

**Nellie Stone Johnson
Narrator**

**Carl Ross
Interviewer**

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CR: Well, as I said before, it isn't my purpose at this point to ask a lot of detailed questions. What I am trying to do is get the general picture together, to be able to put together a kind of a chronology of the main events and developments in the history of Local 665 from its formation in 1935 up to about 1945. And, once having gotten that picture, begin to know what the questions are. I'm interested in how it got to be organized, the full story and variations that various people saw, because they all have a little different perspective having come in at different times in different ways. And I think we are interested in the people who organized it, very interested in the Minneapolis Athletic Club experience. However, the main thing is that this is not so much an effort to put together a history of a union local as it is to get a picture of the times and the people and labor experience and to get a kind of a history view on it.

Assuming that this was an interesting and important local, what kind of permanent impact did it have on the community. What impact did it have, in fact, in those years, first of all, and what lasting effect does trade union experience of this kind have on people. The question of interest in this local arises to a large degree because it was a rank and file type union. But, to say that is not quite enough. How does a rank and file union work? What happens in it? What experience do people have with it? This is the drift of the kind of picture that I think should come out of this. In other words, a segment of labor history of the 30s that would give an insight into what that time was like from the perspective of labor movements -- what effect and what impact it had on Minneapolis. I think myself 665 gives a good means of exploring that subject or getting into focus.

If that is enough to get you going. I think we should begin right there. It would be a good idea if you would start from the beginning, so to speak, with your own personal experience. How did you get into this thing?

NSJ: Well, as you know, the president of the 665 for many years was George Namoff. He also was one of the organizers of it. George also worked at the Minneapolis Athletic Club. And he was there as a houseman at one time and then he became the freight elevator operator. And, I was an elevator operator, for the most part, and ran, having the least seniority, was the operator of what they called the service elevator where all employees rode on. So between George on the freight elevator and me on the service elevator, we come in contact with every employee in the building. So, to begin with, that was just the ideal spot for two people that were concerned about labor.

But, before that I had been invited to attend a meeting at the old Elks Club, that used to be on

Highland Avenue, to talk about whether we should have an union. Word got around the club, and my immediate boss had told all of us that if we attended those meeting, we would be immediately fired. So, I went anyway. My father was quite the supporter of labor, of the Farmers Union and all of those things. I had been home and, which I tried to go home every other week if possible. We were talking about it and he thought was a pretty good idea. So, I just felt like I was pretty well fortified in going in. So, I attended the meeting. In fact, I attended a couple of meetings. Then, I came into work the next day after one of those meetings. And, we always had a round, so to speak, a round up, where our captain talked to all of the employees just before going on duty, the roll call and so forth. And, so, he looked at me and he called everybody by their last name and he says "Allen", that was my maiden name, he said, "Allen, I understand that the you attended that meeting last night." And he said, and he had already said if you attend the meeting you're fired. He said, "But, if you join that union you're fired." Well, I thought, I'm over the first hurdle now, you know. He's not firing me because I attended the meeting. He's telling me down the line if I join the union. So, I just, from there on, kept right on talking union and before I knew, before we knew it, we had enough people to call together.

And I think one of our first meetings might have been right in this building, in old Pioneer Hall, downstairs, it's where the restaurant is now. And then we had another meeting place with the Teamsters Union. And we used to meet there once in a while. But, I'm pretty sure our first meeting, my memory doesn't quite serve me right on that.

About the first meetings, before we were 665, and there may have been some sort of an embryo of 665 prior to that, I don't remember the number. You probably have picked it up from other people.

CR: This is the first I've heard of a meeting at the Elks.

NSJ: Yeah, this was at the old Elks Club on Highland Avenue. Do you remember where it was? And there was only, probably, three or four of us that were there. But, nevertheless, we had it. That was to kind of deal of some of the black employees at the club. And, of course, George was there. It seems to me the Swan was there. But I know George was there. And, not too many people showed up. But, I happened to be one of the first ones.

CR: 665 was already formed at that time.

NSJ: Yeah, there was a group. And that's the reason I said I'm not too sure if they called themselves 665 or not. Probably so. But anyway, that's where we moved into.

CR: I've heard a story about the local starting at a picnic, but I haven't been able to figure out if that was [unclear] some Scandinavian picnic or a Namoff Bulgarian picnic.

NSJ: Yeah, it could have been either one, you know. That could very well be, because, you see, before I came into it, as I say, and the reason I am a little fuzzy on that number, it could have been another number rather than 665, or it could have been the same one. But there was some kind of an organization that we moved into.

CR: They were charted at that time. When do you place this in terms of a calendar?

NSJ: 34, 35.

CR: In between there.

NSJ: Yeah. So, I, uh, anyway, that is the beginning of how I got involved. And then, from there on, by being on this service elevator and George being on the freight, before you know it, we had enough votes for a run off union vote in the club. It went right from there.

CR: That probably was the first contract that they signed. I'm not positive, but I think so.

NSJ: It could very well have been.

CR: That would assume then that they had the charter by that time.

NSJ: Yeah, there is something very fuzzy in my mind when we did get that charter, because there was some talk about it. I know George was talking about it. And, of course, Swan was in and out of town, but very close to us in the formation of the 665, because between times he was with the Wood Workers and a few other places helping to organize.

When I think back on those days, why, it, people had to be pretty gutsy, because it was in the, still in the heart of the depression and you lost a job, you didn't know. The next thing was welfare. And, you just didn't know when you were going eat and sleep and pay for. And, we went, we did it anyhow. I just, maybe the fact that my folks lived on a farm and I thought I would also go home and eat if I got canned. But, I don't know what it was. I just really didn't give it too much thought, about getting fired. As long as I did what I thought was right, I stayed with it.

CR: I never realized you had this farm background until you were talking at that meeting at the public library that day. Where was this?

NSJ: Well, we still have the two farms up in Pine County.

CR: Where?

NSJ: Pine County.

CR: In Pine County.

NSJ: Yeah, east of Hinckley. So, the, yeah, I come from a very active family. My grandmother was, even though all of her kids were grown, she still was very active around the school, school elections. My father was on the Land O'Lakes Creamery Board. He was an appointee, I don't know what the department, what was the Department of Interior, or Department of what that appointed the people in the Roosevelt administration on the REA. He served on the REA Board.

