux] Klan-watch attorney down in Montgomery, Alabama, who's not only afraid for his life, he needs funds to carry on. I always send him something, and George McGovern occasionally always writes. It's funny how a northern Yankee senator will back one of his buddies down there who is more or less embattled, so to speak.

I was in Alabama for what--? Two weeks. If I say ten years ago, I know it will be twice that long. My son, Bob [Robert Oxley], was an industrial relations manager for Kaiser Electronics down there, shipbuilding at that point, and he had a strike going. I didn't know that at the time, but we went down to see him, flew down, and I met my cousin from Chicago down there. We were going to go fishing, but they had a hell of a flood up above, so the fish were all up in the trees--so was the water-- where the fish had plenty of worms and whatnot to eat. [laughter] But the Klan at that point were at the busy intersections--maybe fifteen or twenty intersections--one on each side, standing right in the center. And as the motorists stopped for the lights, they had their cans and they were taking collections. They say that people are more or less afraid

not to put in something, because, what the heck, they all feel that these fellows had a way of checking by your license number or something. I'll tell you, it was sort of scary.

CONNORS: I can imagine. Any Klan activity down here in San Diego? I know that it crops up now and again.

OXLEY: Yeah, we have a little. Yeah. Well, we had a few active Klan people in the plant.

CONNORS: Did they try to recruit?

OXLEY: Very subtly. They were always saying, "The way things are going around here, we better watch out and get some white rights around here, you know." And then if they got a taker on that, they would go the next step.

CONNORS: Did you have any kind of discussion or meetings around that 1972 election period where the question of endorsing McGovern would come up? Did the UAW endorse McGovern, by the way? I'm not sure--

OXLEY: I'm sure we did.

CONNORS: All I know is that on the national level, the AFL-CIO didn't endorse anybody, which a lot of people took to mean that Nixon was being endorsed. And a lot of state AFL-CIO organizations got into trouble for supporting McGovern. In fact, Meany pulled the Colorado state federation charter for supporting McGovern.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: And the Montana AFL-CIO wanted to endorse McGovern, but they couldn't do it after the convention. So they held their convention, and then they called it to an end. Then, immediately, they organized a different convention. They gave it a different name so they wouldn't lose their charter. But in that convention, they came out endorsing McGovern.

OXLEY: There are quite a few contributing factors. You may think this, too. In South Dakota, which is no doubt a right-to-work state-- A fellow, an old craftsman like Meany, doesn't very much go for that kind of thing. And any senator from a state like that running for president-- He doesn't see what kind of a background this is to appeal to him. You know what I mean? They like the industrial hubs.

CONNORS: Yeah, a Humphrey, I suppose.

OXLEY: He for damn sure wasn't getting much of a union fellow when he got Nixon. But then Nixon never was a-- He would never, for instance, have laid off all the aircraft-tower people.

CONNORS: The controllers, PATCO [Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization].

OXLEY: I don't think Nixon would have ever done that. He's a pretty bright guy in a lot of ways.

CONNORS: That was quite a message to labor when [Ronald

W.] Reagan came along and did that.

OXLEY: Without a doubt. That was early in the game, and there wasn't a doubt after that.

CONNORS: It's like down in Mexico. One of the first activities of the new Mexican president was to grab the oil-union brass and throw them in jail to let everybody know that this is now a new game. I think Reagan was thinking of the symbol or the message that he was putting out with that. It was especially ironic since PATCO was one of the few unions that endorsed Reagan, which I also think contributed to organized labor's making a few statements of outrage but not doing a lot to support those guys.

OXLEY: Yup. It's been kind of a mess ever since. People run from something like that. They don't mind somebody else getting into the fight, but you're pretty helpless when you don't have somebody in Washington that gives a darn. It's helpful if a president comes right out and says, "Look, you're going to be working on a good many government contracts here, and if you're not going to treat American workers fairly, you're not going to get a contract." I think that spells it out pretty plainly. I've forgotten what year it was that [John] Allard went back to Washington. He may have said it and appealed to them on this basis over a contract that we were held up on

for days, weeks after the expiration date. And they pretty well spelled it out to Ryan: "If you want to build planes, you've got to come this far," and they did. So it's a good move. And I opposed it. I might as well be honest. [laughter]

CONNORS: The government said they had to come this far on what?

OXLEY: On contractual provisions.

CONNORS: In other words, bargaining--

OXLEY: In essence, they settled the contract. They said, "Here's what we think you ought to do." It was satisfactory with us, and the company finally decided to go along, but they would have stalled for God knows how long. I think that was probably good.

CONNORS: This would have been for the company to get a better deal from the government contract. Is that what you are talking about?

OXLEY: No. We were stalled on our labor contract.

CONNORS: Labor contract, oh. Oh, okay.

OXLEY: So we apparently wrote to the War Labor Board or somebody and complained. So they arranged a hearing. Our president and John Allard and two people from the company flew back, and that's when they laid down the law. "We can't have a stoppage. We don't want one. And here's what we suggest. We've studied the case." So we didn't get a

bad deal that year.

CONNORS: What year was that?

OXLEY: I wish I knew. We were still down on Market Street. When did we move here?

CONNORS: It would have been during the Korean War.

OXLEY: 'Fifty-six. Yeah. It would have been maybe '51 or '52. Allard would know.

CONNORS: The reason I ask is because those judgments and sometimes those testimonies or the meetings that these people would have would all show up in verbatim documents afterwards. I've done a lot of those things. I think we've mentioned, the first time we talked, a little about Walter Reuther and his dying in the air crash. [Leonard F.] Woodcock, I guess, came in right after him. What was the sentiment, the attitude towards Woodcock in those days? He had been aircraft director, I guess.

OXLEY: Yeah. He and Schrade were close. Well, Leonard was very well thought of and was a tremendously intelligent guy, just unbelievable. I wouldn't say, first of all, the workers at Ryan were a great group of Reuther people, but there were a few of us that recognized that he was pretty damned hard to cope with if you were management. We loved him for that reason. I didn't predict any trouble with Woodcock taking over, and certainly there wasn't any. I think he admired and loved Walter himself, so that he was

probably a carbon copy as far as he was able to be. That was a hell of a blow, though. We always, no matter what president decided to take on labor, we always sat back and waited for him to get to Walter.

CONNORS: How about [Douglas A.] Fraser? He followed Woodcock?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: What were your thoughts about Fraser?

OXLEY: Of course, I think we're going slightly downhill. I think Fraser probably-- You see, you can't be around UAW very long without getting to the point where you can more or less take care of yourself. And I think all three of those people had no problems. The presentation of Fraser probably wasn't quite what Walter and Leonard had, but he knew what he was doing and he knew what he was saying. He'd come up with one hell of an idea. He was a stockholder. He got on the board that way.

CONNORS: It was co-management or something like that?

OXLEY: Yes, that's right. Of course, I vomited a few times over that, and so did a lot of other people.

CONNORS: Yeah, a lot of other people said, "So you get to sit in these board meetings, but they've already decided what they're going to do. This is like a showcase."

OXLEY: He ought to know that from UAW. The big caucus is held right after the meeting. I think he stepped on it on

that one.

CONNORS: Co-determination I think it was called. Some name--

OXLEY: So right away, one of our Local 506 phonies went in and bought some Ryan stock so he could emulate Fraser. I don't know that it had helped him any.

CONNORS: It seems to me that Fraser spoke out against-- Well, have to walk a tightrope. I know that Fraser supported some kind of conversion of the defense production to more-- As did Reuther, for that matter.

OXLEY: See, these are the changes that I didn't make any attempt to keep up with. I didn't believe in them. There were a lot of Ryan employees that had stock, and I never knew which ones they were. I'm sure I may have stepped on it a few times. So I don't know. Just about all plants are alike, basically. When you go from one to another-- Of course, I only worked in three of them, but I noticed that there was no difference there.

CONNORS: What did you think of this idea of converting war production or defense production to peacetime activity? Certainly the two aren't equitable in terms of the money that is being thrown.