CR: On the national board?

NSJ: No, on the

CR: On the state board.

NSJ: Yeah, and the local board then for up there in Pine County where we met. They always met at Finlason. That's where the REA office is now.

CR: Yeah, we had, Martin Mackey and I had a cabin up there near Sandstone and we got our electricity from Doc Finlason Court.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right, the old man was responsible for getting that electricity through.

CR: You're father's name was Allen?

NSJ: Yeah, William Allen. And, yeah, Sandstone was just a little bit north of us and [unclear], Delmer Peterson and my father were very good friends. They argued like mad on politics, but they were very good friends. And we probably were the heaviest shippers of potatoes and rutabagas out of the area for Jalmer [?], so.

CR: So you came to the city as a very young person.

NSJ: Yeah, 17. I had one year of high school left yet.

CR: What year was that?

NSJ: That was in, what year did I come down here, 1924 I think it was. So, I had been here almost ten years when I got involved into it. I hadn't worked that long at the Club. I don't think, I went to work at the Club in 27, 28 or something like that. Then I worked at the old West Hotel for a while. I got fired. It was my first time getting fired from the Club. Then I went to work at the West Hotel. Then, I think, what happened, oh, they put all of the women out and put men on. Or, put out all the black women and put on white women. One or the other.

CR: At the West?

NSJ: At the old West Hotel, yeah. And, they said they were bringing in union people, but they weren't. And that we weren't union. Of course, at that time, I said "what's wrong with us becoming union." you know. But, I knew that, you know, there was no chance of staying, because you had no security whatsoever. And then shortly after that, I went back to the Athletic Club. Maybe the experience of the West Hotel may have had something to do with my activities in '34 at the Athletic Club. I don't know. I am sure it was quite prevalent in my mind.

CR: There were comparatively few blacks in the hotel industry.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right. They, well, there were quite a few in various places. One of my aunts had been a bellhop at the Curtis Hotel for many years and they had girl bellhops there. And, checkroom attendants, maids and, there were quite a few. And, same way at the Athletic Club. There were certain departments there that had always had black employees.

CR: Were the black maids live in maids, which seemed to have been a common practice in some

of the hotels, or even most of them?

NSJ: Some of them were, but, now, my aunt, she was an aunt by marriage, her mother worked there but she wasn't a live in. Seems to me that there were some live in maids there. They considered it, you know, quite a good job.

CR: I'm very interested in this because there is a general impression that the only blacks in the hotel industry in, oh like, the early, very early '30s, were the waiters at the Curtis and other hotels did not hire black waiters. And it is also an impression that, even in the chambermaids were almost exclusively white.

NSJ: Well, there were a lot of places, now, I don't know. I know that many people at the Curtis Hotel, because that is where Della work, in the bellhop department, in the checkroom, places like that, they were black. I don't know what the maids were. I don't remember. I remember at the old Maryland Hotel, there were a lot of black maids there.

CR: That would be like the late '20s and early '30s?

NSJ: Yeah. The Radisson always had, at least their front door people were black. It seems to me that a number of the inside porters were black and maids were black. I know the maids go back to the opening of the Radisson, because there was a family by the name of Dawson. This woman, she was a widow, either a widow or a divorcee, was a good friend of my mother and dad. And I can remember them talking about the Radisson Hotel and the people that were hired there. That's when I first heard about the Minneapolis Athletic Club, never realizing that in a few years I'd be there myself.

CR: Now this is a rather interesting question. There was very little of an economic base for a black community in this town in those years and what you're saying seems to indicate that there were employment opportunities for black women almost in excess of those for black men.

NSJ: Yeah, I think there was because there were a lot of domestic jobs too that black women had. And, not all of them live in, but there were a few. They didn't pay much. There were women that were doing laundry work and cooking. There were a lot of families that liked to have black cooks, especially around their kids.

During the depression, there was a hard, it was an awful thing. There actually was no economic base. 64% of the population, black population in Minneapolis was on welfare. So you can see that doesn't. And, this was another that really upset me so far as getting people involved in labor work, because I couldn't understand why that huge percentage, just because people were black should be on welfare, given that there were a lot people on welfare, but, you know, but not to that extent.

I don't think that where that 665 really played a great role in, excuse me I've got to have a drink.

Getting back to the union. It was the beginning of an economic toe hold for blacks was that hotel and restaurant union. There is just no two ways about it. It pioneered really the way for blacks. I can remember when Honeywell, with Bob Wishart [?], because we used to meet with him quite a

bit on how they are going to integrate blacks into the Honeywell structure.

CR: That was up in the '40s.

NSJ: Yeah, that's in the '40s. But, the hotel and restaurant was the pioneer in this field. And, the, none of the AFL, up until that time, were pioneering anything. The other thing that 665 did, as near as possible, had equal pay for women. This was a long discussion. Among people that first raised that, that got me on that binge, was Swan Achison. But, I kept thinking, well, why can't have I the same as a man, you know. Swan had a way about him of saying, "Well, that requires some thought. We'll do something about it." You know. And he was right there, you know, saying that women perform the same jobs as men, where they do that, let's have equal pay.

CR: How did this come about? Can you recall practically what happened, where it happened? You were paid a different scale in the Athletic Club I take it for the same kind of work. Is that what you are referring to ?

NSJ: Well, no it was some other work. It came in for the most part, as I remember it, it was mostly white women that were doing hall walk that was kind of janitorial type of stuff. There were several of the women that were, you see the bulk of our membership at that time was women too. And out of the 1300 or 1400, we must of had around 800, 900 were women. So, anyway, they kind of, everybody that worked for the union had to kind of cater to the women. So, anyway, there were a number of these women that was doing that work, but then they'd be paid a lower scale than the men. And that was one of the first things that we did. When I came in as a checker or receptionist at the Athletic Club, we received the same pay as men. I guess the Board of Directors knew they dare not mess around with us, because, here, at least I was on the Board of the Union. But, I think, you see, Anna was on the desk before I was. And I think that when she first went on, she got a lower scale.

CR: What was that?

NSJ: I don't remember. No I don't. But, I know when I came on, we were equalized immediately. They kind of looked upon me as some kind of a devil over there anyway. So, it was easy to take care of two or three people and equalize their pay rather than to take on a whole group or whole department of people.

I don't know. There was so many interesting things that happened. I remember when we first organized, the black employees were getting two weeks paid vacation, where a lot of the white departments were getting one week. Some, like in the dining room were getting four days and all like that. And, on our first contract, we gave up our one week out of the black area to equalize one week for everybody throughout the Club. Then, when we negotiated the next contract, we came back with the two weeks, maybe it was the third contract, because we negotiated every year at that time. We came back then for two weeks for everybody. That was quite a role that the black employees played there. And, psychologically it really worked.

I am trying to think of all of the incidents that when into making that a strong union. I know for my part, even though I had a strong farm background, organization wise and the whole thing, I think

that the union experience gave me another dimension there that was just what I needed. It put the whole farm perspective in the proper light, what my family was all about. And everything now, what I have done over the last 35 or 40 years has always been geared to the economic organization. The black community itself, that's where it is the weakest. Because if you are weak in economics, you're weak in everything else.

I would like to see a much better grasp of trade unionism among the black, in the black community than we have. You heard me talking to this man, and I am doing everything I can nationally to really get things going. We've got to have it, that's all there is to it. There's just got to be. I feel that the black community missed the first round, which was the hard hitting economic things that came out of the '30s and into the '40s, and then started the academia thing in the '50s, and has been going. The whole organization around economic issues has been going downhill ever since. The NAACP is not doing the job it could do in this field and neither is the Urban League. I think the Urban League may be doing a better job because they have different funding source and are doing a job on research. At least they have the research material for people to work with a little bit better than any other organization. The organized labor movement uses the Urban League's, their statistics on employment and the whole thing, much rather than the Department of Labor's figures. The Department of Labor is so far off on minority people.

CR: Going back to the '30s and 665. Do you think, do you feel that the blacks became integrated in the unions they were recruited to at that time? If so, how was this taking place? What was different?

NSJ: Well, I think the only union that they really became integrated in, again, gets back to 665. And I guess I'm talking quite a bit from my own experience from some of the people that were in 665 that really supported me. No other union took one of its members and had them running for public office and that sort of thing. And 665 certainly gave me all of the support it was possible to give me. The delegation fought like made for me to get the endorsement from the CLU. And things like that.

CR: Was that for the library board campaign?

NSJ: Yes. Which at that time, 1945, being a woman, let alone being a black woman, was almost the same as a black person running for the mayor of Minneapolis today, you know. And I came out in very good shape. But I also realized that running for public office, for me, was not what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a part of the policy making of politics, a part of the policy making of the economic structure and that whole thing. And then, if other people wanted to run for politics, then I'd be a part of that, you know. And, kind of like, when I managed Van White's campaign. And the pundits in the world said it was impossible that I knew different. I brought him through in one of the biggest votes that ever came out of the northside. But those are the kinds of things that I like to do. And, I know I'll never get wealthy or anything like that. But, who cares, who wants to be. As long as you can do what you want to do. And I really getting people elected.

But I think that black people that are elected to public office have to, everything has to be generated to the black community. And whatever they do for the black community is bound to be good for the rest of the community. You're talking about education, food, what have you, health. And that

seems to be a little bit of a problem in talking to elected officials after they do get elected. They get to the place that they have to say, "Well, I'm elected by all the people," Well, that's true. Serve all the people, but have your priorities. Parren Mitchell, I think, is probably one of the best at that. He always says how does this affect the black community. We'll see how this effects the black community first then we'll go from there. Then I know good and well how this effects the white community. And he just uses that as his credo. So that's kind of a part of what my thinking was, Carl, after being elected. And after, right off the REA election brought that home to me. I had served on the United Labor Committee, which was a very powerful committee. And after being elected, I had to get off and I didn't like that.

CR: The United Labor Committee was, was that predecessor of the AFL-CIO or was that the war time unity committee?

NSJ: It was the, well, it did both. It was the forerunner of the endorsing committee for the Cope Committee out of the CLU at the same time it came out of the war kind of thing. And it was a unity kind of thing for the DFL, a label to support the DFL candidates. That's where we took Hubert and gave him his comeuppance in politics. A lot of people thought that Hubert came by, I don't want to take anything away from him, you know, he came by being a liberal by himself. I think he had the intelligence and everything to absorb what we were doing and 665 played quite a role in that. As well as 1145.

CR: How do you, Can you elaborate on your remark about 665 in that connection. 665 as a political group or a political force.

NSJ: Well, I think you're talking about civil and human rights, that's what you're alluding to. This is the

CR: Well, in the education of Hubert Humphrey for instance.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right. And the thing was that we did not allow any discrimination in hotel housing or anything when we had our conventions. And it moved from the conventions to the open kind of thing. And we had, after educating Hubert, Hubert got to the place he said, why can't a black person can't come into this hotel and just sit down and eat on their own or call up and get a room. I guess he wasn't even aware of this. And he came out fighting. But, if it hadn't been for us, he wouldn't have known all of these things. And, we had a lot of things that were attempted in other cities to discriminate against some of the black delegates, but they never got by with it.

CR: You're talking about the late '30s, early '40s.

NSJ: Well, it was in the '30s and '40s. Of course, the Humphrey thing came up in the '40s. And this was around '43, '44 and '45.

CR: You know Ray Wright told me that, in about 1938, 665 drew up some kind of a policy statement or declaration on equal rights. You must have been involved in that. Is there a chance that you might have a copy of that?

NSJ: No, I don't have a copy of it. In fact, I was thinking about that here some time ago. And I don't know where there is a copy. I have no idea. There was many things that was done through the, and, of course, one of the prime movers again was Swan Achison in a lot of that stuff. And not to take anything away from George Namoff, but he too was good at that. Just right on top of that equal rights thing. We, you know, resolutions would come through the conventions thick and fast on civil and human rights and fair employment and all of that. But, it wasn't until some few of the unions really buckled down and put those resolutions to work, because the rest of the people just passed the resolutions and sounded good. But 665 stayed right on top of it. And I have to give a lot of credit to 1145 too. But the union that was in the forefront was 665 on all of this.

CR: Well, 1145 became organized when, in about 1943/44, about that late?