OXLEY: Well, I wanted to do that right away. I wanted to start building homes that could be moved on wide loads. I thought we could do a hell of a job on a prefab home. Of

course that-- And I don't think that's a wild dream. Everybody else does it. I thought that the plants who converted should be protected just as if they were producing war equipment. Now, these are radical ideas in the view of many people. Damned communist! Well, when we got Kaiser Permanente [Medical Care Program] as a health plan, I asked the doctor at Ryan--and he turned out to be a friend of mine--if he knew about Kaiser Permanente. He said, "Yes, it's a good group. There isn't an insurance plan on earth that can compete with their health plan." Here's a man in his later years that had been in the medical profession all his life and thought this way. A pretty good guy. When you get old, Tom, you can begin telling the truth. What if they do knock you off. [laughter]

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FEBRUARY 3, 1989

CONNORS: One other topic there for the 1960s and also into the seventies would be the relations with the IAM [International Association of Machinists]. We talked a bit about this last week. I did some reading of back issues of microfilm copies of the **UAW Solidarity** during the week. During that sixties period, there seemed to be a fairly regular coordinated bargaining approach. Did you do that? Did you meet with the Machinists?

OXLEY: With their political arm, yes. Then we'd meet occasionally at a council meeting downtown. I'd say that the atmosphere was friendly. We knew we had a problem. By then we were acquainted with the fact that we were kind of getting our butts kicked a little bit, not only by management and government but by our membership. By now, Tom, they're beginning to own homes--and let's say more than one. With a lot of them, the kids are out of school and working, married, grandkids. What the hell? They have the old philosophy that I've got mine, you know. They've forgotten that they rode on the backs of a bunch of kids carrying rifles and getting killed. That's one thing I tried never to forget--that (at one time) I had no chance of ever having a good job if the Depression had continued. I should be out digging postholes and hauling manure for

some farmer back in the Midwest. But many, many people can't figure out how it all happened or don't want to.

CONNORS: Do you think that has something to do with the response to concession bargaining that has come up in the eighties? I suppose in the seventies too.

OXLEY: I think so.

CONNORS: In your last years there on the negotiating committee, did give-backs come up on those years? You retired in 1975, first of all. That's correct?

OXLEY: Yeah. Well, you mean like two tier?

CONNORS: Yeah.

OXLEY: No. We didn't give anything away. Well, I won't say anything. I told you about shuffling through the contract, and wherever management had lost a grievance, if it was a serious loss, why, they wanted that remedied. We used to tell them to go to hell, but, of course, this newer, "enlightened" group, who appreciated being employed there, didn't believe that. There may have been an indication of it in the seventies, but in the last few years it has gotten to be-- [tape recorder off]

CONNORS: We were talking before the pause about some of the concessions. You mentioned in the last few years that there had been give-backs with Ryan [Aeronautical Company] Local 506. What have those give-backs been?

OXLEY: Well, mostly in beginners. You see, if you were a

master machinist and Ryan did not need any master machinists and you came here from say Ohio, Detroit, or someplace, they could hire you in as a beginner aircraft assembler for a minimal $4.50. I think they have added a dime--$4.60. But this is so grossly unfair. Just so it isn't in the classification you held. Well, my God, in order to be a skilled tradesman in that classification, you had to have a sheet metal classification and training, but that doesn't make any difference. So that's what the two tier is all about. It just fractionates the wage scale to the point where it is pathetic. These are the populated areas--the assemblers, the fabricators. Hell, if we deny them a nickel raise, for instance, give them a nickel instead of ten cents, the company would gladly go over and give the plumbers another quarter or the pipe fitters another quarter an hour, because they didn't have any population in those areas--it didn't cost as much. It looks good on the report, but here's maybe five hundred assemblers that would like like hell to have another nickel. And there you run into it with the skilled trades. They don't see why these assemblers-- They think that anybody can screw a screw or run a rivet gun, but the truth of it is anybody can't. When I first started at Consolidated [Vultee Aircraft Corporation], a butt-fit between skins on an airplane-- Oh, a thirty-second to a

sixteenth of an inch, you could get by with that. But now, that type of fitting may fly apart at five hundred miles an hour. You've got to have it fit so close that when you paint over it you can hardly see it.

CONNORS: So even unskilled has to be skilled.

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: You mentioned that the plumbers and the pipe fitters-- Were the plumbers and pipe fitters in the plant?

OXLEY: Yeah, maintenance.

CONNORS: Maintenance guys. They were in the UAW bargaining committee, right? I think I read somewhere--this was during the sixties--that some of the building trades and councils in certain cities were raiding aircraft, skilled workers.

OXLEY: Well, yeah. Where was it? Up north?