NSJ: Yeah, it was kind of late. It was during the war, you know, when Jacobson and Wishart and the Forteeers got involved. We already had a good ten years under our belt at that time.

CR: I've heard about two incidents of interest that I know very little about. One is that document, which would be lovely to find. I'll look for it, let's see if one of us might turn it up. The other incident that seems to be important, and this is quite early days, is the transformation of that Jim Crow local of Curtis waiters into legitimate members of the hotel and restaurant [unclear]. I associate that with 665's influence. I think I will be able to talk to Cassius. There was a suit filed for instance, do you know anything about that?

NSJ: Yeah, but I don't know the details of it. I remember it and that's about all. But you know

CR: Do you know who was sued?

NSJ: Cassius probably would remember because he was involved. And a fellow by the name of Ewing was involved there. What happened was we had as much opposition or more opposition internally from the local itself because of the officialdom of the local then you would from the opposition coming, who they were coming in with. And it was a very touchy thing. It was just a very sensitive kind of thing. Because the people figured that they would no longer maintain their offices and have full jurisdiction over their own affairs. This was a hard one. Even though I was on the Board of 665, it didn't satisfy the guys. They finally did have to expand the Board. But the local came into the overall international and the culinary council. I don't know if you remember the fact that I was elected first vice president of the State Culinary Council, and as far as I know, was the first woman who held that spot.

CR: Well, I think the council was formed right in there. Ray mentioned the organization of it. He thought that 665 deserved credit for the fact that it was established.

NSJ: Yeah, they did. Because you see, the other unions, as we started getting involved in the state federation and the conventions, we realized the state organizations of all various locals within a certain industry and, of course, we went to work and formed our own. 665 played a real role in that. And, of course, once you got that going with 665, the first thing you had to do was convince 458 and 152 that it was a necessary evil, so you had half of it going for yourself. At that time, it was Thor Berg and Al Kilday who were leading those two locals. And they went along.

I was trying to think what else we pioneered in. We were part of the state federation setting up its first public relations department. And the local, the liberal locals out of Duluth. I remember that, I think that's when I first met George Dissard and a number of other people from around Rochester and places like that, the milk drivers, the Twin Cities Milk Drivers. I remember Gene Morrison, who on many issues was very conservative, but he was very far sighted on this and helped to lead the fight on it. The ultra-conservative people under the thumb of Olson and Lawson at that time fought us tooth and nail, but we won.

CR: This was to establish a committee for the department to, what we would call outreach these days.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right. That was one of our hard bitter fights between the conservatives and the liberals. And we had later, there were many to come. But that was one of the toughies. I just think the labor movement around the state of Minnesota owes an awful lot to 665, because it was a lot. It was nontraditional leadership that it came out of there. It wasn't the traditional old line, the skilled trades kinds of things, which they were hard labor and I'm not saying that they weren't good labor people, but certainly did not reach out on these other issues, in which labor should be involved.

CR: Do you think that was just, Do you think was a reflection of their left wing politics or is it something do with economic character of the union, the people in the trades? What would you think was the reason for this? There were other left wing unions which seemingly didn't do as well.

NSJ: I think it was a combination of things in 665. I think 665 people understood the economics. I think they were almost on a parallel say with the rising CIO at that time, understanding that you have to have an economic base, but you also have to have a social kind of thing out there social base, and that economic has to feed that social performance. And, of course, a part of that was equal rights. But, I felt at that time that 665 had much more in common with the industrial organizations than they did within their own framework. Because I knew a lot of the CIO people and we were on very friendly terms. I assume that philosophically we talked the same kind of language. I always felt that, as a woman, you know, I had as much ability, should we say, as a man. And this was not true in most of the unions, because the unions reflected the corporate structure. And that's the thing that, I think, persists today, is that a lot of the unions that have not broken down the racial discrimination, sex discrimination, is because they are still reflecting the policies of the corporate structure. And if women and minority people don't have sense enough to take it, to go into the unions, this is their organization, change that kind of philosophical thinking, it's their fault. I feel very strongly about it. And, you know, I'm always saying to when blacks are critical of trade unionism. I said, it's you. And if you don't get in there, sure I know it's going to be hard, but you have to get in there and fight for yourself.

CR: Do you think you were, that 665 was taking its membership along; that the membership was supportive; that they understood what this was about?

NSJ: I think to a great degree, because I think my election and re-election for many years reflected that. Because there had to be a good understanding of what we were all about. I think there was a time afterwards that the educational aspects really let down, and, in 665, as well as labor education, political education in every other union. Maybe, less so in the hotel and restaurant. But it really has

gotten to a new low now. I think it's on the way back, because Reagan is going to force unions to come back.

CR: I've heard that the shop meetings were particularly used to develop educational discussions and was considerable success and meeting attendance generally was exceptionally high.

NSJ: It was. We'd run any place from 500 to 700 people at meetings. At that went on for a long time. And a lot of the people did not have their own cars, they had to go by street car too to get to those meetings. And, when there was an automobile around, they pooled rides. Yeah, the shop stewards' meetings were very good, or as you said the shop meetings because they'd talk one place, the Radisson or the Club and they'd have meetings with just the employees of those places. And I thought it was very good.

CR: What went on at these meetings?

NSJ: Well, they'd usually talk about conditions and listen to all of the gripes of the people. That's the way you found out what was going on within the shop. And then you'd talk about what can be done about it and what should go into the next contract. Plus the fact that you lace that with a certain degree of political education.

With the weather there so long, I'm running so far behind, and those four days I spent in Washington. Then I got to feeling bad down there again. So, I felt it was worthwhile to go even though I felt bad. I think, when I was talking to Earl just now, he seems to think that we really laid some good ground work. I had dinner with him the night before I left and we got a chance to talk over a few things. He's the political action man for the machinist union. So, I and he and Bill Lucy and people like that, I'm very close to, Hattie Wyatt, formerly of the Meatcutters Union. I try to touch base with them every time I go to Washington.

CR: Well, I'm interested and even perplexed by the difference between unionism that adopts resolutions at their meetings and conventions and unionism that succeeds in moving their membership. We're looking at something like that here in 665 and it's very hard to identify it. It's partly a matter of being able to think back far enough to recall the details kind of life as a union that obviously made differences nor can we even simply say, well the members were active. We have to have some actual evidence that this was so.

NSJ: Yeah. The thing was, I think we were lucky to have in our office our paid staff, good level minded people that were geared to people's causes. It wasn't just enough to say, well, you have an active membership out there. On the Board you had people like John Vordnick who, you know, was just a real radical when it come to trade unionism. You had persons like myself and we were geared to this. And, you know, we didn't let our paid staff get by with everything. But, giving them something too, they didn't want to, because they felt the need of doing things. So I think that combination really put over the educational aspect of what 665 was all about. We had a couple of women sitting up on the Board that just were not too sharp on things. But, once you pounded that educational thing to them, they were just like the traditional bull in a China closet. They went rounds of where they worked and mouthed what you were talking about. They really just weren't too sharp on a lot of issues, but they got the word out.

CR: Can you recall more about Swan Achison than most of us do? You know, the only way we can find out about Swan now is to get different people to give their impressions of him. We can talk to the rest of them but not to him. Obviously he was a very key person in this thing, in a way the main instigator of it. I knew him of course, but I can't quite put together a picture of his, other than to visualize, I can see him as a person and hear him talk in my mind, but who was he? What was he?

NSJ: Well, as far as I was concerned, to me personally, he was very important in my labor life. Swan was just a beautiful person. I know that there were political differences within the radical politics and everything as to where he was going and what he was all about. But the man was so solid. We were talking about Swan. I don't know, there just seems like there are so many things to say about Swan, I don't quite know where to start, other than the fact that I know he got me very much involved in a number of things I probably would not have gotten involved in. He was primarily the one that recommended that I run for public office. And, of course, I thought at the time that he was a little crazy to bring that up, but we did it anyway. He certainly was right in the front row when it come to equal rights for women and racial minorities. Swan had quite a background in liberal politics. He knew the governments of the world. It seemed like he just knew everything, about the trade union movements all over the world, any kind of economic organization. He used to talk a lot about Sweden and their liberalness there, or attempting to be at that time, it was prior to the so-called middle government.

CR: Do you know when he came from Sweden?

NSJ: No I don't. I don't remember.

CR: Do you know if he had a family somewhere?

NSJ: I don't know anything about that. I always saw Swan as a loner. He apparently spent quite a bit of time in Chicago before coming here, because he talked about the Swedish-American house there quite a bit. In fact, I saw it at one time, I wasn't in it, but once I was there for some seminar or something and I saw that. No, I, you know, after he died, you began to wonder about people's family connection. It never occurred to me to ask him before. The early days that I knew Swan, I had heard a lot about Meridel LeSueur, her writings and her opposition to a lot of status quo, so to speak, of people's lives. I mentioned one day I would like to meet. I was sitting on the davenport up there in the union office and Swan was sitting there. I guess we had both been reading and whatever brought it up I don't know. But, when I mentioned it, he just kind of put his hand on my knee and said, "You would like to meet Meridel, it will be arranged." Just like that and that was it. It was arranged. The next thing I know, the next time she had a reading or some kind of a cultural event at her house, I got an invitation. I thought that was pretty good. Gosh, I don't know. Have you talked to Vicky Hanson and her husband Doug Hanson?

CR: Yeah, Vicky and Doug, Doug particularly, told me about this at the Nicollet.

NSJ: Yeah, Doug and Vicky Hanson, because, you know, Swan lived with them for a long time.

CR: Yeah. We spent some time with them. Ole Fagerhaugh and Doug and Vicky were together and we got interrupted by something before we finished up, but I'm going to talk to them some

more. They had a fairly intimate picture of Swan, but like everyone else's, it's somewhat incomplete. It's going to have to be pieced together.

NSJ: I remember the closest to anything family that a girl that Swan dated, that's all I knew about. And I guess just took it for granted that he didn't have any family in this country. You know, it's strange how you forget a lot of those things, then somebody mentions something and things begin to unfold.

CR: That's why I said that I am going to have more questions later about things other people mention. And so on.

NSJ: Yeah, I think that each of us, probably, can kind of feed the memory of the others too.

CR: Right, I now about different things. Now, Doug, he gave me a quite good picture of the old Nicollet Hotel. He worked there and he could describe what was going on, different groups of workers, different departments, to a pretty good degree. Someone else has to shed light on the Curtis and the Athletic Club.

NSJ: There were quite a few blacks that worked at the Nicollet at the time when Doug worked there. I don't know when they came in or anything like that, but they were there. I remember when the Nicollet was built. And, it was when I was fairly young, but I still remember it.

TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

NSJ: ...and...the Athletic Club was really the den, the den of inequity at the time of the organizing of the union and I think had we not had people there that felt fairly dedicated to trade unionism, it never would have been organized.

CR: How do you feel it was possible to organize the Athletic Club that easily?

NSJ: Well, one of the things was that particularly in the black area, and I think this was true in the other areas up to a degree, just prior to organizing the people had all had a salary cut.

CR: That's a good argument, isn't it.

NSJ: Yeah, and so that was one of the main arguments that George and I used you know to bring back that cut.

CR: That was on account of hard times.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right, and I remember the elevator operators had a twelve dollar a month cut which was you know...

CR: That was a lot of money...

NSJ: ...that was a lot of money in those days because you could run your grocery bill on \$3 a week you know and that meant a whole month's groceries gone down the drain.

CR: What were you making, about fifty-sixty cents an hour, or that much?

NSJ: No, we weren't making that much, something like a quarter...twenty-five cents. And we were making \$60 a month, and they cut us back to less than \$50. Forty-eight dollars is what we got cut off.

CR: On the other hand, the, you would have expected the employers in the Athletic Club to be, after all they're the people who belong, to be particularly tough about signing your contract there....

NSJ: They were, they were except that the number of employees that signed for the union was pretty rough to overcome, that was a tough one.

CR: So [unclear] these were the same people, weren't they, who all ran the athletic club or who were members there who had been in the Citizens Alliance.

NSJ: That's right, yeah.

CR: And they give in on home base before they organized, allowed their own factories or shops to be organized.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right, the thing was that you didn't have the solidarity though in their private shops as you did in this club because... [silence on tape for few seconds]... what I was going to say is that 665 used its whole executive board as its negotiating committee. In later years it was cut down to certain people of the board, but the, it came in when all the women and the men you know, and we negotiated.