CONNORS: Maybe that was in Northern California.

OXLEY: Carpenters built the place, and then they stayed right on and went into the work force.

CONNORS: Stayed as carpenters?

OXLEY: Well, some of them, but then a lot of them went into other jobs.

CONNORS: I mean, as far as the union went, did they remain with the [United Brotherhood of] Carpenters and Joiners of America union or did they get--?

OXLEY: They went into whatever union was there, I think,

but the company gave them seniority and all. They may have stayed Carpenters. Probably did. Maybe that's the way the Carpenters got in there in the first place. It was a sneaky deal. I remember that.

CONNORS: Speaking of some of this business of two-tier wage scales and reorganization of work, another thing that I was looking into--just in getting familiar with some of the UAW [United Automobile Workers] scene here in Southern California--was what happened at the GM [General Motors Corporation] plant in Van Nuys. In the past few years, there was a lot of union activity around this question of the team concept, where the company was trying to impose a new form of work: instead of being on the line, you would be working in groups putting parts or entire cars together. I'm not sure how it works, but there was quite a bit of opposition to that. Did you follow that at all?

OXLEY: No.

CONNORS: I know that the UAW region six came out and supported this team concept, and the local union leadership, a guy named Pete Beltran, was leading a group in strong opposition to it. There's a group within UAW now called the New Directions group. Have you heard of that?

OXLEY: No.

CONNORS: No? I guess they're some of the younger, insurgent-type, more radical unionists. I don't know what

will happen to them in the long run, but they've brought a lot of issues to the fore, as far as what the UAW has become. They seem to be strongly opposed to Owen [F.] Bieber and his style of leadership, which they argue has become bureaucratic and more of a crony type of a deal.
OXLEY: Well, you know, when I first got on the committee, as inexperienced as I may have been, I was accorded the right to speak. If there was a gap and we were discussing, I could break in and say something. I didn't require any more than that, even after I got to be chairman of the committee. But then, in 1962, that all changed. There was a chairman of the committee then, and from that point, you had to just about look at the chairman and ask if you could speak. Here we had a chairman of the committee that never had been on a committee. [laughter] And he wasn't elected on the committee then. He was what they called an alternate, but they made him a chairman. So there he got to sit in on the meetings. It was all a political thing, as far as I'm concerned. Anyhow, he's the one who made the speech about the cooperation from now on. So then it got to be that there was a chairman on the company committee and a chairman opposite on the union committee, and they did the talking. Now, I wasn't accustomed to that at all and didn't like it. I thought that anyone who had expertise should speak. Well, some of these people

couldn't present at all. So, in a way, that sure took good care of the company. And how good can you be to them?

CONNORS: In the last years of your employment, even from the sixties, were there any major strikes during that period?

OXLEY: No, it got to be real peaceful.

CONNORS: Was it that the bargaining and the relations were smooth enough that it never even got to the point of a strike vote?

OXLEY: Oh, I think that, what, we threatened to strike and found ourselves getting close enough. But, Tom, we had the best pension, the best vacation, the best sick leave, the best everything for many years in San Diego. No one could understand that--here is this little ol' Ryan sitting down there. And then all of a sudden, we began slipping back, till now our retirement is quite a lot lower than IAM's per month and per hour. You know how our retirement works?

CONNORS: No. Tell me how the retirement works.

OXLEY: Well, what happens-- For thirty years, you get so much per month, per every year you were there. Say it's $9, just to take a figure--you'd get $270 a month. Convair [Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation] is much higher than ours now. I don't know where we are now, around $12, I guess.

CONNORS: Does that happen because you just didn't bargain

for that, or did the company slash and cut it?

OXLEY: They company refused to give any beyond a certain point. If you want the exact figure of what it is now compared to Convair, you could probably get it from one of those guys. They'd know. It doesn't affect me. We have an adjustment at the end of the year. It's on a scale somehow of how much money they took in. Anyhow, this year I think we got $375. It's supposed to sort of make up, because back when I retired, I think it was only $9 and something a month.

CONNORS: Are you active with the UAW retirees group?

OXLEY: Yeah. I don't go very often anymore. Strange things happen there. People who never came to the meetings now get lonesome for their old Ryan friends and they come to this thing. We have so little in common, but I come once in a while.