CR: I've wondered if the fact that the Athletic Club signed up reflected changes in the view of at least some of the Minneapolis employers about attitudes toward collective bargaining. Would you have any evidence of that?

NSJ: I don't really have too much evidence of that except that a couple of people that I knew quite well that were on the board of directors talked directly to me about this and said that people deserved to have a living wage and things like that and there were two of the men that I knew, in fact one of them, I knew his daughter quite well, and that was kind of my entree. The other one I knew the wife very well, and they just seemed very susceptible to the fact that people should have a living wage, and particularly in the black department there and of course people like myself would use that and move out into the other area so that everybody that was an employee had the benefit of that. So, no, I think that it was a kind of hard one to, on the surface would have been a very hard institution to have broken except that like I said we had such an overwhelming sign up on there that it just did the job. And people, once people started going to meetings, talking to the people that they worked with, the next meeting you had...cause we'd have meetings almost every week there for a while and you talked to the employee or your co-worker and they would go and the next thing you know it was almost a hundred percent.

CR: Well, just kind of a general question,

[NSJ speaks of needing a cough drop, itching throat...]

CR: Well, I was going to ask a kind of general question about your feelings about what brought about the change toward labor organization possibilities in Minneapolis. Do you think it was primarily the Teamster's strike or...

NSJ: Well, I think that had a lot to do with it, but I also think that organizations like 665 that immediately started out doing so many humanitarian things, and injecting that into the CLU, also did because you know the owners of the trucking industry had painted quite a picture of the Teamsters being goons and that sort of thing and this kind of an attitude prevailed and of course the real goons were sent in by the employers. Course I have the advantage of, as I said, my folks were very supportive of the whole philosophy of trade unionism and the old man was bringing potatoes and rutabaggies down to feed the Teamsters so you know... it... he came down, he was supposed to go to Hollandale, Minnesota and I think it was a load of rutabaggies at that time, and he got stopped at Forest Lake, and he said you guys, okay, you stopped me and I can't go through, he said, I didn't realize ?you or we were picketed out this far and he said but you got to eat so why don't you let me go to your headquarters and unload it and everybody said...and I can bring you more if you pay my gas, so they paid the gas and he brought potatoes and more rutabaggies. I don't remember how many truckloads he brought up. They got their potatoes and rutabaggies. But anyway, the price of potatoes and rutabaggies wasn't that much you know, couldn't pay the mortgage with it.

CR: Well, yeah, there's little doubt that the Teamsters strike opened the way for unionism. I sometimes wonder if that isn't a somewhat oversimplified version of how things took place.

NSJ: Well, yeah, I think it's a combination of things, now I know that I knew Ray Dunn quite well, and Grant, you know you got Mickie, you know, you got a chance to know the Dunn brothers various places. Mickie and his wife were very good friends of Mr. and Mrs. I G Scott so you know, they're social as well as political, so I got to know them very well, and naturally they played that angle up for everything it was worth about the Teamsters strike, and Ray of course he acted like a professor on the subject but, and that you can understand, because they were involved in it, you know, so...well, I just get an awful itch right there, the doctor says there's nothing wrong with it except it's sensitive so...but anyway, I think I quite agree with you on the oversimplification of the degree that the Teamsters strike had, you know, you don't want to take anything away from them because it did have an impact, but also there were other things working too, a lot of people were hungry and were forming different kinds of concepts about organization. They were being kicked around by the Citizens Alliance people and all that so...

CR: People were receptive to unionism...

NSJ: Yeah, that's right, I think it softened up, you know, an awful lot of people because the traditional skilled trades unions really weren't getting, they didn't have no impact at all, you know, they organized for themselves and that was about it.

CR: Earlier you were talking about the Athletic Club, you used the terms black department a couple of times, what does that mean?

NSJ: Well, there was an area where it was traditionally black employees, that was the elevator operators, the check room attendants, the checkers, better known as receptionists, the porters, door

people, doormen, and I think that's about it, and all of those people were under the supervision of one person that was called captain. And Cap Crowder had been there for years and years and years.

CR: Was he black?

NSJ: Yeah.

CR: So it was a kind of a, bit of a Jim Crow set-up...

NSJ: Yeah, it was, sure. And then you had departments you could very well refer to as the Phillipino department which was all the bus boys. There were a couple of them that broke out of that and one was a fellow that took care of the lunches in the bath department for people that wanted to swim and have their lunch served there right after swimming and...at a table just poolside, and a few things like that.

CR: That meant then that the waiters, most of the chambermaids...

NSJ: All the chambermaids were white at that time...

CR: All the chambermaids were white, all the waiters were white...

NSJ: Yeah, the waiters were white, the...mostly waitresses with the supervisory personnel of that department being men, white men, and there were a couple of women that worked their way up to captains in the restaurant.

CR: You have segregated facilities...

NSJ: Yeah, oh yeah...

CR: Wash rooms, lunch rooms, or did you have lunch rooms [unclear]

NSJ: Yeah we had lunch rooms, but it wasn't, there was a table over here for the service employees and a table over there for the maids and what have you, but we all were on the same floor you know. It seems to me that if I remember right, one of the porters served both groups though.

CR: Did you, I take it that in the course of unionization this structure began to break down.

NSJ: Yeah, it did, it broke down quite a bit, it broke down to the point that a lot of people were no longer served food, they got extra money instead of being served food, and that was true of the service department with the exception of the checkers who worked on Sundays and holidays and if there was nobody there to relieve them then they would order off of the menu and have a tray sent down.

CR: But if you held a shop meeting and it was the union, that brought everybody together.

NSJ: Yeah, that's right.

CR: They feel that kind of strange at the outset?

NSJ: No, I don't think so because there was a good relationship between employees. There was always a few that were knocking each other down, but most of the people felt pretty good kinship, worked at the Athletic Club and that was it you know.

CR: Yeah, it's just interesting because no one describes that to me, Albert didn't mention that for instance.

NSJ: Albert, he was one of the people that broke out of the so-called black department and headed up the sport department in the hand ball courts, built with the locker rooms and so forth. Kind of like a couple of the Filipino fellows that had their respective little places, it was kind of an isolated thing, but they, sharp people within their own field you know and management recognized that and put them around.

CR: Do you have more about this?

NSJ: No, I was just trying to think of when we started equalizing the pay cause I remember that I had raised the point in one of our executive meetings. See, we had what was known as janitors who were engineering kind of people, could regulate the boilers and do all of that and they also did some kind of well, traditional janitorial work and so forth. Then we had the housemen and then we had the porters and a lot of the work was kind of inter-related and we, then I raised this point about especially the housemen and the porters who were black and the housemen was like George and a few people who didn't speak the best English but they were white and of course the engineer janitor was a notch above them, so there was quite a difference in the wage structure so I talked about one classification and also a across the board kind of wage and boy I tell you the management jumped up and down on that one. But we did equalize the pay of the porters and the housemen.

CR: What's supposed to be the difference between a housemen and a porter?

NSJ: There really wasn't that much because the housemen had their dressing rooms upstairs, did a porter work in the rooms, that sort of things, in the halls; porters they have clean bowls and the floors downstairs and lobby....

CR: Toilets and lobbies....

NSJ: Yeah, all of that kind of thing, well, the housemen had toilets and what have you upstairs too you know, and I just couldn't see that much difference in it and just because their skin was white that they were getting more money than the black...

CR: That seemed to be the main difference...

NSJ: Yeah, that was the main difference, so finally when I asked for, you know, one classification, why....but we made a lot of real impact on a lot of that stuff. And coming out of the Athletic Club seemed to have had a good influence on the whole hotel situation cause you had the hotel association at that time and you could negotiate the contract with the hotel association where at the Athletic Club it was a little different, you negotiated directly with them.

CR: A couple of questions, did you ever hear of...do you recall something somebody mentioned to me once about a apartment house or hotel fire down here in the loop that 665 made an issue of, does that ring a bell with you at all?

NSJ: Hmm, I don't know...

CR: No one seems to recall the episode, I think Bob Kelly told me about it years ago.

NSJ: Was that the old Milener Hotel?

CR: I don't know, it might well have been, it was one of those old resident hotels, glorified flophouses you know, that kind of thing, and apparently it burned and as usual people get killed in those things and so...Bob said at the time that the union had made a public issue of this in the town and it created quite a scandal.

NSJ: Yeah, I don't recall, but there's a lot of that that I wasn't directly involved, it probably passed through the board, and I probably voted on it and what-have-you, but a lot of it I just don't, didn't latch on to. I was, as I told you before, I never was too enthusiastic about being a paid employee, I worked for the union, it might have been good if I had, but I liked to do the other thing, I still do, you know. Like in politics, I just love being where I am.

CR: Well, if you're a union paid official you have to trim your sails to suit the breezes...

NSJ: That's right, that's right... and I just didn't want any part of that.

CR: Do you remember the Miller strike?

NSJ: Yes, in fact I was on the picket line there.

CR: What do you remember about that?

NSJ: Mostly what I remember on that is a position, it took an awful lot of our time, it took up a lot of our money, and when we'd, most of us would get off from work, wherever our respective places, where we went on the picket line at Millers. I had the bank call me yesterday for a resume for directorship on a program there and wanted to know if I had ever been arrested, I said just one person away from having been arrested and that was on that picket line. They took women and men too you know, yeah, it didn't make any differences, they'd so many and that was it.

Yeah, that's the thing that was most vivid in my mind was the, walking the picket line, and I didn't do the, any of the detail work in the office, but I was on the board, Iola was worked half to death and she was in the office at that time and so was Ray and George, you know, they were just going night and day.

CR: Who?

NSJ: Ray and George at the time of the Miller's strike. Well, we seemed to have come out of it except that Miller didn't stay in business. The Forum was a tough one, they never did get an

organization going there, in spite of having a lot of people that were sympathetic to the cause.

CR: Well, do you, do you think we might still find some of the people who were active in the union though not officers or leaders of it? It'd be awful interesting to find some of those people who didn't go on in the labor movement necessarily but just to talk about how they saw the union...

NSJ: Yeah, and how their personal lives...

CR: And what it may have meant to them over the long run.

NSJ: Lou Winslow did...I don't know if she's still living or not, she was on the board but a rank and filer you know that never really took on a real active role officially, and I was trying to think of another woman, gosh I can't even think of what her name was...you know, Annie might come up with some people, Ann Lewis.

CR: Ann who?

NSJ: Ann Lewis, yeah, she went on the board of 665 after I left.

CR: Who was she?

NSJ: Well, she was, what was she, a trustee, she was a trustee at the Central Labor Union, not too sharp on labor though, they used her. She sat up on the board, you would, when you talked to her you would see what I meant, and Ann is a friend of mine too...see what my little brown book is here...I do have her telephone number, anyway you can find her in the book, it's Anna Lewis and she lives up, way up north.

CR: L-E-W-I-S?

NSJ: Hmm humm.

CR: I can look it up and see.

NSJ: I think it's Anna M., right here, yeah, Anna M., 4959 Humboldt Av. N., 529-3974, you get it? 529-3974...[repeats address]...yeah, she's right up there on the you know the city limits, what they call the Humboldt Heights area.

CR: Well, there's two things that would be important to get this picture worked out. One is, talk to more people other than the very top level of people who, you know, it's a paradox that you can find so many of the organizers and original initiators of this local, it's nothing, nothing like it to my knowledge anywhere else, but so it'd be a problem to find the other kind of people.

NSJ: Yeah, too bad that you hadn't started doing this last year cause you have found John Bortnick, he just died.

CR: Yes, I've been interested in this for some time but it wasn't until, I asked the Historical Society for a grant last fall and then I was away during the winter and came back in the spring, but I'm just

having trouble getting out of other things and getting on to this. And then the other thing which is a problem is documentary stuff. As I mentioned to you Ray told me that when they amalgamated the locals they just burned the files since '65 and Ray has nothing, the couple of things he had he loaned to me and George has nothing except that 20th anniversary booklet but it's interesting that he had that but Ray didn't.