CONNORS: You were active in the FORUM [Federation of Retired Union Members] group? That's a different group, right?

OXLEY: Yes. This is leaders from throughout the county and all of them--butchers, electricians, carpenters, aircraft, everybody. These old boys all had positions of real responsibility--signed the checks, helped with the picket signs. So it's a little bit different kind of deal.

CONNORS: How long have you been active with them?

OXLEY: Oh, about fifteen or twenty years I guess--ever since I retired. No, not before [I retired]. So it would be fourteen, fifteen years.

CONNORS: What kinds of activities does this group do? Is it lobbying-type activities?

OXLEY: Yes, and we picket. After some thirty years, I think it was, the San Diego County Fair decided to hire nonunion people to operate it. Now, we picketed. Even my wife [Helen Oxley] went up to that. We had about a hundred of us up there. And so then we write letters to congressmen, telling them to knock off some of the stuff. The Jack Murphy Stadium, where the [San Diego] Padres play, they built an entire new wing on it so it would hold a lot more football people, and that was done with nonunion labor. So a public edifice built with scabs, that was unheard of in the past. We were down there picketing. We picketed a couple of restaurants downtown who were for the first time in years hiring nonunion help, where union guys used to eat. One of them was Anthony's Fish Grotto. I don't know whether we straightened them out or not, because I wasn't dealing with them, but we were picketing down there. So that's a few of the things we do. Normally, we're writing to [Alan] Cranston or Duncan Hunter or somebody around here, telling them that we object to some crazy thing they're doing with labor.

CONNORS: Hunter being the representative for this area?

OXLEY: Yeah. He's in South Bay, a congressman.

CONNORS: Congressman. Yeah. Is he a Democrat?

OXLEY: No. He's a strong serviceman type. You get the big contracts here. You get the big ships here. Old Dunc. He isn't the worst Republican we have. [William P.] Lowery is the worst. I don't think he ever had an honorable thought in his life.

CONNORS: Is Lowery still in?

OXLEY: Yes. The one before him, Bob [Robert] Wilson, was there for about twenty-eight years, and I think Lowery is going to follow right in his footsteps.

CONNORS: In your retirement, what else have you been doing? Are you active at all with the seniors organizations?

OXLEY: Well, I'm a member of the Gray Panthers.

CONNORS: Gray Panthers?

OXLEY: You know Gray Panthers?

CONNORS: Yes.

OXLEY: They're a volatile group.

CONNORS: Yes, great group.

OXLEY: I don't go to the meetings, but I contribute and I plan on going to meetings here, because I think they're going to furnish wheelchairs one of these days, and I'll be interested in that. But I like the way they act. Then

I've got kids scattered all over the place now. My mother [Marian Hylbahl Oxley] is still living. I've got to get back every year to see her. That's when I meet with all the Nebraska Republicans. [laughter] I can't wait to get out.

CONNORS: You also mentioned to me before that you go camping a lot out there in the desert.

OXLEY: Oh, yes.

CONNORS: You mentioned there were a couple of times in your president's letter--it would be in the late fifties or something--where you'd write the letter from some vacation spot back East, fishing or camping or something like that. I thought when I read that, "The guy's out there on vacation saying, 'Hey, folks, I'm on vacation.'" It struck me that there was probably a method to the madness there. You had fought for the right to have this vacation. People should take their vacations. It was something that wasn't just handed. It's part of a long struggle.

OXLEY: Yeah, we started with the three-day vacation, you know. Like I said, you didn't have to take it. Let's see, three days at eighty cents an hour. What--?

CONNORS: Eighty cents an hour times--

OXLEY: Six dollars and forty cents a day. So you could take the $19.16 or you could take your vacation. Lots of times, we went right ahead and worked.

CONNORS: So that would be like getting double time or something?

OXLEY: Yeah. Well, what? I guess they did pay you for it. Yeah, that would be like getting double time. And most of us with families could sure use it in those days. We needed everything.

CONNORS: When you were hired at Ryan in the forties, what were you making an hour? Do you remember that?

OXLEY: I got eighty-five cents an hour. I started at Convair on night shift at sixty-eight cents. Everybody at the department was only getting seventy-five, and here I am I come in at eighty-five cents. My God, someone had been there for two years, and here was a leadman getting a nickel more. He was getting eighty cents and I'm getting eighty-five cents. Nobody would speak to me; they thought it was my fault.

CONNORS: What accounts for that? Was that just a job classification?

OXLEY: I wanted as much as I got over at Consolidated. The general foreman, Joe Love, said, "I can't do it." I said, "Well, they want me to go down and work at Rohr [Aircraft Corporation]. I'll just go down and see if they can do it." "Oh, well," he said, "I'll do it." So he had to raise the rest of those guys right away or they would have killed somebody, probably me.

CONNORS: Take it out on you.

OXLEY: I started right out getting them a raise. They didn't realize that. And then they said, "You don't even know how to do this job." I said, "I know it." Then the leadman, now, he had to show me. He may not have wanted to. Then I watched some of the rest of them and I kind of caught on to it. Yeah, those were hard old days.

CONNORS: I don't have particular questions to ask at this point. Do you have any kind of a long-view summary? Also, I did want to say thanks a lot for allowing this.

OXLEY: Tom, you're entirely welcome. I just wish that old folks in general had better memories, and I wish I did because there were a lot of company impositions, meddling. The area of health was always a problem. After working in a factory for a while, you could develop bad health, especially the women. I came to the plant one day, and there were two gals standing at the gate. They'd called their husbands from the plant. They had been laid off. This was about two in the afternoon. "What's the matter?" "Oh, they fired us because we can't any longer do our jobs." "What's the matter?" Well, they had swollen wrists from operating big squeeze riveters, swollen shoulders from overhead work. And they were doctoring. So I said, "Look, they can't do that, you know." "Well, they did." I said, "They can't do that. You have an industrial

accident commission. You can get a judgment on that shoulder and that wrist." And so they did. After drawing money for all that time-- One of them got $1,600. Back then, that was a year's wages, you know. The other one got $1,800. The thanks I got-- One of their husbands said, "Well, look at all the taxes I'm going to have to--" I said, "No, not on insurance, fellow." So there again, every day, I had a way of attracting grief--and loving it! [laughter]

The worst one I got into, I believe-- We had a big welders' supervisor. Now, it was a major layoff. A real nice lady, Pearl Wright, had gotten laid off, and they kept a kind of a nice-looking redheaded gal with about a third as much seniority as Mrs. Wright. So the premise was that Mrs. Wright had money and this redhead had two kids and no husband or money. So when Mrs. Wright told me she was laid off, I said, "That can't be, because you have a lot more seniority than--" Whatever the other gal's name was. Ruby, I think. She said, "That doesn't make any difference. When they fire you, what can you do?" I said, "Well, let me go out and talk to these people."

So I talked to one of the employee-relations group. I told him what had happened. He said, "Wait a minute. Let me call Claude." Claude was the welders' supervisor. He got him out there, and I told him, "Well, Claude, you can't

do this now." He said, "Do you realize that Mrs. Wright has a lot of money? More than she'll probably ever spend. And Ruby has two kids and a mother to support." I said, "You can search that contract until you go crazy and you'll never see any provisions for two kids and a mother. Seniority is what we're talking about here, Claude." "Well, all right, damn it. I'll do it, Bill. But it hurts my damn feelings. I thought maybe I could--" "No, you can't."

So I got back out to the floor and somebody said, "What happened in there?" I said, "Well, he's going to let Ruby go. I've got a hunch he'll find a place for her. He has a personal interest in her." He'd been hauling her back and forth to work, this and that. I didn't know that, but I was told later.

So pretty soon, here comes Claude, within the hour. "Do you want to talk to me outside?" I said, "Sure." We went out and he said, "You made a statement in there a few minutes ago that I think you better clean up." I said, "I'd be happy to. What did I say?" He said, "You said that I had a personal interest in Ruby." Well, I said, "I don't doubt I did say that. Don't you have a personal interest when you begin telling me outside the contract that she has two kids and a mother to take care of? Now, Claude, that's a personal interest; it's not a contractual

interest." "All right." Like I say, every day it's something.

CONNORS: When you went on layoff there during 1964 through 1966, when you came back, did you come back at your seniority?

OXLEY: Yeah.

CONNORS: Did that just happen automatically or was there a time when you would have lost the seniority that you would have had anyway?