NSJ: Yeah, I suppose, there was a couple of boxes of stuff that I had stored that got burned up too, I had moved stuff and I'm sure there might have been some 665 stuff in there cause I had a lot of clippings about myself and my activities you know, and I do have a couple of scrap books that I think are fairly intact. I'll go through those and see...

CR: I'd like to see them...

NSJ: Yeah, see if there's anything in there on 665. I have a lot of my old books, my union books, the little ones you know.

CR: I have Ray's for a sample. The public record, the newspapers and so on is available, the only thing lacking there is where to look. I'm going to start with the Labor Review which will have the...I think there's a place I can locate time and place of events that has something to do with the union, from that I can go to the files of the Mpls. Tribune and Star and locate papers of that period and so on. I will look at the records and reports of the state conventions of the DFL from that period and I will look at the Central Labor Union papers, but this is a big mass of stuff and I've got to find approximate time and place of events in order to facilitate that kind of research so anything you can suggest along that line is going to be helpful.

NSJ: Before you and I meet again I'll try very hard to go through those two scrap books. I, there's a lot of, I know there's maybe a lot of stuff in there, I'm just hoping there's some 665 stuff because it got to the place that the books on the pages were filled up and I just clipped and through it in between the pages you know, and kind of go through that and see. I got so much paper in my apartment I, if a fire ever broke out in there...

CR: Do you have any pictures?

NSJ: I don't have too many pictures, I did have some convention pictures and I don't even know where they are.

CR: They make good documentation for history.

NSJ: I have someplace, and I thought it was in the bottom of a dresser drawer and I looked for it and I couldn't find it cause I thought it was a good picture of, most of us from the State Culinary Council, we were either in Winona or Red Wing, our banquet, you know, and I remember that Tony Ferral, do you remember him from St. Paul, was one of the hotel and restaurant people that was active over there. Well, he was singing, he just loved to sing Irish songs, you know, and the thing was that, he was kind of, well he was a nice man in many ways, but he liked to flirt with all the gals, and I happened to be one of those so what he would do, he'd get up there and sing these Irish love songs and I felt like, you know, I was on some of kind of a display or something. And I was sitting

at this table and here we were and this picture was being taken and it's a very good picture of all of us and I was thinking of what was going on when Tony was singing, you know, but if I could find that it would be a real good one.

CR: Well, look around, you know, if you see something...

NSJ: Well, that always interested me, I was very careful never to get involved with....

END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE

TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO

NSJ: ...singing you know, but if I could find that it would be a good one.

CR: Well, look around, you know, if you see something...

NSJ: Well, that always interested me, I was very careful never to get involved with any of the men in the union because it was, at that time it wasn't good. It, people nowadays don't look upon the relationships by way of color as much as they did, but in those days it was kind of rough. And if you accidentally even run into somebody you liked very much you'd almost have to put it out of your mind because it was just kind of a rough thing. Well, that was kind of a...it was nice, very nice kind of thing, overtures and all that, but, I had to be very very careful. And a lot of the fellows you know that were very nice people in many ways, they were kind of lushy, you know, in the hotel and restaurant, drank too much, and ran around too much and the whole thing. [pause] Well, you....just about....

CR: Well, should we call it a day for today...[pause] say that for the record.

NSJ: Oh, well, I just...

CR: That has an awful lot to do with the value of labor unions, you can add up dollars and cents but you're talking about something else...

NSJ: Yeah, as I was saying, that because of unions like 665 that it just has created entirely different atmosphere for people to get to know each other and be associated with each other and have very personal relationships other than men and women, and including that, but other than. And I just think that the trade unionism just brings about everything, once people can get everything that pertains to humanity comes out of the trade union movement. There was something else I was trying to think of that, in relationship to that...well, it just left my mind, but the, you'd think that, well, you were talking about thinking back...oh, I know, the, a lot of people now, that are minority people, particularly black scientists and technicians that are coming into Minnesota and will say that Minnesota is one of the best states in the union for minority people in those fields to work, don't realize that the reason for it was, is that Minnesota is a union state and much of this has happened as a result of people being active in politics and in the trade union movement, one feeding the other and our whole early position on fair employment practices.

CR: You think that, you said earlier that, something which actually [unclear] be affected?,

Humphrey was a product of this influence on him.

NSJ: Yes, I thoroughly believe that cause I was with Humphrey from the time, 1943, right on up to the first time he was elected and when we were both elected in 1945, and I saw the influence that, they were trade union people had had on him.

CR: You knew him before...

NSJ: When he was just...

NSJ: Not too well, but I had met him, he was on the campus and he was working on a WPA project over there, at the same time he was going to school, I think he was doing both, going to Macalaster as a student and then teaching on extension classes later on on the WPA.

CR: Was he in that, he was in that Labor Education Project [unclear]

NSJ: Yes, and Swan Asterson introduced me to Hubert and I used to get a big kick out of him over there on nice days around the campus, stand out on the lawn someplace and talk, get two or three people around you know, they'd listen. Swan was over there quite a bit you know and he'd be talking to people and certainly after the building of Coffman Memorial, he was around there a lot and I think that was built in 1939 or 40.

CR: I was going to say that was, when you're talking WPA, you're talking late 30's, this is no longer '43-4, this is much earlier.

NSJ: Yeah, and the, quite a group of us used to go over there and meet and we bowled in the union, but the thing I was going to say about Hubert, there used to be a little saying that many of us had, Hubert would come to the corner and he talk to two or three people and if five people gathered he'd stand up and start yelling, and I can see him very vividly...yeah...and you know, he was quite a campaigner and I liked that, cause I liked grass roots politics. It was nothing to see him after he became senator, vice president, if he had time - mostly when he was a senator, I think it was Hibbing, it could have been another town, but I think it was Hibbing that he was riding in a car and he jumped out of the car and ran over to somebody he thought he knew and he says my name is Hubert Humphrey and you are, and before you know it everybody on Main Street is there and he just did that hard kind of campaigning all the time, and I thought, and he did that in the black community, and when he was running for vice president, some of my friends in Harlem New York said, why nobody was worried about Hubert, he could take care of himself all over Harlem, everybody just loved him, and, but you know you have a lot of candidates who don't even want to go to Harlem, you know, so...well, anyway I think maybe that might...

CR: Do you want to go eat?

NSJ: I should, do you want to open the door and let me see who...

END INTERVIEW