OXLEY: No, the only way that I could have lost it is if I had refused to come back. They had a guy from tooling inspection who was in labor grade one--I was in two--who was working on my job, because you can work down for a limited length of time. And they phonied up a job for him to inspect a bunch of jigs over in the airframe department. So all the while I was out running a beer joint, he was coming over and doing my job, for the most part. Nobody gave a hoot because the political opposition was in control, and they didn't particularly want me in there anyhow. It got to be that kind of a local. [tape recorder off]

CONNORS: You just said as we were on pause there, in talking about the general development and the general history of the local, that at some point politics overcame brotherhood. Tell me more about that. Would you say in

that earlier period the brotherhood side of it was what was maintained?

OXLEY: Yeah. I think what made it worse--and I don't know why it should--is international politics, the idea of socialism versus capitalism. I don't think it would have been serious at all excepting, what, with all the wartime [protests] going on, people began to take it pretty to heart--flag-waving.

CONNORS: Using that as a stick against any kind of critical point of view.

OXLEY: As far as I'm concerned, that's all there was to it. I think Walter [P.] Reuther got in on a sort of a communist purge.

CONNORS: You were talking about that in the first interview, I think, when you said being local here and having a grown family, you didn't really pay that much attention to the faction fighting of the union.

OXLEY: Well, I didn't really recognize it. I guess I refused to believe that it was that venomous, serious. It isn't long until somebody approaches you and says, "Well, that red SOB. I wouldn't vote for him. I don't want anything to do with him." Then you really realize the hatred. When you go out on a strike, you want everybody out there, so you can't afford enemies.

CONNORS: Your relation to the local now seems pretty

good. You seem to be on very cordial terms with the president, Chuck Lemelle.

OXLEY: Yeah. Well, he's a sincere union man.

CONNORS: So you're considered the president emeritus or--

OXLEY: Yeah, maybe. Well, as long as I can remember Chuck, he's been a very nice guy, and he's an inspector, so we have a sort of a kindred relationship. As far as I know, he accepts the idea that if you're in a union, you're supposed to be brothers. See, I belonged to the deal, [if] you meet in the hall, you refer to somebody as "Brother Anderson." But not very many of them do that anymore--even the presidents. That's another thing about the old FORUM guys. They have all the old brothers as friends.

CONNORS: What do you think that says about the direction of unionism in the country? It's not just the UAW, I suppose. I imagine that the-- Every international is different and every local is different, so you can't make such a blanket judgment on something that is so varied as American trade unionism. But in general, what does that say about this? Seems like a lack of--

OXLEY: As I told you the other day, our leadership has to be chosen from a bunch of high school dropouts, and they're not all that brilliant, you know. They haven't read much. Not only do they not express themselves too well, they don't understand what somebody is trying to say to

them, to a large degree. I think as years go on and your uneducated membership grows-- And it gets more serious nowadays because more people have more education. I don't see that these people have much business, being limited as they are, going up against some of the management personnel that they're forced to do business with. Hell, this even manifests itself-- Anybody below [Owen F.] Bieber could be in trouble on this basis. So it's a serious thing. It's a serious thing when verbiage involved in a job description is so baffling to some people that they run into trouble and they're able to be hoodwinked by a word here and there. All of a sudden, in a grievance procedure, you're sort of out of luck. You've allowed a little change in language there that made sense at the time. We used to fight two or three days over one word, because that made the job either an A or a B job. So, like I say, you choose a bunch of people--sometimes popularity, sometimes a war hero, sometimes as [often as] not the worst choice. So here you are doing business with them for three years in a union office, and the company loves it. It makes the company look real good.

*[In remembering some of the great and dedicated union

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* Oxley added the following bracketed section during his review of the transcript.

brothers who gave me the education I so badly needed at a time when both labor unions and industry (defense) were in a catch-up situation during the World War II years: By their honesty, dedication and with their day-to-day advice I was able to get most of the training necessary to carry on in my various union positions. I would like to mention from the United Auto Workers International, John Allard, Ernest West, Paul Russo, Irving Bluestone, and others; from my Local 506, John "Pop" Gavin, Robert Spears, Dewey Cress, T. B. Fitzsimmons, and, in later years, Oscar A. Kirtright. I thank them all. They were and are brothers.]

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